

Ivory Statue of Columbia: Personification of the Americas

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Columbia, Anonymous, 17th c., Ivory,
Germany

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The ivory statue of Columbia, made in Germany by an unknown artist, shows a Native American woman depicted from a 17th century European viewpoint. The statue is an allegorical representation and personification of America, and may actually be one statue in a series of four, which would also include the personifications of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Together, they would be depictions of the allegorical Four Continents theme that gained popularity in art as trade expanded and globalization increased in Europe during the Baroque period. This expansion of global trade and commerce is highlighted in the choice of material, using the ivory that was made available from the increase of European trade with Asia and Africa. The statue's subject matter and material signify the transfer of information and the globalization of the period. The ivory statue of Columbia is the European Baroque depiction of the allegorical figure of America, and when conceptualized through the allegory of the Four Continents, the statue signifies the cultural and historical importance of the expansion of trade and transfer of information throughout the world, and specifically in Europe, during this time period.

The statue of Columbia, also known as the Indian Maiden, is a 17th century German ivory sculpture. It is darkened and cracked with age, and the objects Columbia once held in her hand have been broken. Columbia is facing left, wearing a headband around her forehead and a scarf draped from her left shoulder to her right hip, along with a skirt and jewelry, but no top or blouse. She is clearly a European conception of a Native American woman, as the face and attire do not reflect actual Native American attributes. This makes the statue itself even more important as it represents the European idea of an Indian Maiden and, furthermore, of America itself. The statue is a personification of the

continent of the Americas, and most likely, it was made as a part of a series depicting the Four Continents. Indeed, the ivory from which the statue is made attests to the expansion of intercontinental trade and the materials that became available as a result.

To better grasp the significance of the statue, it is necessary to understand the history of the Four Continents allegory and its role in 17th century Europe, as well as in Baroque artwork. Waldseemüller's *Cosmographiae* popularized both the term "America" and the idea that America was the fourth and final corner of the world, along with Asia, Africa, and of course, Europe.¹ The iconography of the Four Continents began to be established in the sixteenth century, with customary iconography and predominant motifs emerging from the text and illustrations of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologica*, a handbook of allegorical figures that standardized the use of female personifications accompanied by indigenous animals and artifacts.² The theme of the Four Continents, personified by four queen-like feminine figures, became popular in the arts of Western Europe during the Baroque period.³ The characterizations of geographic and cultural or ethnic units have appeared in art for centuries, and have been seen in ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman art.⁴ As exploration by sea provided links between different lands, the idea of the continents emerged as a concept, beginning with Asia, Africa, and Europe during the Middle Ages, and eventually adding America as the fourth. The Four Continents became a common theme alongside the Four Seasons and the Four Elements in the imagery of the

¹ E.M. Fleming, "The American Image as Indian Princess 1765-1783," *Winterthur Portfolio*, (1965): 67.

² Ashton, M. "Allegory, Fact, and Meaning in Giambattista Tiepolo's Four Continents in Wurzburg," *Art Bulletin*, (1978): 109.

³ Fleming, "The American Image as Indian Princess 1765-1783," (1965): 67.

⁴ Clare Le Corbeiller, "Miss America and Her Sisters: Personifications of the Four Parts of the World," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 19 (1961): 217

arts.⁵ The iconography of the early depictions of the Four Continents varied widely and did not have a set image, but as travel and exploration continued, more information was made available to artists, who used the descriptions of natives from the tales of voyagers and travelers to develop common depictions that were not only unrealistic, but also inaccurate and stereotypical.⁶ For example, America was frequently shown as a huntress from the “uncivilized” part of the world, envisioned as a fierce savage, only slightly removed from the medieval tradition of the wild man.⁷ She is based on notions about the “barbarous” Indians of the semi-tropical and Caribbean regions, presented as Amazonian in size, wearing feathered headdresses and skirts, and armed with a club or bow and arrow.⁸

The results of artists’ depictions of each of the continents were four generally consistent allegorical figures for Europe, Africa, Asia, and America. Europe is often portrayed as a simply and elegantly clad woman of nobility. She is frequently shown in great glory, as the ruler of all of the continents. As such, the allegorical figure of Europe is presented with traditional attributes and symbols of power, including a crown, a scepter, an orb, or a small temple. Her surroundings usually denote Europe’s accomplishments and military power, as well as control over her dominion.⁹ Africa is typically depicted as dark-skinned, and is accompanied by an elephant or wearing an elephant headdress, holding a cornucopia. She is the only one of the four to be copied

⁵ J. H. Hyde, *The Four Continents*. (New York: 1961), 5-6.

⁶ Hyde, *The Four Continents*. (New York: 1961), 6.

⁷ Le Corbeiller, “Miss America and Her Sisters: Personifications of the Four Parts of the World,” (1961): 210.

⁸ Fleming, “The American Image as Indian Princess 1765-1783,” (1965): 67.

⁹ Le Corbeiller, “Miss America and Her Sisters: Personifications of the Four Parts of the World,” (1961): 210-17.

from ancient Roman sources, specifically from Hadrianic coins dating about A.D. 138.¹⁰ The allegory of Asia is dressed similarly to Europe and is symbolic of wealth. This is a reflection of the valuable goods, such as pearls, silk, and spices that Europe gained from trade with Asia.¹¹ Finally, the personification of America was frequently shown as a savage Native American, scantily clad in a skirt and headdress with jewelry and long hair, and armed with a club or bow and arrow, an image which fits well with the description of the statuette of Columbia.¹² These personifications of each of the continents were used in a variety of art and mediums, including sculpture, painting, etching, and writing, and they were also arranged in groups expressing the attitudes and relationships between the continents, most often showing Europe with the highest status and most privileged position.¹³ They were used in “cosmographies” or “imagines mundi” by the Roman Empire, the Papacy, and scientific academies to express universal significance or universal domination.¹⁴

It is from the history of the Four Continents allegory and its use in art during the Baroque period that the statuette of Columbia gains much of its significance. As mentioned earlier, the Indian Maiden statue is a personification of America as viewed through a 17th century European lens. The image of Columbia has many of the characteristics of other allegorical representations, as she is topless and clad in a skirt, jewelry, and headband. The statue itself is made of ivory, a good that became more

¹⁰ Le Corbeiller, “Miss America and Her Sisters: Personifications of the Four Parts of the World,” 217-18.

¹¹ Le Corbeiller, “Miss America and Her Sisters: Personifications of the Four Parts of the World,” 216-17.

¹² Le Corbeiller, “Miss America and Her Sisters: Personifications of the Four Parts of the World,” 210.

¹³ Justin Stagl, *A History of Curiosity: The Theory of Travel, 1550-1800* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), 155.

¹⁴ Stagl, *A History of Curiosity: The Theory of Travel, 1550-1800*, 168.

available as trade between Europe, Africa, and Asia expanded during this time period. These characteristics make the statuette of Columbia a strong representation of the transfer of information and goods between the four continents during the 17th century, as it both reflects a popular theme in the Baroque period of Western Europe and is the product of the globalization of the era.

When contextualized with the tradition of the Four Continents allegory, the statuette of Columbia signifies the cultural and historical importance of the expansion of trade and transfer of information throughout the world. The iconography of the statue and its general subject matter stem from the allegory of the Four Continents, a European theme depicted in numerous artworks and in various mediums that focuses on the personifications of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. Each of the figures represents a continent and depicts a different race. They each wear characteristic clothing and are decorated with telling attributes and accessories. The history and increase in popularity of the Four Continents allegory, specifically the depiction of the allegorical figure of America, contextualize the iconography of the statue of Columbia as representative of the globalization and intercontinental trade between the continents during the 17th century. Furthermore, the ivory used to make the statue adds to its significance, as it was made available by the globalization of trade during the period. For these reasons, Columbia, the Indian Maiden, can be seen as a reflection of the transfer of information and goods, as well as of the expansion of international interactions and trade for European countries during the Baroque period.

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