

ICONOGRAPHIC RHETORIC AND THE GEOGRAPHICAL IMAGINATION: ATLAS FRONTISPIECES AS DECLARATIONS OF IDEOLOGY

Agustín Hernando

Universidad de Barcelona

Although rarely studied, atlas frontispieces are one of the most interesting legacies of our geographical heritage, especially those produced between the 16th and 19th centuries. Thanks to the endeavours of skilled artists, their elegant designs reflect the information contained within these atlases – iconographic depictions that used an artistic language inherited from classical culture. The frontispieces were designed to satisfy the refined tastes of a select audience – the social, cultural and economic elite of the day – and reveal a rich, creative talent, geographical imagination, aesthetic taste, communicative force and a power to seduce; indeed, cultural and social values that have gone largely unnoticed.

Since Ortelius had had the idea of placing on the cover of his *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570) a metaphorical representation of its contents, all atlas publishers felt obliged to follow his example. They competed with each other in their aesthetic merits, as these prints became a persuasive argument for the virtues of their works and the frontispiece a mark of identity of product and publisher alike. This art work speaks with great eloquence, revealing the fertile relationship forged between geography and art. The outstanding cultural legacy is typified by the magnitude of prints produced, the imagination that they exhibited and the delicate beauty contained in many of the illustrations. Their seductive charm was designed to connect with the ambitions of a select clientele, fully satisfying their aesthetic tastes and social aspirations. Those who examined them would have been inspired with a pride of being European, flattering their cultural vanity and love of beautiful objects.

Their rich iconography –the narrative language– draws on the repertory of mythological allegories inherited from the classical tradition, enriched by the invention of new symbols and figures. And thanks to the importance acquired by this language in the Renaissance, the artists sought inspiration in literary sources, including odes and poems exalting recent discoveries, in the riches attributed to certain places and in the inventions of a number of creative minds. The result was a series of artistic creations of marked sensual pleasure, comparable to those that appear in triumphal arches erected to commemorate a monarch's entry into a city or in visual testimonies extolling his virtues and achievements.

In the Low Countries in the 16th and 17th centuries lived the most brilliant figures dedicated to the production and trade in geographical knowledge in the whole of the Western world. In its cities, first in Antwerp and later in Amsterdam, richly decorated maps were being published that were much sought after by the elite of the day in all corners of Europe. Well-known painters were documenting in their works the popularity enjoyed by cartography - witness the mural maps that adorned domestic walls, bearing witness in their portraits to the economic and social successes achieved.

In order to enhance the presentation of their work, geographers appealed to the artists who would have already lent their talents to such tasks as the engraving of manuscripts and the ornamental decoration of cartouches. Some of these celebrated artists had even contributed sketches to various publications. These included the urban panoramas in the *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (1572-1618), especially those depicting the cities of the Iberian Peninsula. Aware of the value of the geographical information, the artists were able to evoke in fine allegories the virtues of this knowledge.

This metaphorical language began with the use of conventional allegories, the female personification of geography and related sciences, extending later to the continents and countries, and the artistic depiction of the elements and the seasons. The prints were decorated in a highly evocative manner so that the whole composition presented a considerable splendour. They also included more deep-rooted beliefs that served to embellish the central theme, such as their admiration for the harmony that governs the cosmos and the sequence of the seasons, evoking the spatial and temporal framework of our ephemeral and changing human existence. And they were completed with allusions to the virtues of fame and victory.

In a continuation of the solemn style of the first contributions, the geographical allegories tended to be given an architectural setting: an opulent environment of pedestals and columns, crowned with arches, pediments and other elements of these noble buildings. Later, influenced by painting and engravings, the artists broke with this style and placed figures in landscapes or royal gardens.

Despite the many years during which these frontispieces were being created, there are few major differences in their iconography. Logically, though, they do illustrate the artistic tastes of the time and so during the 18th century they tend to be less metaphorical and more realistic, including, for example, the presence of new measuring instruments used by mapmakers: theodolites, goniometers, astrolabes, time pieces, rulers and chains, together with other astronomical instruments, in particular telescopes. With their inclusion, they endowed the geographical data with greater authority.

The obligatory presence of these atlas frontispieces responds to the importance attached to visual culture in renaissance and baroque society. So, their lyrical illustrations invited the reader to unravel the clues hidden in their rich iconography which reveals the European pride felt by the elite of the day for the successes of their explorers, an imperialistic and materialistic view of the world, imagining these peoples to be the owners of the products coveted in the West. They might be compared to commemorative works marking the triumphs enjoyed by a society, as other art forms have sought to do. With their narratives and rhetoric, they satisfied the audience's yearnings, awakening their admiration with their reassuring visions, while feeding their intellectual curiosity. All the messages transmitted flatter the

social class they are designed for. Some frontispieces bear the heraldic motifs of European monarchs, proclaiming their power and the submission to their will.

Judging by the number of editions, we know these atlases were circulated widely. In addition to governors, merchants and the aristocracy, more modest libraries, such as those in monasteries, owned these opulent works. Thus, they were studied avidly by scholars throughout Europe - a group of readers on whom these allegories would have had most impact. And even though the main aim of their editors was to disseminate a commercial product, their great informative and emotional impact on the audience helped consolidate the political, economic and cultural ideals of the elite which granted legitimacy to the prevailing social order in Europe. The atlases revealed the cultural and economic virtues of geographical knowledge, increasing the self-esteem of their owners. The maps bore witness to the successes of the West's scientists and explorers, celebrating the ideals of economic, political and cultural supremacy that characterised its rulers, and contributing to their propagation throughout society.

Of the many examples available, two frontispieces have been selected to illustrate the ideas outlined above. This analysis seeks to unveil the messages they contain and to offer a geographical and ideological interpretation.

THE FRONTISPIECE OF WILLEN BLAEU (1630)

The mapmaking business founded by Willem Blaeu (1571-1638) is considered the most prestigious of those operating in Amsterdam and Blaeu's maps are among the most admired in the history of cartography, combining the very latest geographical information with a highly attractive rhetoric. Thanks to his inventiveness, he strengthened the social and economic success of this new way of presenting geographical information. His son and successor in the business, Johannes (1599-1673), built on these foundations and profited from the success of his work.

The *Appendix* (1630), in which this frontispiece appeared for the first time, was seen as an updating of the well-known anthologies of Ortelius and Mercator, published in the preceding century. Since its first edition it enjoyed great success, sought out by a clientele hungry for new geographical information in an age that was experiencing rapid transformation. Thanks to the addition of new cartographic prints, it was to become the colossal *Atlas Maior* (in 1662), the most precious jewel in Blaeu's collection. The work comprised twelve volumes and brought together more than six hundred maps.

The four continents, portrayed as four muses bearing the riches of their lands, appear in the middle of the frontispiece. To the right of the title stands Europe, bedecked in fine clothes and bearing the symbols of power - a crown and sceptre, which proclaim her ascendance and dominion over the others. In her left arm she holds a cornucopia, from which flow a variety of fruits, symbolizing her fertility and wealth, while at her feet lies an open book representing her knowledge and learning. Behind her, to the right, appears Asia, bearing the products of this continent - the silk cloth of her dress, precious stones in her headdress and perfumes emanating from her incense burner. There are clear references also to her faith or religion in the shape of the half moon that crowns her staff. Behind her comes a camel, the animal employed by the caravans that travel across this continent.

To their left, like separate continents, stand the personifications of first, America, and behind her Africa. Both appear naked, a metaphor of their culturally primitive state and the little wealth of their peoples. America, barefoot, is clothed in feathers, and wears a feather headdress. She carries her hunting weapons - her bow and arrows, as well as a mace or club. Black Africa appears in a short dress and tunic. She holds in her arms a staff and a balsam shoot, a plant imported from Egypt, and is flanked by an elephant with prominent tusks – an animal that supplied the much coveted ivory.

In the upper stone niches of the classically built edifice are two of the great regions of the Americas: Mexico and Peru. The figures are naked, one mounted on a caiman, the other, seated next to a wild animal, most likely a puma. The former carries a parasol, a symbol that might either represent the dignity of her peoples or the suffocating heat of the region. The two are accompanied neither by Magallanica nor Tierra de Fuego, as they are typically depicted.

The opulence of the image is emphasized by the architectural setting – its Corinthian columns, the solid pedestals and the plinths supporting the figures, in particular those portrayed at the top of the frontispiece. Here appear a number of figures depicted with their respective tools and instruments revealing their identity. In the centre hangs a great armillary sphere with its ecliptic and the signs of the zodiac – an allusion to the harmony that governs the movement of the cosmos. It is flanked, to the left, by the god Apollo, bearing his lyre and sceptre, and to the right by the mother goddess, Gaia or Rhea, providing the sustenance that fertilizes and makes life possible on Earth. Clemency is also typically depicted in this way, administering from her breasts the food required by all living creatures. Around her are the four elements that give shape to reality, forming its landscapes. In the top right, sits an immediately recognizable allegory: Jupiter, lord of the heavens and the symbol of fire; in the opposite corner, the goddess Juno, metaphor of the air, depicted as a woman of changeable character, symbolised by the chameleon that she holds in her hand. Below them, under the armillary sphere, sit two female figures, one embodying water, in the shape of a nymph with her up-ended jar from which this element flows; and Ceres, earth, crowned with ears of corn and holding the long-awaited fruits of the harvest. And presiding over the scene, beyond the clouds, the divine light illuminates these figures, symbolized by the Tetragrammaton spelling out the name of God in Hebrew.

This scene is completed with two venerable masters teaching their disciples the secrets of astronomy and geography. The first of these uses a celestial globe; the second an earth globe, helped by a compass, an instrument associated with great precision. Here the disciple is a woman, who faithfully notes down the teachings she receives.

THE FRONTISPIECE AT THE *ATLAS DE GÉOGRAPHIE* OF A.H. DUFOUR (C.1850)

During the 18th century, enthused by the spirit of the Enlightenment, French geographers put all their efforts into improving the geographical accuracy of their maps. Their aesthetics led them to omit from their work these earlier allegories, restricting themselves to what they considered essential information. This rhetorical tradition was to be fully adopted during the 19th century. Some publishers, however, aware of the commercial advantages associated with

an attractive presentation, maintained the custom of metaphorically narrating the content of their atlases, evoking the concerns that guided the observations of the geographers.

Fruit of the new enlightened spirit, society and culture were subject to numerous changes. Education was granted increasing importance, above all the study of geography. Thanks to its popularity, several atlases were published in Spain. The author of the next atlas we shall examine was A. H. Dufour, and the publishing house was based in Paris and Toulouse, and managed by the widow Turgis. A further change had also occurred by this date in publishing technology; this frontispiece was a lithograph.

Despite certain rhetorical similarities, this frontispiece illustrates the great change in iconographic traditions. The main figures - without exception male, represent the peoples of the world, including now those of Oceania. Illustrative of the curiosity that guided the well-to-do, educated travellers on their journeys to exotic lands, attention is given to the ethnic traits of these peoples, emphasising their differences. The central section is dedicated to the countries of Europe. Reflecting the ethnocentrism of the age, a member of the French aristocracy is depicted in all the finery of the governing, entrepreneurial social class to which he belongs. To his left are depicted other figures attired in the clothing of their station, in particular that of the working classes. He is accompanied by an Englishman, followed by a Scot, a Scandinavian, a bare-footed Neapolitan playing his guitar, a Pole and, seated, an idealised image of a southern Spaniard - an image drawn from a travel book. Lying behind them is a man in a turban with a splendid moustache, suggestive of the autochthonous population of the Carpathians. To his right stand a Russian, a Greek, a German from Tyrol and a Swiss man leaning on a rock, representative perhaps of the mountainous terrain of his country. With them are depicted other figures who go unidentified by the author. All in all, we are provided with a definition of Europe through its peoples and the economic condition they enjoy, illustrated by characters from certain nations presented in the romantic guise of their rural dwellers.

The upper section depicts the peoples of Asia and Africa. Ten characters are chosen to represent the nations of the Asian continent, in the centre the Chinese surrounded by Turks, Hindus, Japanese, Persians, Kurds and Armenians. Other nations alluded to are not readily identifiable, even though they bear a label. As for the nations of Africa, they are depicted listening to a central figure, wearing a turban and identified as a Mamluk. And around him are depicted people from Egypt, a Bedouin, a native of Guinea and others.

The scene used by the author to depict the American continent and Oceania is somewhat perplexing. In eloquent contrast to the calm breathed in the other scenes, this surprises us with its acts of aggression, especially those of the second of these continents, whose representatives are drawn brandishing weapons in defiant pose, displaying tattoos and expressions of unequivocal hostility and appearing virtually naked. Highlighting even more this exoticism and difference, one of the figures bears the inscription of *Anthropophage (Antropophage d'Ombay)*. In the case of America, the hostility breaks out in the presence of a wild animal - a puma, in a jungle setting where the natives are armed with rudimentary weapons, and go barefoot and virtually naked. The somewhat inhibited character on horseback in the background is Mexican.

As well as revealing another perspective of the world - impregnated with ethnocentric curiosity and moralistic ethics, we should recall that the frontispiece was designed for a

young, highly impressionable audience of secondary school pupils and university students. It sought to raise their awareness of the aesthetic and ethical virtues associated with a prosperous Europe, conceived as yardstick by which the rest were measured, and classed as exotic and dangerous. In its definition of a universal geography, organised around the study of the continents and places – something that strikes a chord with us - it pays particular attention to the ethnographic traits of its residents, their race, appearance, clothing and customs - the travellers' stereotypes that have survived to the present day. The frontispiece calls on icons that tend to emphasise differences: these people wear turbans and feathers, brandish weapons, smoke long pipes, display tattoos and the other traits and costumes that are attributed to their 'otherness'. With the exception of the puma and the incense burner from which wafts a perfumed fragrance, the vegetation is limited to adorn the peoples of Europe, while the artist used a climbing plant as a frame to separate the continents. This setting is quite removed from the majestic setting of the grand architecture depicted in our first example.

Illustrative of the cultural changes experienced by society and in keeping with the audience for whom they were prepared, a number of highly significant omissions can be detected. Contrasting with the opulence that characterised the maps of the earlier period, the publisher preferred a less sumptuous more realistic design, narrating what geographers were paying greatest attention to, namely the portrayal of the peoples of the different continents. The artist, rather than being inspired by classical iconography, drew on illustrations from travel books. These images were largely realistic, with an exotic, romantic aesthetic resulting from the prevailing European geographical imagination. This frontispiece does not allude to the cosmos nor to the system that governs the movement of the stars, despite the fact that the first map is entitled *Tableau Cosmographique & Uranographique*. Neither is there any evidence of the providential fervour of the earlier centuries, nor the appetite for consumer goods facilitated by trade. And they do not incorporate the naturalist sensibilities that are beginning to acquire importance within society and geography.