

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

ORSOLYA KOVÁCS-PALKÓ

## Introduction

John White (who died in 1593) is best known as an artist, not because he had the most remarkable style in the 16th 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 represents a terrapin turtle that has one more toe than it should have<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, their aims did not happen, and they 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 lately discovered land.

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

## Life and journeys of John White

About White's early ages, 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 they had two children together, but one of them died in infancy.

Before his first voyage with Martin Frobisher, he had spent some time studying art in England. On his first visit to the New World, White 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

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1906-0509-1-70](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1906-0509-1-70) (last download: 2022/06/29)

<sup>2</sup> Moran: John White (d. 1593)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1906-0509-1-30](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1906-0509-1-30) (last download: 2022/06/29)

America again. This was a series of expeditions that White accompanied and was sponsored by Sir Walter Raleigh, who was an English explorer and a favorite 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 did the trip from Plymouth, England to Roanoke Island had him on the board as well in 1584. This voyage served as an investigation of the land for the upcoming expeditions and it 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 was 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, which 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*, the name of 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, and the Pomeiooc and Secoton towns in detail, which in the 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 wasn't the most brilliant idea, despite the fact, that White knew a lot about the local culture, because he was present on both previous voyages, he was not built up with leader-material. This was probably the cause of the upcoming troubles. Raleigh chose the Chesapeake Bay as the destination because back in 1585 White and Harriot 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 the 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). Tension erupted between White and

---

<sup>4</sup> Latham: Sir Walter Raleigh

<sup>5</sup> Estes: The Roanoke Voyages 1584–1590

<sup>6</sup> Wolfe: The Roanoke Colonies

<sup>7</sup> Apt: Thomas Harriot

<sup>8</sup> Moran: John White (d. 1593) (Roanoke 1584–1586)

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 about 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 couldn't make his way back to Roanoke until 1590. By that time the colony has been gone from the island, and only the word CROATAN has 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 couldn't stay searching for too long. This is what later became the mysterious Lost Colony, but it's part of a different story.<sup>12</sup> John White never reunited with his family again.

What White did after this tragic event remains unknown, the last record we have of his life is a letter which he sent to Richard Hakluyt in 1593. In that letter White summarizes the story of his last voyage and ends it with: "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 painting 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 1590s version). This book describes numerous aspects of Native life and it 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's 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 illustrations of Inuit were made before the expeditions between 1584-87, or a representation of the town of Secoton was certainly done in 1585 (or after).

After arriving at Roanoke, White captured everything he had seen and painted his observations. He made watercolours of the vegetation, the fauna, the landscape, and the

---

<sup>9</sup> Moran: John White (d. 1593) (The Lost Colony)

<sup>10</sup> Moran: John White (d. 1593) (The Lost Colony)

<sup>11</sup> Apt: Thomas Harriot

<sup>12</sup> Hogeback: The Lost Colony of Roanoke

<sup>13</sup> Estes: The Roanoke Voyages 1584-1590

<sup>14</sup> Zacek: A briefe and true report...

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



Figure 1 John White: *La Virginea Pars*,  
British Museum

David Beers Quinn, who is an expert in 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 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 the following, there will be

<sup>15</sup> Hulton – Quinn: American Drawings of John White, 1577-1590 (Plate 59)

<sup>16</sup> *La Virginea Pars*

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 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 Paradise through White's amazing watercolours and Harriot's written observations that documented the voyages.<sup>18</sup> The representation of the Secoton town (*Fig. 2*) is one of White's most famous illustrations and not without reason. The image not only shows the structure of the Natives' settlement from a birds-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, and the walls were made of bark or reed mats, which were movable to have 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 corns, there are people in a circle doing festive dances. Next to them, people are sitting on the road, waiting for a chance to join. Over them, there are people preparing food on the ground (the description is: "theire sitting at meate"). At the left bottom, a tomb of their dead is visible, over it, there is a place for prayer.



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

<sup>17</sup> Sloan 2009, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Sloan 2009, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Moran: John White (d. 1593) (The Illustrations of Roanoke; 2022/06/29)

These aspects of their life also show up in other individual pictures. For instance, the festive dance is visible closer in the next painting (*Fig. 5*). When the explorers arrived in the 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 re strange... dansing abowt posts carved on the topps lyke mens faces”. In their book, Harriot and White say<sup>21</sup> that Natives from every near 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 to sing and dance and “vse the strangest gestures that they can”. When they finish, they prepare food and eat it. Another example is the one where they are eating.<sup>22</sup> A man and a woman, facing each other, eating 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!



Figure 3 John White: *Indian Chief*,  
British Museum



Figure 4 John White: *A wife of an Indian chief of Pomeiooc, and her daughter*,  
British Museum

Their previous illustration shows their festive attire, but the following pictures will show their everyday clothing. White’s representations of people in the New World were made in a European style. His figures are posed 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 by English. Despite the fact how Wingina’s story ends, in this picture he looks quite calm and

<sup>20</sup> A Festive Dance

<sup>21</sup> Harriot: A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia, 58.

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

<sup>23</sup> Harriot: A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia, 55.

<sup>24</sup> Moran: John White (d. 1593) (The Illustrations of Roanoke; 2022/06/29)

even amused, although he was surely unhappy that the English took the food from his tribe.<sup>25</sup> It's 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. Despite the 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, 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 describes that only older men can wear beards, it's their trait. He finishes this chapter with the statement: this land is so good "that England is not to bee compared to yt."<sup>28</sup>

According to the description of 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, 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, and in her hand, she holds a water vessel. The little girl wears a string tied on her body as an item of clothing, with tree leaves at her genitals, which was, according to Harriot, every child's clothing under 10 years. The interesting thing in this painting is the girl, who holds a doll in her hand with an Elizabethan costume while landing it on 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.<sup>29</sup> The girl got this doll from the first Englishmen arriving on the Island, says Harriot.<sup>30</sup> The fact, that on White's illustrations this is the only time anything appears which is from outside the land, makes it even more interesting. Through his paintings, he showed an untouched land, which only represented 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 certain 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, because it didn't represent a world, which was strange and new, but a world, which was

<sup>25</sup> Johnson: Pemisapan (Wingina)

<sup>26</sup> Harriot: A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia, 45.

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

<sup>28</sup> Harriot: A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia, 47.

<sup>29</sup> cit. in Tucker: Sketching the Earliest Views of the New World

<sup>30</sup> Harriot: A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia, 46.

<sup>31</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica: Theodor de Bry

somehow familiar. The faces of the characters are like the ones on every Ancient Greek fresco, their movement is just as if they're 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, that 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 humble opinion.

One of the most outstanding differences is visible in 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, 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 their dresses are more complex than originally were. The posts with carved faces on them, in White's version look bizarre and strange, however, de Bry's version shows, again, something that is more familiar to our eyes. But the most outstanding part is the middle: originally, there are 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.

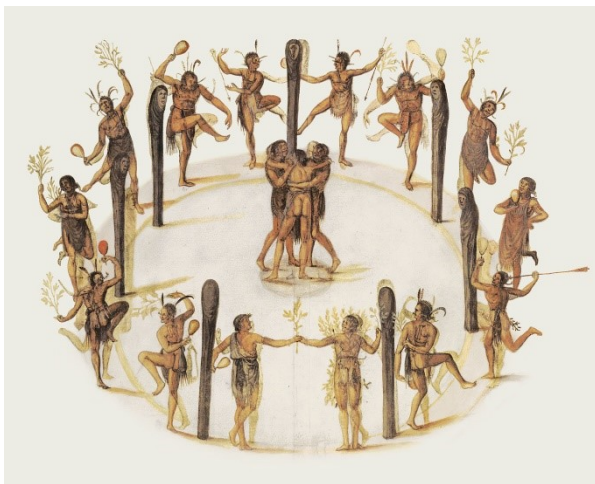


Figure 5 John White: *Festive dance*, British Museum



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

It is clear, that de Bry's message was different from White's, however, his watercolours did remain in some form through the engravings as well, and gave the first look of 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 at the beginning of the John White exhibition's catalogue. White believed in the English

<sup>32</sup> Moran: John White (d. 1593)

<sup>33</sup> Burnard 2007, 587.



settlement in 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 Englishmen with their technology and development. His watercolours meant to show how great this land was for English settlers and how particular the people there are. His representation formed the upcoming centuries' visions 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 done. The next man, who made illustrations only appeared in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, George Catlin (1796 –1872)<sup>35</sup>, who painted the Great Plains. That means, 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 didn't even suspect it when he first put his feet on the land of the New World.

## Bibliography

[A Festive Dance](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

Apt, Adam Jared: [Thomas Harriot](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

Burnard, T.: *A New World: England's First View of America*. Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Chaplin, J.: *Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Estes, Roberta: [The Roanoke Voyages 1584-1590 Volume 2 edited by David Beers Quinn](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

Harriot, T.: [A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia](#), 1590 (last download: 12/05/2022)

Hogeback, Jonathan: [The Lost Colony of Roanoke](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

Hulton, Paul – Quinn, David Beers: [American Drawings of John White, 1577–1590](#) (2022/05/12)

Johnson, F. Roy: [Pemisapan \(Wingina\)](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

[La Virginea Pars](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

Latham, Agnes M.C.: [Sir Walter Raleigh](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

Moran, Michael G.: [John White \(d. 1593\)](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

Price, David A.: [Jamestown Colony](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

Sloan K.: „Introduction” = Sloan, K. (ed.): *European Visions: American Voices*. London: British Museum Research Publication, 2009, 1–2.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica: [George Catlin](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica: [Theodor de Bry](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

Tucker, Abigail: [Sketching the Earliest Views of the New World](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

Wolfe, Brendan: [The Roanoke Colonies](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

Zacek, Natalie: [A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia \(1588\)](#) (last download: 12/05/2022)

---

<sup>34</sup> Price: Jamestown Colony

<sup>35</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica: George Catlin