

3 Envisioning the commercial and colonial world

The four terms just discussed can all be used to illuminate the myriad ways in which European art and visual culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were transformed by commerce and colonialism. Also helpful for this purpose, however, are a number of broad themes widely used by scholars working in this field. Many studies of the global dimension of artistic practice during the early modern period have explored issues of representation, with particular reference to visualisations of the body of the colonised and enslaved Other as well as depictions of the non-European world more generally.⁴⁹ Scholars have also investigated what is variously termed contact, exchange, circulation, transfer and translation, primarily with reference to trade, but also to other activities by means of which people and objects moved from one cultural context to another and were modified in the process, such as diplomacy, missions and conquest.⁵⁰ Underlying much of this work has been a concern with the issue of space, or rather, more specifically, with the articulation of space by means of visual and material strategies, such as mapping, navigation, fortification, urban planning, plantation and the art of landscape, all of which were deployed for commercial and colonial purposes in this period.⁵¹ The remainder of this introduction will draw on these approaches to show how images both reflected and shaped Europeans' understanding of the world.

A significant artistic development that helps to define the period around 1600 as inaugurating a new era in Europe's relationship with the rest of the world is the appearance of the iconography of the four continents. The 'discovery' of America had overturned the ancient tripartite model of the world, but it took a while to establish a new way of conceptualising and visualising the globe. Significantly, it was done through the medium of print, which played a crucial role in diffusing knowledge about the rest of the world during this period. Scholars agree that the



Plate 0.15 Title page to Abraham Ortelius, *Theatrum orbis terrarum*, first edition, Antwerp, 1570. The British Library, London, shelfmark Cartographic Items Maps.C.2.c.1. Photo: © British Library, London/ Bridgeman Images.

breakthrough took place on the title page of a book often termed the first modern atlas, *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (*The Theatre of the World*), published by the Flemish map-maker Abraham Ortelius in Antwerp, in 1570 (Plate 0.15).⁵² A female personification of Europe is enthroned at the top of the image, leaving no doubt



Plate 0.16 Johann Friedrich Eberlein and Johann Joachim Kändler, Meissen factory, allegorical figures (clockwise from top right), *Continents of Europe, America, Asia and Africa*, c. 1760, hard-paste porcelain, height approximately 30 cm. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917. I294A. Photo: Allen Phillips/Wadsworth Atheneum.

as to her dominance of the globe, while Asia and Africa stand on either side below; at the bottom, a reclining America holds a severed head in reference to the cannibalism attributed to its inhabitants. They are accompanied by the bust of a putative southern continent, indicating that the quadripartite division of the globe had yet to be securely established. The image combines the classical tradition of allegorising abstract ideas in the female form with a modern commitment to ordering knowledge in a rational way; each continent is positioned and characterised so as to reflect its relative degree of civilisation (from a European perspective, of course). The iconography was probably borrowed from a civic procession in Antwerp in 1564, in which four ‘empresses’ each carried the products that their part of the world contributed to the global marketplace.⁵³

Although the iconography of the continents originally had a primarily commercial significance, reflecting Antwerp’s status at the time as Europe’s leading port, it was rapidly appropriated for the purpose of asserting a claim to rule over the world. It has already been seen how the iconography was adapted by a Flemish artist in order to celebrate the global dominance of the House of Habsburg, which here takes the place of Europe so that only three continents appear (see Plate 0.1). As has also previously been noted, such claims rested ultimately on a commitment to spreading the Christian faith around the globe; the Catholic Church therefore also adopted the iconography of the continents. Perhaps the most famous of such depictions is the vast ceiling fresco painted by the Venetian artist Giovanni Battista Tiepolo in the bishop’s palace at Wurzburg in Bavaria, in 1752.

All of the European powers who competed for global dominance appropriated this iconography; it appeared on the pediment of the new town hall of Amsterdam at the height of Dutch power, for example (see Chapter 2, Plate 2.4).⁵⁴ Also important to note, however, is that it was thanks to the medium of print that the iconography could be so readily transferred from one cultural context to another, and into different media, including tapestry and porcelain (Plate 0.16). Meissen table ornaments of the four continents, which allowed elite European diners to play at global dominance on a miniature scale, proved highly popular.⁵⁵

The iconography of the continents also raises issues around the representation of non-European peoples, since each was embodied by one of its inhabitants. To a greater extent than the others, Africa was characterised as a distinct physical type; she is shown in profile on Ortelius's frontispiece to reveal her physiognomy, for example. Typically, in European art of this period, black people are depicted in a servile role, unsurprisingly since it was as a result of the slave trade that most of them reached Europe. Usually, as in the Southwell family portrait discussed earlier (Plate 0.13), the black figure is a page boy, who is visually subordinated by being placed on a lower level than his master or mistress. Often, the portrait sitters do not have a direct connection to global commerce, but are monarchs and nobles, for whom the black page functions to enhance their aura of power and splendour in the same way as any other exotic luxury commodity. In portraits of aristocratic women, the dark skin of a black attendant provides a flattering contrast to the refined pallor of the sitter's own complexion. In a seventeenth-century example by the French painter Pierre Mignard, the effect is heightened by the string of pearls around the child's neck, which ironically echoes the metal slave collars used at the time (Plate 0.17).⁵⁶ During the following century, however, a black person might very occasionally be depicted in a formal portrait not as an ornamental appendage, but as a named individual, whose identity and achievements would be of interest to the viewer (see Plate 0.9).

Nevertheless, all such representations were exceptions to the rule. The vast majority of enslaved Africans never reached Europe, but were instead transported to work in the plantations of the New World, of which there is scarcely any pictorial record. Members of colonial elites might sometimes be portrayed with a slave in

attendance, but the whole system of plantation slavery functioned to reduce black people to labouring bodies, of only numerical value for their masters. Among the few images of the period that register the black presence in the New World are scenes in the West Indies painted by Agostino Brunias, an Italian artist employed by the British governor of Dominica, St Vincent and Tobago, which emphasise the prosperity and civility of the islands rather than the sugar production on which their economy depended. These pictures demonstrate how much commerce and colonialism had done by the late eighteenth century to create a new kind of society in the Atlantic world, since they depict a diverse population of African, European (primarily French; France controlled these islands until 1763) and indigenous Carib origins, in which people of mixed black and white descent called mulattos figure prominently (Plate 0.18).⁵⁷ So-called *casta* paintings produced in colonial Mexico reveal a similarly diverse and complex society (see, for example, Chapter 1, Plate 1.28). Such images belie the orderly vision of a quadripartite world inhabited by visibly distinct peoples presented by the iconography of the continents.

From the outset, however, the subordination of Asia, Africa and America in the iconography of the continents conveyed Europe's power to transform the world by commanding people and things across oceans to serve her purposes. She appears in Ortelius's frontispiece with her hand on a cross-like rudder embedded in a globe, metaphorically steering the world. Europe's dominion over the world and its resources is vividly conveyed by the portrait by Mignard discussed above; the seascape behind reveals how both the black girl and the jewels that she offers have reached the aristocratic sitter (Plate 0.17).⁵⁸ If the girl betokens Africa, the jewels evoke Asia, who appears in Ortelius's frontispiece in a jewel-encrusted gown. In this respect, the portrait anticipates eighteenth-century *turquerie*-style pictures that depict an aristocratic European woman attended by a black slave, one or other of whom wears Turkish dress. The conjunction of the black body, Asian goods and the mistress-slave relationship in this type of picture exemplifies an association of sexuality, femininity, luxury, power and the exotic that was a persistent feature of early modern European culture.⁵⁹ It is important to note, however, that *turquerie* did not always convey these potentially negative associations of a typically Orientalist kind.



Plate 0.17 Pierre Mignard, *Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth*, 1682, oil on canvas, 121 × 95 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London. Photo: © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Other eighteenth-century paintings of European women in Turkish dress show them alone, engaged in exemplary domestic occupations such as needlework or reading a book on morality, notably in works by the Swiss artist Jean-Etienne Liotard, who actually travelled to Constantinople (Plate 0.19).⁶⁰ Another significant feature of the pastel painting by Liotard reproduced here is the divan or sofa on which the lady sits; comfortable seating inspired by Asian models helped to transform European design and material culture.

The iconography of the continents also demonstrates that European interest in the rest of the world was not restricted to exotic peoples and luxury goods. Often, as in the Meissen ornaments already mentioned, the figures are accompanied by animals and vegetation

characteristic of the continent they represent (see Plate 0.16). Natural history illustration played an important role in visualising the non-European world during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Scholars working on such images emphasise that the domains of art and science were so closely intertwined during this period that it would be quite misleading to discuss them separately.⁶¹ The motives that prompted natural history projects were commercial as well as scientific, however, as has already been noted in connection with the work of Merian in Surinam (see Plate 0.10). In this case too, the global dominance of the European powers gave rise to extensive movement between different regions of the world in a way that effectively belied the orderly vision



Plate 0.18 Agostino Brunias, *Linen Market, Dominica*, c.1780, oil on canvas, 50 × 69 cm. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection. Photo: Bridgeman Images.

presented by the iconography of the four continents. Crops such as sugar-cane and coffee were transported from Europe and Asia to the New World, where they became lynchpins of the colonial economy, while many exotic new specimens entered zoological and botanical collections in Europe, where they attested to the global power and scientific interests of their owners.⁶² George III, for example, kept a cheetah presented to him by the governor of Madras (Chennai) in a menagerie at Windsor; the gift is commemorated in a painting by George Stubbs showing the cheetah being urged by its handlers to chase a stag (Plate 0.20).⁶³ The houses and gardens of wealthy private citizens could similarly boast animals and plants of non-European origin (see Plate 0.11).

Practices of representation and movement across the globe were closely associated not only with each

other, but also with mapping and other strategies for shaping the commercial and colonial world. Not for nothing did the iconography of the four continents make its first appearance in the earliest world map published in book form. Wall maps of this period also featured personifications of the continents and other geographical entities in decorative cartouches.⁶⁴ The Dutch, for example, not only improved map-making, charted navigation routes and constructed colonial outposts in order to dominate global trade during the seventeenth century, but also, in so doing, pioneered the art of marine painting and produced the first landscapes of the non-European world to be consistently based on first-hand observation, notably during the brief period of their colonial rule over Brazil (Plate 0.8). When they took over from the Dutch as the world's leading commercial and colonial



Plate 0.19 Jean-Etienne Liotard, *Young Woman in Turkish Costume Seated on a Divan* (supposed portrait of Maria Gunning, Countess of Coventry), 1749, pastel on paper, 24 × 19 cm. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva. Photo: Bridgeman Images.

power, the British followed suit. They commissioned marine paintings, appropriating Dutch artists such as Willem van de Velde for the purpose, and, with the shift towards an overtly imperial agenda from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, produced increasing numbers of overseas landscapes.⁶⁵ Examples of such landscapes by William Hodges, who accompanied Captain Cook to the South Pacific and later travelled to India, are typical in the way that they impose a harmonious classicising vision on the disparate territories of the non-European world (Plate 0.21).⁶⁶ In this respect, they parallel the classical buildings erected in British-controlled territories across the world, which reshaped the colonial landscape in a more literal way.

By 1800, however, practices of representation and related strategies were being deployed to oppose as well as to support commerce and colonialism. Among the images produced by the anti-slavery campaign in Britain around this time is one that presents a plan and cross-section of a slave ship, demonstrating how clear and precise techniques of technical illustration could be used to turn knowledge against power (Plate 0.22).⁶⁷ It distils the otherwise unseen horrors of the Middle Passage, the central section of the triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the Americas. In this context, the boycott of West Indian sugar advocated by the abolitionists and taken up by many British households may be construed as a space-shaping strategy, comparable to



Plate 0.20 George Stubbs, *Cheetah and Stag with Two Indians*, c.1765, oil on canvas, 183 × 275 cm. Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester. Photo: Bridgeman Images.



Plate 0.21 William Hodges, *A View Taken in the Bay of Otaheite Peha (Vaitepiha, Tahiti)*, 1776, oil on canvas, 93 × 138 cm. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London. Photo: © NMM.

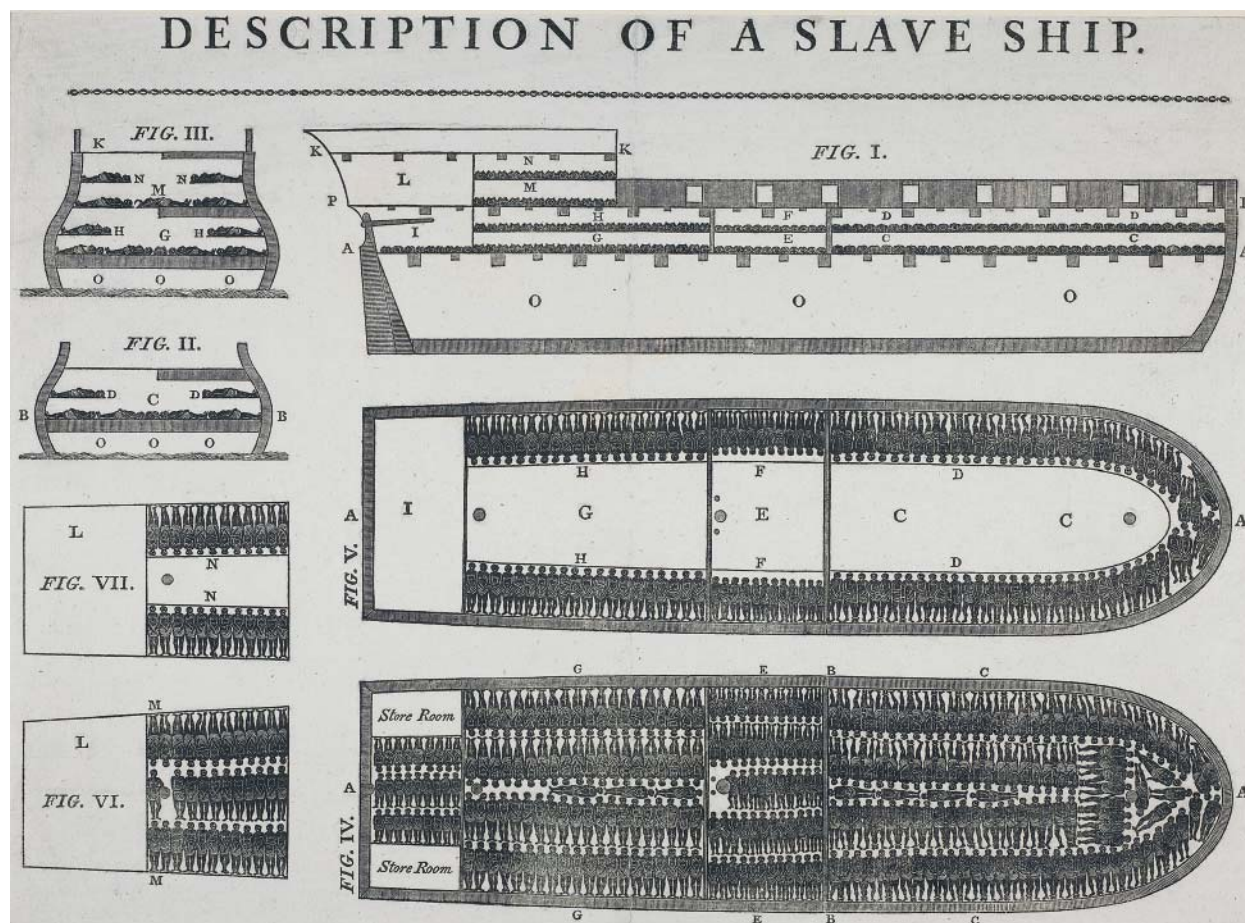


Plate 022 Description of a slave ship, showing plan and cross-section of the 'Brookes' of Liverpool, 1789, woodcut, 33 × 44 cm. British Museum, London, 2000,0521.31. Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

mapping or navigation, only in this case disruptive of the triangular trade. At the same time, however, similar practices and strategies were also being used to reinforce the ordering of the peoples of the world into a hierarchy on the basis of their relative civilisation and barbarism, such as can already be seen in Ortelius's frontispiece. During the eighteenth century, a tradition of visual typologies of different national and ethnic categories was combined with long-standing prejudices against non-Europeans to produce a supposedly scientific understanding of race, in which physical features such as skin colour

and physiognomy played a central role; it was now Africa, rather than America, that was placed at the bottom of the hierarchy.⁶⁸ Both responses to the commercial and colonial world that had come into existence by 1800, that is, political protest and activism, on the one hand, and the rise of modern racism, on the other, together with their shared use of images to convey their message, are indicative of the direct relevance of this period and its art to the world we live in today and hence of the potential they offer for alerting us to contemporary visual politics.