

Reviews

Worlds Collide

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The First Viral Images: Maerten de Vos, Antwerp Print, and the Early Modern Globe, by Stephanie Porras, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023, 185 pp., 27 col. and 61 b. & w. illus., hardback, £91.95.

Amerasia, by Elizabeth Horodowich and Alexander Nagel, New York: Zone Books, 2023, 464 pp., 13 col. and 175 b. & w. illus., hardback, £35.

Two recent books chart different courses for examining art objects on the move in the early modern world. In *The First Viral Images*, Stephanie Porras demonstrates incisively how close attention to a focused selection of images opens up trajectories far from their place of manufacture. In *Amerasia*, Elizabeth Horodowich and Alexander Nagel organise an impressive amount of material into a book that they describe as ‘a preliminary cabinet display’, like a *Kunstammer* of almost encyclopaedic ambition (15). A rich body of work in recent decades has examined early modern art for its mobilities, exchanges and circulations.¹ However, both volumes largely eschew those terms in favour of their own analytic devices. Porras in particular critiques the term ‘circulation’ for obscuring the mediating power of individuals and systems in propagating particular images and visual strategies, as though objects circulate on their own. Thus, Porras adopts the notion of virality, which better attends to these power dynamics. Horodowich and Nagel use the word ‘Amerasia’, which names a worldview that was less

about those two continents as known entities than early modern Europeans’ own uncertainty or anxiety with regards to their place in a new world.

Porras anchors her study around two sets of images: a popular illustrated devotional text entitled *Evangelicae historiae imagines* and a design of *St. Michael the Archangel* by Maerten de Vos, executed as a painting and an engraving. Both sets of images date to late sixteenth-century Antwerp, but Porras is concerned particularly with the many ways that artists around the world mobilised these images to local ends across the seventeenth century. Thus, while de Vos appears in the book’s title for the authority that his design held, the book is less about de Vos as an individual than about his global reach and the numerous artists across Latin America and the Philippines who creatively re-worked his design as it travelled, especially by way of copies. Porras diligently traces de Vos’ design across a multitude of materials, including ivory carvings from Manila, which often operated as export products sent back to Latin America (plate 1). This roughly sixty-to seventy-year span between de Vos’ design from the 1580s and the export of these ivory carvings in the mid-seventeenth century, Porras writes evocatively, ‘[indicates] the speed with which this design circumnavigated the globe—within a human lifetime’ (8).

Despite this enticing formulation of a lifetime, Porras goes beyond the notion of an object’s biography to theorise an excellent model for framing the mobility of early modern images: virality. She defines virality as a social phenomenon that captures the complex pathways by which people replicate images across mediums and geographies. Instead of a linear relationship, with one artist interpreting another artist’s source image, Porras describes rhizomatic, distributed networks in which artists synthesised



I Manila artist, *St. Michael the Archangel*, c. 1630. Ivory with polychromy and gilding, 140.3 × 63.5 × 33 cm. Baltimore: Walters Art Museum. Photo: Walters Art Museum.

multiple source materials and in which replication is mediated by powerful state or religious actors, or gatekeepers. Rather than merely project internet culture onto the past, Porras is careful to outline that virality in the early modern sense was engendered by technologies like engraving and infrastructures like the rise of regular transoceanic travel. Porras' deployment of a timely term and her clear manner of writing make her text useful for teaching. In her skilful hands, virality resonates on multiple levels. Beyond referring to the reproduction of images both then and today, the term also brings into view the biopolitical violence wrought by European invaders on indigenous people and their land, as well as the global Covid-19 pandemic during which she wrote the book. In these ways, the book makes accessible to a variety of readers a mode for understanding the past both in its historical context and in continuity with our contemporary moment.

In the second chapter, Porras establishes the importance of Antwerp to the virality of the images in her book due to the many networks in which Antwerp was enmeshed as a major port and printing city. The Society of Jesus chose to produce and publish the *Evangelicae historiae imagines* in Antwerp despite its connections to Rome because of the markets opened up by Antwerp's overseas connections and the masterful quality of its engraving, including the work of de Vos. It was this attention to marketability that, according to Porras, enabled the *Imagines* to go viral and inspire replications and reinterpretations in Mughal South Asia, China, the Andes and elsewhere. The book then picks up speed in its remaining three chapters as Porras deftly articulates the localised contexts and meanings that attended the movements of de Vos' *St. Michael the Archangel* across Antwerp, Latin America and the Philippines. In the context of Antwerp, in chapter three, Porras interprets de Vos' unusually unarmed *St. Michael* both as an appeal from the printmakers for Catholic Spain to forgive their Protestant pasts amidst the Counter-Reformation and as 'a magnanimous interpretation of Philip's reign' as one of 'graceful victory' (64).

Chapter four moves across the Atlantic to Mexico and Peru. Examining the inclusion by a Limeño artist of an indigenous woman donor in a painting of *St. Michael*, Porras concludes that the viral image 'can simultaneously address multiple and overlapping audiences', in this case those with a connoisseurial eye for de Vos' design and/or those with localised knowledge of the donor or her textiles (105). In chapter five, de Vos' two-dimensional design is fleshed out in three dimensions by ivory carvers, typically Chinese immigrants to the Philippines, who negotiated the unique materiality of the tusk, including its inherent sheen and curvature (plate 1). These examples show Porras' overriding interest in recovering the artistic agency involved in copying, whereby printmakers, painters and ivory carvers made strategic choices to conform to, and diverge from, source materials according to their local contexts. In this way, *The First Viral Images* joins other recent work that analyses the copy as a crucial site of artistic creativity and skill.²

While the above has explained the term 'viral', there is something to be said about another important word in the book's title: 'first'. The title makes the apparent proposal that de Vos and/or Antwerp hold a unique claim to the first images that art history might deem to have been viral. Porras is well aware

of Eurocentric biases and clarifies that it is not so much de Vos' design on its own but rather the specific systems of his broader historical moment, such as settler colonialism and the consolidation of global capital in the form of silver, that created the conditions for virality. She notes that one might posit something like porcelain vessels as an even earlier viral object; however, throughout the book, she emphasises the medium of the print as essential to virality (56). Images travelled long distances and prompted the making of copies prior to the innovation of the printing press.³ While Porras describes a scale of systematised image-making that is particular to the early modern period, it is a testament to the power of her methodology to wonder if virality might be useful, too, to global art histories of earlier periods (as well as, of course, later ones). Given that it is a book so concerned with toggling between the global and the local, *The First Viral Images* invites readers of a variety of disciplinary subfields to imagine how virality might apply across both space and time to localities whose images evince imperial aims and global connections.

By bridging the Pacific Ocean, the ivory St. Michael sculptures tied Asia and the Americas together in a manner that Horodowich and Nagel might argue held significant historical precedent. In *Amerasia*, the authors amass a vast amount of material that speaks to a shifting early modern worldview of America and Asia as geographically and/or conceptually linked or overlapping. The so-called discovery of the new world around the turn of the sixteenth century, they write, did not fix understandings of world geography but rather instantiated a paradigm through which Europeans attempted to make sense of America by way of association with Asia, sometimes with reference, as well, to Africa. This slippage is what resulted, for instance, in a woodcut illustration from a German travel account dating to 1515 which shows the local people of Sumatra wearing feather headdresses and accoutrements belonging to the Tupi people of Brazil. The authors' term 'Amerasia' and its recurrent adjectival form ('Amerasian thinking', 'Amerasian logic', 'Amerasian imaginary', 'Amerasian views') delineate a subjective, unstable category, as knowledge of the two continents continually changed across the early modern period. While not an operative term within their primary sources, 'Amerasia' permits Horodowich and Nagel to mobilise a wide range of materials that they say might otherwise slip through the cracks as error-filled oddities. They argue convincingly for a

period sensibility that views the conflation of America and Asia not as confusion but as a function of a specific historical position with its attendant prejudices and limitations.

Amerasia is composed of seventeen short chapters, none of them much longer than twenty pages, that are arranged in loosely chronological order and move across India, Brazil, Mexico, China, Canada, England, Italy, Japan, Peru, Indonesia and the Pacific Ocean. An exciting aspect of *Amerasia* is its attention to the sonic dimensions of European colonial expansion, which is borne out in some of the book's objects. The authors write that 'Amerasia could never have arisen without the constant interaction with Indigenous communities and voices' (23). They trace, for instance, how Christopher Columbus' misapprehension of the Arawak word 'Cariba' as 'Caniba' created tropes about cannibalism that linked the Caribbean to China. Chapter eight focuses on copper bells, likely from western Mexico, that Spanish invaders encountered in northern Mexico and that contributed to their greedy visions that China and Asia were located to the north of Mexico. The sonic objects underscore the extent to which Amerasia emerged through communication. According to the authors, some indigenous communities in northern Mexico may have fabricated stories about rich cities to the north in order to keep the invaders moving through and away from their towns. This interest in orality and sound instructively rounds out art histories of colonisation and domination beyond the visual to include objects that appeal to a variety of senses and beyond dominant narratives to seek some of the stories that colonised people have told.

Horodowich and Nagel implicitly join Porras in describing virality as a characteristic of Amerasia. Regarding dissemination of information about the 'new world', especially by way of the new printing medium of copperplate engraving, they write that '[t]he new world occasionally arrived in samples—botanical, animal, or human specimens, as well as artifacts—but it was assembled into an imaginary above all by printed images' (311). For example, they analyse an engraving by Stradanus from the late sixteenth century that depicts Amerigo Vespucci claiming and naming America, both as land and as allegorised, nude human figure (plate 2). Prints made America accessible to Europeans, who were aware of 'participating in a broadcast ... [with] other people in other places holding the same image' (311). In this way, America and other parts of the world became stereotyped



2 Theodor Galle after a design by Jan van der Straet, called Stradanus, *America*, c. 1588. Copper engraving on paper, 27 × 20 cm. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

in the imaginations of many Europeans as distant both in space and time, branded with the supposed backwardness of nudity. Such prejudicial notions are infectious. The authors write that ‘prints hosted images ... [that] turned their viewers and collectors into hosts for images of all kinds’ (313). Horodowich and Nagel’s language here (‘hosts’) is distinctly viral.

The bulk of the images in *Amerasia* are, understandably, maps. In chapter two, European maps from across the sixteenth century seem to bring Asia and America closer together. Particularly striking, though, is the discussion in chapter four of the embodied viewing of globes. Ruminating on Raphael’s *Philosophy* fresco and the globes painted within and around it, Horodowich and Nagel suggest that the full room (the *Stanza della Segnatura*) and its programme operate as a compass that orientates viewers to the cardinal directions. They zoom in on a rendering of

the earth at the centre of the cosmos in a vault panel, which may actually have been painted by Johannes Ruysch and which is located above the *Philosophy* fresco. The authors propose that this globe presents an unusual view from below, one centred on the southern hemisphere, perhaps inspired both by viewers’ position below the vault and by knowledge garnered from sailors rounding the southern capes of Africa and South America. This ‘view from below’, they write, ‘gives us a new view of the world ... with the [Western] viewer’s own position lost to view’ (106).

Amerasia follows its own advice about seeking a different view with the addendum of a very welcome afterword by Timothy Brook, which re-orientates the reader through the perspective of Chinese cartographers. Brook focuses especially on the cartographer Luo Hongxian and his mid-sixteenth-century *Map of the Maritime Barbarians to the Southeast and Southwest*. (As one can tell from the title, maps here, too, are tools of imperial ambitions and policed borders.) Brook beautifully details how areas of Luo’s map, especially Africa, reveal that Luo copied only the

bottom half of a fourteenth-century world map as part of making his. Brook suggests convincingly that Luo was in possession of only a bottom half of a copy of that earlier map, which likely had torn along the horizontal middle point, as frequently-folded maps are wont to do. In Brook's words, Luo 'may not have even known that an upper half existed' (377). Here readers are given a gorgeous, satisfying rhyme with Horodowich and Nagel's much earlier 'view from below' of the southern hemisphere. In a book about unsettled and unsettling worldviews, the fascinating mental image of a world map lacking a northern hemisphere makes one wonder what it might have been like if details such as this were woven into the book earlier.

These two wonderful books both break important new ground on how global art history can attend to early modern European art while directly confronting the imbrication of art within empire and its attendant power dynamics. Strikingly, the two books end in the same place. In their final chapters, the books each examine Manila and transpacific trade. Horodowich and Nagel write that, with the rise of the systematic trade of goods between Asia and America in the seventeenth century, the 'land-based Amerasian idea was adapted to the new transpacific Amerasian reality' (354). One example might be Porras' ivory St. Michael sculptures, which returned de Vos' imagery, but in a new form, back along the trade routes whence it came. Are such sculptures Amerasian, though? Porras refers to these objects as 'Hispano-Philippine ivories', a term that locates them much more specifically within cultures and places rather than whole continents. She also says the ivory that the carvers worked came from both Asia and Africa. How do we tell the art history of objects that open onto as many as four continents? These two books provide ample inspiration for innovative, rigorous modes by which to do so.

Notes

- 1 For instance, Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall, *Collecting across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, Philadelphia, 2011; and Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, London and New York, 2015.
- 2 See Aaron Hyman, *Rubens in Repeat: The Logic of the Copy in Colonial Latin America*, Los Angeles, 2021.
- 3 One instructive example is the catalogue of the recent exhibition 'Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time', which follows the movements of images across mediums and distance in medieval West Africa, North Africa, the Middle East and Europe. Kathleen Bickford Berzock, *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa*, Princeton, 2019.