

The voyager as a scholar.
Amerigo Vespucci in Early Modern graphical representation

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In 1507 German cosmographers Mathias Ringmann and Martin Waldseemüller suggested the name of Amerigo Vespucci for the designation of a region in the South Atlantic. Both authors had read the letter written by the Italian sailor and published in 1503 under the title *Mundus novus*. Vespucci's travelogue gave rise to his celebrity: between 1503 and 1505 the *Mundus novus* was published no less than 29 times, 19 times alone in the German speaking countries. As it has been rightly stated by Luis de Matos, no other document related to the Portuguese overseas endeavor has ever found such swift and widespread dissemination.¹

It is worth mentioning that Mathias Ringmann was living in Paris at the time when Fra Giovanni Giocondi, a well-known architect from Verona and a friend of the Florentine sailor, very much probably translated Vespucci's letter to Lorenzo di Pier Francesco de Medici into Latin.² Knowing about the first edition in the French capital might in fact have stimulated the idea of further editions, as Ringmann himself published a version of the letter two years later in Strasburg. This time, Ringmann chose a new title, *De ora antartica...*, instead of *Mundus novus* (Fig. 1) and added to the original a text written by himself. Ringmann confirmed what had been rejected ever since St. Augustin: the existence of the so-called antipodes. The illustrated title page of the 1505 Vespucci edition clearly shows this opposition of two worlds without communication.³ Portuguese experiences overseas were going to challenge the classical concept of the world, rendering visible how much ancient authorities had missed and failed in the attempt at a correct description of the entire world. Ringmann explicitly refers to Ptolemy pointing out that one had now learned about regions that did not appear at all in his maps. Here we find one of the

¹ Matos 1991: 288.

² Vogel 1995: 15; Briesemeister 2000.

³ Matos 1991: 305.

main reasons for its editorial success: the revelation of new geographic knowledge.



Fig. 1: Amerigo Vespucci, *De ora antarctica per regem Portugallie pridem inuenta*, Strasburg, 1505

This new geographic knowledge not only included topographical issues, as it also referred to a wide range of increasing interest in new peoples with new and unknown costumes, as shown by the xylographs that illustrated some of the Vespucci editions, awakening the curiosity of those readers who would like to know more about the world. Be it for professional reasons or as a question of improving knowledge, geographical and cosmographical issues lay at the center of contemporary science. As pointed out by Frauke Gewecke, information on the discovery of a whole new world certainly caused a deep impact on the public, as Vespucci very well knew.⁴ It implied a revelation completely unknown to the recognized authorities whose reception had recently increased again.

When in 1507, two years after the first edition of Vespucci's letter, Mathias Ringmann and Martin Waldseemüller published their *Cosmographiae introductio*, a cosmographical text which accompanies the edition of a world map, they gave the name of America for the first time to the lands which had remained unknown until then, thus honoring the man who first wrote and reported about them. Two humanists baptized a region using the female version – following here the examples of Africa and Asia – of the surname of a Florentine navigator. Still it should be noted that the two cosmographers do not

⁴ Gewecke 1986: 105.

refer to a continent, but to an island instead, completely surrounded by water, as suggested by Vespucci himself. It remained uncertain whether the newly discovered lands were to be considered a continent and if so whether they were the same Columbus had discovered further north and whose southern extension was still unknown. Thus, Ringmann and Waldseemüller duly decided to call the region by the name of its rapporteur. Only later it was possible to establish the real extension of this island as a continent, which would then adopt the name given to its southern part by the two cosmographers from Saint Dié.

It is in this state of uncertainty and in the context of an increasing geographical and cosmographical knowledge that Ringmann and Waldseemüller published the recent, contemporary and experience-based information delivered by Vespucci accompanied by a reedition of Ptolemy's *Geography*, dating originally from the 2nd century AD. In this sense, Ringmann and Waldseemüller recognized in Vespucci a renovator of geographical knowledge, the new Ptolemy, as shown in the juxtaposition of their two portraits in the planisphere from 1507 (Fig. 2). On the left we see Ptolemy next to a map of the old world, and on the right Vespucci is depicted next to a map of "his" new world or – to use a contemporary term frequently adopted by geographers and scholars of the time – next to the extra-Ptolemaic world, which Vespucci had known, described and disseminated so successfully.

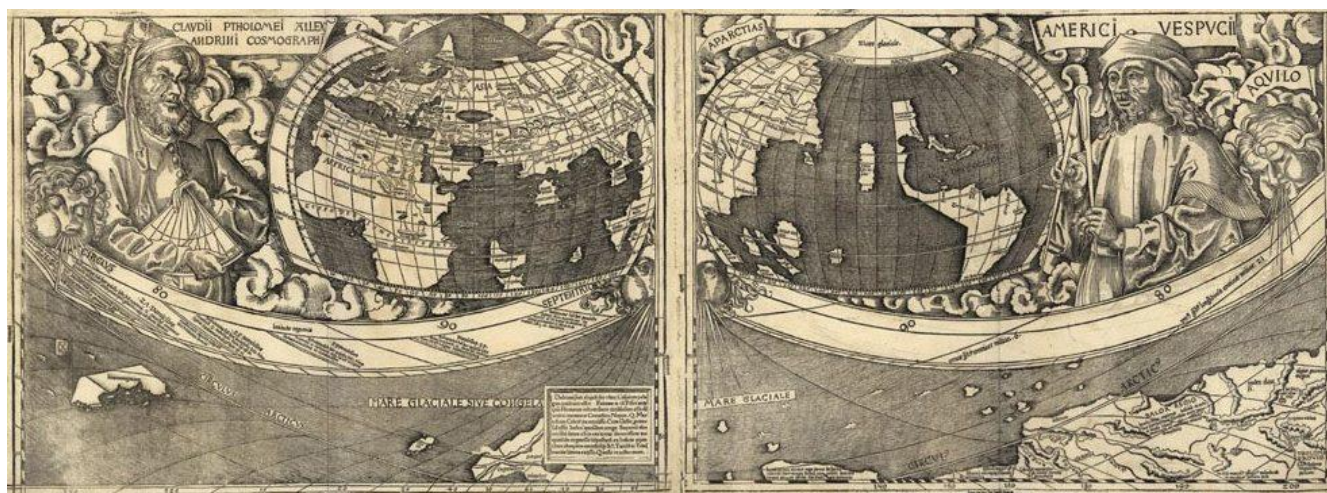


Fig. 2: Emisphere of the Ancients and Emisphere of the Moderns. Upper central part of the *Universalis cosmographia secundum Ptholomaei traditionem et Americi Vespuccii aliorū que lustrationes* [Saint Dié des Vosges, 1507], one printed planisphere made of twelve leaves; 128 x 233 cm. Washington DC, Library of Congress.

The German humanists not only attributed Vespucci's name to America, they clearly wanted to distinguish him and his knowledge as being worth standing on the same level as a classical authority like Ptolemy – though, of course, opposed to him. Their iconographic message is as clear as it is unique – so

scarce is a personified representation of navigators. But in the case of Vespucci, Ringmann and Waldseemüller recognized his importance as a messenger of a completely new knowledge that he was able to understand and put forward. This is the reason why he is represented with a compass and in the robe of a scholar, as if he were teaching the new dimension of the world. For many researchers, Vespucci's work represents a crucial element to the fundamental change that the history of European culture would go through at the time.⁵ Vespucci's *Mundus Novus* would not just inform about a previously unknown world, but it would simultaneously replace ancient knowledge with the empiric experience of the overseas efforts. As Vespucci had received a broad and extensive humanistic education in Florence and at the same time being aware of the Iberian endeavor, he was particularly well prepared to understand and describe the real meaning of the new geographic insights; what he saw with his own eyes and what his voyages allowed him to experience. Thus, he became an outstanding representative of coeval knowledge, widely recognized and emphasized by his contemporaries. Depicting Vespucci next to Ptolemy, a classical authority, meant upgrading contemporary knowledge to the level of ancient heritage: just as Ptolemy in former times, Vespucci now turns out to be one of the pillars of a new description of the world.

The representation of Vespucci as a scholar is an exceptional if not singular case in Renaissance cartography, a case which will decisively mark the path of geographic and global knowledge in the sixteenth century. In fact, at the beginning of the century, Vespucci's name is strongly linked to the profound change in the conception of the world.

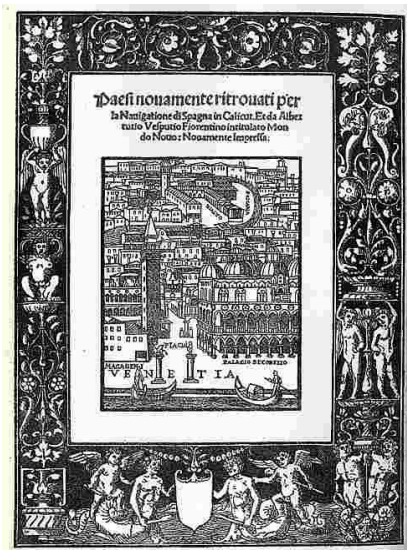


Fig. 3:
Fracanzio da Montalbodo, *Paesi nouamente retrouati et*



Fig. 4: [Amerigo Vespucci], *Von der new gefunden Region so wol ein welt genempt mag werden, durch den*

⁵ See for example Wallisch 2002.

Nouo Mondo da Alberico Vesputio Florentino intitulado.
Stampato in Vicentia : Cu[m] la impensa de m[a]g[ist]ro
Henrico Vicentino: & diligente cura & industria de
Za[m]maria suo fiol, Nel. M.ccccvii. adi. iii. de
Nouembre [Vicenza 1507]

*Cristenlichen Künig von Portugal, wunderbarlich
erfunden, Nüremberg: Wolffganng Hueber [1506]*

Thus it is hardly surprising that the collection of travelogues edited by Francanzio da Montalboddo under the title *Paesi nouamente retrouati et Nouo Mondo da Alberico Vesputio Florentino intitulado* mentioned Vespucci's name already in the title, although the collection contains the writings of many other contemporary travelers, such as Christopher Columbus (Fig. 3). Nonetheless this anthology gives special attention only to Vespucci. Columbus is considered one of the many travelers who arrived at former unknown countries, many of them working on behalf of the Portuguese crown. As long as there is no notion that the lands described by Vespucci and Columbus actually belonged to the same continent, it was Vespucci's name that guaranteed the interest and importance of a new world.

Vespucci's name is frequently associated with the initiatives carried out by the Portuguese king, as can be confirmed by the frontispieces of several editions of his work. This is the case of a 1506 edition of the *Mundus novus*, where one finds a knight whose coat of arms resembles that of the King of Portugal. (Fig. 4) His whole appearance seems to defend an ideal of chivalry, in which Europe recognizes the Portuguese King as the one responsible for a glorious maritime endeavor and in which the monarch could claim to be the vanguard and leader of European Christianity, an ideal clearly stated in the very title: *Von der neu gefunden Region die wol ein welt genent mag werden / durch den Cristenlichen künig von portigal/ wunderbarlich erfunden* (About a new found region which might be called a world / marvelously discovered by the Christian King of Portugal).

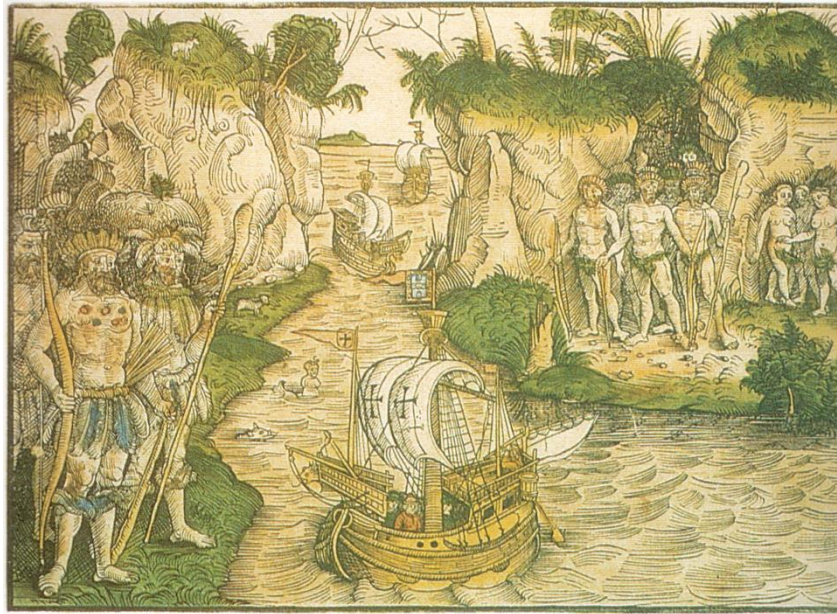


Fig. 5: [Amerigo Vespucci], *Das sind die new gefunde[n] mensche[n] od[er] volcker Jn form vn[d] gestalt Als sie hie stend durch de[n] Cristenlichen Künig von Portugall/ gar wunnderbarlich erfunden*, [Nürnberg: Stuchs?] 1505

However in this first phase of acknowledgement of Portuguese overseas endeavors, attention was not only driven to the historical feats of Portuguese leaders, but also to the surprising and decisive discovery of peoples which had been unknown before. This fascinating discovery was given duly evidence both in illustrated frontispieces or through long titles that underlined its importance, as made clear by an edition of Vespucci's letter published in Leipzig in 1505: *Das sind die new gefunden menschen oder volcker Jn form vnd gestalt | Als sie hie stend durch den Cristenlichen Künig von Portugall | gar wunnderbarlich erfunden* (These are the new found people or peoples in the form and manner | as they here stand marvelously discovered by the Christian King of Portugal). In the lower side of the image we see a caravel sailing up an unknown river and on its margins people stand admiring the spectacle: some of them are naked, others wear skirts made of feathers and head adornments also made of feathers, while a few of them hold bows and arrows, as described by Vespucci. (Fig. 5) On their narrow and tight way, the ships appear in disproportionate dimensions, much smaller than the people watching them. The image of the strong and robust people corresponds faithfully and meticulously to the description given by the Italian sailor in the service of the Portuguese king, even evidencing the detail revealed by him concerning the habit of piercing body and face with stones. This is one of the earliest representations of feather skirts and adornment that later on become the iconographic stereotype for the representation of American people, in particular of Brazilian Indians. Only later in the sixteenth century, when it became clear that Vespucci's letter referred to the same continent that had been discovered by Columbus, the name of

Portugal became less considered, while the first voices that criticized the choice of the name of ‘America’ and thus the reference to the Florentine sailor, appeared, such as in Bartolomeu de las Casas’ *Historia de las Indias* and later in Michael Servetus’ edition of Ptolemy’s *Geography* published in Lyon in 1535.⁶ In fact, while the suggestion to designate the new lands with the name of Amerigo Vespucci was quickly and widely accepted, it took much more time to actually recognize the discovery of America itself as an unquestionable fact in all its real dimensions.⁷

The high number of editions in which Vespucci’s letter was published bears witness of the interest in such an enigma. In all, 50 editions drew attention to Vespucci’s discovery, so that he frequently could be set at the side of Christophe Columbus, as in the works of Johann Schöner and Sebastian Münster. While in the *Opusculum geographicum*, published in 1533, Schöner still referred to the new regions as an island, Sebastian Münster’s *Cosmographia* developed the idea of a continent with two distinct zones (North- and South-America), still, they both mention Columbus as well as Vespucci.⁸ The same combination can be observed in Johann Stradanus’ famous engraving *America relectio* where Vespucci and Columbus are represented together as the discoverers of the continent.⁹ The Flemish artist, born under the name Jan van der Straet (1523-1605), worked in Florence at the Medici court and his concept was reused again some years later by Phillippp Galle in a 1589 edition of engravings representing America.



Fig. 6: Adriaen Collaert / Johann Stradanus, *America relectio*, Antwerp: Galle 1589; 20,9 x 27,4 cm

⁶ Vogel 1995: 27

⁷ Lopes 1995.

⁸ Lopes 1992: 108-123.

⁹ Palm 1985.

In the *America relectio* (Fig. 6) the discovery is revealed by the Holy Spirit in the figure of a dove uncovering the globe, in which shape of America is clearly recognizable: by lifting the cover the world is rendered visible. On the left we see Flora, the goddess of flowers and spring, holding the cover, and on the right Janus, the god with his two faces of beginnings and transition. On the top one perceives two smaller representations in form of locket. Vespucci on the left is accompanied by a warrior standing on a car pulled by lions and decorated with the coat of arms of Florence, the *fleur-de-lis*. Could it be a Florentine campaign? Below we see the Italian coastline with Genoa at its center and expanding on to Livorno, celebrating the art of travel. This representation clearly emphasizes the Italian presence and contribution – and particularly the role of the Medici. It is worth mentioning that the engraving appeared at a time when Ferdinando I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, who had begun his rule in 1587, tried to promote commerce by amplifying Livorno's harbor, perhaps in an attempt to participate in the colonization of America.¹⁰ It might also be stressed, that the engraving is dedicated to Ludovico and Luigi Alamanni, two scholars from the Florentine academy which shows how much the engraving were part of a larger scientific debate.¹¹

Stradanus came back to Vespucci in one of the three engravings representing the three discoverers of America: Columbus, Vespucci and Magellan. In this very famous set of engravings, we see Vespucci arriving at the continent, which – as the inscription says – had received his name. (Fig. 7) Although the mast is apparently broken, the sailor standing on the prow of the ship, next to the flag with a Christian cross, seems to be looking towards his successful endeavor. In front of the ship a triton and a Nereid display pieces of human bodies, reminding that the cannibals do not live far from this coastline, and thus announcing the arrival at the Brazilian coast. The enormous sunset in the background makes it clear that this ship is heading west. Between the ship and the land one sees a warrior standing on a turtle pulled by lions, as if on a combat car. This car pulled by lions and the adornment made of peacock feathers on the head of the Nereid suggest an Indian atmosphere resembling the conquest of India by Bacchus, an older maritime triumph in another India. The fact that it would take long to conclude a new and complete description of the world might explain the exotic choice of a turtle (standing for slowness) as a means of transportation.

¹⁰ Palm 1985: 13.

¹¹ Markey 2012: 392-398.



Fig. 7: Adriaen Collaert / Johann Stradanus, *Americus Vesputius Florentinus portentosa navigatione*, Frankfurt: Bry 1589; 23,7 x 30,4 cm

Between land and sea, between *India*, the landing they were looking for, and the territory they discovered, stands the sailor, not dressed as a warrior (his armor lies on the ground) but in scholar's attire, holding the instrument of knowledge that had brought him further: a quadrant. The representation is very much to the taste of Renaissance curiosity, an idea reinforced by the inscription *Vesputius Florentinus portentosa navigatione* that emphasizes Vesputti's great achievement in discovering the lands in the South. For Stradanus, Vesputti does not lose his status as the discoverer of America – a representation that was later adopted by many authors and publishers, such as the famous family de Bry, who published the best-known collections of travelogues in the 16th century. The younger Theodor de Bry (1528-1598) included this representation in the fourth volume dedicated to America, *Das Vierdte Buch von der neuwen Welt*, which came out in Frankfurt in 1594.

Stradanus himself went back to Vesputti again in his cycle *Nova reperta*, in which appears the most famous and controversially discussed engraving representing Vesputti talking to a young woman lying in front of him, called *America* (Fig. 8). The rich and fruitful natural landscape of the recently discovered region actually attracted scholars and artists who searched for new forms of representation. Stradanus transforms Vesputti's arrival in the fourth continent into an allegory of an unexpected encounter between the European man and the native woman. Guided by his astrolabe, the navigator reaches the unknown

coast and meets the young and naked woman who later would have been baptized with his name. Undisturbed she gets up from her hammock where she was lying, to meet the respectable man who has come to greet her. He seems to have just arrived, as it is shown by the ships anchored nearby the coastline and he carries not just his experience as a sailor but also the conviction of a man of faith, represented by the crossed banner in his right hand. The young woman seems sound and innocent, seemingly suggesting that such natural virtuousness would soon be converted into a conscious commitment to Christian faith.



Fig. 8: Theodore Galle / Johann Stradanus, *America*, c. 1599–1603; Frankfurt: Bry; 19,8 × 26,7 cm

Glancing around him he sees a fecund, prosperous nature and unknown animals like the one that devours ants and which he will call anteater. Considering the prodigious nature, a sensation of victory and promise must have overtaken the sailor. However a little further in the background some native people seem to shade the praise of the achievement and the pleasure of the moment: they are sitting around a skewer of human meat. The smoke coming out of their grill rises up into the air just between the sailor and the young woman, announcing some unpleasant perspectives.

This representation has been the object of manifold studies in the last decades, particularly in the context of postcolonial and gender studies.¹² It has been demonstrated how clearly the image expresses and reflects the opposition between colonists and colonized people – and how it simultaneously applies an explicitly male gaze at women and at what “innocence” was supposed to be and to be good for.

Without going into details, these colonial and male perspectives were strongly marked by certain prototypes of “discovery”, “science” and “invention” that underlie the humanistic tradition to which

¹² Christadler 2001; Priore 1992.

Stradanus was committed and which his *Nova reperta* represents. In many respects, art and artistic representation worked as a precursor and motor of scientific reflection.¹³ The “discovery” of America had naturally to be included in this vision, as the opening engraving of the cycle demonstrates. (Fig. 9) There we see a young man approaching and pointing at a medallion that displays a map of America encircled by an inscription bearing two names: Columbus as *inventor* and Vespucci as *receptor* and *denominator*. The young man on the left side is pointing at the New World, whereas the old man on the right seems to be leaving: a new generation, a new man is taking over the world. Among the inventions of the time, it is America that stands out as very special and important.

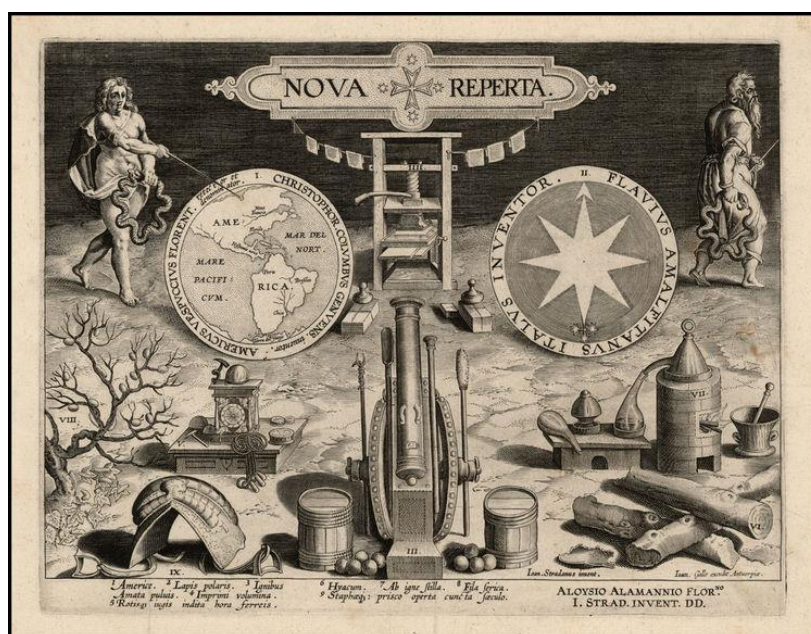


Fig. 9: Jan Collaert / Johann Stradanus, *Nova reperta*, (New inventions and discoveries of modern times), Antwerp: Carel van Mallery 1591; 20,4 x 26,5 cm

Stradanus developed a whole catalogue of illustrations that depicted all recent European inventions: printing press, compass, spectacles, clockwork, distillation, etc. Amerigo Vespucci is repeatedly honored in this work, once again mentioned as the representative of Florentine science and culture.

As Mauro has shown, Vespucci notes in a letter to Lorenzo Pier Francesco Medici how he tried to find a fixed star in the southern sky that could be used in determining the direction, but the search was unsuccessful. He writes: "Even though I had worked so many nights and with so many tools – the quadrant and the astrolabe – I could not identify a star that had less than ten degrees of motion around

¹³ Smith 2006.

the sky; that is why I did not name any of them the austral pole because of the large movement they all made around the firmament".¹⁴ But suddenly, Vespucci remembers a passage from the *Divine Comedy*, and thanks to the words of Dante, he can recognize the Southern Cross: “And continuing this work, I remembered some lines of our poet Dante, mentioned in the first chapter on the Purgatory, when he imagines leaving this hemisphere and wanting to describe the Antarctic pole on the other:

I turned right, and well in front of
the southern pole, I saw the four stars
never again seen since the very first people.

The sky was full of their brightness:

You northern widower are not allowed
to see such stars!”¹⁵

Vespucci's words are cited in another of Stradanus' images of the *Nova reperta* in which the existence and knowledge of the constellation are confirmed by the author of the *Divine Comedy*. (Fig. 10) As Alessandra Mauro emphasizes, the authority of Dante is sufficient for this identification, since experience finds its proof in the poetic tradition.¹⁶



Fig. 10: Jan Collaert / Johann Stradanus, *Nova reperta*, (New inventions and discoveries of modern times), Antwerp: Carel

¹⁴ Cit. Mauro 1988: 12.

¹⁵ Quoted in Mauro 1988: 12; the English translation is mine.

¹⁶ Mauro 1988: 12.

We thus see Vespucci at work while observing the sky and the stars in the moonlight. On the table beside him there are a lamp, some paper, ink, a globe, a crucifix, in other words all that is needed for a scholar and a scientist to study the world. Next to him, two soldiers are sleeping, recalling the biblical scene on the Mount of Olives and establishing thus an analogy to how revealing has been his work.

Here too, the image conveys the idea of Vespucci as an outstanding reader of the world, and, as such, the constructor of a new scientific image of the world is recalled. This role in the discovery, understanding and, actually, in the cultural construction of the world should be further highlighted by the fact that, for example, Alida Metcalf sees in Vespucci the author of the so-called *Kunstmann II* map.¹⁷ Worth mentioning is also the fact that in 1508 Amerigo was appointed by the Board of Burgos as a *Piloto Mayor*, when the position of a chief pilot was created.¹⁸ This appointment confirms his excellent skills as cosmographer, a position he held for four years until his death on 22 February 1512. Vespucci has to be considered a pilot with a significant curriculum, both concerning the practice of sailing and the teaching of cosmography, especially in the determination of latitude on the high seas by using the astrolabe, tables of solar declination and the so-called *regimento* of the Sun.

Vespucci was the first to formulate the existence of a new world on the other side of the Atlantic. While Christopher Columbus had eagerly sought the islands mentioned by Marco Polo, Vespucci had the exact notion of being in a totally unknown territory. Aware of this fact, Vespucci baptizes the unknown as such and thus his name will be associated to the newly discovered land.

¹⁷ An anonymous map (111 x 99 cm) which has been dated to c. 1502-1506, published by Friedrich Kunstmann in 1859 (*Die Entdeckung Amerikas: Nach den ältesten Quellen geschichtlich dargestellt*, München: Asher & Cie. in Berlin 1859).

¹⁸ Metcalf 2012: 37.



Fig. 11: Arnold Montanus, *De Nieuwe en Onbekende Weereld...*, Amsterdam: Jacob van Meurs 1671

Since the publication of the *Mundus Novus*, Vesputius appears in the cartography and iconography of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the navigator, the geographer, the scientist who thanks to his knowledge, curiosity and interest, discovered *terra incognita*. This was still the image associated to him, a century later, as we see in a picture published in the work of Arnold Montanus (c.1625–1683) in 1671 (Fig. 11).¹⁹ Vesputius is represented as a man of science among his instruments that include a compass and a globe. In the back of the image, behind a curtain, ships are navigating the high seas, certainly sailing towards the West. Bearing a compass in his hand, while studying a geography book – maybe the work of a classic author, perhaps Ptolemy, or even his own account – Vesputius is celebrated as a distinguished *connoisseur* of the science of his time and an outstanding agent within the magnificent and glorifying project of overseas expansion, guided by Renaissance *curiosity*.

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¹⁹ Arnold Montanus, *De Nieuwe en Onbekende Weereld...*, Amsterdam: Jacob van Meurs 1671; the image is published between the pages 60 and 61.

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- Fig. 6: Adriaen Collaert / Johann Stradanus, *America relectio*, Antwerp: Galle 1589; 20,9 x 27,4 cm; <http://alteagallery.com/jpegs/5475.jpg>
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- Fig. 8: Theodore Galle / Johann Stradanus, *America*, c. 1599–1603; Frankfurt: Bry; 19,8 × 26,7 cm; http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Theodor_Galle_after_Johannes_Stradanus.PNG
- Fig. 9: Jan Collaert / Johann Stradanus, *Nova reperta*, (New inventions and discoveries of modern times), Antwerp: Carel van Mallery 1591; 20,4 x 26,5 cm; <http://www4.ncsu.edu/~kimler/hi322/newstuff.html>
- Fig. 10: Jan Collaert / Johann Stradanus, *Nova reperta*, (New inventions and discoveries of modern times), Antwerp: Carel van Mallery 1591; 20,4 x 26,5 cm; http://posner.library.cmu.edu/Posner/books/pages.cgi?call=390_S89N&layout=vol0/part0/copy0&file=0003
- Fig. 11: Arnold Montanus, *De Nieuwe en Onbekende Weereld...*, Amsterdam: Jacob van Meurs 1671. <https://archive.org/stream/denieuweenonbeke00mont#page/60/mode/2up>