



4

European Views of Native Americans, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Las Casas's sympathetic view of the Indians was hardly one shared by the average Frenchman, Italian, or Scot. Indeed, many Europeans harbored fantastical and negative notions about the inhabitants of the "New World," envisioning them as wild and cannibalistic, savage and ruthless toward their enemies. Reinforcing this impression were images that circulated throughout Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as this engraving from 1564, part of a series by Flemish engraver Theodore de Bry, based on paintings by an artist who had accompanied a French expedition to Florida a few decades earlier. Figure 16.1 shows the alleged cannibalistic practices by natives supposedly witnessed by the explorers. What is going on in this picture? It is likely that de Bry made adjustments to his engravings from the originals to please potential buyers. If so, what does this tell us about the expectations of European audiences about the Americas and their inhabitants?

Almost seventy-five years later, a very different set of no less remarkable images emerged from a Dutch colony in northeastern Brazil. Count Johan Maurits, the humanist governor general of the colony from 1636 to 1644, brought several artists and scientists with him to observe and record the region's flora and fauna as well as its

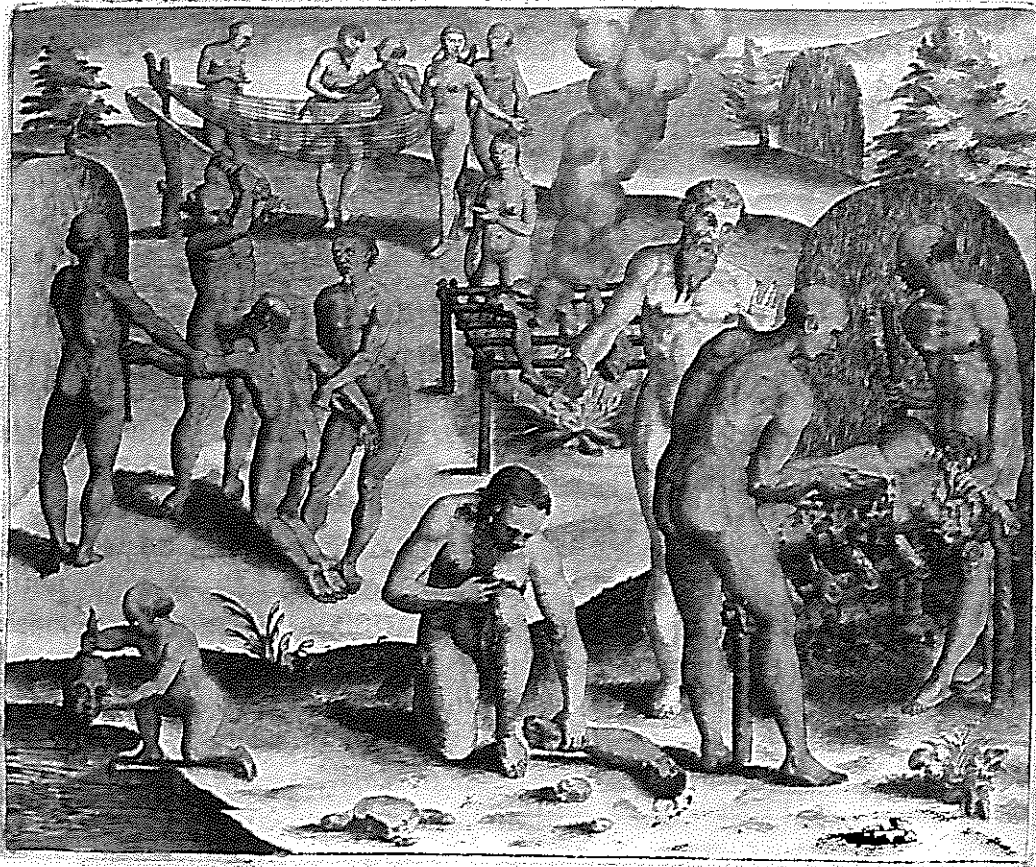


Figure 16.1 Cannibalism, engraving by Theodore de Bry.

Source: Scene of Cannibalism, from ‘Brevis Narratio,’ engraved by Theodore de Bry (1528–98) 1564 (coloured engraving), Le Moyne, Jacques (de Morgues) (1533–88) (after)/ Service Historique de la Marine, Vincennes, France/Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art Library.

inhabitants. Johan Maurits, who was fascinated by the local peoples and their cultures, commissioned from artist Albert Eckhout a number of still-lives and group and individual portraits, including one showing a female Tapuya Indian (see Figure 16.2). According to Dutch accounts, the Tapuya were more warlike and less “civilized” than some of the other local peoples—for example, they sometimes consumed their dead instead of burying them. Aside from the body parts this woman carries in her hand and in her bag, what other signs of this warlike tendency do you see in Figure 16.2? Look closely at the many interesting details in this painting. What does the artist seem to be interested in showing?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

What are the differences in style and content between Figures 16.1 and 16.2, and how do you account for them? Which of the following factors do you think is most important in explaining their differences: chronology, agenda of the artist, the potential audience for the image, the



Figure 16.2 Tapuya Indian, by Albert Eckhout.

Source: The Granger Collection, New York.

setting in which they were produced? What might be the pitfalls for students of history in comparing these two images? How do you reconcile Las Casas's account in the previous source with the scene portrayed in Figure 16.1? Which source would you consider more reliable, and why? Which source would a sixteenth-century Spaniard have considered more reliable, and why? Consider how women are depicted in these works. What differences and similarities do you see? What might that tell us about European notions of women and gender in the New World?