Primary Source Instructional Tool

**Visual Voyages: Images of Latin American Nature from Columbus to Darwin**

As part of the Getty’s *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA* initiative, The Huntington’s extensive exhibition surveys the connections among art, science, and the environment in Latin America, from the voyages of Columbus to the publications of Charles Darwin in the mid-19th century. “Visual Voyages” introduces audiences to new understandings of Latin American nature from a range of cultural perspectives: as a wondrous earthly paradise; as a new source of profitable commodities such as chocolate, tobacco, and cochineal; as a landscape of good and evil, as viewed through the filter of religion; as the site for an Enlightenment project of collecting and classifying; and, in the 19th century, as the reflection of a national spirit. “Visual Voyages” features approximately 100 objects that are drawn from The Huntington’s library, art, and botanical holdings, as well as from dozens of international collections, in a range of media including paintings, rare books, illustrated manuscripts, prints, and drawings. Importantly, the exhibition and its catalog bring together Latin American and European depictions of Latin American nature.

Text in this instructional tool is drawn from the exhibition labels and catalog.

**Compelling Question:**
Why do people depict nature?

Why it is important to consider an artist’s point of view?
1. The Value of Nature

Unknown artist, *Le vrai Bresil es province du Quito* (The true Brazil, a province of Quito), in Vallard Atlas, Dieppe (France), ca. 1547, map 12, tempera, gold paint, gold leaf, and black ink on parchment, The Huntington Library, HM 29

The Value of Nature

Europeans initially explored the Americas searching for potential natural riches. Maps of the American continent in the French Vallard Atlas depict verdant territories bursting with natural commodities and exotic animals. This map of South America focuses on Brazil (note that North is oriented to the bottom of this map). In it, two men carry heavy logs of a reddish wood known as pau-brasil (brazilwood), a tree that the Portuguese valued for use in construction and as a dye, and that gave the region its European name.

The Vallard Atlas shows how, amid the rapid pace of cartographic and technological discoveries, old pictorial traditions continued to thrive. While the printing press revolutionized communications at this time, artists still created hand-made manuscripts, like this one, using techniques, designs, and materials that dated back to the Middle Ages.

Close looking:

A. What does this map show?
B. How are people represented in this map?
C. What is the perspective of this map? Compare it with a modern map of Brazil.

How do maps reflect the artists who make them and the audiences for which they were intended?
2. **First Impressions**

Unknown artist, *King-Hamy Portolan Chart*, manuscript map including America, Italy, ca. 1502, tempera, brown and red ink, and gold paint on parchment, full skin: 23 x 37 in. including left extension, map: $20\frac{3}{4} \times 30\frac{7}{8}$ in., The Huntington Library, HM 45

**First Impressions**

This portolan chart of the world highlights routes for mariners; portolan comes from the Italian word *porto* for harbor. The chart was drawn on an entire sheepskin, the neck of which can be seen at the left side. It was designed to be rolled up.

The map primarily shows the discoveries made by the Portuguese along the coasts of Africa and China in the East Indies. However, this is also one of the earliest world maps to show the American continent. European mapmakers rendered their expanding world by adding tentative squiggles to articulate the coasts of the West Indies, Venezuela, Brazil, and Newfoundland (*seen on the left of the map)*.

**Close looking:**

- A. What does this map show?
- B. What is the purpose of this map?
- C. What does this reflect about the mapmaker’s knowledge of the world at the time it was created?
  
  Compare with a modern world map.

How do maps reflect a culture’s worldview?
3. Indigenous Maps, Imperial Visions

Unknown artist, *Relación geográfica map of Santiago Atitlán*, 1585, ink and watercolor on paper, 24 3/16 x 31 7/8 in. (61.5 x 81 cm.), Joaquín García Icazbalceta Manuscript Collection, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, The University of Texas at Austin, JG xx-10

**Indigenous Maps, Imperial Visions**

In 1577, the Spanish Council of the Indies distributed a document with fifty questions to town officials throughout Mexico and Central America. The goal of the questionnaire was to compile information about each town, including its infrastructure, geography, landscape, flora, fauna, and minerals. Local artists painted maps that show both the continuity of native traditions and the radical changes introduced by Europeans. Elements from indigenous art include pictographs providing place names and wavy lines and whirlwinds marking bodies of water. These maps present local visions of the landscape at a time of rapid cultural and social transformation.

**Close looking:**

A. What does this map show?
B. How does the artist choose to represent the natural world?
C. What different perspectives does the artist show in this map?

What are some ways maps were made in the past? How do they compare to maps we use now?
4. Putting Nature into Print

Printing, a technology developed in Europe from around 1450, allowed texts and images to circulate in large numbers, at fast speeds, and across great distances. To create books and prints, authors and artists often employed existing sources, freely copying and adapting them. This was particularly so with rarities from the Americas, which few Europeans could see firsthand.

Religious Readings: The Passionflower

One example of the religious interpretation of American nature is the passionflower, a plant named after the Passion of Christ. Passion is the term for Christ’s suffering and death; this woodcut in a Jesuit publication shows the plant’s features as symbols of Christ’s death on the cross: his crown of thorns, the three nails driven through his body, the whips that struck him, and the sponge offered to him. For Catholic missionaries, such signs of God’s presence in the Americas validated their missionary work.

Close looking:
A. What does this woodcut represent?
B. Where does the artist use naturalism and where does the artist use symbolism?
C. What is the point of view of the artist?

How can artists use nature to carry a message?
5. Traveling Artists in South America

Maria Sibylla Merian, Pineapple, in *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium* (*The Metamorphosis of the Insects of Suriname*, Amsterdam, 1705), fig. 2, counterproof etching with watercolor (hand coloring), The Huntington Library, 633752

**Traveling Artists in South America**

In 1699, German artist Maria Sibylla Merian traveled with her daughter to Suriname, a Dutch possession in South America, to study rare insects and flora—an exceedingly unusual undertaking for a woman at the time. Merian observed from nature and received samples and information from the local populations. After her return to Amsterdam, she published this book, which is the first work on the natural history of the region. Her book focused on insects to an unprecedented degree and provided detailed portrayals of the various moments in each animal’s life cycle, presenting carefully observed accounts of change over time rather than static snapshots.

Rather than the commonly depicted subject of isolated specimens, Merian focused on the interrelationships between plants and animals, making her images particularly remarkable and captivating.

**Close looking:**

A. What does this piece show?

B. How does the artist show nature in a dynamic way?

C. What is the point of view of the artist?

How do artists blend art and science?
6. Botanical Art from New Granada

[Image of botanical illustration]

Luis Eduardo Mora Osejo, “Scleria macrophylla Presl.,” AJB, Div. III, plate 186 from the Royal Botanical Expedition to the New Kingdom of Granada (1783–1816) led by José Celestino Mutis, tempera on paper, approx. 21 1/4 x 15 in. (54 x 38 cm.), Archivo del Real Jardín Botánico-CSIC (Madrid)

Botanical Art from New Granada

The Royal Botanical Expedition (1783–1816) sent by the King of Spain to the Viceroyalty of New Granada (which encompassed parts of modern Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela) employed almost sixty artists—most from South America—who created over seven thousand illustrations. These were often colored with paints made from such local ingredients as saffron, indigo, and lichens.

The paintings show not only the artists' mastery of the techniques and conventions of European botanical illustration but also their inventive reworking of that tradition. They would depict various stages in the life of a plant in a single imaginary specimen, chop a tall plant into segments displayed side by side, or squeeze a reedy example onto a page by bending it into sinuous curves. Frequently, leaves of plants curl over so that both sides may be seen.

Close looking:

A. What does this piece show?
B. Where does the artist employ creativity and ingenuity in the depiction of this plant?
C. What is the point of view of the artist?

What are some reasons why artists have been interested in depicting the natural world?
After Reading:

Summative argument:
Based on your close reading of the primary source materials, provide an argument about why people depict nature and why it is important to evaluate an artist’s point of view.

Extension:
What are some reasons why people depict nature today?