

Discovering “The View from the Shore”

What does the word discovery mean to you? The “Discovery” of the Americas has been remembered as one of those significant moments in history; it is a point where, in many United States schools, children are taught that the world fundamentally changed. And in many ways this is true. New countries would rise, cultures would clash and the course of the world was, in no small way, changed. However, often the only perspective of the European discovery of America discussed is that of those who had arrived; in other words, the “View from the Boat.” The discovery of America is often where most students begin to learn about the Americas, or at the very least, all studies of native culture is made in connection with the discovery.



“At two o’clock in the morning the land was discovered, at two leagues’ distance; they took in sail and remained under the square-sail lying to till day, which was Friday, when they found themselves near a small island, one of the Lucayos, called in the Indian language Guanahani. Presently they descried people, naked, and the Admiral landed in the boat, which was armed, along with Martin Alonzo Pinzon, and Vincent Yanez his brother, captain of the Nina. The Admiral bore the royal standard, and the two captains each a banner of the Green Cross, which all the ships had carried; this contained the initials of the names of the King and Queen each side of the cross, and a crown over each letter Arrived on shore, they saw trees very green many streams of water, and diverse sorts of fruits” (By: Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Journals and other Documents on the Life and Voyages Of Christopher Columbus*. New York: Printed for the Members of the Limited Editions Club, 1963. Pg.62)

This excerpt is a translation from one of Christopher Columbus’s Voyage journals. The “View from the Boat” is the idea of discovery, of a new world being found, waiting to be explored. Often times it is filled with riches waiting to be plucked, and new resources ripe for the taking. But it also ignores those who already were living here.



“The View from the Boat”

Painting by Dioscoro Teofilo

Even artwork expresses this ideal. Examine this painting made almost four centuries after Columbus’s voyage. How does it represent “the View from the Boat?” Columbus and his crew are seen as heroic figures, stepping forth on new land, ready to spread civilization and Christianity. Students might notice that Columbus and his men are almost bathed in light, their sense of thanks and happiness evident as they hug the shore, give thanks to God. Yet, in the dark shadows, the Natives look at the Spanish with confusion and wariness. The explorers felt they had the right to go and not only explore but conquer. It became something of a mission from God, a belief that is later echoed in United States through the nineteenth century philosophy of Manifest Destiny.

However, this is only one side of the Historical Narrative. The very real “flip side” to this is the “View from the Shore.” This is the view where there is not a new world being discovered, but rather, two worlds meeting each other and the consequences of this meeting. Just as with the “View from the Boat,” artwork can also represent this perspective.

There has been recorded evidence of Native groups in the Americas for tens of thousands of years. These various sophisticated societies had in-depth mythologies, cosmologies, and identities, tied to both their communities and the lands around them. In the above painting, one can see life as it was conducted 500 hundred years ago in one region of the Americas. How is this painting different than the “the View from the Boat” painting? If you look closely, there are three peculiar objects on the horizon. Imagine, waking up to discover strange wooden objects, like nothing anyone has seen, carrying even stranger people, with odd clothes and objects. They speak a language no one can understand, but more challenging is the fact that they bring different beliefs and values.

“Brothers, we must be one as the English are, or we shall be destroyed. You know our fathers had plenty of deer and skins and our plains were full of game and turkeys, and our coves and rivers were full of fish. But, brothers, since these Englishmen have seized our country, they have cut down the grass with scythes, and trees with axes. Their cows and horses eat up the grass, and their hogs spoil our bed of clams; and finally we shall starve to death.” (By: Miantinomo, Grand Sachem of the Narragansett)

“The View from the Shore”

Painting by Jean-Louis Nicole



This moment marks the beginning of a New Age and not just for those who are arriving. The “Discovery” of the Americas is, truly, a change in history, and should be treated as such. In a certain sense, the homelands of the Native inhabitants of the Americas were indeed becoming a “New World.” Native peoples were suddenly faced with a choice: should they maintain the traditions of their ancestors, or adopt the ways of the new ones? Many Native Americans found that they could do some of both options, even if they received pressure to *assimilate* – or become like the Europeans. Yet European discovery also ushered in centuries of warfare, disease, and *cultural genocide* – the attempted destruction of cultural heritage. Where the “View from the Boat” was a simplistic one of joy and excitement, the “View from the Shore” is a more complete perspective: one that recognizes the challenges that European arrival brought, as well as the continued survival of the Native inhabitants’ descendants.

[1] Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Journals and Other Documents on the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. New York: Printed for the Members of The Limited Editions Club, 1963. Pg. 62

[2] The First Landing Of Christopher Columbus In America. 1862

[3] Jean-Louis, Nicole. *Haiti 1492 Before Christopher Columbus*. May 12th, 2012.

[4] Miantinomo, Grand Sachem of the Narragansett, 1642. As quoted in Lucianne Lavin, *Connecticut’s Indigenous Peoples: What Archaeology, History, and Oral Traditions Tell Us About their Communities and Cultures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 270.

[5] De Las Casas, Bartolomé. “A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies Or, a Faithful NARRATIVE OF THE Horrid and Unexampled Massacres, Butcheries, and All Manner of Cruelties, That Hell and Malice Could Invent, Committed by the Popish Spanish Party on the Inhabitants of West-India, TOGETHER With the Devastations of Several Kingdoms in America by Fire and Sword, for the Space of Forty and Two Years, from the Time of Its First Discovery by Them.” Gutenberg. January 9, 2009. Accessed September 08, 2018. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/20321/pg20321-images.html>. Originally published in Seville in 1552.