



Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization

Michael Gaudio

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In 1585, the British painter and explorer John White created images of Carolina Algonquian Indians. These images were collected and engraved in 1590 by the Flemish publisher and printmaker Theodor de Bry and were reproduced widely, establishing the visual prototype of North American Indians for European and Euro-American readers.

In this innovative analysis, Michael Gaudio explains how popular engravings of Native American Indians defined the nature of Western civilization by producing an image of its “savage other.” Going beyond the notion of the “savage” as an intellectual and ideological construct, Gaudio examines how the tools, materials, and techniques of copperplate engraving shaped Western responses to indigenous peoples. Engraving the Savage demonstrates that the early visual critics of the engravings attempted—without complete success—to open a comfortable space between their own “civil” image-making practices and the “savage” practices of Native Americans—such as tattooing, bodily ornamentation, picture-writing, and idol worship. The real significance of these ethnographic engravings, he contends, lies in the traces they leave of a struggle to create meaning from the image of the American Indian.

The visual culture of engraving and what it shows, Gaudio reasons, is critical to grasping how America was first understood in the European imagination. His interpretations of de Bry’s engravings describe a deeply ambivalent pictorial space in between civil and savage—a space in which these two organizing concepts of Western culture are revealed in their making.

Michael Gaudio is assistant professor of art history at the University of Minnesota.

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