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THE FIRST PAINTED IMAGE OF AMERICA IN EUROPE: A DETAIL FROM PINTURICCHIO'S *RESURRECTION* IN THE SALA DEI MISTERI

ANDRÉS H. RUBIANO

La primera imagen pictórica de América en Europa:
un detalle de la *Resurrección* de Pinturicchio en la Sala de los Misterios

A primeira imagem pintada da América na Europa:
um detalhe da Ressurreição de Pinturicchio na Sala dei Misteri

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Tiene una maestría en Historia del Arte del Courtauld Institute of Art y una maestría en Filosofía de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Su trabajo se ha centrado en el Renacimiento italiano del Quattrocento, en particular en el intercambio de imágenes entre el arte neerlandés y florentino, y en la representación visual de Europa sobre el Nuevo Mundo.

ABSTRACT:

The article analyses the *Resurrection of Christ*, a fresco commissioned from Pinturicchio by Pope Alexander VI in 1492 as part of his project to renovate the Borgia Apartments in the Vatican. The analysis focuses on a detail of the painting: the figures of what seems to be a group of indigenous warriors located at the centre of the fresco. The purpose of the paper is to identify the iconographic meaning and sources of this particular image. The central claim is that Pinturicchio used specific scenes from Christopher Columbus's *Diario* to create, biased by a misconception of the New World, the first painted image of America in Europe.

KEYWORDS:

New World, Alexander VI, Renaissance, Pinturicchio, Quattrocento, 1492, America

RESUMEN:

El artículo analiza *La Resurrección de Cristo*, un fresco de

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Pinturicchio comisionado por el papa Alejandro VI en 1492 como parte de la renovación de los Apartamentos Borgia en el Vaticano. Un detalle de la pintura es el foco de atención: las figuras de lo que parece ser un grupo de guerreros indígenas ubicado en el centro del fresco. Identificar el origen y el significado iconográfico de esta particular imagen es el propósito principal del texto. La apuesta central es que Pinturicchio se basó en escenas específicas del *Diario* de Colón para crear, sesgado por una concepción errónea del Nuevo Mundo, la primera representación pictórica de América en Europa.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Nuevo Mundo, Alejandro VI, Renacimiento, Pinturicchio, Quattrocento, 1492, América

RESUMO:

O artigo analisa a *Ressurreição de Cristo*, um afresco de Pinturicchio comisionado pelo papa Alexandre VI em 1492 como parte da renovação dos Apartamentos Borgia no Vaticano. Um dos detalhes da pintura é o ponto de referência: as figuras do que parece ser um grupo de indianos no centro do fresco. O propósito principal do texto é identificar a origem e o significado iconográfico da imagem. A proposta principal é que Pinturicchio se baseou nas cenas escritas do *Diário* de Cristóvão Colombo para criar, com uma imagem errada do Novo Mundo, a primeira representação pictórica de América na Europa.

PALAVRAS CHAVE:

Novo Mundo, Alexandre VI, Renascimento, Pinturicchio, Quattrocento, 1492, América.

1. Christopher Columbus, *The Letter of Columbus on the Discovery of America: A Facsimile Reprint of the Pictorial Edition of 1493, with a Literal Translation, and an Introduction* (New York: Lenox Library, 1893), 3.

2. Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land: European Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 6; Santiago Sebastián, *Iconografía del indio americano, siglos XVI-XVII* (Madrid: Ediciones Tuero, 1992), 25.

The first visual images of America produced in Europe were inspired by the accounts of the pioneer explorers of the New World. One of the main sources for these initial representations was a letter written in 1493 by Christopher Columbus, announcing the success of his voyage. The engravings made for the frontispieces of the missive's printed versions are the earliest depictions of Amerindians to have circulated throughout Europe. The first illustrated edition,¹ a Latin version of Columbus's epistle, was published in Basel in 1493, and was followed by two illustrated Italian editions printed in Rome and Florence in that same year.² These images (Img. 1, Img. 2, and Img. 3) depict the Indians in accordance with the Admiral's descriptions of the people that he encountered in the



Image 1. Anonymous, frontispiece of *De insulis nuper in mari Indico repertis Insula hispana*, 1493, engraving, Basel. Image provided by the Osher Map Library and Smith Center for Cartographic Education.

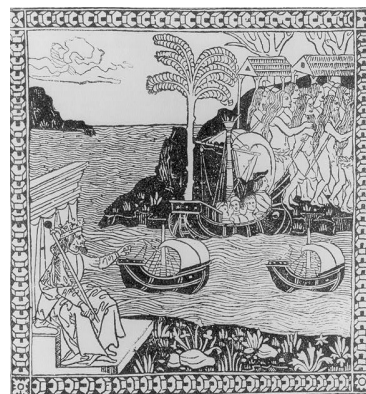


Image 3. Anonymous, frontispiece of *La lettera dell'isole che ha trovato nuovamente il Re di Spagna*, 1493, engraving, Florence. Image provided by Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



Image 2. Anonymous, frontispiece of *La storia delle inventioni delle nuove insule di Channaria Indiane*, 1493, engraving, Rome. Image provided by BCC, sign. 6-3-24(11) © Cabildo Catedral de Sevilla.

lands to which he had arrived. During the first two decades after Columbus's voyage in 1492, the main media used to create a visual depiction of the New World was engraving, by which the letters and chronicles of other explorers, like Americus Vespucci, were illustrated.³

In contrast with the diversity of engravings representing the New World during these years, paintings related to America were particularly scarce. One of the few pictures to take on the subject was painted in Portugal and corresponds to a representation of the *Adoration of the Magi* (Img. 4), dated to around 1502-1505 and attributed to either the Master of Viseu or Vasco Fernandes. As with the first engravings of Amerindians, this image is also inspired by the accounts of a pioneer explorer of the New World, Pedro Álvares Cabral, who discovered

3. These images were printed in northern cities like Rostock, Strasbourg, Antwerp, and Nuremberg. See Honour, *New Golden Land*, 10-11; and Sebastián, *Iconografía*, 29-38.



Image 4. Vasco Fernandes, *Adoration of the Magi*, ca 1502-1505, oil on wood, Viseu, Museu Grao Vasco.

4. Alexander Nagel, *Some Discoveries of 1492: Eastern Antiquities and Renaissance Europe* (Groningen: The Gerson Lectures Foundation, 2013), 25.

5. See Nagel, *Some Discoveries*, 27; and Honour, *New Golden Land*, 53.

6. According to Roberto Levillier, Vespucci's *Mundus Novus*, written in 1502, was the first document to assert that the recently discovered lands were a new continent and not a part of Asia (see Roberto Levillier, "New Light on Vespucci's Third Voyage," *Imago Mundi* 11 (1954): 39). On Magellan and the awareness among Europeans of America as a different continent, see Honour, *New Golden Land*, 15-16.

the lands that are now Brazil and who first encountered the Tupinambá people, known for their feather headdresses.⁴ In this painting, one of the magi is represented as an Amerind with dark skin, a feather crown, gold earrings, bracelets, and a spear. Several scholars have pointed out that this representation of the Wise Man from the East reflects the misbelief, then common among Europeans, that the lands to which Columbus had arrived were part of Asia.⁵ Although in 1502, after his third voyage to America, Vespucci established that the new lands discovered ten years earlier were not an extension of the Asiatic continent, Europeans only took this as a proven fact after Ferdinand Magellan circumnavigated the world between 1519 and 1522.⁶ In light of this, one may say that misconceptions about the location of America functioned as a latent idea in every representation of the New World produced in the West during the first decade after Columbus's voyage, and perhaps later.

One of the main purposes of this paper is to analyse, under this premise, the *Resurrection of Christ* (Img. 5), a fresco in the Vatican's Borgia Apartments painted around 1493-1494 by Bernardino di Betto di Baggio—better known as Pinturicchio—and his workshop assistants. The fresco is credited as featuring the first painted image of America in Europe. In recent years, after a restoration in



Image 5. Pinturicchio, *Resurrection of Christ*, ca 1493-1494, fresco, Borgia Apartments, Sala dei Misteri, Musei Vaticani, Vatican City. Image provided by photographer Damian Entwile, CC BY-NC 2.0 <https://flic.kr/p/mgY9n4>



Image 6. Detail of Pinturicchio's *Resurrection of Christ* (group of aborigines). Image provided by photographer Erik Törner, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 <https://flic.kr/p/RxwFeW>

2006 of the Sala dei Misteri in the Borgia Apartments, it was argued that a cluster of figures that could now be seen more clearly at the centre of the *Resurrection* might be interpreted as a group of American Indians (Img. 6).⁷ Documents show that Pinturicchio concluded his work in the Borgia Apartments in 1494, only two years after Columbus landed on the Caribbean Islands.⁸ If the group of figures corresponds to Amerindians, the date of the painting's completion suggests that, like the magus in Viséu's *Adoration*, it was most likely painted under the assumption that the newly discovered lands and their inhabitants were part of the Asiatic continent. This date also indicates that, if the figures do represent Indians from the New World, the *Resurrection* probably contains the very first painted image of America known in Western art.

AMERINDIANS IN THE BORGIA APARTMENTS: AN OBSTRUCTION ON THE WAY TO THE ORIENT

As has been mentioned, Pinturicchio's *Resurrection of Christ* is a fresco found in the Sala dei Misteri, one of the Vatican rooms renovated by Rodrigo Borgia after assuming the papacy as Alexander VI in 1492. Although there is no documented evidence of the exact date at which the works began, it must have been somewhere between August 1492, when Rodrigo Borgia was proclaimed Alexander VI, and March 1493, when the Pope wrote a letter to the cathedral of Orvieto where he reports that Pinturicchio was by then already working in the Vatican. It has been argued that Pinturicchio and his workshop must have ended their work

7. A brief reference to the interpretation of this group of figures as Amerindians can be found in Jessica Horton, *Art for an Undivided Earth* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 149-151. Horton's analysis of these particular figures is part of her study of indigenous art in relation to contemporary art. Other texts published after the restoration fail to mention the group of Native Americans (see, for example, Claudia La Malfa, *Pinturicchio a Roma: La seduzione dell'antico* [Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2009]). It is noteworthy that this group of figures was already identified before the restoration, as can be seen in Sabine Poeschel's study of the Borgia Apartments, in which she reads them as a group of warriors unrelated to the New World (see Sabine Poeschel, *Alexander Maximus. Das Bildprogramm des Appartamento Borgia im Vatikan* (Weimar: VDG, 1999), 108-109). Nevertheless, the reading of this image as a group of American natives has only been emphasized recently. Alexandre Nagel, for instance, highlighted this reading in his lecture "Through the Slant of Night: The Dark Side of the Earth in the Sixteenth Century," delivered at the Courtauld Institute of Art in January 2018, which inspired this paper's research topic. More recently, Michael Gaudio has identified pagan elements within this detail of the *Resurrection* as a device used by Pinturicchio to represent the inhabitants of the New World (see Michael Gaudio, *Sound, Image, Silence: Art and the Aural Imagination in the Atlantic World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 6-18). Gaudio's argument will be discussed below.

8. La Malfa, *Pinturicchio a Roma*, 122-123.

before the 16th of January of 1495, when the king of France, Charles VIII, was invited by Alexander VI to the Vatican.⁹

The programme of the Borgia Apartments—as the rooms came to be known after Rodrigo Borgia's restorations—reflects the Pope's interest in commemorating the power of his family and his legacy. As Fritz Saxl argues in his essay on the Borgia Apartments, the Sala dei Santi reveals a particular iconography that merges Christian and pagan subjects around the symbol of the bull. This mixture of symbols—which is also present in the frescoes painted on the walls of other chambers—was intended to mirror the Pope's "constant endeavour to raise [his family] to ever greater power."¹⁰ Indeed, Alexander VI's constant striving for power is a key determinant of the pictorial programme of the Borgia Apartments. In the Sala dei Misteri, the *Resurrection* fresco in particular represents the Pope's political interests and ambitions at the time.

Alexander VI had strong bonds with King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile. After all, the Borgias were a family with blood connections to the Aragonese crown.¹¹ But the Pope and the Catholic monarchs had a more compelling reason for maintaining their relationship in positive terms: the discovery of the New World in 1492. Rodrigo Borgia was proclaimed pope the same year that Columbus reached America, and as soon as the Spanish crown received news of the voyage's success, the Spaniards sought to secure their rights upon the discoveries by requesting from the Pope an "official grant of their new possessions, together with his license to make further discoveries and appropriations."¹² Spain's dispute with Portugal over territories that were to be found in the New World triggered the urgency of this request. Pope Alexander VI, serving as the authority invested with the power to secure peace among Christian princes, issued between 1493 and 1494 a series of bulls related to the New World and the conflict between Portugal and Spain. The treaty of Tordesillas, signed on the 7th of June of 1494, and created to settle the quarrel between the Portuguese and the Spaniards, was the final outcome of these papal bulls.¹³

Of course, Alexander VI had his own interests in the newly discovered territories. As it is explicitly established in the different documents that he issued in favour of the Catholic monarchy, the Spanish Crown was granted control over the terrains discovered by Columbus on the condition of morally educating and Christianizing the aborigines of the New World. To this end, a selected group of ecclesiastical men were sent to the territories in order to perform the sacred functions of evangelization. Alexander VI was interested in the propagation of Catholicism in the new territories as this would imply an extension of his power over the world. The preface of the main bull that gave way to the treaty of Tordesillas explicitly expresses this motivation and the interest of the Church in the New World.¹⁴

9. Randolph Parks, "On the Meaning of Pinturicchio's Sala dei Santi," *Art History* 2, n.º. 3 (1979): 291, n. 2.; La Malfa, Pinturicchio a Roma, 120.

10. Fritz Saxl, "The Appartamento Borgia," in *Lectures* (London: Warburg Institute, 1957), 188.

11. Saxl, "The Appartamento," 178.

12. Peter de Roo, *Material for a History of Pope Alexander VI, His Relatives and His Time*, Volume III (Bruges: Desclée, De Brouwer and Co., 1942), 61.

13. De Roo, *Material*, 60-64.

14. De Roo, *Material*, 62-65.

The political agenda of Alexander VI was not limited to the expansion of Christianity. Since the Turks had conquered Constantinople in 1453, the Mohammedan threat was a main issue for the Vatican. The Turks had been a concern for all the popes since Constantinople was taken, but, contrary to most of his predecessors, Alexander VI embraced a decidedly radical stance. Randolph Parks points out that “thirty-five years before [1492], Callixtus III, uncle of Alexander, who had brought him to Rome and made him cardinal, had emphasized the Turkish crusade as the overriding concern of his brief papacy; and Alexander, as newly elected Pope, vowed on several occasions that he intended to emulate the policy of Callixtus.”¹⁵ The quest for power that characterized Alexander VI, and the often ferocious anti-Turkish policies that he had deployed in the past, may have been aspects of his persona that he would have wanted to be known for, which would account for some features of Pinturicchio’s *Resurrection* fresco.

The two guards seen at the right side of the fresco bending their knee towards the risen Christ are a cue to our understanding of how the Pope’s political interests play a key function in the painting. One of these guards directs his gaze towards the viewer, while holding a large spear that seems to point to the flag of victory, as if inviting the viewer to focus his attention on the central figure of Christ. The other kneeling guard, located at the far right of the fresco, also seems to be addressing the viewer, but this time our attention is drawn towards the left side of the painting, as the guard’s gesture seems to summon someone behind him to join Christ. Alternatively, however, the gesture could be read as drawing our attention past the figure of Christ and towards a group of buildings seen in the background at the upper left side. The fresco’s lavish decoration, with golden details found throughout the whole painting, bolsters this alternative reading, bearing in mind that the golden marks in the background vegetation configure a path that can be traced as it winds from the lower right side of the fresco, at the level of the guard’s shoulder, up along the side of a group of rock formations, and then across to the left side of the painting, where a group of three travellers can be distinguished. The guard’s gesture can be read as an invitation to follow that path, and it is worth noting that exactly the same gesture is also performed by one of the three travellers who are seen making their way up the road to the buildings in the far background at the left. But what is this place to which the road leads? Why are these figures displayed as though to invite the viewer to look towards that section of the painting?

The gesture of the guard who directs the viewer’s attention towards the left side of the painting may be interpreted as a representation of the Pope’s interest in expanding Catholicism to the East and confronting the Oriental threat. The pointy buildings to which the road leads, with their particular architecture,

15. Parks, “On The Meaning,” 302.

may be seen as referring to cities under Islamic influence. It is not gratuitous that two of the figures depicted on the background path wear headdresses that resemble turbans. Moreover, in line with this reading, the guard who is seen holding a large spear pointing towards the flag of victory held by Christ in his left hand can be interpreted as an allusion to the Pope's crusading intentions. Under this interpretation, the role of this guard is to draw our attention towards the emblem of Christ, thus revealing one of the political interests of Alexander VI depicted in the *Resurrection* fresco: the recovery of the East in the name of Christ.

This reading of the fresco allows us to account for the presence of the group of figures found at the centre of the painting. As mentioned before, Alexander VI regarded Columbus's discovery as an immense opportunity for expanding his power by propagating Catholicism in the New World and evangelizing its people. The appearance of a group of Amerinds at the centre of the fresco is, in this sense, compatible with the *Resurrection*'s purpose of representing the Pope's political ambitions. If, according to this reading, the image is indeed intended as a representation of the native inhabitants of the New World, two questions arise: why are the Amerindians located in that particular area of the fresco, and what is their relation, if any, with the allusions to Islamic culture found elsewhere in the painting? The answer to these queries might be found in the above-mentioned fact that during the first decades after the discovery of the American territories, Europeans mistakenly regarded them as a mere extension of the Oriental realms.¹⁶ In this sense, Europeans had the erroneous geographical perception of the New World as "an obstruction on the way to Orient."¹⁷ If we take these erroneous views into consideration, and bearing in mind that the fresco was painted around 1494, only two years after Columbus's first voyage to America, we see that the presence of the aborigines in Pinturicchio's painting can be explained as a reference to the inhabitants of lands that, as it was then thought, stood between Europe and the East, people who, according to the political interests of Alexander VI, had to be Christianized.

The detail in Pinturicchio's fresco is, in this sense, a representation of an encounter between two worlds. As Michael Gaudio has pointed out, there is a tension in the painting that can be identified as the enactment of a confrontation between Christianity and paganism. The inhabitants of the lands discovered by Columbus are located right underneath the rising figure of Christ, a placing that can be read as "an assertion that the New World must be known through its enclosure within Christian revelation, the central truth of which is Christ's resurrection."¹⁸ According to Gaudio, Pinturicchio paints the aborigines as if they were dancing in circles in order to link them to paganism. Like the Morris dance and other rituals condemned in Christian theology, the custom of dancing in circles was associated during the Renaissance and in the Middle Ages to pagan

16. David Quinn, "New Geographical Horizons: Literature," in *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old*, volume II, edited by Fredi Chiappelli (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 653-654.

17. Quinn, "New Geographical Horizons," 660.

18. Gaudio, *Sound, Image, Silence*, 11.

beliefs and practices.¹⁹ Although it is not entirely clear whether the aborigines in the painting are indeed dancing in circles or not, Gaudio is right in asserting that Pinturicchio's fresco puts "the inhabitants of the New World into motion as details within larger theological programs that court paganism only to subordinate it to sacred history."²⁰ As I have argued, this is simply an extension of the overarching programme that determines other aspects of Pinturicchio's composition: to convey the political ambitions of Alexander VI to seize control of the New World.

COLUMBIAN DOCUMENTS AND PINTURICCHIO'S INVENTION OF AMERINDIANS

How did Pinturicchio come up with the visual imagery that he used to represent the native inhabitants of the New World? The only textual reference to America known by 1494, the year when Pinturicchio and his workshop finished the frescos in the Borgia Apartments, was Columbus's own account of his voyages. The Admiral's letter to Luis Santángel, a court official of the Catholic Monarchs who played a key role in financing the first voyage, was one of the main documents.²¹ The missive was first printed in Barcelona in April of 1493. In the following months it was translated from Castilian into Latin and published in Basel, Rome, and Florence in illustrated editions featuring the first images of Amerindians to be found in Europe.²² If the *Resurrection* displays a group of aborigines from the New World, one would expect to find the iconographic source for this image either in the text of this epistle or in the frontispieces of its illustrated editions, which were widely disseminated throughout Europe in 1493.²³

According to Columbus's account, the people that he first encountered were always "naked, men and women alike, just as their mothers bear them, although some women cover themselves in one place with a leaf from a plant or a cotton garment which they make for the purpose."²⁴ At different points, his descriptions present an idealized image of the Indians, which may be explained by the influence of medieval readings and the doctrines of Christian religious orders.²⁵ This can be seen in his portrayal of the Indians as completely innocent, almost evoking a state of purity associated with the idea of Paradise and reinforced by the aborigines' nakedness. The centrality of this nakedness as a defining feature can be seen illustrated in the editions printed in Basel (1493, Img. 1), Rome (1493, Img. 2), and Florence (1493, Img. 3). In contrast with the Indians in the Basel edition, those depicted in the Roman and Florentine prints cover their genitals with leaves and also carry primitive weapons, as described by Columbus. "They have no iron or steel or weapons," says the Admiral, "nor

19. Gaudio, Sound, Image, Silence, 8-10.

20. Gaudio, Sound, Image, Silence, 13.

21. Two different letters written by Columbus after his arrival are known to us: one addressed to the Catholic Monarchs and one addressed to Luis Santángel. The Latin version of this second letter is addressed to Gabriel Sánchez, the general treasurer of the kingdom of Aragon. For a discussion of the differences between the letters and their addressees, see Barry Ife, *Letters from America: Columbus's First Accounts of the 1492 Voyage* (London: King's College, 1992), 10-15. According to Elise Bartosik-Vélez, the original letters to Santángel and Sánchez are lost, but available copies show that they have the same content, although different dates and signatures (see Elise Bartosik-Vélez, "The First Interpretations of the Columbian Enterprise," *Revista canadiense de estudios hispánicos* 33, n.º. 2 (2009): 317-334). For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on examining the letter to Santángel, which does not differ from the others in its description of American aborigines and was the first to be published in illustrated editions.

22. Ife, Letters, 10; Sebastián, Iconografía, 25-28; Honour, New Golden Land, 6.

23. For the printed versions of the letter and its reception in Europe, see Rudolf Hirsch, "Printed Reports on the Early Discoveries and their Reception," in Chiappelli, *First Images of America*, 537-562.

24. Ife, Letters, 51.

25. Sandra Sáenz-López, "Las primeras imágenes occidentales de los indígenas americanos: entre la tradición medieval y los inicios de la antropología moderna," *Anales de Historia del Arte*, volumen extraordinario (2011): 465-466; John H. Elliot, *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 22-23; and Santiago Sebastián, "El indio desde la iconografía," in *La imagen del indio en la Europa moderna*, edited by Fundación Europea de la Ciencia (Seville: Escuela de Estudios Hispanoamericanos, 1990), 435-439.

are they that way inclined, not because they are not well built and of fine bearing, but because they are amazingly timid. They have no weapons other than those made from canes cut when they are in seed, to the ends of which they fix a sharp stick [...].”²⁶ These weapons can be seen in the Florentine and Roman editions, where some Indians can be seen holding what seem to be spears as they apparently speed away from the voyagers, arguably a sign of the timidity to which Columbus alludes in his letter.

Like the Roman and Florentine frontispieces, the Basel edition also represents this characteristic shyness, but, in contrast with the Italian editions, it also highlights another trait of character proper to the aborigines according to the Admiral: their generosity. As Columbus recorded, he encountered people “that are ‘the finest under the sun, without evil or deception;’ naked, weaponless, eschewing private property, without religion, and generous in the extreme.”²⁷ These personality traits, timidity and generosity, are represented in two different groups of Indians depicted in the frontispiece of the Basel edition. One of them seems to be walking away from the navigators who offer them an object as they approach the coast in a small boat. The other group, on the contrary, marches towards the shore led by a native who is holding up an object, indicating his willingness to trade it in exchange for the object offered by the sailors. Columbus records in his letter how some of his men traded trinkets for gold with the Indians, just as the Basel edition seems to depict it.

How do Columbus's letter and its frontispieces relate to the group of primitives depicted in Pinturicchio's *Resurrection* fresco? Is it plausible to think that Pinturicchio and his workshop may have used them as sources? I will now examine the group in more detail in order to address these questions.

The group of aborigines in the *Resurrection* (Img. 6) is formed by figures of naked men emerging from the background at the centre of the composition, right below the figure of the rising Christ and filling the space between the head and fluttering cape of a perplexed guard who looks upwards from behind the sepulchre. The dynamism of the group, which emerges lively from the background, sets it apart from the stillness of the figures in the foreground. The movements of the two leading figures suggest that the group may be dancing: one of them faces the viewer, vivaciously moving his limbs and tilting his head in the opposite direction to the movement of his body, whilst the other is turning his body back towards the rest of the group, raising his right arm and bending his head down as he steps towards the crowd. Painted with reddish monochrome traces, the forms of the natives are merely suggested. Their faces, for instance, are sketched only by the shadows of their eyes, noses, and mouths. In spite of these indeterminate characteristics, their bodies are muscular and well-defined, a trait that allows Pinturicchio to highlight their nakedness, as

26. Ife, *Letters*, 51.

27. Ife, *Letters*, 13-14.

can be evinced particularly in the frontal figure that looks to the viewer. One particular element of this figure is his headwear, which seems to be made out of feathers. Although it is harder to make out, he also wears an ornament on his right calf. Along with the dancing movements, these details differentiate the aborigines from classical figures that have the same muscular bodies and are also characterized by their nakedness. It is noteworthy that the group of natives is accompanied by three horses, one of which can be seen to the left of the puzzled guard's head. The other two can be seen to the right side of the group, right above the guard's cape.

One of the most notable similarities between this image and the illustrated frontispieces of Columbus's letter is the nakedness of the Indians. In the fresco the aborigines appear entirely unclothed, as can be seen in the two leading figures, particularly the one who turns towards the viewer, who as in Columbus's account is completely naked, with the sole exception of his head-dress. The spears sketched in the fresco likewise coincide with those depicted in the illustrated editions of the Admiral's letter and described in the text of the missive itself.

These similarities, however, are not sufficient evidence for claiming that the frontispieces or the epistle were the source upon which Pinturicchio based his representation of the group of natives in the *Resurrection*. Firstly, Columbus's descriptions of the Indians' psychological and behavioural traits are not echoed by Pinturicchio's figures. In contrast with the image of pure and innocent peoples displayed on the Basel and Italian frontispieces, the figures in the fresco are more dynamic and do not correspond to the description of weaponless and peaceful men wavering between timidity and generosity. Far from this, the figures by Pinturicchio are more similar to warriors. Indeed, as Sabine Poeschel has noted, there is something martial about this group of figures.²⁸ These divergences suggest that the source of the painted natives must be different from the illustrations of the printed editions of the letter, or from the passages in which Columbus presents his idealized account of the natives as peaceful and innocent.

One alternative source on which Pinturicchio may have based his depiction is a passage in the epistle to Santángel in which the Admiral mentions another tribe, less peaceful than the first natives he encountered:

So I have found no monsters, nor heard of any except on an island here which is the second one as you approach the Indies and which is inhabited by people who are held in all the islands to be very ferocious and who eat human flesh [...]. They are ferocious with these other people who are excessively cowardly, but I take no more account of them than of the rest.²⁹

28. Poeschel argues for a different reading of the fresco, according to which the group of figures should not be read as a representation of Native Americans but simply as an army of lancers who are preparing for battle in order to fight for the grave of Christ. See Poeschel, *Alexander Maximus*, 108-109.

29. Ife, *Letters*, 61.

The description by Columbus of cannibal Indians as a ferocious people might be a more adequate source for the image of Pinturicchio's group of natives, since it evokes the possibility of a dynamic and belligerent group such as the one depicted in the *Resurrection*. However, the figures in the fresco bear no signs of cannibalistic behaviour, preventing us from definitely settling for this passage of the letter as Pinturicchio's source. Nevertheless, based on the attitude of the Indians, it seems more plausible to establish this as the textual basis for the image, rather than the fragments in which the natives are described as peaceful and innocent.

There are other elements in the fresco that diverge from the content of the letter to Santángel and the images included in its illustrated editions. One of them is the person seen standing between the guard's head and the naked native who leads the group while turning to look towards the viewer. Standing behind and to the left of the dancing leader, this figure stands depicted in profile, wearing what seems to be a metal helmet, indicating that he might be a soldier. We may link this figure to the three horses that, as mentioned above, appear to belong to the group of aborigines. There are no references in Columbus's missive to the presence of horses on the islands that he discovered, and the illustrated editions contain no images of animals. Why then are there horses in this detail of the fresco? Once again, the initial misconception of Europeans of the New World as an extension of the Eastern lands might answer this question, since the artist might have conceived of the natives he was depicting as inhabitants of Asia. Moreover, as is well known, Columbus originally intended to find a new route to the East, and specifically to Cathay, a place that had been described by Marco Polo at the time of the Great Khan's rule.³⁰ Columbus in fact mentions this emperor in his letter to Santángel when he describes the strategic value of the lands that he had claimed possession of for establishing trading relationships.³¹ These references to the East as the location of the new lands discovered by Columbus might thus account for the presence of horses in connection to the group of aborigines in the fresco.

However, besides lacking compelling evidence to support it, this reading is not enough to explain the figure of the soldier who seems to be wearing a helmet. The presence of this figure and of the three horses may have a more straightforward explanation: Pinturicchio painted these figures to represent the encounter between Amerindians and Europeans as he envisioned it. The idea of a tension produced by the confrontation of two worlds, of Christianity and paganism, of European civilization and unknown primitiveness, which we have seen at work in other areas of the fresco, would in that sense likewise determine this central detail. There is a conspicuous disparity between the aborigines and the horsemen and soldier that surround them. The helmet and the silhouette of an

30. Silvio Beding, *The Christopher Columbus Encyclopaedia*, volume 1 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 118.

31. Ife, *Letters*, 57.

armour create a marked contrast with the nakedness of the natives, and the same can be said of the horsemen riding their stallions close to the aborigines dancing barefoot. The detail can then be understood as Pinturicchio's representation of the tense encounter between the New World and the Old World produced by the advance of Europeans towards the Orient.

Up to this point, there seems to be no conclusive reasons to reject the possibility of establishing a relation between the scene of natives and Columbus's letter and its illustrated editions, but there is also no strong evidence to accept that these documents were indeed the sources that Pinturicchio used for this detail of the fresco. There is, however, a further element to be found in his representation of the aborigines that may be taken as a definite clue as to the source: the crown of feathers. There are no references at all to this detail in the illustrations of Columbus's letter or in the text proper. The association between Amerindians and the use of feathers as crowns was popularized only after the voyages of Vespucci and other explorers around 1500-1505 to the lands of what is now Brazil.³² It was only through the images of the illustrated editions of Vespucci's letter, which portrayed Indians from the Tupinambá tribe, that Europeans started to visually identify Native Americans with the use of feathers.³³ If these prints were produced only nearly a decade after Columbus's first voyage, the question concerning the source of Pinturicchio's depiction of the crown of feathers in his *Resurrection* fresco remains unanswered.

Gaudio has in fact questioned the identification of the headdress as an artifact made of feathers, "since Columbus's letter, which was the only published account of his voyage at the time Pinturicchio was painting, does not mention feathers,"³⁴ and suggested instead that the iconographic origin of the aborigine's headpiece can be traced to Pinturicchio's fascination for a set of antique Roman *grotteschi* discovered in the 1490s as decorations for Nero's Domus Aurea. Gaudio presents as evidence for his claim a detail from the ceiling of the Piccolomini Library painted by Pinturicchio in the Siena Cathedral, where a figure is seen wearing something quite similar to the Amerindian's headwear. Thus, Gaudio argues that the apparent feathered headpiece was not based on documents referring to the New World at all, but on Pinturicchio's inclination to reproduce an antique pictorial device for representing the exotic.³⁵

Although Gaudio's argument is compelling, there is a further consideration that prevents us from discarding the possibility that Columbus's documents may yet have served as Pinturicchio's inspiration for the aborigine figures. Columbus's letter might have been the only published account of his voyage, but there is another account to which Pinturicchio may have had access: his *Diario*. The difficulty of considering this text as a source for Pinturicchio rests in the fact that there is no evidence that this document was reproduced during

32. Elizabeth Hill Boone, "Seeking Indianness: Christoph Weiditz, the Aztecs, and feathered Amerindians," *Colonial Latin American Review* 26, n° 1 (2017): 50-51.

33. Several scholars have pointed out that the image published in 1505 as an illustration to Vespucci's letter is the earliest representation of Amerindians that can be said to have a certain degree of ethnographic precision. See Susi Colin, *Das Bild des Indianers im 16. Jahrhundert* (Idstein: Schulz-Kirchner, 1988), 186-187; William Sturtevant, "First Visual Images of Native America," in Chiappelli, *First Images of America*, volume II, 420; and Christian Feest, "The People of Calicut: Objects, Texts, and Images in the Age of Proto-Ethnography," *Boletim do Museu Paraense Emilio Goeldi* (2014): 298.

34. Gaudio, Sound, Image, Silence, 11.

35. Gaudio, Sound, Image, Silence, 12.

Columbus's lifetime, as was the case with the letter to Santángel. The original manuscript has been lost and the text that is known to us is a summary and reconstruction of the journal compiled by Bartolomé de Las Casas in the 1520s, based on extracts from the original.³⁶ Nothing is known about the original document aside from the fact that, after the Admiral reached Spain at the end of his first voyage, he gave the original *Diario* to Queen Isabella, who had it copied and gave that copy to Columbus.³⁷ Some authors have argued that only one-fifth of the content of the journal as we know it is phrased in Columbus's own words, while the rest of the document seems to be the work of De Las Casas paraphrasing the original.³⁸ Thus, as several scholars have pointed out, it is not possible to know which parts of the text were created by De Las Casas and which correspond to Columbus's original account.³⁹ Despite these doubts regarding the authenticity of its content, other authors argue that the document is reliable, because, as David Henige explains, "De Las Casas, particularly in the long descriptive passages, probably found it easiest to transcribe verbatim but did not bother to say so."⁴⁰ Also, even though we do not know to what extent or how the document was reproduced in Europe—we may assume that, if it circulated, it was only within a very restricted circle—the journal might still be regarded as a possible source for Pinturicchio, since the Pope may well have had access to it given his ties with the Spanish Crown, the reach of his power at the time, and his interest in the New World.

If we assume that Pinturicchio may have had access to the *Diario* while he was working for the Pope, the entry for January 13, 1493, might be considered as the main source for the group of aborigines painted in the fresco.⁴¹ In this passage, De Las Casas summarized an encounter that Columbus had with a group of aborigines, and it is only here that the document mentions the use of feathers as headwear by the Indians. The description refers to an aborigine who was invited to meet the Admiral aboard one of the Spanish ships: "His face was all stained with charcoal, but in all parts there is the custom of painting the body in different colours. He wore his hair very long, brought together and fastened behind, and put into a small net of parrots' feathers. He was naked, like all the others."⁴² Another mention of feathers can be found later on in the *Diario*'s description of a group of Indians who were part of the same tribe as the Indian described in the previous fragment: "When the boat reached the shore there were fifty-five men behind the trees, naked, and with very long hair, as the women wear it in Castille. Behind the head they wore plumes of feathers of parrots and other birds, and each man carried a bow."⁴³

A connection between these fragments and the group of aborigines in the fresco can be established not only on account of the fact that feathers are mentioned as part of the Indians' headwear, but also because the native identified

36. Samuel Eliot Morison, "Texts and Translations of the Journal of Columbus's First Voyage," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 19, n.º. 3 (1939), 237-238.

37. Ife, Letters, 8.

38. David Henige, *In Search for Columbus: The Sources for the First Voyage* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1991), 3.

39. For a discussion of the debate around the authenticity of the *Diario*, see Bartosik-Vélez, "The First Interpretations," 322.

40. Henige, *In Search of Columbus*, 3.

41. As Gaudio himself acknowledges, to argue that the iconographic source for the headwear is to be found in Pinturicchio's fascination for *groteschi* is not to deny that Columbus may also have been an influence. As will be shown below, the *Diario* contains passages that may be considered as a source for the first painted image of Amerindians in Europe.

42. Christopher Columbus, *The Journal of Christopher Columbus (During His First Voyage, 1492-93) and Documents Relating the Voyages of John Cabot and Gaspar Corte Real*, edited by Clements Markham (London: Hakluyt Society, 1893), 159.

43. Columbus, *Journal*, 160.

in the first passage is described as a member of a group of natives said to be cannibals: “The Admiral supposed that he belonged to the Caribs, who eat men [...]. He thought they must be an audacious race, for they go to all these islands and eat the people they can capture.”⁴⁴ As mentioned before, the natives in the fresco have a warrior-like disposition that differs completely from that of the Indians described by Columbus in his letter to Santángel, which makes it plausible to identify them as the cannibals to which Columbus also refers in his epistle. After describing an incident with the Indians in the same entry for the 13th of January, in which the natives are said to have attacked the Spaniards during an arms trade, there is a passage in the journal that makes this difference explicit:

The Admiral regretted the affair for one reason, and was pleased for another. They would have fear of the Christians, and they were no doubt an ill-conditioned people, probably Caribs, who eat men. But the Admiral felt alarm lest they should do some harm to the 39 men left in the fortress and town of Navidad, in the event of their coming here in their boat. Even if they are not Caribs, they are a neighbouring people, with similar habits, and fearless, unlike the other inhabitants of the island, who are timid, and without arms.⁴⁵

This entry in Columbus’s journal can thus be regarded as the source for Pinturicchio’s image of the aborigines painted in the *Resurrection* fresco, inasmuch as it portrays a group of Indians with a warrior-like attitude, as an ‘audacious race,’ and at the same time refers to the use of feathers as headwear such as is used by the Indian depicted in front of the group of natives.

Although the *Diario* describes the feather-wearing Indians as also equipped with arrows and bows as weapons, rather than the spears used by the aborigines in the fresco, this could be explained as resulting from a combination of sources, namely, the letter, the frontispieces, and the journal entry, which would all have been used by Pinturicchio in order to represent, based on his own invention, the people from the New World that Alexander VI was hoping to evangelize.



The *Resurrection* fresco by Pinturicchio, as has been argued in this paper, is a representation of the political interests of Alexander VI: the eastward expansion of Christianity by confronting the Muslims, and the conversion of the peoples found in the New World. The decoration of the Borgia Apartments was a visual manifestation of the Pope’s ambitions, which revolved around his own image and

44. Columbus, Journal, 159-160.

45. Columbus, Journal, 161.

the legacy of his family. Based on our interpretation and historical analysis of a central detail of the *Resurrection* depicting a group of Amerindians, it is tempting to suggest that the fresco is a picture that holds together different elements typical of the years that followed Columbus's "discovery", years during which America was perceived as a territory full of contradictions, whose development would be characterized by fabulous and brutal stories produced by the encounter of two entirely different cultures. The erroneous perception of the New World as a part of Asia, and the European preconception, inspired by medieval text books, of foreign lands as inhabited by fabulous creatures who were altogether different from the people of Europe, the overwhelming influence of the Church and its projected evangelization of the New World, and Pinturicchio's own artistic inventiveness, are all sources that feed into this detail of the *Resurrection*. Notably, these same elements would go on to play a considerable role in the ensuing development of the history of the Americas. In this sense, it may be said that the *Resurrection* fresco not only contains the first painted image of the New World, but also symbolizes the tensions and forces that were already at work from the very beginning of Europe's understanding of America as an object of discovery and invention.



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