

Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization.* Michael Gaudio. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 226 pp.

Reviewed by Stephanie Pratt

Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization appeared in print on the heels of the British Museum's John White exhibition that opened in 2007 in London, and which traveled on to a number of venues in the United States in 2007 and 2008. However, instead of concentrating on White's watercolors, this new book by Michael Gaudio takes as its starting point the work of the engraver and book publisher Theodor de Bry, whose reproductions of White's images were the only record of his work until the original watercolors appeared on the market in the mid-19th century.

Gaudio selects examples from de Bry's engraved plates to engage in a discussion on what such images can tell us, not so much about their ostensible subject (the Virginia Indians), but about the time and conditions of their making and the limits on their comprehension. He makes a strong case for looking directly at the "materiality" of printed images in order to understand more clearly how they created meanings for the contemporary spectator. It is in the printed medium particularly, he argues, that many of the ambiguities of the early modern age, including the growth of a "science" of ethnography are more fully revealed. In essence, what Gaudio undertakes here is an anthropology of the engraved image, beginning in the 16th century with its invention and taking it up to the late 19th century when other technologies of reproduction replaced its efficacy.

Rather than adopt the expected position on European imagery of the "non-European" which would be to concern oneself with how such images relate to actual lives lived by Native Americans, Gaudio looks more closely at what is being shown through and via the printed medium with its particular materials and techniques, such as the copperplate of the engraving and the burin that scratches out the lines on the incised surface. He also examines the use of letterpress and pays particular attention to some of the details in these engravings that prompt further thoughts about the limits of visual capture: tattooing, smoke, perspectival space, and the "graven" image or idol. By so doing, he offers something of a departure from the usual sorts of analyses undertaken on de Bry's project.

Gaudio is an art historian and makes reference to important figures in the semiological field such as Michel de Certeau, Charles Sanders Peirce, Hubert Damisch, and Jacques Derrida, whose impact on the discipline has been increasingly acknowledged. For instance, the play of signification systems is artfully described in the introduction to the book where Gaudio juxtaposes the making of a copperplate engraved image in de Bry's workshop with the "blank page" of the "Chief of Roanoke's" un-inscribed copper chest piece adornment, revealing an intriguing alignment of signifiers. This sort of analysis is continued especially in the first chapter

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of the book, called “Savage Marks,” where in a discussion of the specific terms used for the act of inscription, Gaudio gestures towards an understanding of agency on the part of those being represented, the Native American man and the inscribed marks—tattoos—that have been made on his back. In turning his critical and interpretative instruments to bear on the images themselves, in the material sense, he is able to situate the images much more fully in the cultural context that gave them meaning and for which they had representational effects. No longer can they be seen simply as windows onto what early Virginia was actually like (if this ever was the case) nor can they be only problematic European imaginings of the encounter bound up with the larger project of “coloniality,” as Gaudio calls it. His stated aim is to “name the materials and techniques through which [de Bry’s printed book] constitutes itself as a text and, more generally, through which an early modern ethnography constituted its subjects and objects” (p. 2).

Chapter 2, “Making Sense of Smoke” further elaborates the book’s semiotic and post-structural approach to the imagery, finding interest in the insubstantial and “senseless” aspects of the printed artifact, in this case the representation of “smoke” and grotesquerie. Although Gaudio never seeks to limit the interpretative framework for these images, he rather studiously avoids making observations about the images’ locations in a broader tradition of European iconography; his purpose is much more specific to the problems of creating ethnological subjects in the context of the Reformation and the Protestants’ renewed suspicion of images and image-making, particularly during the 17th century when these images were first received.

In chapters 3 and 4, the full extent of the print medium’s implications for signification at the level of the engraved image is further explored. Gaudio’s discussion of de Bry’s print “Tombe of their Weroans” relates the bodies of deceased chieftains with the “unreformed” body of Christ in Christian thought. Gaudio makes his case in terms of what such images and their reproduction in subsequent published histories can say about the early forms of comparative ethnology, as produced in 17th and 18th century texts, and for what it tells us about the attitudes of the Protestant print makers and their audiences.

Engraving the Savage makes a strong case for looking more closely at the materiality of the printed images of American Indians. Its attention to the specific features of the intaglio and relief processes suggests that an analysis of the iconography of such images is impoverished without reference to the texture of the engraved mark. For it is at this deeper level of signification, where workshop practice meets intellectual curiosity, that the image of the other is constituted. Through Gaudio’s analysis, the exigencies of the engraver’s situation, working within a culturally and semiotically bound system, are not impermeable barriers to any comprehension of the original inhabitants of North America; instead, the trace of the European encounter with the New World is revealed in the material practice of engraving, whose sharpness of line wrestles with the uncertainty of cultural difference.

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