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ARH530: Art and Travel

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A Letter of Columbus

A Letter of Columbus (Logan Elm Press, 1990), a collaborative artists' book created by American poet David Citino, printmaker Anthony Rice, and book artist Robert Tauber uses text and image to create a new version of the story of Italian explorer Christopher Columbus' first encounter with America. The work draws on Columbus' letter of February 15, 1493 to the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella,[1] which Citino re-imagined as Columbus' private diary and personal narrative of his journey.[2] As such the monotypes by Rice are meant to represent the casual doodles and sketches that the famous navigator could have made in his diary of what he saw and experienced first hand in the New World.[3] Columbus' original letter of February 1493 was written with the intention of wide distribution, but here his work is extremely personal and private. Rice's choice to create monotypes, rather than use another sort of printmaking technique, may be based on the spontaneity and expressive qualities associated with this medium. Very few travel logs about the New World or sketches of its land and people survive from the earliest period of contact with Europe, so the authors, artists, and publishers involved with *A Letter of*

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[1] Robert Tauber, e-mail message to author, April 21, 2010.
[2] Robert Tauber, phone conversation with Dr. Rebecca Brienen, April 9, 2010.
[3] Monotypes are made by applying ink or paint to a clean metal plate, which is then put through a printing press and transferred to paper. There are two types of monotypes: light field and dark field. Most of Rice's prints are examples of light field monotypes, in which the artist works from light to dark rather than dark to light. Each image made through the monotype process is one of a kind.

Columbus had to take certain liberties to create something both new and true to its fifteenth-century source.[4] The text of *A Letter of Columbus* and the images that accompany it make Columbus into a very real, sympathetic figure; the viewer pages through the manuscript, reading the famous explorer's words and engaging with his personal, somewhat naïve, sketches. Yet the fact that Columbus, who marveled so at the wonders of the New World, was also responsible for putting into motion forces of change and destruction in the Americas, is an ever present theme throughout the work.

Columbus was the first person to undertake the experiment of sailing west in order to go east; as scholars have noted, he underestimated the size of the earth by several thousand miles. His original goal was China, with the objective of giving non-Venetian Europe a way into the spice trade. Columbus set sail in 1492 with a letter from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain addressed to the Great Khan, or the ruler of China. He also brought along several Arabic interpreters for his eventual landfall.[5] Because he was the first to try out this novel route to the east, Columbus had no concrete evidence that he would even make in back to Europe, much less actually end up in China.[6] According to some writers, Atlantis itself lay beyond the western ocean. Other stories, such as those found in the accounts of the travels of the legendary fourteenth-century English knight Sir John Mandeville, among others, told of strange creatures found in unknown parts of the world, such as men with eyes in their chests, ears that hung down

[4] Documents produced by the earliest Europeans in the Americas are rare and highly desirable for their ethnographic information. See Fredi Chiappelli, *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 417.

[5] Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 3.

[6] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 8.

to their knees, or heads of dogs.[7] A twelfth-century cosmographer stated that Asia must be balanced by a large continent of the same size on the other side of the world, and Icelandic sagas told of the hostility of the natives encountered by explorers; however, Columbus' navigational miscalculations led him to believe there was no space for such a large land mass between Europe and China.[8] When Columbus set sail from Spain in 1492, he had no idea of the enormous discovery he was about to make.

This idea is reflected in the frontispiece to the book [Figure 1]. A frontispiece is a decorative image opposed to the title page of a book, which is intended to pique the reader's interest as to the contents of the book. The primary image here is made up of several intertwined figures, including a dragon breathing flames, a human-faced serpent, and an elephant, which are rendered in a rather expressive and calligraphic manner and are set off by a vibrant red background.[9] The frontispiece was designed by the artist to depict what might have been Columbus' understanding of an eastern creation myth.[10] Versions of these animals are all mentioned in Hindu mythology, which was passed into Europe in various, often highly inaccurate, forms through works such as 1st century CE Roman historian Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*. One Hindu myth associated with the Temple of Kalahasti tells of an elephant and a cobra that competed for the god Shiva's attention. The elephant poured water over the sacred lingam, or phallic-shaped symbol of the god, and left flowers and leaves as offerings. The

[7] Honour, 4. These figures are called the "marvels of the east" and stories about them go back to classical Greek sources.
[8] Honour, 3.
[9] The crossed diagonal lines in the background to the frontispiece, which look like navigational rhumb lines, are in fact based on the ideal, Pythagorean layout for the double-spread layout of a book, and represent an inside joke. These same lines appear on a map that is displayed towards the end of the book.

[10] Robert Tauber, e-mail message to author, April 21, 2010.

cobra instead left gemstones, which he grew in his hood. The snake became so angry and jealous of his competitor for the god's attention that he crawled up the elephant's trunk, causing the elephant so much pain that he smashed his head open against a rock, killing them both. Seeing the animals' devotion to him, Shiva took both up to heaven.[11] In Pliny the Elder's version of the Hindu myth, the snake has become a dragon, and he calls the pigment cinnabar ("dragon's blood") in reference to the "thick matter" that issued from the dragon as he was crushed to death by the elephant. The bright Chinese red of the background may refer to the blood mentioned in these stories, or it may be a reference to cinnabar.

The animals here may also refer to the traditional Hindu belief that the world is supported by four elephants balanced on top of a tortoise, all of which are encircled by an ouroboros, a snake or dragon, shown in a circular form consuming its own tail. This powerful symbol represents the cycles of death and rebirth, and thus of the cyclic nature of the universe.[12]

Given what we now know about Columbus' geographical confusion—he sailed west to go east—and early modern Europeans' lack of first-hand knowledge about Asia, it is not at all improbable that Columbus associated this Hindu story not with India but with the Marco Polo's China, which was, after all, where he thought he was heading. In his journals, he states that "I am determined to go to the mainland and to the city of Quisay and to present your Highnesses' letters to the Great Khan, and to beg a reply and come home with it."[13]

Finally, the use of the human-faced serpent, whose head is topped with curved horns, in the frontispiece may also be a reference to the horned serpent featured in Native American,

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[11] Hank Heifetz and Velcheru Narayana Rao, *For the Lord of the Animals: Poems for the Telugu* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 2-3.

[12] "Ouroboros," *Oxford English Dictionary*, second ed. 1989. http://dictionary.oed.com/ (accessed June 8, 2010).

[13] Todorov, 10.

especially Mexican, mythology, thus tying together the themes of east and west that occur throughout the book. The serpent is commonly found in Mayan imagery and architecture, where one finds serpent pillars and serpent-mask doorways.[14] Some scholars believe the serpent cult may have come to South America directly from China: "From time to time, archaeologists and art historians have been impressed by similarities in the motifs represented, on the one hand, in relics of Asian cultures and, on the other, those of Meso- and South America."[15] This imagery, with its rich and multiple sources, suggests Columbus' interest in the world around him and his attempt to make sense of it.

The Secret Map [Figure 2], which separates the primary text of the journal from the postscript, shows, in map form, both Columbus' actual journey to the New World as well as the journey he thought he was undertaking. There are two charted courses on the map, both departing from Spain and heading west before diverging in the Gulf of Mexico. One of the charted paths (see the black dotted lines) visible on the map travels across the Atlantic and around the Caribbean islands; this represents Columbus' actual journey. The other line (also indicated by dotted lines), which travels past the Caribbean and on towards China, is the path Columbus expected to take. As represented on this map, the world is rather compressed, representing Columbus' belief that the earth was much smaller in circumference than it actually is. At the time of Columbus' journey, mapping was still an inexact science that depended more on personal interpretation than on facts and measurable distances. This also helps to explain the navigational errors Columbus made, which led him to greatly underestimate the distance from Spain to China.

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[14] George Kubler, "Serpent and Atlantean Columns: Symbols of Maya-Toltec Polity," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 41 (1982):93.

[15] Balaji Mundkur et al, "The Cult of the Serpent in the Americas: Its Asian Background." *Current Anthropology* 17 (1976): 430.

Unfortunately for Columbus this ideal path to China would prove impossible. Note the map's geographic irregularities, including the missing Central America and the far too large area between the continents of North and South America. According to Robert Tauber, the artists involved in this project imagined that prior to his revolutionary voyage, Columbus ran into a merchant in a market in southern Spain who tricked him into buying an ostensibly "Chinese" map, which this map represents. Note the Chinese lettering in the lower right hand corner of the map, which reads "Secret Map," and the lettering on China in the upper left, which says "China." Columbus remained a prisoner of his own focus on the east and died before he understood or appreciated the significance of his discovery.

It is amusing to note that this map—both in form and content-- was inspired by the disposable paper placemats often available in modern Chinese restaurants. These placemats feature the Chinese zodiac and include lots of red ink.[16] The animals of the Chinese zodiac are scattered around the map in *A Letter of Columbus* to show both this influence and Columbus' belief that he would end up in China. Like the frontispiece, however, this map is also printed on a vivid red background and may reference the blood of the Hindu creation myth

This image also reflects the inaccuracies of world maps created during the Renaissance. In the Middle Ages, there were primarily three different types of maps: "one relied on the concept of consistent physical measurement and scale, another on the notion of varying scale depending on perceived importance of the affective qualities of iconography, and another stressed the qualitative topological relationships of adjacency and connectedness rather than

[16] Robert Tauber, e-mail message to author, April 21, 2010.

those of measured distance and area."[17] All of these models were based on different structural frameworks and served different purposes, yet often were incorporated into the same map.[18] This led to common inaccuracies in maps at the time. Also, not all maps were meant for navigation. Some, such as the T-O style *mappemundi*, were in fact based on the three continents known to the Romans. With the rise of Christianity, T-O maps came to represent religious rather than physical geography, demonstrating how the three sons of Noah went out to populate the three corners of the earth by assigning the name of each to a particular region.

The first geographically accurate maps did not begin to appear until the thirteenth century in the form of Mediterranean "portolan charts" or navigational maps that show coastlines. These maps were drawn based on compass headings and centrally radiating directional lines.[19] The true mapping revolution did not occur until 1406 with the translation of Ptolemy's *Geography* from Greek to Latin, which re-introduced the concept of longitude and latitude to the Europeans. Even so, it was not until the early sixteenth century that these ideas became prevalent in European cartography.[20]

Although this map does not include images of people, many maps of the Americas from the sixteenth century do. In a circa 1519 map by Portuguese cartographers Pedro and Jorge Reinel, the largely unknown interior of Brazil is enlivened with scenes of the natives—most likely the Tupinamba. Naked people chop Brazilwood and others, wearing feather skirts and

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[17] David Woodward, "Maps and the Rationalization of Geographic Space," in *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1991), 83.

[18] Woodward, 83.

[19] Woodward, 83.

[20] Woodward, 84.

capes, hold the bows and arrows traditionally associated with Indians.[21] In 1546, a world map published by French cartographer Pierre Desceliers also included images of South America peoples, who are similarly featured wearing feathers or pictured naked holding bows and arrows.[22] New World peoples were also associated with the mythic peoples mentioned in medieval and ancient texts, and they were often described as living according to the laws of nature, without laws, kings, or priests.[23] To many others, including humanist Peter Martyr, the indigenous peoples of the Americas represented the Golden Age of Man, an ideal period in which mankind was ruled simply by piety, honesty, and natural morality.[24]

Images that reference this view of the Americas are also included in *A Letter of Columbus*. *The Land of Plenty* [Figure 3], for example, shows a simple but ideal tropical landscape with palm trees juxtaposed with a scene of a man falling from the sky on the facing page. The *Land of Plenty* depicts an Eden-like landscape; the accompanying text speaks of the riches of the land and the fact that the trees never lose their leaves: "Rivers run with spice and gold, harbors are deep and still, everything about this paradise is so wonderful it is like those miracles that even true believers cannot accept until, like Doubting Thomas, they witness first-hand, and then they see" (Citino, 1990). The land is fruitful and marvelous; like Adam and Eve, the native people are naïve and lack clothing. Cinto has Columbus claim that "plenty is the proper name of this land." This idealized vision of America (or Asia, depending on your point of view!) was common among early explorers, although the mythology of New World cannibalism

[21] Chiappelli, 424.
[22] Chiappelli, 427.
[23] Honour, 56.
[24] Honour, 19.

would soon overshadow it. The setting sun adds to the beauty of the image, although it may also suggest the end of innocence due to the arrival of the Europeans.

Indeed, danger and the clear threat represented by Europeans to this ideal world are present in the facing image, which depicts the indigenous population running away from a large figure falling from the sky. These figures are all rendered in a primitive and expressive manner, which stresses simple, stick-like forms and outlines. Rice may have looked to Aboriginal art or the Paleolithic cave drawings in France; by using invoking such imagery, the figures are separated from us and from the European explorers in both space and time. The falling man represents the Europeans; as Columbus explains in the text, the indigenous population of Hispaniola, or Tainos, believed Columbus and his men fell out of out the sky. The juxtaposition of this invading European with the Eden-like landscape on the facing page also suggests the possibility that Rice was thinking about the loss of peace and human innocence with the Fall of Man and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. The Taino population of these islands would soon be wiped out due to violence and the introduction of European diseases.

References to religion are made throughout the manuscript and in the images. In the images *Christianity* and *Primitivism*, which face each other in the text, we see three rectilinear religious figures on the left contrasted with the curved form of a blue naked woman on the right. The simple stick-like figures in *Christianity* may be interpreted in a variety of ways: they could be people—wearing the bee-hive like hat of the pope combined with the blood-red robes appropriate to a cardinal—or they could represent monstrances, which are special, often elaborate containers for holding the Eucharistic wafer. The crosses on figures' attire may symbolize the cardinals' right to wear the Pectorale, or a special bejeweled cross holding a relic

worn by higher levels of the clergy.[25] A connection has also been made between the red worn by cardinals and their dedication to the church, even to the point of shedding their own blood and dying for their faith.[26] This vivid red also works on a formal level by connecting the image to both the *Frontispiece* and the *Secret Map*. Regardless of whether they are humans or monstrances, the three forms featured in this illustration suggest Columbus' devotion to the Catholic church and his desire to spread Christianity throughout the world, both of which were motives in undertaking his original voyage in 1492.

Columbus' faith was a central motivating factor in undertaking his voyages of exploration. In a journal entry dated December 26th 1492, Columbus clearly communicates his goal of using any funds procured from his travels to fund a Holy War in order to reclaim Jerusalem. He also states that the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella agreed to this plan: "I declared to Your Highnesses that all the gain of this my enterprise should be spent in the conquest of Jerusalem; and Your Highnesses smiled and said that it pleased you, and that even without this you have that strong desire."[27] The monarchs would never follow through with this plan, but this journal entry highlights Columbus' religious commitment.

Columbus also corresponded with Pope Alexander VI in 1502, stating that he hoped his journey would be "great and magnifying for the glory and growth of the Holy Christian religion," and claiming that he hoped "in Our Lord to be able to propagate His holy name and His Gospel throughout the universe."[28] Columbus also states in the text accompanying this

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[25] Joseph Braun, "Pectorale," *Catholic Encyclopedia*. n.d. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11601a.html, 14 May 2010.

[26] Johannes Baptist Sägmüller, "Cardinal," *Catholic Encyclopedia.* n.d. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03333b.html, 14 April 14, 2010.

[27] Todorov, 11.

[28] Todorov, 10

image that he feels the inhabitants of the islands are interested in Christianity and could easily be converted: “They are able to speak to one another across countries—a singular thing, to us from Christian lands—which will make it easy to convert them to our faith, toward which they seem inclined.” Columbus’ desire to reclaim Jerusalem and convert New World natives to Christianity demonstrates the impact his faith had on his journey.

On the facing page, a nude blue woman, rendered in a simple yet graceful outline, reminds one of French impressionist artist Edgar Degas’s monotypes of nude women bathing and reclining. Nude or partially clothed women appear frequently in art related to the discovery and exploration of the Americas, both as allegorical figures and as objectified inhabitants of the New World. While this figure is naked, she is nonetheless not overtly sexualized in her pose or activity. She is an Eve-like figure, nude and innocent, and not yet corrupted by knowledge. Her nudity and classical pose may also allude to prints in the influential works on the Americas of sixteenth-century Flemish engraver and publisher Theodor de Bry and eighteenth-century engraver Jean Bernard Picart. Her role as a primitive Eve, however, connects her more directly to the Tahitian women painted by French artist Paul Gauguin in the late nineteenth century. The contrast of between her ethereal beauty and the rigidity of the religious figures on the facing page suggests a critique of the missionary work that was carried out in the New World in the centuries following discovery.

Despite her classical pose, this woman has few attributes that associate her with other early images of the New World. She is fully naked and is shown with pubic hair, which is very unusual before the modern period. This may have been done to emphasize her primitive yet innocent state. In the earliest images of indigenous Americans, they are frequently pictured wearing feather skirts based on pieces of Tupinamba featherwork that were brought back to

Europe. [29] The Tupinamba samples were in fact not skirts, but rather mantles that the natives wore around their shoulders; however, the feather skirt became a common way to clothe the natives in art.[30] Other early images of women in the Americas shows them enticing sailors with their nudity, and then leading them to their deaths.[31] Cannibalism and violence are themes commonly featured in early images of the Americas, especially in allegorical representations.[32] The fact that the blue woman is shown with none of these common motifs suggests that Columbus had an unbiased and sympathetic response to the people of the New World when he first encountered them.

The violence required to subdue the Americas and its peoples, which would come to dominate the writing of later explorers, including the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortes, is alluded to in the image of *The Hunter*, the last illustration of the book. This monotype presents a startlingly odd juxtaposition; a very modern silhouette of a man holding gun on one side and the much more lyrical representation of a bird and a hare on the other. The gun in this image also provides an interesting contrast as it is the one place such modern technology is shown in this book. Although handguns were available during the Renaissance, the gun here is quite modern in appearance, as is the man who holds it, suggesting a somewhat sinister presence in the image.

Hares, by contrast, appear in a number of images throughout the book, and according to Robert Tauber, the hare is meant to represent the Hopi hare from Native American mythology.[33] Hares are common symbols in Native American art and mythology. The fact that the Hopi live in the southwest of the modern United States was used by the artist to show that Columbus had

[29] Chiappelli, 424.
[30] Chiappelli, 420.
[31] Honour, 11.
[32] Honour, 87.
[33] Robert Tauber, e-mail message to author, April 21, 2010.

an uncanny "future-knowledge" about the greatness of his discovery.[34] In the Hopewell culture, "Michabo the Great Hare, the Algonquian culture hero, was the creator of the world and the impersonation of life."[35] The hare's power to give and take away life allowed him to defeat the Great Horned Serpent, which could refer to the dragon in the frontispiece.[36]

It is unclear from the image if the hare and the bird are side by side or if the bird has eaten him. If the bird represents a bird of prey, the latter would be probable, but the bird's curved beak is that of a parrot, whose sheer numbers astounded early explorers in the New World. The bright colors of parrots' plumage also fascinated the first sailors and explorers to set foot on the shores of the Americas, who collected both living and dead birds for their colorful feathers. As Hugh Honour has noted: "Featherwork was admired as much for the beauty of the plumes as much as for the skill with which the patterns and pictures were made from them, and from the moment of discovery, gaily colored birds played a prominent part in the visual imagery of the New World." [37] The featherwork brought back from the Americas was often kept in *Kunst und Wunderkammeren* and collections of curiosities of the wealthy and elite throughout Europe.[38] Although hares appear throughout the book, this image is where the hare makes its last appearance.

A Letter of Columbus is a subtle yet dynamic reinterpretation of the historical figure of Christopher Columbus appropriate to the 500 year anniversary of his landfall in the Americas. Told in first person and made both modern and accessible via Cintino's poetry and Rice's

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[34] Robert Tauber, e-mail message to author, April 21, 2010.

[35] Charles Willoughby, "Michabo the Great Hare: Patron of the Hopewell Mound Settlement." *American Anthropologist* 37 (1935): 280.

[36] Willoughby, 280.

[37] Honour, 34.

[38] Honour, 30.

monotypes, this work brings the overblown mythology surrounding Columbus down to earth by allowing us to imagine him writing and sketching out his own thoughts, ideas, and images in this journal. Nonetheless, the work is not a simple recovery of Columbus, but a complicated, indeed often critical, response to his discovery and the worldwide changes that it would bring about.

Figure 1: Frontispiece

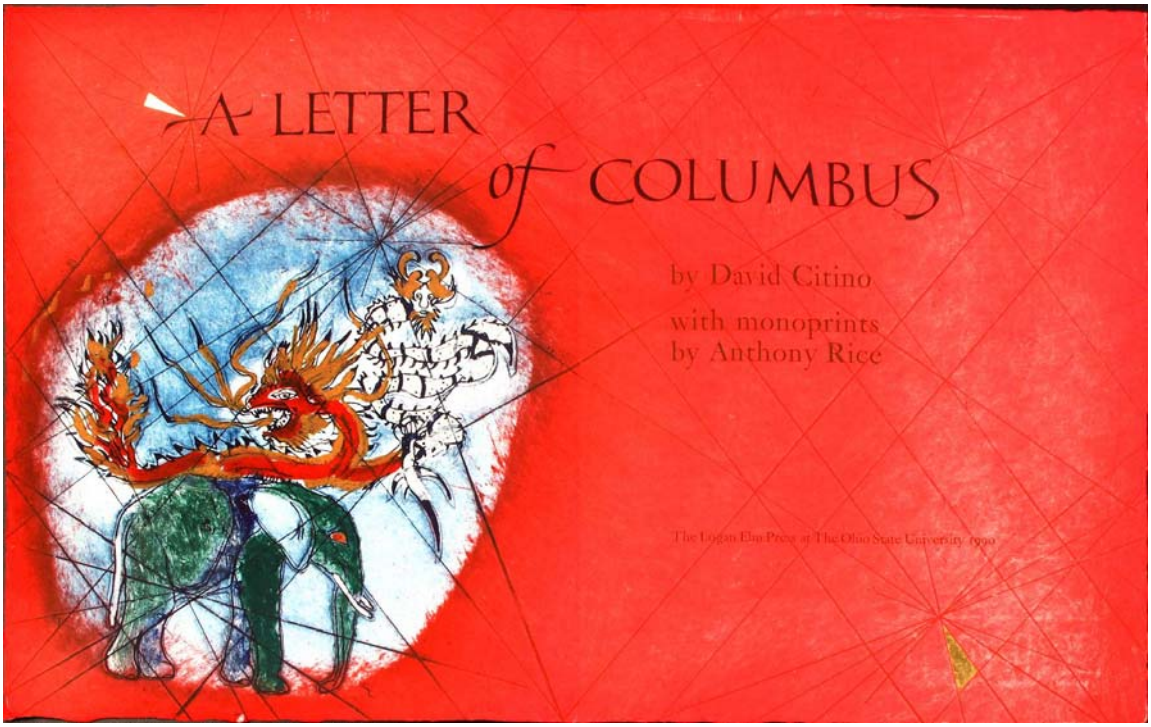

Figure 2: Map

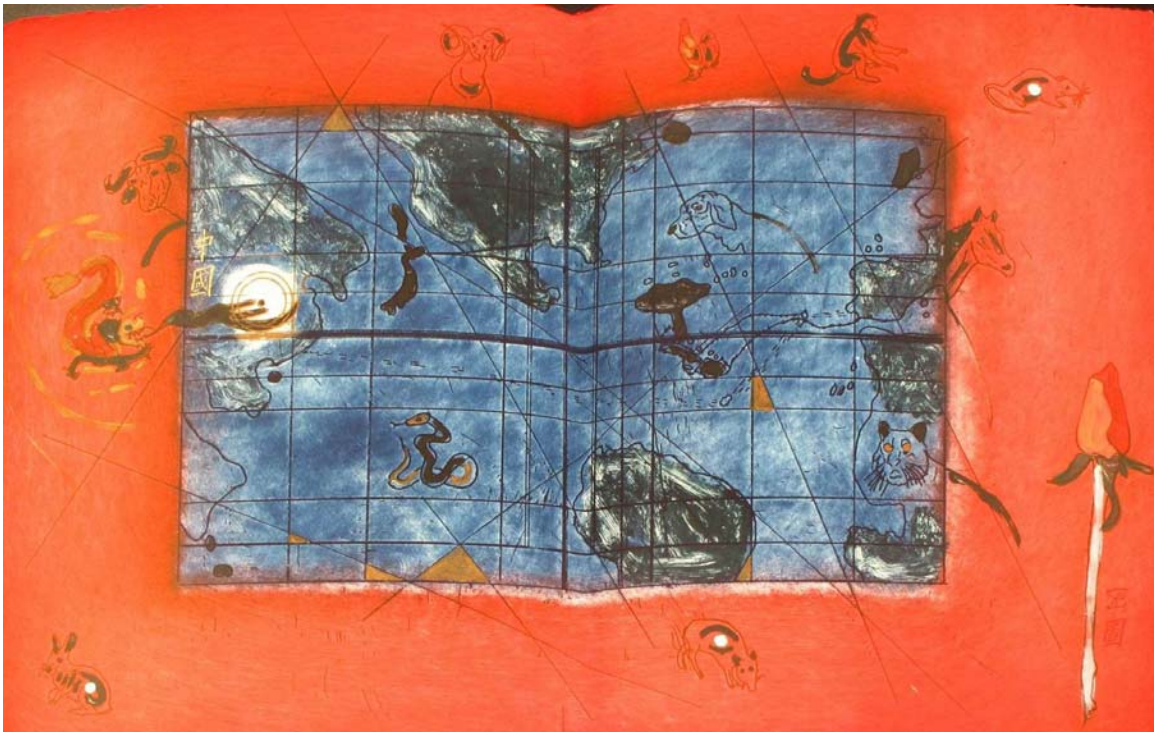
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Figure 3: Land of Plenty

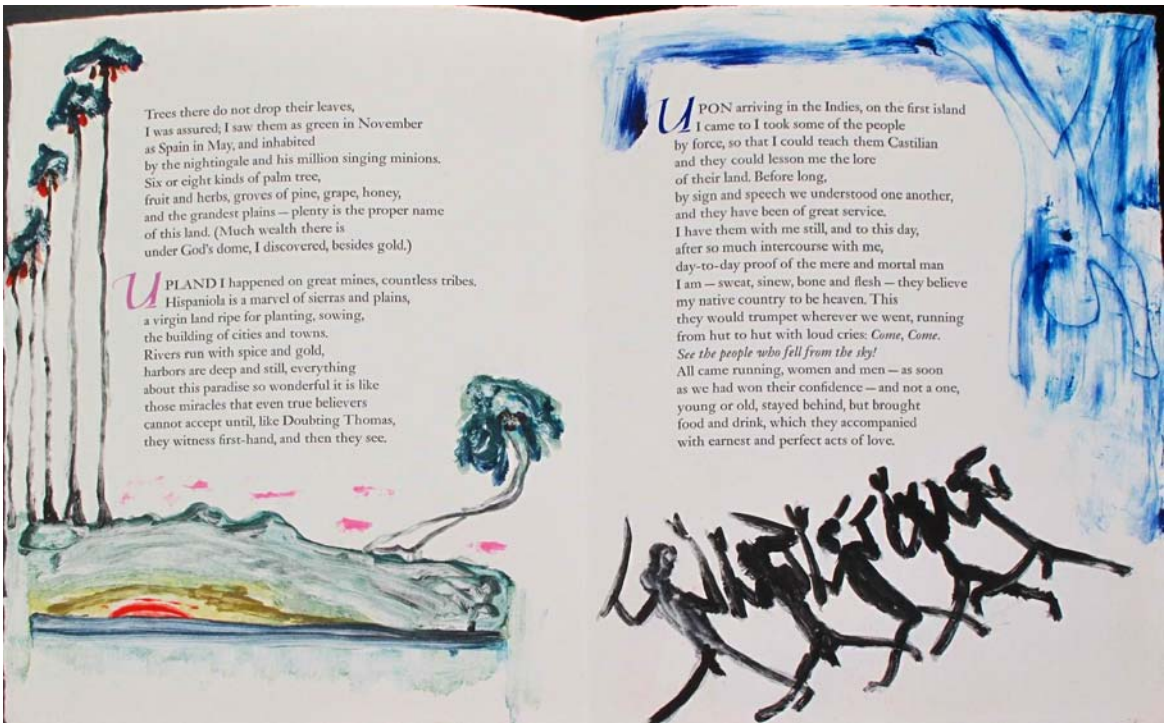


Figure 4: Catholicism and Primitivism

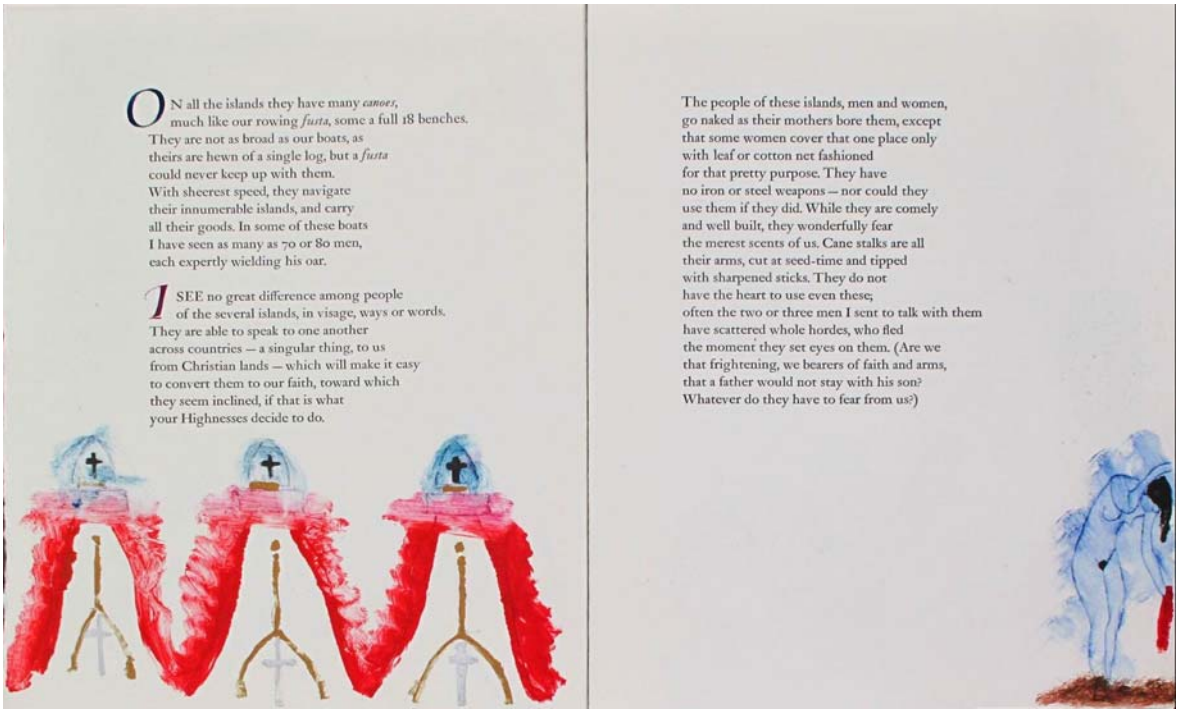
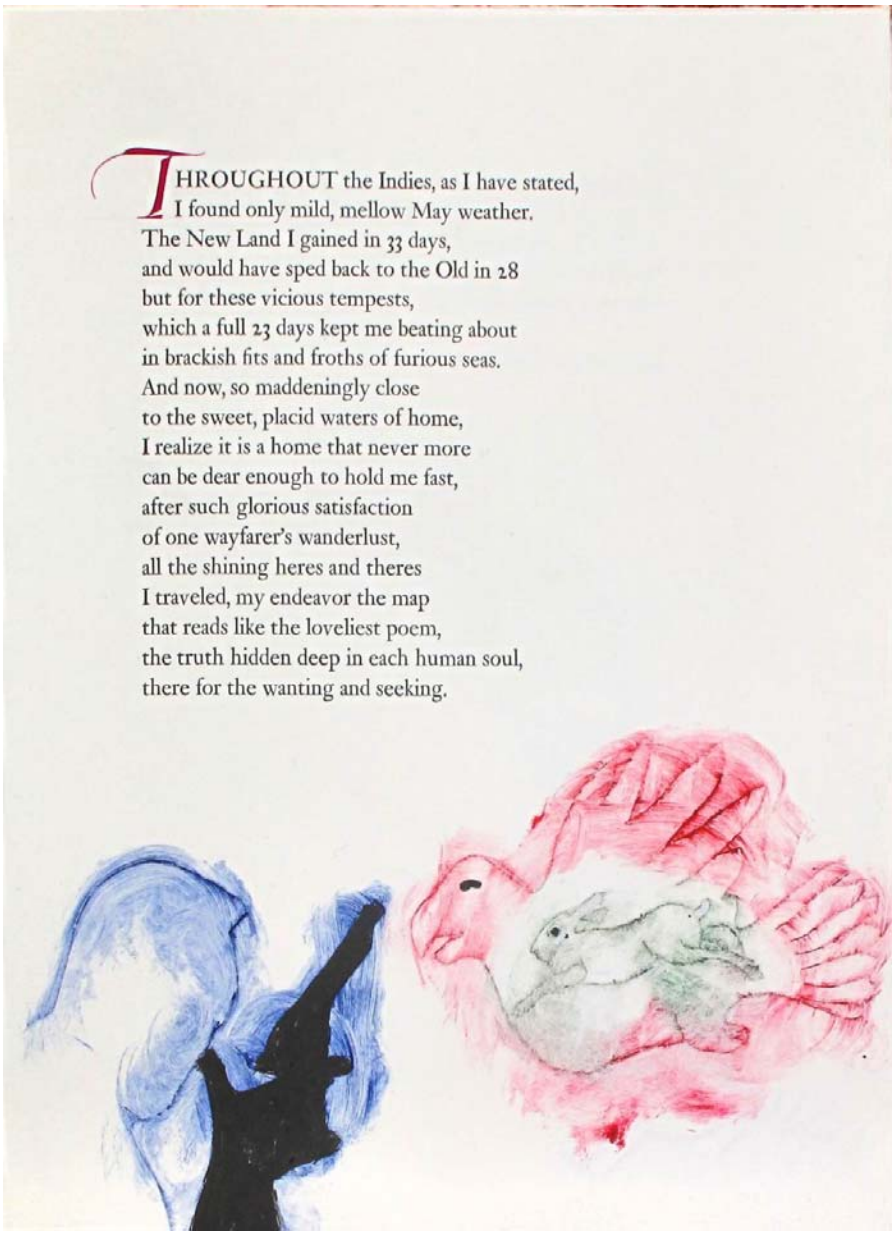


Figure 5: The Hunter



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