

A Map Attributed to Holbein

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A Map Attributed to Holbein

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Public Archives of Canada

Few art historians have examined maps as sources of art. This has been left to historians of cartography, whose lack of specialization has resulted in some neglect of the subject. Perhaps maps have not been brought to art historians' attention, or it may be that the lack of artistry in present day cartographical products has led to the misconception that maps have always been merely functional devices.

A recent acquisition by the National Map Collection, Public Archives of Canada, derives from an earlier period in the history of mapmaking, before maps were stripped of their artistic decoration to become a specialized medium by which to transmit precise scientific information. The map, titled *Typus Cosmographicus Vniversalis*, is a woodcut oval world map printed on two sheets with inscriptions in movable type. Ours is not the

TYPVS COSMOGRAPHICVS VNIVERSALIS

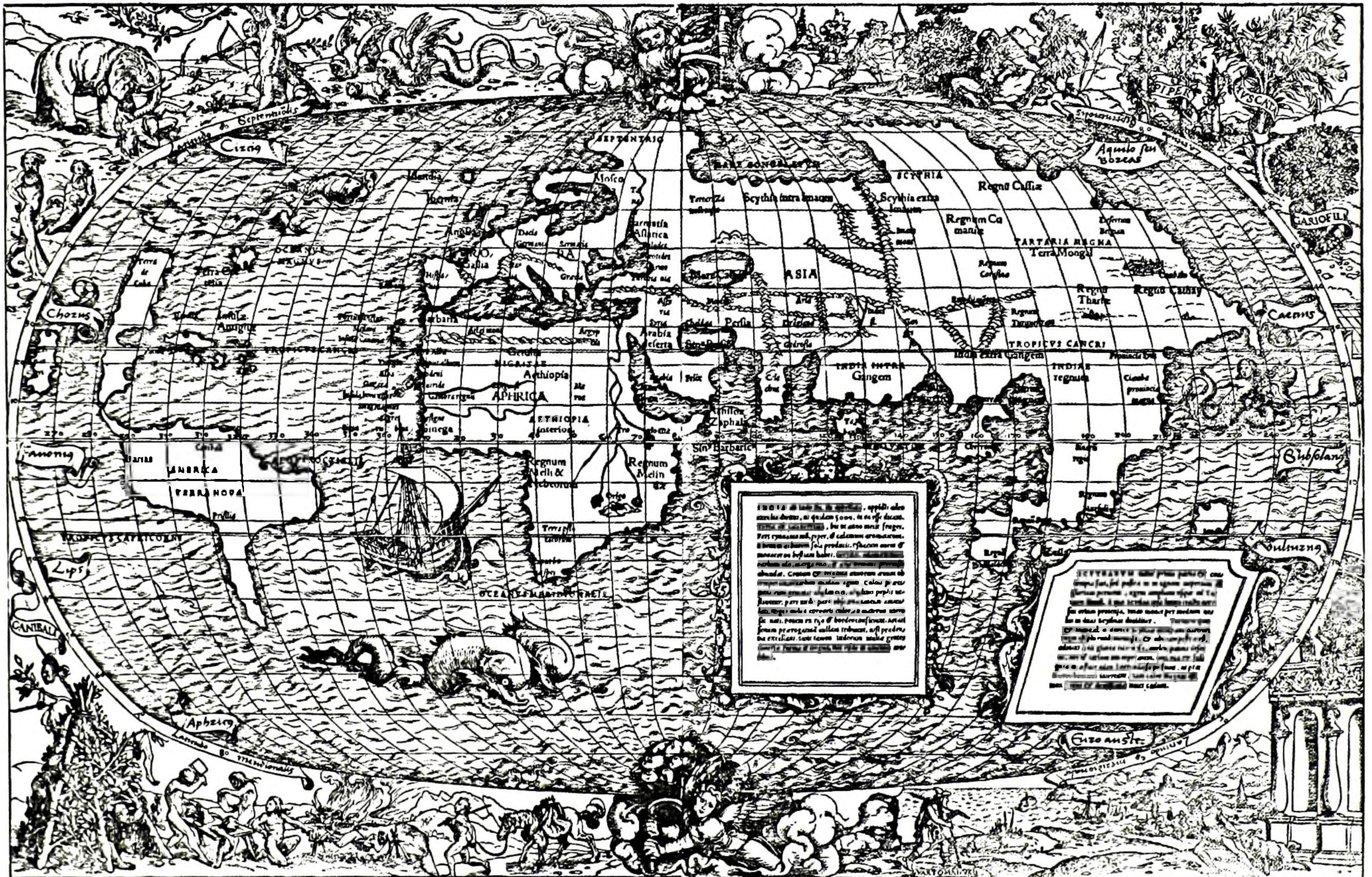


FIGURE 1. Attributed to Hans Holbein the Younger, *Typus Cosmographicus Vniversalis*. First published in Basel in 1532. 35.7 × 55.5 cm. Ottawa: National Map Collection, Public Archives of Canada (Photo: Public Archives of Canada).

first state of this map (1532), but comparison with other known variants shows that the map remained virtually unchanged through several decades of reissues.

The map appeared in Simon Grynaeus and Johann Huttich's *Novus Orbis* (Basel, 1532) in which the geographer Sebastian Münster writes: 'We have found it impossible to indicate the position of all the regions and of all the islands, because the narrowness of our map did not allow of it, and that was not our object.'¹ A.E. Nordenskiöld wrote in the nineteenth century that the map is 'a composition of no value whatsoever, proving that only vague rumours had reached the maker of the map concerning the great discoveries of the Portuguese in Asia.'²

Lloyd A. Brown, another historian of cartography, while agreeing that the map reflects configurations of both the Old and New Worlds of at least a decade earlier, declares that the map is 'from the artistic point of view . . . one of the most interesting of the many world maps turned out in the sixteenth century.'³ Having drawn

attention to the decoration of the map, Brown continues: 'The masterful delineation of these scenes, as well as of the ships and sea-monsters which embellish the oceans, has caused the design of the map to be attributed to the renowned Hanns Holbein the Younger, who had many relationships with Basel publishers. During his third Basel period he designed a number of illustrations for books issued by the geographer Sebastian Münster, to whom this map was formerly attributed.'

Historians of cartography have not pursued this attribution to Hans Holbein the Younger. Can art historians support the attribution with more concrete evidence?

¹ Henry Harrisse's translation from the Latin text, published in Harrisse, *The Discovery of North America* (London, 1892), 588.

² A.E. Nordenskiöld, *Periplus*, trans. Francis A. Bather (Stockholm, 1897), 156.

³ *The World Encompassed*. An exhibition of the history of maps held at the Baltimore Museum of Art, 7 October – 23 November 1952, no. 65.