



Collection 19: Voyages & Imagination

Travel Writings and Literature in the Early Modern Period

In the early modern era, most ordinary people rarely traveled beyond their home village or city for the duration of their lives. Those who did travel were missionaries, colonial administrators, and adventurers. The geographical insights and discoveries brought home often transformed the way people saw their own countries and the rest of the world. The marketplace of print took full advantage of this new trend. Engraved maps were designed and printed with increasing skillfulness and precision, using instruments developed by the mathematicians of the time. Many manuals and handbooks were printed with convenience in mind, such as portolans and detailed travel guides to cities. Guides to Rome, always a destination for pilgrims, were perhaps the most prevalent. At the same time, many books were destined for the homes of armchair or lectern travelers who were unlikely to visit the places described.

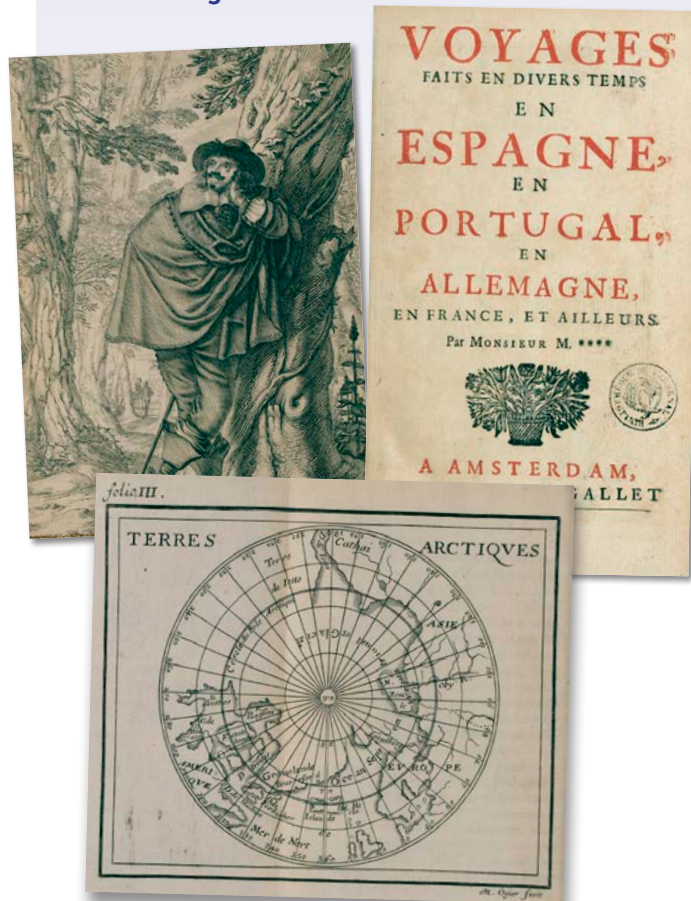
EEB 19 covers materials curated by France in the BnF. There are accounts written by travelers of the time, which were extremely popular and appeared in a variety of different forms – some as news pamphlets, others in book form, and often in more than one volume. The collection covers early maps from the Roman empire and descriptions of places, as well as Early Modern sea voyages along the Mediterranean coastline. There are ethnographic descriptions of new cultures encountered such as the works of Chrestien Le Clercq (born 1641-1695), a Franciscan friar and missionary who chronicled New France (later to

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Source Library: French materials from the BnF.

Approx. 500,000 pages, 1500 works

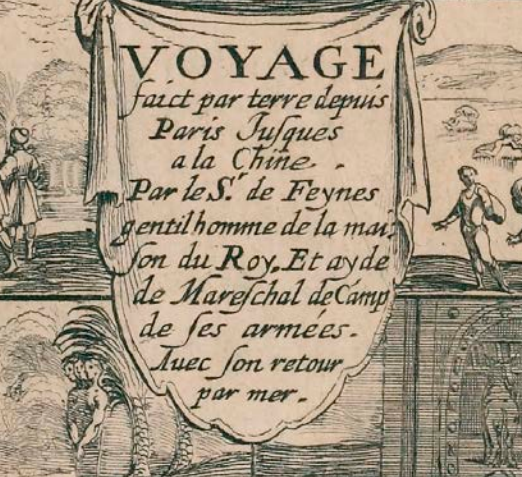
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become Canada) and was a translator of a Native American language of the region that he visited. The Jesuits were among the most prolific writers of their travels and there are many contributions in this collection reaching as far as China and Japan. Arnauld de Oihenart (1592-1668) was a Basque lawyer, politician, historian, and poet whose most important travel writings focused on a detailed description of Gascony and Navarre. Ambassadors and colonial administrators wrote their reports and travel journals on experiences of governance of far-off lands such as Siam. There are also fictional and more fanciful accounts of exploration, like that of the travels of John Mandeville, which were, at the time, more a source of literary pleasure than as a medieval contribution to geography. The travels had a fixation on Jerusalem as the center of the world and Christendom and were part of a retelling of crusader history.

Reading these books and looking at their marvelous illustrations allowed the early modern reader to conjure up an image of the entire world without moving from their home. Whether this image was reliable or not was, of course, an entirely different matter.



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