

# John White: The Story of a British Artist and Explorer of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century

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## Introduction

John White (†1593) is best known as an artist, though not because he had the most remarkable style in the 16<sup>th</sup> century but because he was the first Englishman who painted America. By now, we know that his works were not exactly accurate or anatomically well-structured (for example, one of his paintings which represents a terrapin turtle has one toe too many),<sup>1</sup> but through his watercolours England had the first look at the New World around 1585 and that is what makes him historically important.

Starting his journeys, in May 1577 White sailed to America with an expedition that aimed to find gold and the Northwest passage to Asia. The commander of the expedition, Martin Frobisher reported he had found possible gold mines on a previous voyage at Baffin Island, and he was also interested in finding the Northwest passage. The expedition had first arrived in Greenland and after, on Baffin Island. Unfortunately, they did not strike it rich, and arrived back in England in September 1577. Despite the failed expedition, they did have something to show up, and that was White's first watercolours of the recently discovered land.

Later in this essay, I am going to describe White's paintings from closer and then compare them to the engravings made of them. Before that happens, however, I must dig into the story of his life.

## John White's life and journeys

Of White's early years we only know very few details:<sup>2</sup> he was born somewhere in the English Midlands and married Thomasine Cooper in 1566 in the city of London. Later on, they had two children together, but one of them died in infancy.

Before his first voyage with Martin Frobisher, White had spent some time studying art in England. On his first visit to the New World, he created some illustrations of the Inuit,<sup>3</sup> which seemed to be good enough, because in 1585 he found himself on a boat sailing to America

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<sup>1</sup> britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\_1906-0509-1-70 (last download: 2022/06/29)

<sup>2</sup> encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/white-john-d-1593/ (last download: 2022/06/29)

<sup>3</sup> britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\_1906-0509-1-30 (last download: 2022/06/29)

again. This was a series of expeditions which White accompanied and which were sponsored by Sir Walter Raleigh, who was an English explorer and a favourite of Queen Elisabeth I.<sup>4</sup> Raleigh's aim was to settle the first successful English colony in the New World. Explorers and colonizers hired artists to make visual reports from America and that is exactly what White's role was on these voyages. According to a letter which was written by John White<sup>5</sup> the first ship which made the trip from Plymouth, England to Roanoke Island had him on the board as well in 1584. This voyage served as an investigation about the land for the upcoming expeditions and was successful. Later that year, they arrived back in England with two high-ranking natives who accompanied them, Manteo and Wanchese.<sup>6</sup>

Back in London White and Thomas Harriot (1560–1621), who was a mathematician, astronomer and naturalist and also a member of Raleigh's group,<sup>7</sup> studied the Algonquian language and culture with the help of Manteo and Wanchese. In April 1585 they left Plymouth for the second voyage to present-day North Carolina with the aim of colonization. The fleet altogether had nearly 600 colonists and Sir Richard Grenville was the commander of the ship that had Harriot and White on board. The two were meant to draw pictures and maps about the land where they were going to arrive. *Tiger*, their ship first stopped at Puerto Rico, then on the Outer Banks, where it broke down, so they built a camp. From there, in July, Grenville made a one-week-long journey to discover the mainland where they visited the following towns: Pomeiooc, Aquascogoc, and Secoton. White captured the local flora, fauna, the Pomeiooc and Secoton towns in detail, which in a following chapter I will closely examine. By the end of August, they made a camp on Roanoke Island. Later, they visited more nearby towns, but due to a dispute with the Natives, White returned to England in 1586. The dispute led to the decapitation of a high-ranking native, Wingina (*Fig. 3*) and the destruction of his town by the colonists.<sup>8</sup>

After the disaster of the first attempt of colonizing the area, Raleigh planned a next expedition and this time he wanted to avoid the previous events. Instead of hiring military men he replaced them with farmers and asked White to be the leader. However, it was not the most brilliant idea, despite the fact that White knew a lot about the local culture because he was present on both previous voyages, yet he was not built up with leader-material. This was probably the cause of the upcoming troubles. Raleigh chose Chesapeake Bay as the destination, because back in 1585 White and Harriot had visited it and it seemed habitable, especially compared to Roanoke, which was not inviting anymore after the previous incident.

White's pregnant daughter, Elinor and her husband joined the colony to be the first English residents of the New World. In July 1587 a colony of 117 arrived on Roanoke Island with the plan of a short stay to find the soldiers who had been left behind by the commander of the previous voyage (but they were never found). A tension erupted between White and

<sup>4</sup> [britannica.com/biography/Walter-Raleigh-English-explorer](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Walter-Raleigh-English-explorer) (last download 2022/06/29)

<sup>5</sup> [sites.rootsweb.com/~molcgdrg/rml/trv2-beers.htm](https://sites.rootsweb.com/~molcgdrg/rml/trv2-beers.htm) (last download 2022/06/29)

<sup>6</sup> [encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/roanoke-colonies-the/](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/roanoke-colonies-the/) (last download 2022/06/29)

<sup>7</sup> [britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Harriot](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Harriot) (last download 2022/06/29)

<sup>8</sup> [encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/white-john-d-1593/](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/white-john-d-1593/) (Roanoke 1584–1586) (last download: 2022/06/29)

Simon Fernandez, who piloted one of the vessels of the expedition. Fernandez wanted to stay on the island and White was not charismatic enough, therefore he surrendered to his will, and they stayed on Roanoke.<sup>9</sup> In the meantime Elinor gave birth to her daughter, Virginia, who became the first European child to be born in America. Nine days after her birth, on 27 August, White sailed back to England to tell Raleigh the change of location<sup>10</sup> or as other sources say, to obtain further aid.<sup>11</sup> However, when he arrived home, the relations between England and Spain were deteriorating, and he could not make his way back to Roanoke until 1590. By that time the colony had abandoned the island, only the word Croatan remained, carved into a stone. This carved word could mean that the colony had moved to another island named Croatan but because of the weather (it was the season of hurricanes), the search team could not stay searching for too long. This is what later became the mysterious Lost Colony, but it is part of a different story.<sup>12</sup> John White never reunited with his family again.

What White did after this tragical event remains unknown, the last record we have of his life is a letter he sent to Richard Hakluyt in 1593. In that letter White summarizes the story of his last voyage and ends it with the following: “which was no less unfortunately ended then forwardly begun, and as luckless to many, as sinister to myself.”<sup>13</sup> He died in that same year somewhere in England or on one of Raleigh estates in Ireland.

White’s paintings and engravings mostly remained in a book which was published by Thomas Harriot: *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia* (White’s illustrations first appeared in the 1590’s version). This book describes numerous aspects of Native life and draws a very inviting image of “Virginia” (on the coast of present-day North Carolina) for further colonization efforts. All the texts and colourful engravings tell it is the land of abundance and friendly Natives.<sup>14</sup>

## The land of Roanoke

When it comes to John White’s paintings it is hard to tell when exactly he had made them. Of course, we can group them according to what they represent, and then we can assign them to various voyages. For instance, it is quite clear that his illustrations of Inuit were made before the expeditions between 1584–87, or that a representation of the town of Secoton was certainly made in 1585 (or after).

<sup>9</sup> [encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/white-john-d-1593/](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/white-john-d-1593/) (The Lost Colony) (last download: 2022/06/29)

<sup>10</sup> [encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/white-john-d-1593/](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/white-john-d-1593/) (The Lost Colony) (last download: 2022/06/29)

<sup>11</sup> [smithsonianmag.com/travel/sketching-the-earliest-views-of-the-new-world-92306407/](https://smithsonianmag.com/travel/sketching-the-earliest-views-of-the-new-world-92306407/) (22/06/29)

<sup>12</sup> [britannica.com/story/the-lost-colony-of-roanoke](https://britannica.com/story/the-lost-colony-of-roanoke) (last download: 2022/06/29)

<sup>13</sup> [sites.rootsweb.com/~molcgdrg/rml/trv2-beers.htm](https://sites.rootsweb.com/~molcgdrg/rml/trv2-beers.htm) (last download: 2022/06/29)

<sup>14</sup> [encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/a-briefe-and-true-report-of-the-new-found-land-of-virginia-1588/](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/a-briefe-and-true-report-of-the-new-found-land-of-virginia-1588/)

After arriving at Roanoke, White captured everything he had seen and painted his observations. He made watercolours about the vegetation, the fauna, the landscape, and the people of the New World. Together with Harriot they made a map of the east coast of North America, from Chesapeake Bay at the top to Cape Lookout at the bottom (*Fig. 1, cut-out*). This map represents the stops of the 1585 expedition to North America in various colours.



Figure 1, John White: “La Virginea Pars,” British Museum

For example, Roanoke is a purple island, with the word “Roanoac” on it and the Outer Banks are in reddish and brownish colours. There are also several ships on the map, the *Tiger*, which was under Grenville’s command, is at the bottom but we can also see four Natives in canoes under Secoton town, on present-day Pamlico River.<sup>15</sup>

David Beers Quinn, who is an expert on White’s paintings, says<sup>16</sup> the following: “the most careful detailed piece of cartography for any part of North America to be made in the sixteenth century.” It is a remarkably accurate map, which White made on the basis of Harriot’s measurements.

### A brief and true report of White’s representations

The book, *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia*, only contains replications of White’s original paintings, made by Theodor de Bry (1528–1598). De Bry took

<sup>15</sup> [virtualjamestown.org/images/white\\_debry\\_html/white.html#s111](http://virtualjamestown.org/images/white_debry_html/white.html#s111) (Plate 59; 2022/06/29)

<sup>16</sup> [encyclopediavirginia.org/148hpr-fc93fooc66e5182/](http://encyclopediavirginia.org/148hpr-fc93fooc66e5182/) (last download: 2022/06/29)

White's colourful watercolours and made black and white engravings for Harriot's book which were easily reproducible in the printing process. The only problem which occurred was that de Bry made White's illustrations more "European" (in what follows, I will cite examples). The other way how White's paintings survived is in the collection of the British Museum. All White originals that are known are in the hands of the British Museum and are only visible once in every few decades, because aquarelle paint is less and less durable as time goes by.<sup>17</sup>

The book represents the New World as the Paradise through White's amazing watercolours and Harriot's written observations that documented the voyages.<sup>18</sup> The representation of Secoton town (*Fig. 2*) is one of the White's most famous illustrations and not without a reason. The image not only shows the structure of the Natives' settlement from bird's-eye view but reflects various aspects of their life.

In the middle there is a road that cuts the picture in half. On the left, we can see that the houses of the Natives had rounded roofs, the walls were made of bark or reed mats, which were movable to let more light or air inside. At right, from the top to the bottom, we can see three stages of corn growing ("newly sprong" "greene" and "rype," says the description) which shows that they were probably growing three full crops of corn every season, according to Arthur Barlowe (1550–1620).<sup>19</sup> Under the corn fields, there are people in a circle doing festive dance. Next to them, people are sitting on the road, waiting for a chance to join. Above them, there are people preparing food on the ground (the description is: "theire sitting



Figure 2, John White: "The town of Secoton," British Museum

<sup>17</sup> Sloan: Introduction = Sloan (ed.): European Visions..., 2.

<sup>18</sup> Sloan: Introduction = Sloan (ed.): European Visions..., 1.

<sup>19</sup> [encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/white-john-d-1593/](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/white-john-d-1593/) (The Illustrations of Roanoke; 2022/06/29)



at meate” ). At the left bottom a tomb of their dead is visible, while over it, there is a place for prayer.

These aspects of Native life also show up on other individual pictures. For instance, the festive dance is visible from closer in the next painting (*Fig. 5*). When the explorers arrived in Secoton town in July 1585, there was a ritual ceremony going on, which was probably connected to the corn harvest.<sup>20</sup> According to the description on the previous picture “A Ceremony in their prayers with strange gestures... dancing about posts carved on the topps lyke mens faces.” In their book, Harriot and White say<sup>21</sup> that Natives from every nearby town gather once a year for this festivity. “Euery man attyred in the most strange fashion” and on their backs there are symbols of their home. After sunset they start singing and dancing and



Figure 3 and Figure 4, John White: “Indian Chief;” „A wife of an Indian chief of Pomeiooc, and her daughter, British Museum

“vse the strangest gestures that they can.” When they finish, they prepare food and eat. Another example is the one where the Natives are eating.<sup>22</sup> A man and a woman, facing each other, eat hulled corn from a big plate. In the book Harriot writes “They are verye sober in their eatinge, and trinkinge, and consequentye verye longe liued because they doe not oppress nature.”<sup>23</sup> It is clear that the message behind this painting was: come here, there is food everywhere and people are living a happy life.

The previous illustration shows festive Native attire, but the following pictures show their everyday clothing. White’s representations of people in the New World were made in a European style. His figures are posing in a way every portrayal looked in that time, almost looking like a catalogue for future investors.<sup>24</sup> There is an illustration, for instance, of an Algonquian chief (*Fig. 3*) which is believed to be Wingina, the Native who had been beheaded

<sup>20</sup> [encyclopediavirginia.org/1663-9dadboc31c73827/](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/1663-9dadboc31c73827/) (last download: 2022/06/29)

<sup>21</sup> Harriot, T., [docsouth.unc.edu/nc/harriot/harriot.html](https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/harriot/harriot.html), 58. (last download: 2022/06/29)

<sup>22</sup> [britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1906-0509-1-20](https://britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1906-0509-1-20) (last download: 2022/06/29)

<sup>23</sup> Harriot, [ocsouth.unc.edu/nc/harriot/harriot.html](https://ocsouth.unc.edu/nc/harriot/harriot.html), 55. (last download: 2022/06/29)

<sup>24</sup> [encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/white-john-d-1593/](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/white-john-d-1593/) (The Illustrations of Roanoke; 2022/06/29)

by the English. Despite the fact how Wingina's story ends, in this picture he looks quite calm and even amused, although he was surely unhappy that the English took the food from his tribe.<sup>25</sup> This figure is believed to be Wingina because in the book Harriot says that he is "the cheefe men of the yland and towne of Roanoac."<sup>26</sup> Wingina or not, the chief wears a huge copper pendant as a sign that precious metals can be found on this land. Except for a one-layer skirt he does not wear anything else, and even the colour of it shows he is the Chief, because he is the only one in red while everyone else is in blue. In another painting, White captures an old man of Pomeiooc in his winter garment,<sup>27</sup> which is basically a blanket tied upon one of his shoulders, so the other arm remains free. He also specifies that only older men can wear beards, it is their characteristic trait. He finishes this chapter with the statement that this land is so good "that England is not to bee compared to yt."<sup>28</sup>

According to the description in the painting (*Fig. 4*), the wife of Pomeiooc's chief is visible with her daughter, who is around 8 years old. The woman's body is tattooed or painted. She has a long necklace made from pearls, or copper, or bone beads – which also shows how rich this land is. The clothing of the woman is only a skirt, her upper body is visible, while in her hand, she holds a water vessel. The little girl wears a string tied to her body as a clothing, with tree leaves at her genitals, which was, according to Harriot, every child's clothing under 10 years. The interesting feature in this painting is the girl, who in her hand holds a doll with Elizabethan costume, while handing it to her mother. It looks like she is just about to say "Is this someone I could meet or even possibly be?" writes Joyce Chaplin, a historian at Harvard University in her book.<sup>29</sup> The girl got this doll from the first Englishmen arriving on the Island, says Harriot.<sup>30</sup> The fact that in White's illustrations this is the only time anything appears that is from outside the land makes it even more interesting. Through his paintings he showed an untouched land, represented only the Natives and did not show the moments when they met or traded with the Outsiders. The only sign of their presence on the land is a little doll in a girl's hand. Why did he choose this specific moment? Maybe this is how he showed his hope that the next generation of the Natives will be connected to England and Europe? Or he just wanted to leave a sign of their presence?

## Theodor de Bry's Engravings

As I noted before, in Harriot's book White's illustrations had been redone by Theodor de Bry, who was an engraver and an editor.<sup>31</sup> Although the content of de Bry's engravings is the same as White's the style is different. His artworks were made for European eyes and minds,

<sup>25</sup> [ncpedia.org/biography/pemisapan](https://ncpedia.org/biography/pemisapan) (last download: 2022/06/29)

<sup>26</sup> Harriot: [docsouth.unc.edu/nc/harriot/harriot.html](https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/harriot/harriot.html), 45. (last download: 2022/06/29)

<sup>27</sup> [britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1906-0509-1-19](https://britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1906-0509-1-19) (last download 2022/06/29)

<sup>28</sup> Harriot: [docsouth.unc.edu/nc/harriot/harriot.html](https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/harriot/harriot.html), 47. (last download 2022/06/29)

<sup>29</sup> Chaplin: *Technology, the Body, and Science...*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Harriot: [docsouth.unc.edu/nc/harriot/harriot.html](https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/harriot/harriot.html), 46. (last download 2022/06/29)

<sup>31</sup> [britannica.com/biography/Theodor-de-Bry](https://britannica.com/biography/Theodor-de-Bry) (last download 2022/06/29)

insofar as they did not represent a world that was strange and new but one that was somehow familiar. The faces of the characters are like the ones on any Ancient Greek fresco, their movement is just as if they are doing ballet and the clothing is not just an animal skin tied up on them, they wear moccasins.

White's paintings are representing an untouched world, which is different, new, and even rampageous, and which was unfamiliar to European eyes. De Bry gave them harmony and measure, which brought them closer to the European taste but with that, he took away what made the Native Americans so particular, at least in my opinion.



Figure 5, John White: *Festive dance*, British Museum



Figure 6, Theodor de Bry: *Festival Dance of the Virginians*, Harvard College

One of the most outstanding differences is visible on the painting of the festive dance. I think it stands out how the gestures of the Natives on de Bry's etching (*Fig. 6*) are changed as compared to White's original (*Fig. 5*). The moves are not instinctive anymore, they are measured steps. The faces on the engraving look like a Greek sculpture and the dresses are more complex than they originally were. The posts with carved faces on them, in White's version, look bizarre and strange while de Bry's version shows, again, something which is more familiar to our eyes. But the most outstanding part is the middle: originally, there were three men, standing in a small circle, embracing each other. Somehow, de Bry turned them into girls – according to some sources,<sup>32</sup> they are the three Graces, joy, charm, and beauty. It is clear that de Bry's message was different from White's but the latter's watercolours did remain in some form through the engravings as well, and gave the first look into the New World to the old one.

## Closure

“White was as much propagandist as an anthropologist and an artist,”<sup>33</sup> says Trevor Burnard in the beginning of John White exhibition's catalogue. White believed in the English

<sup>32</sup> [encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/white-john-d-1593/](https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/white-john-d-1593/) (The Roanoke Illustrations; last download 2022/06/29)

<sup>33</sup> Burnard: *A New World...*, 587.



settlement at Virginia and in the assimilation of the Natives to England. He believed they could mutually help each other – the Natives with their natural endowments and the English with their technology and development. His watercolours meant to show how great this land was for English settlers and how particular the people there were. His representation formed the upcoming centuries' vision of the Natives and America.

The first successful permanent colony<sup>34</sup> was established only nearly two decades after White's and Raleigh's try. However, that colony did not have an artist so illustrations of the Natives were not made. The next man to make illustrations only appeared in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – it was George Catlin (1796–1872),<sup>35</sup> who painted the Great Plains. That means that for nearly 200 years all the representations of America were based on White's illustrations; he had shaped the way how Europe thought about the Natives. But probably he did not even suspect this when he first put his feet on the land of the New World.

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<sup>34</sup> [britannica.com/place/Jamestown-Colony](https://britannica.com/place/Jamestown-Colony) (last download 2022/06/29)

<sup>35</sup> [britannica.com/biography/George-Catlin](https://britannica.com/biography/George-Catlin) (last download 2022/06/29)