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Book review: inventing exoticism: geography, globalism and Europe's early modern world

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Review for *Journal of Global History*

Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism and Europe's Early Modern World

By Benjamin Schmidt, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. xx + 412.

\$85, £55.50 ISBN 978-0-8122-4646-9.

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Benjamin Schmidt's elegantly written and beautifully produced new book argues that 'a new conception of the world and of Europe's relationship to it' developed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (3). Previously Europeans comprehended the non-European world in terms of 'national, confessional, colonial [and] imperial' contestation, an emphasis which familiarised distant lands by inserting them into Eurocentric narratives of conquest and rivalry (9). Columbus, for instance, described the New World in terms which explicitly evoked Castile's victories against the Moors. From 1650 though, Europeans became more interested in the distinctiveness of spaces outside Europe. These regions became 'agreeable', exotic 'products', represented as alluring and aestheticized realms in a burgeoning consumer-culture of books, prints, maps and other material objects (5). Despite its apparent attention to non-European particularity, exoticism homogenised the non-European world into a single, interchangeable space defined by oft-repeated tropes: strange creatures, resplendent emperors, abundant natural resources and so on. Crucially too, the exotic helped shape new ideas about Europe's post-Westphalian identity. It allowed Europeans to see themselves as secular, acquisitive and commercial aesthetes, rather than as violent religious belligerents.

The evidence for this argument is drawn mainly from Dutch materials, though Schmidt argues persuasively that they were aimed at – and succeeded in reaching – a purposely ‘European’ audience.

Inventing Exoticism's opening chapter discusses the emergence of a new type of geographical text in the late seventeenth-century. Physically large and lavishly illustrated, these books shaped and disseminated ideas about the exotic for transnational audiences. Schmidt makes a number of important methodological observations here: he is excellent on the material aspects of book production, and suggests that we need to interpret these volumes using the strategies of the book historian as well as the textual critic. For instance, the notion of a presiding ‘author’ is often unhelpful for works which were compiled by editors, or pieced together from multiple extant sources. By attending to such issues, Schmidt shows how wider contexts of production, audience and paratext (e.g. frontispieces, dedications and so on) helped shape and disseminate ideas in early modern culture.

The second chapter concentrates on the visual exotic, analysing the different types of illustration which together created an exotic aesthetic: maps, cityscapes, ethnographic vignettes, pictures of animals, plants, and objects. The emphasis here is on the exotic as something easily apportioned, displayed and sold; but it also shows the importance of spectacle in the early modern geographical gaze – a relationship which has endured in contemporary magazines such as *National Geographic*. There is also a productive tension in how these illustrations functioned in wider cultural discourse. The images were partly designed as ‘truth statements’ intended to record and present a supposedly objective idea of real places. But they were also conventionalised, stereotypical devices, recycled across formats, and therefore concerned to standardise ideas about exoticism. In this way, exotic

imagery served a double-function: aestheticizing the non-European world while reifying that aesthetic as an objective description.

Chapter three discusses 'exotic corporality', specifically the way in which exoticism was associated with violence and dangerous sexuality. For Schmidt, this represents a 'shift in the geography of violence': aggressive personal conduct, oppressive political systems, and sexual deviance were 'banished from the boundaries of Europe', allowing Europeans to imagine themselves as inhabitants of a civilised space (221). The non-European world was thus configured in erotic and despotic terms from the very start of the early modern period. This is significant because the heyday of Orientalism is usually dated to the nineteenth century thanks to Edward Said's influential analysis (*Orientalism*, 1978).

The final chapter concentrates on consumer goods. 'Exotic' became 'a linguistic means to identify a range of material objects, particularly [...] consumable luxury items' (227). By discussing a wide range of two- and three-dimensional objects, Schmidt shows how they imbricate 'decoration' and 'narrative'. Early modern geographical ideas were often expressed decoratively in beautiful and desirable objects; and similarly those physical objects, both individually and collectively, constructed narratives about how to see and interpret the world.

Inventing Exoticism is an inventive and perceptive book. It lucidly combines detailed analysis of specific texts and objects with discussion of larger themes invaluable for any reader interested in early modern European identities and perceptions. Crucially too, with his thorough accounts of particular objects and their wider intellectual implications, Schmidt provides an important historiographical service in showing how concepts and materiality can

intersect. However, I am not fully persuaded by his argument that exotic ‘difference’ superseded an earlier focus on the ‘familiar’ non-European world. In my view, later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century geographical works often continued to comprehend distant places in terms of their correspondence to ‘home’. In that respect, ‘exoticism’ may be embroiled in broader tensions about how to interpret the non-European world: particular places often being understood simultaneously both as strange and unknowable, and as fully exploitable commodities. Seen through another lens, exoticism might be a way of making otherness comfortably familiar by constructing a set of easily-recognisable Eurocentric stereotypes. Conversely, Schmidt is perhaps too modest in suggesting that exotic geography declined after the early eighteenth century. For instance, geographical works with the characteristics he identifies – lavish illustration, an unsystematic structure – were still being produced in the 1790s.

I must end by noting that, appropriately for a book about luxury objects, *Inventing Exoticism* is a beautiful book. Printed on acid-free paper, and with 24 colour plates and no fewer than 179 figures, no expense has been spared in producing this work, something for which the author and publisher deserve much praise. It is doubtful whether a project so reliant on visual material could have been realised so successfully without a publisher fully committed to the art of fine book production. *Inventing Exoticism* is consequently a double pleasure to read, not just due to its lively and rigorous intellectual content, but also due to its sumptuous physical form.