

Native American from Virginia 1645

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Native American in Virginia, Wenceslaus Hollar,
1645, etching, London

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The Virginia Native American, etched in 1645 by Wenceslaus Hollar, a Czech artist who most likely traveled to London to create this image, was one of the first images made of Native Americans from the New World. This etching, now in the Fleming Museum, was likely created when the twenty-three year old Native American depicted in the etching was in London as an emissary for the Algonquian tribe. However, most sources site the year of 1710 as the year when the first Native Americans started going to London. Beginning with the four Indian Kings during Queen Anne's reign, a tradition began where portraits were taken of Native Americans when they visited London on business. This essay discusses the depiction of Native Americans in British art, particularly in portraiture, in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Native American paintings were created to help the British people understand and interpret this new culture. Drawings and paintings were meant to depict the tension, contradictions and practices between the colonized and colonizers on an aesthetic level for people in London.¹ A common idea in travel literature was that words could not capture the strangeness of the New World. These pieces of writing emphasized the need to see it in order to believe it. That, only through visual arts, could one grasp the otherness of the New World.² Jean de Lery argues that by using engraving, in particular, the image was able to transmit

¹ Beth Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 1.

² Michael Gaudio, *Engraving the Savage* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xi.

knowledge about the native inhabitations of the Americans.³ Through portraiture, like the Virginia Native American, an artist is able to move past a one-dimensional representation of the subject by adding iconographic elements such as a bow and arrow, as well as visual structure such as light, line, mass and color to help the viewer have a deeper understanding of the message the artist is trying to portray regarding things like an Indian's individual status or power.⁴

These paintings and etchings were meant to demonstrate the Native American as exotic and having come from a remote land. The Native American represented to the British people a distant past where every part of society including the environment was primitive and uncivilized. They thought that Native Americans would be destroyed by God and nature in order to make way for a more progressive and civilized Man."⁵ They believed that as a civilized society they had the right to modernize and utilize the new world so to meet their own needs economically as an imperialist country as well as a Christian country.

The appeal of portraits by the British population of Native Americans as well as Native American portraits of themselves dates back to 1710 when the four Indian "kings" came to London. Englishmen throughout London wanted to see the "savage" and created a market for Mohawk tokens, and other mementos to memorialize the moment.⁶ As a result, etchings, paintings, poems, and pamphlets were created to meet the need of the English population. Additionally, while visiting the queen, each of the four "kings" had their portraits painted which started an English tradition as a ritual form of diplomacy. Native Americans enjoyed having

³ Gaudio, *Engraving the Savage*, xi.

⁴ Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting*, 219.

⁵ Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Berkeley: University of California, 1988), 4.

⁶ Richmond Bond, *Queen Anne's American Kings* (New York: Octagon Books, 1974), 66.

their pictures painted to document the work they had done in London in legal affairs, treaties, land claims and protests as well to show their communities back at home their new position as foreign emissaries.⁷

British society portrayed Native Americans as “noble savages.” The term noble savage, created by the English, who may never have visited the North American colonies, was meant to be a way to try and control the Indian population in hopes of gaining access to territory controlled by Native Americans. However, this land that the British desired had already been taken control over by the colonists.⁸ This term was also meant to explain the progressive Indian who would do anything to protect his family and land, and who was also able to live in both the white and Indian world. This term became a cliché by the end of the eighteenth century and was meant to represent a protector with a splendid body, kept in shape by activity. Their bodies replicated that of ancient sculptures like Apollo del Belvedere.⁹ Opposed to this idea, Copley argues in *Picturing Imperial Power* that Native Americans were in fact primitive, and thus were living without a history, in a timeless present.¹⁰ Additionally, the British saw the noble savage who lived a simple life, being devoid of corruption by luxury and the excesses of commercialized and urbanized civilization.¹¹

While for many artists, they saw the noble savage as muscular and progressive, such as the Native American of Virginia etching, others saw Native Americans as feminine and, as such, depicted them that way. Sometimes Native Americans would be portrayed with bright colors

⁷ William Truettner, *Painting Indians and Building Empires in North America, 1710-1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 4.

⁸ Truettner, *Painting Indians and Building Empires in North America, 1710-1840*, 11.

⁹ Stephanie Pratt, *American Indians in British Art 1700-1840* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 22.

¹⁰ Pratt, *American Indians in British Art 1700-1840*, 22.

¹¹ Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting*, 223.

and elaborate jewelry while the colonists were wearing neutral drab clothing such as in Benjamin West's painting of Penn's Treaty. By doing this, the artist was trying to portray Native Americans as feminine for their desire to consume commodities and their eagerness to receive lustrous cloth. While some Indians were portrayed holding a rifle or hatchet to demonstrate their violent environment, many other Indians were portrayed as emotional, gaudily dressed and feminine to demonstrate their desire for cloth and trinkets - items associated with the British female.¹² This grouping together of Indian and British women was very common, as it was believed that both had

“a love for finery and bodily decorations as well as a consequent mental and moral weakness ‘A strong inclination for external ornaments ever appears in barbarous states...An immoderate fondness for dress, and for sway are the passions of savages; the passions that occupy those uncivilized beings who have not yet extended the dominion of the mind, or even learned to think with the energy necessary to concatenate that abstract train of thought which produces principles....’”¹³

Here the idea of what is masculine is meant to help explain everything that a “savage” is not. They are meant to be primitive people stuck in their own past, who, like the female, gets carried away with new trinkets and is less intelligent than the male. Helen Carr explores this idea further, arguing how the relationship between Native Americans and British colonists helps to demonstrate the relationship between the masculine male and feminine women in British society. She argues that the imagery regarding gender in the American colonial experience is asymmetrical. “This asymmetry might be expressed as the stark oppositions of man and woman, seducer and seduced, and even rapist and victim. This series of binary oppositions is essentially predicated on the notion of active and inactive gendered roles, where a dominant masculinity (Europe) masters a subordinate femininity (America).”¹⁴ This example

¹² Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting*, 59.

¹³ Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting*, 60.

¹⁴ Pratt, *American Indians in British Art 1700-1840*, 14.

demonstrates again the idea that once the British defined masculinity, they defined the Native American as the opposite. Everything a British man was, masculine, explained what the Indian and women was, the opposite, feminine.

Another popular depiction of Native Americans in British culture was in cross-dress. Painters created images of Native Americans dressed as members of British society as a way to improve Indian culture. By being shown in hybrid dress, Native Americans in white mens costumes were meant to show a degree of enlightenment while also showing the ability to cross racial barriers. When the Native American dressed in British military garb, the question was, whether he is “appropriating the power of the Other, or is he reproducing on his body a partial and therefore debased version of colonial power.”¹⁵ This ethnographic informality makes it clear that Enlightenment painters did not particularly care to record exactly what Native Americans wore, or to depict their homes, customs or well known cultural artifacts. However, some Native Americans by dressing up as Englishmen saw this as a way to resist colonizing strategies and as a way to show the negative implications British colonizers would have on Indian society; where the British would infiltrate not only Indian territory, but Indian culture as well.

The use of paintings and etchings to help depict the Native American as a noble savage was very popular during the 17th and 18th centuries particularly when they were still somewhat of a mystery to the majority of the British population. These images helped the British public understand this new world in ways that writing was unable to. Through aesthetic imagery, men who might never travel to the new continent were able to understand life there as well as

¹⁵ Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-Century British Painting*, 82.

to understand the Native American as a noble savage, both progressive and primitive, living in a world that would soon be destroyed to make way for a more civilized society.

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