



Figure 7. P. Barbiers, *Sychnecta, Mohawk Indian Displayed at the Blauw Jan Inn in 1764*. Etching by A. Smit. Gemeentearchief Amsterdam.

## Local sites, foreign sights

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### *A sailor's sketchbook of human and animal curiosities in early modern Amsterdam*

ANGELA VANHAELEN

The album of Amsterdam inhabitant Jan Velten presents viewers with the remarkable range of foreign sights that local residents must have encountered routinely in the public spaces of this early modern trading center.<sup>1</sup> Part sketchbook, part scrapbook, the album, which was compiled from around 1695 to 1709, is filled with drawings, watercolors, and prints. Velten's hand-drawn title page enthusiastically relays his interests:

Wonders of Nature: Described Described [sic] by Jan Velten and which he himself has seen in his time in Amsterdam such as Humans: Beasts: Bloodless little animals: Birds: Fishes: Conches: Shells: Sea plants: Trees: Plants: Flowers: next to their images. With the pen: drawn from life and all the most prominent and rarest birds: and: beasts which Jan Westerhof otherwise commonly named Jan blauw=or Blauw Jan=has exhibited in his Theatre or aviary, set off with water colour, after their live colours all done by Jan Velten.<sup>2</sup>

This preface certainly prepares prospective readers for the album's contents. The book is a lively collection of Velten's own sketches of more than two hundred exotic mammals, birds, crustaceans, fish, insects, seashells, and plants. These natural curiosities are arranged without any apparent attempt at classification: drawings often

overlap or are pasted over each other as wildly disparate beasts jostle on the page. These are punctuated by prints, and, perhaps most striking of all, by vivid gouaches of marvels such as giants, armless and legless contortionists, and "parasitic twins." As the title page attests, all of these wonders were seen and recorded by Velten himself in Amsterdam. His activities centered mainly on the inn of Jan Westerhof, one of the sites within the city where the excesses of nature were put on public display.<sup>3</sup> Velten's album seems to respond to the theatrical presentation of nature's oddities at this inn, providing an extraordinary glimpse of some of the city's wondrous sights.

Indeed, Velten's compulsion to see and to keep a visual record of his encounters with the strange, rare, and unusual is conveyed on every page of the album. He clearly emphasizes his role as an eyewitness, stating that these were things that "he himself has seen in his time in Amsterdam," recording them "after their live colours" and reiterating, "all done by Jan Velten." And yet, even a cursory glance through Velten's drawings reveals that, although they may be based upon first-hand observation, Velten was anything but a removed and authoritative viewer. He does not stand at an invariable distance and fix the things he sees with reasoned order on the page. Rather, Velten's sketchbook is characterized by constantly changing orientations and an inconsistent sense of scale. His pages often lack a horizon line, a background, and a sense of perspectively rendered space. In short, these drawings do not call up the distanced detachment of an objective viewer; rather, they bear traces of the presence of Velten's body as it approaches and backs away from the panoply of fascinating and sometimes terrifying things that he sees.

There is more at stake here than simply Velten's failure to master the techniques of illusionistic art making. Veristic representations drawn from nature were highly valued in this period, and the artist's skill at

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1. The 176-page manuscript is housed in the Artis Bibliotheek of the University of Amsterdam. It is also available on Photo CD as *Wonderen der Natuur in de Menagerie van Blauw Jan te Amsterdam, zoals gezien door Jan Velten rond 1700* (Amsterdam: ETI Digital Rare and Historical Books, 1998). Further references will be to *Wonderen*.

2. *Wonderen* (see note 1), p. 3: "Wonderen der NATUUR: Beschreven Beschreven door Jan Velten & die hij selfs in sijn tijt tot—Amsterdam gesien heeft—soo Menschen: Dieren: Bloedeloose diertijes: Gevogelte: Vissen: Hoorens: Schelpen: Zeegewassen: Boomen: Planten: Bloemen: neffen haar beeltenisse. Met d'pen: na leven geteekend en al d'voornaamste en vreemste vogelen: en: dieren die Jan Westehoft anders, in gemeen genaamdt, Jan blauw=ofte Blauw Jan=in sijn Toonneel, ofte vogelparck, vertoondt heeft, met waterverft, na haar levenscolueren afgeset & alles gedaan door Jan Velten." This passage has been translated into English by Florence Pieters on page 58 of the booklet that accompanies the CD.

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3. The history of the various proprietors of the Blauw Jan and the Witte Oliphant inns are detailed by I. H. van Eeghen, "Notaris Hendrik de Wilde en de Exotische Dierenwereld," *Amstelodamum* 49 (1962):150–159.

presenting a credible illusion of reality was certainly a pivotal point in the convergence of art and natural science.<sup>4</sup> The rhetoric of artistic objectivity played a crucial role in this. As Christopher Wood argues, "The practice of description is predicated on a clean split between subject and object, and thus presumes that the attributes of the resulting representation derive exclusively from the object and not the describing subject."<sup>5</sup> Velten's way of transferring sights to the page is extraordinary, therefore, precisely because it does not, or cannot, lay claim to the visual rhetoric of neutrality. Here, Velten's status as a non-professional artist—his very lack of skill and training—seems to reveal what ostensibly objective art so often seeks to conceal: that interest in nature's wonders could be driven by a tactile, sensual, and less-than-objective impulse to apprehend that which could not easily be classified or understood. Thus although Velten's album does participate in the descriptive enterprise, it also indicates the deeply embedded ambiguities of this model, revealing what Martin Jay has called "the cultural variability of ocular experience."<sup>6</sup> In what follows, I will draw mainly on the visual material collected in this album in order to examine some of the diverse modes of viewing and representing that were prompted when the wonders of nature were displayed to a broad public.

Besides the evidence of the sketchbook, very little is known about Velten. Research in the Amsterdam Municipal Archives turned up a "Jan Velten, alias Jan Valentijn," a sailor who purchased "poorterschap," or membership in Amsterdam's urban community in 1679.<sup>7</sup> Possibly this is the maker of the album. The profession of sailor fits well with an interest in exotic peoples and beasts. In fact, curiosity was a motivating force for many who signed on board with the East Indies Company.<sup>8</sup> However, nowhere in his album does Velten refer to places or things that he encountered while abroad, as

one might expect. This may be because, like many Dutch seamen, he was not involved in overseas trade.<sup>9</sup> His profession should also tell us something about his social status. However, recent investigation has revealed that, while most sailors came from the lower- or lower-middle class, some middle- and even upper-class men signed on with the East India Company in search of adventure, wealth, and new experiences.<sup>10</sup> Thus we cannot assume that, as a sailor, Velten took his place among the lowest ranks of society. He obviously had received some education, as he could read, write, and paint, if somewhat clumsily, with gouaches.<sup>11</sup> His album also reveals that he was a man with some leisure time and disposable income.<sup>12</sup> Thus it is difficult to pinpoint Velten's social position, though based on his profession and level of education, it is most probable that he was from a lower middle-class background.

What was it that drove Velten to visit various sites around the city and fill pages and pages with his visual impressions of what he saw? Curiosity certainly appears to be the primary motivator, and this may have been intertwined with an inclination towards self-improvement. Probably Velten showed the album to friends and acquaintances, but its imagery conveys his intensely personal visual absorption in all that he observed. Unlike professional artists of the day, Velten could escape the expectations and demands of teachers, patrons, markets, and viewers, which may account, at least in part, for his somewhat eccentric view of the natural sciences. His artistic production therefore expands our understanding of early modern Dutch visual culture, for it provides uncommon evidence regarding the spread of new knowledge about the world among those who were not from society's dominant groups.<sup>13</sup>

4. Peter Parshall, "Art and Curiosity," *Word and Image* 11:4 (1995):327–331. Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen, "Commerce and the Representation of Nature in Art and Science," in Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen, eds. *Merchants and Marvels, Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1–25.

5. Christopher Wood, "'Curious Pictures' and the Art of Description," *Word and Image* 11:4 (1995):336.

6. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 9.

7. Gemeentearchief Amsterdam, Poorterboek no. 4, blz. 636, Jan. 30, 1679.

8. See Roelof van Gelder, *Het Oost Indisch Avontuur. Duitsers in Dienst van de VOC* (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij SUN, 1997).

9. A. T. van Deursen, *Plain Lives in a Golden Age. Popular Culture, Religion and Society in Seventeenth-Century Holland*, trans. M. Ultee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 24.

10. The stereotype of the sailor as a desperate pauper who could not find any other kind of work has been debunked by Roelof van Gelder (see note 8).

11. Elementary education was available to children of all classes in the Netherlands by the late seventeenth century. See E. P. de Booy and P. Boekholt, *Geschiedenis van de School in Nederland vanaf de Middeleeuwen tot aan de Huidige Tijd* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1987).

12. Not only could Velten afford the admission fees for repeated trips to various inns and cabinets, but the 1992/1993 restoration of his manuscript also reveals that he used surprisingly good-quality, expensive paper. Thank you to Florence Pieters at the Artis Bibliotheek for sharing information about the Velten album with me.

13. On the importance of amateur artists, see Elizabeth Alice Honig, "The Art of Being 'Artistic': Dutch Women's Creative Practices

While Velten may have been less constrained by the discourses and institutions of professional art making, however, his view of the natural sciences was still very much mediated by cultural and social practices of the time. In fact, although a wide segment of the population had access to new information at sites like the Blauw Jan Inn, interpretations were influenced by the controlled presentation of unusual sights. A printed advertising poster that Velten pasted into his album vividly demonstrates this (fig. 1). The poster pictures a South American tapir that was on display at an Amsterdam inn called the Witte Oliphant, or White Elephant.<sup>14</sup> Like the Blauw Jan inn, the White Elephant also capitalized on the influx of curiosities into Amsterdam. Animals probably were purchased at the docks of the East India Company, or from sailors returning from overseas, who might bring back a monkey or tropical bird, knowing that they could be sold to the inns' proprietors.<sup>15</sup> These inns were not just public curiosity cabinets, however, for the animals and objects on display also were offered for sale to those who could afford them.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the inns' curious sights were not only exhibited for a fee, but were also rare and expensive commodities sold to wealthy collectors throughout Europe.<sup>17</sup> The resultant mingling of social groups and practices was exceptional.

The advertising poster that Velten preserved in his scrapbook probably was posted by the door of the

in the Seventeenth Century," *Women's Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2001/Winter 2002):31–39.

14. On the animals displayed at the White Elephant, or Witte Oliphant, see F. F. J. M. Pieters, "De Dieren in de menagerie van 'De Witte Oliphant' te Amsterdam zoals gezien door Jan Velten rond 1700," in *Over Beesten en Boeken*, ed. K. van der Horst et al. (Rotterdam: Erasmus Publishers, 1995), pp. 179–194.

15. R. van Gelder, "De wereld binnen handbereik," in E. Bergvelt et al., eds., *De Wereld Binnen Handbereik. Nederlands Kunst-en Rareitatenverzamelingen, 1585–1735* (Zwolle and Amsterdam: Waanders Uitgevers and Amsterdams Historisch Museum, 1992), p. 18.

16. K. Pomian has defined a collection as a set of objects protected and displayed in an enclosed space and kept out of the economic circuit. *Collectors and Curiosities. Paris and Venice, 1500–1800*, trans. E. Wiles-Portier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 7–10.

17. Upon the death of the inn's proprietor Evert Metz in 1727, an inventory of goods was drawn up that comprises the prices of several animals, including an extremely expensive white cockatoo for one hundred guilders and two apes for forty guilders. (Gemeentearchief Amsterdam, Notariële Archieven, arch. 6528, nr. 410.) The inn was a well-known distributor, supplying animals to prestigious menageries such as the ones at Versailles and Schönbrunn. See P. H. Witcamp, "Vroegere diergaarden en beoefenaars der dierkunde," *Eigen Haard* 26 (1888):312–316.



Figure 1. Advertisement of the arrival of a tapir in the menagerie of the White Elephant Inn, woodcut and printed text, pasted in *Wonderen der Natuur*, ca. 1700, p. 174. Artis Library, University of Amsterdam.

White Elephant inn and at other sites around the city, where it enticed viewers to come and see. The striking black and white woodcut of the unusual-looking tapir attracts the eye, so that even those who were not fluent readers might stop, look, and even go in. The text follows with a broad invitation "to all Gentlemen, Ladies, Burghers, Merchants, and furthermore to all Lovers of Animals" to come and see this rarity "which many writers say . . . does not exist anywhere in the world." It had been "captured with great difficulty and cost in the River Euphrates in AMERICA."<sup>18</sup> This is probably an error: the Euphrates River is far from

18. *Wonderen* (see note 1), p. 174.

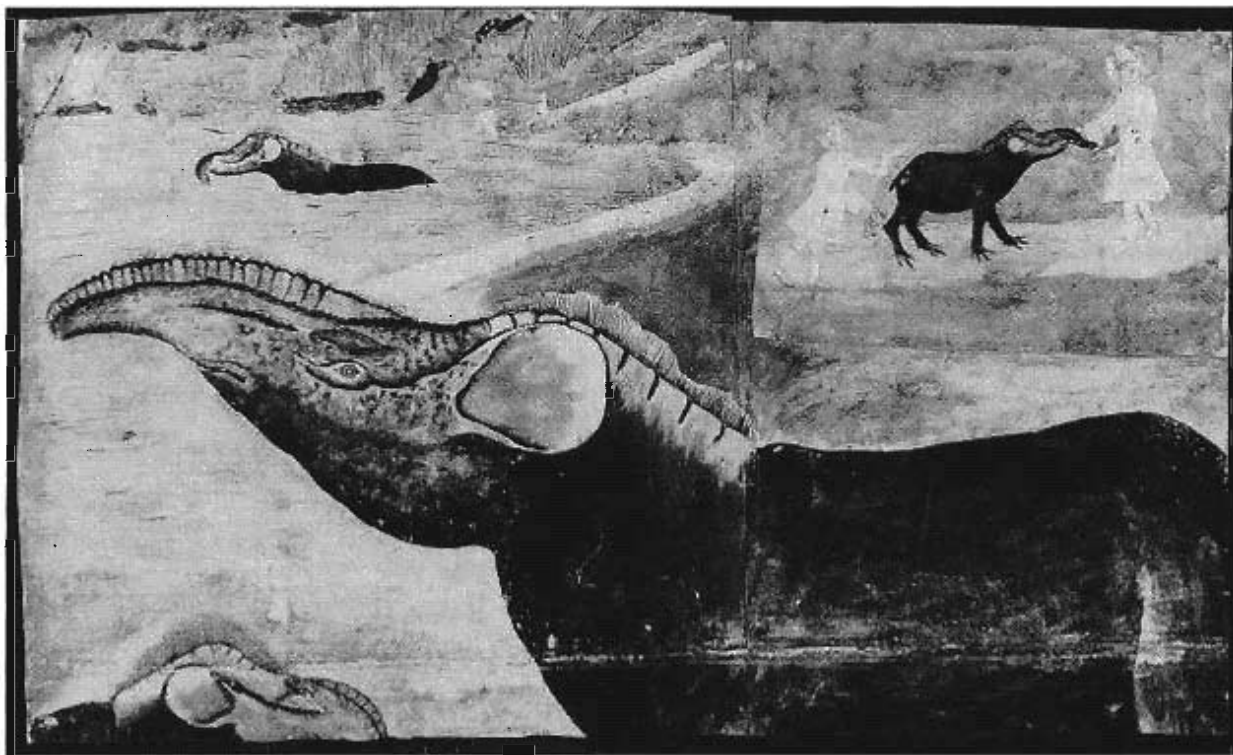


Figure 2. Jan Velten, *Tapir with Young*, gouache painting in *Wonderen der Natuur*, ca. 1700, p. 150. Artis Library, University of Amsterdam.

America.<sup>19</sup> But geographical accuracy clearly is not the issue here. The work of the poster is to conjure up an exotic locale for a beast that had “not been seen by anyone in this country ever,” attracting people to pay “a small charge” for a glimpse of this uncommon sight.

Such a description fires the viewer’s imagination. Most would never travel to America, but the poster offers an opportunity to encounter that far-away place at the local pub. Velten’s sketches give rare insight into the type of response such encounters elicited. For he does not picture the animal as he saw it, surrounded by onlookers in the White Elephant inn. Rather, he paints a colorful gouache of several tapirs grazing peacefully in the waters of what is undoubtedly meant to be the Euphrates River in America (fig. 2). The river and its bank are suggested with vague washes of blue and

green. Probably Velten’s lack of artistic training explains this rather unconvincing depiction of forms in space. However, this fluid blending of paint also reveals much about the reception of the exotic in Amsterdam. Here, Velten’s inability to picture a detailed setting for this beast seems to indicate how difficult it was to imagine foreign sights in their original context. In another sketch (fig. 3), Velten adds three flamingos—other American animals that he had encountered in Amsterdam—to a watery landscape inhabited by a family of tapirs.<sup>20</sup> He also includes a small human figure who shoots with an arrow from a boat—possibly representing a Native American on the hunt. These additions can be seen as attempts to give the scene greater authenticity. In fact, Velten writes that he has recorded a true picture of a tapir drawn from life.<sup>21</sup> However, the influence of the

19. F. F. J. M. Pieters and S. Pinkster, “1704: De Eerste Zuidamerikaanse Tapir in Europa,” in *De Horen en Zijn Echo. Verzameling Essays Opgedragen aan Dr Henny E. Coomans ter Gelegenheid van Zijn Afscheid van de Universiteit van Amsterdam op 9 September 1994*, ed. M. Coomans-Eustatia et al. (Amsterdam: Stichting Libri Antilliani, Zoölogische Museum, 1994), p. 82.

20. Flamingos were a favorite of Velten’s. They appear no less than ten times throughout the album. Some of these are depicted in the context of the Blauw Jan inn. *Wonderen* (see note 1), pp. 5, 13, 20, 31, 57, 58, 64, 65, 66, 152.

21. Another of his tapir drawings includes the caption: “True picture of an *Equus aquaticus* otherwise called a Water- or Seahorse





Figure 3. Jan Velten, *Tapir, Two Flamingos and a Man*, gouache painting in *Wonderen der Natuur*, ca. 1700, p. 152. Artis Library, University of Amsterdam.

woodcut image is obvious, for Velten actually reproduces its erroneous depiction of a tapir with four toes on its forelegs and only three on its hind legs.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, his eyewitness account was mediated by the printed image.

In this way, a tapir seen at the White Elephant and a flamingo encountered at the Blauw Jan inn prompt Velten to imagine “America.” Wrested from their original context, these animals were mediated by exhibition practices and representations that recontextualized them for a local audience. While this may have served to make them accessible and knowable, it also rendered them more elusive. As Velten’s sketches reveal, encounters with these animals served to stimulate what could only be a partial and fragmentary vision of the New World.

The advertising poster of the tapir attempts to bridge this gap between a radically alien beast and its

that was shown alive at the Buttermarket in the White Elephant.” (“Waare afbeeldige van een Equus Aquaticus of anders ’t segge het Waater of het Zeepaert dat levendicht ’t sien gewees is op d’Bottermarckt in de witte oliphant.”) *Wonderen* (see note 1), p. 114.

22. This was pointed out to me by Florence Pieters. See Pieters and Pinkster (see note 19), p. 85.

European audience. Together with its emphasis on an exotic locale, the text calls up the wildness of the strange-looking animal that was “captured with great difficulty.” This hint of danger undoubtedly served to entice the reader. However, as if to allay any fears about the unpredictability of an encounter, the poster includes a postscript, which is set apart at the bottom left where it catches the reader’s attention: “N.B. This illustrious Beast has been tamed and is so gentle that anyone can handle it without fear.” In this way, the text emphasizes that there was no real risk in the encounter: this beast had been successfully domesticated so that all could approach—and even touch—without fear. This postscript might have influenced Velten’s gouache of the tapirs (fig. 2). In a small background scene, two men in European dress approach one of the animals. One holds its snout, the other walks behind with a set of keys. Possibly this is how Velten imagined the capture of the tamed tapir that he saw at the White Elephant inn.

A comparable tension between the threat of the new and the reassurance of the familiar can be seen in Jan Velten’s sketch of lions seen at the Blauw Jan. In the drawing, a seated man holds something out to a chained



Figure 4. Jan Velten, *Seated Man and Two Lions*, pen drawing in *Wonderen der Natuur*, ca. 1700, p. 144. Artis Library, University of Amsterdam.

lion (fig. 4).<sup>23</sup> Possibly some sort of performance is being staged, and watching keepers feed the animals might have been part of the show. The proximity of the man to the lion indicates that the wild beast has been at least somewhat tamed. This lion looks anything but docile however. Up on all fours, it bristles aggressively. In

23. The memoirs of Professor Heinrich Sanders, who visited the Blauw Jan inn in 1776, state that lions were kept in the inn's stables and extra admission was charged to see them. See P. H. Witkamp, "Het Natura Artis Magistra onzer Voorouders," *Jaarboekje van het Koninklijk Zoölogisch Genootschap Natura Artis Magistra* (1875):153–154; and G. Loisel, *Histoire des Ménageries de l'antiquité à nos jours* (Paris: O. Doin et fils, 1912), p. 53.

conjuring up the ferocity of this beast, Velten has paid special attention to the details of eyes, teeth, claws, and penis. Moreover, this lion is disproportionately large, and appears to be several times the size of the tiny seated man. Another male lion is depicted in the foreground. Because of the awkward way that Velten has overlapped this figure with the low rail, it is difficult to tell if the beast is safely within the enclosure, or if it actually stands in the spectators' space outside of it. As with Velten's images of the tapirs, the visual clumsiness of this drawing is eloquent testimony to the reception of the unfamiliar. It seems to convey some of Velten's uneasiness about coming into close proximity with the unpredictable. The careful observation of detail, a trait of the distanced and detached viewer, is at odds with the discrepancies of scale and strange overlapping of forms. The incongruities of the drawing thus seem to call up an unresolved tension between attraction and fear, between the detached mind and the bodily impulses of the observer. In Velten's rendering, close inspection of the new apparently conflicts with physical dread of coming too close.

A group of French travellers who visited Amsterdam in 1736 recorded a remarkably similar response when presented with Blauw Jan's lions. As one of them wrote in his travel journal:

We saw a giant there, and a lion that, although only five years old, was already fearsome. A female servant forced it to throw a baton, and it did this with very bad grace, for before it obeyed it gave a terrible roar, and worked itself into a rage that made one tremble. However, it showed much tameness and docility towards its mistress, who had raised it since it was no bigger than a cat, and used to carry it in her apron.<sup>24</sup>

This passage indicates some of the practices surrounding the presentation of animals in Amsterdam. Significantly, it was a female servant who coerced the lion to obey. In this way, the performance demonstrated how even a European of low social status had the power to dominate in an encounter with the foreign. This reassuring message undoubtedly was reinforced by an

24. My translation of a passage quoted in E. V. Biema, "Een reis door Holland in 1736," *Oud Holland* 28 (1910):87. "Nous y vîmes un géant, et un lion qui quoy qu'agé seulement de cinq ans étoit déjà formidable. Une servante l'obligeoit de sauter le batton, ce qu'il faisoit de fort mauvaise grace, puisqu'avant d'obéir il rugissoit d'un ton terrible, et se mettoit dans une colère à faire trembler. Il a cependant beaucoup de douceur et de docilité pour sa maitresse qui l'a élevé qu'il n'étoit pas plus gros qu'un chat, et le portoit dans son tabelier."

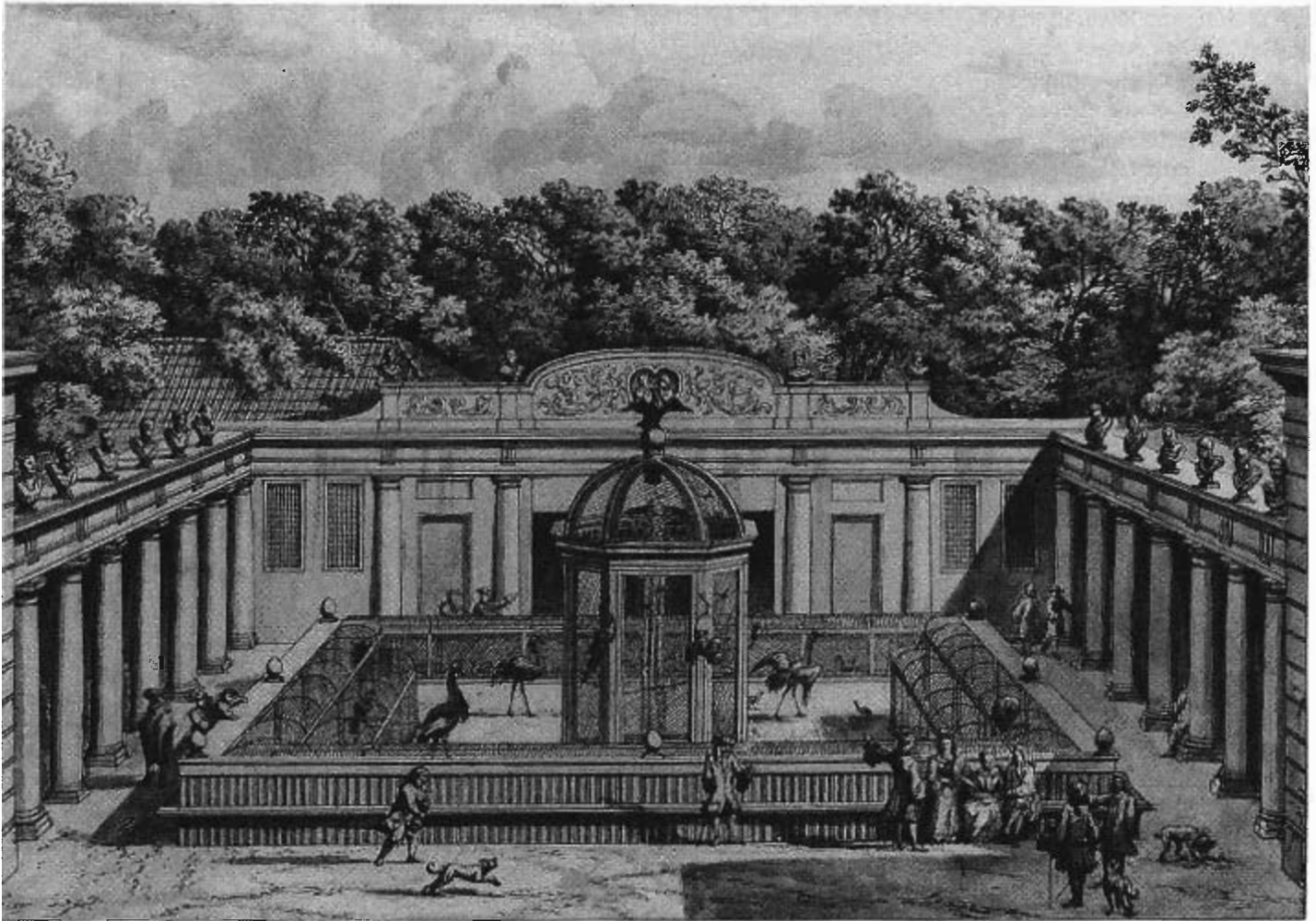


Figure 5. Isaac de Moucheron, *The Aviary of the Blauw Jan Inn*, engraving, ca. 1700. Gemeentearchief Amsterdam.

oral presentation. The journal entry bears the traces of the calculated way that the dangers of the wild animal were exhibited, and then mitigated by the comforting image of a girl carrying a kitten in her apron pocket. Different aspects of the show thus worked together to mediate the threat of the new. Prints with images and texts attracted and prepared spectators for staged performances that traded upon tension between the terrors of the exotic and the reassurance of the familiar, between physical trembling and detached interest.

Velten's album is thus an unusual source, for the imagery it contains vividly documents his response to the actual presentation of curious sights in Amsterdam. In order to press this point further, it is useful to contrast the Velten album with a printed image of the Blauw Jan

inn, done around 1700 by the artist Isaac de Moucheron (fig. 5).<sup>25</sup> Possibly the inn's proprietor commissioned this print as an advertisement. The image depicts several well-dressed patrons in the inn's classically colonnaded courtyard, which is centered around a large aviary filled with exotic birds. A low wall separates the onlookers from these sights. Some of the figures look or point at the birds, while others stand in groups and converse. In this engraving, the Blauw Jan inn is represented as a decorous gathering place for the apprehension,

25. See F. W. H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts, 1450–1700*, 43 vols. (Amsterdam: Menno Hertzberger, 1949–), vol. XIV, p. 94, no. 47.



discussion, and evaluation of new knowledge about the world. The inn comes across as a place where middle-class people could come together in the collective and creative process of making sense of the natural phenomena that appeared in their city.

Velten's sketchbook reveals more than the Moucheron print's rather controlled view of the inn's alluring sights. Not only does the album exceed the bounds of restrained curiosity, but it also reveals that Blauw Jan's clientele was not limited to the middle class. In fact, the low price of admission opened the inn to a broad range of spectators.<sup>26</sup> This allowed sailors like Velten to mix with foreign dignitaries such as Sir James Thornhill, the British artist who drew the courtyard in his sketchbook, and Carolus Linnaeus, the Swedish pioneer of natural history, who described the Blauw Jan in a letter to a colleague.<sup>27</sup> Other sites that Velten frequented allowed for similar mingling of disparate classes of people. For instance, he devotes two pages of his sketchbook to an image and textual description of his visit to the curiosity cabinet of Levinus Vincent (fig. 6). Vincent was one of the few private collectors in Amsterdam who opened his collection to members of the public who would pay a fairly high entrance fee.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, Velten's caption does not detail the sights that he saw at Vincent's, as one might expect. Rather he proudly describes the extraordinary company that he kept there: "True picture of the renowned Chamber of Curiosities of: Vincent which I saw in the company of some Barons, Counts and a Prince from Italy in the year 1701 on the second

day of Easter."<sup>29</sup> Surviving guest books of Vincent's cabinet indicate that visitors included nobles, dignitaries, professors of botany and medicine, artists and collectors, as well as sailors, and middle-class men who brought their wives and children.<sup>30</sup>

Carolus Linnaeus's recollections of the Blauw Jan inn also suggest how the public display of curiosities appealed to a wide range of interests. When a colleague asked him for advice concerning the purchase of animals from Blauw Jan for the menagerie of King Adolf Frederick of Sweden, Linnaeus sent the following reply:

Concerning my good Blaw Jaen, when in Holland, I would rather buy a flask of wine than animals from him, look twice at my money than buy flesh from his shop. He has quite pleasing animals: porcupine, civet cat, anteaters, etc., but my hair stands on end and the lice bite at the roots when I gaze at the catalogue: 300, 100, 50 guilders; . . . All of his animals are beautiful, but the money is more beautiful. And I begrudge my noble Sir such coarse gains. But do by all means recommend the monkeys, for jesting aside there are none so delightful, so strange and different, and for everyone so droll.<sup>31</sup>

Linnaeus's disdain for Blauw Jan is obvious. To profit from the sale of new animals is described as coarse gain, and Blauw Jan comes across as one who benefits from immoral traffic in flesh. As Linnaeus describes it, Blauw Jan was a place where commerce and entertainment converged in the visual attraction of new specimens. While he may have belittled this combination, however, his comments also betray his intense enjoyment of the place. When discussing the inn in his letter, he switches from Swedish into the lively Dutch dialect spoken in Amsterdam. Here, the disparaging remarks of a dispassionate scientist seem to

26. Admission was four stuivers (one guilder = twenty stuivers), about half the price of a loaf of bread. F. Pieters and M. M. Bruyns, "Menagerieën in Holland in de 17de en 18de eeuw," *Holland*, 20 (1988):197.

27. Thornhill's sketch of the inn's courtyard is based on the Moucheron print. Velten also did a drawing after this print. See K. Fremantle, ed., *Sir James Thornhill's Sketch-book Travel Journal of 1711. A Visit to East Anglia and the Netherlands*, 2 vols. (Utrecht: Haentjens Dekker en Gumbert, 1975), vol. I, p. 99. Linnaeus's impressions of the Blauw Jan are recorded in K. Hagberg, *Carl Linnaeus de Bloemenkoning* (Amsterdam: A. J. G. Strengholt, 1964), p. 95. A bibliography of all published references to the Blauw Jan inn, both by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tourists, and by subsequent scholars, can be found in P. Smit et al., eds., *Hendrik Engel's Alphabetical List of Dutch Zoological Cabinets and Menageries* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986), pp. 30–31.

28. On Vincent's cabinet, see R. van Gelder, "Liefhebbers en geleerde luiden," in Bergvelt (see note 15), pp. 280–282; and Peter Mason, *Infelicities. Representations of the Exotic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 92–99.

29. *Wonderen* (see note 1), pp. 124–125: "Waare afbeelding van d'vermaarde Raare Teijt-Kamer van: Vicendt die ick in 't selschap van eenige: Baronnen Graaven: en een Priens uyt Ytalien besein heeft in 't ijaar 1701: d'tweede paasdach."

30. Van Gelder (see note 28), p. 281.

31. Quoted in Hagberg (see note 27), p. 95: "Wat mijn goede Blaw Jaen betreft, zo wil ik liever in Holland een zuur wijntje bij hem kopen dan dieren. Liever rondkijken voor mijn geld dan vlees kopen uit zijn winkel. Hij heeft heel aardige dieren: Eysere verken, Ziewet kat, Mieräters, enz.; maar de haren gaan overeind staan op mijn hoofd en de luizen knagen aan de wortels, als ik de catalogus bekijk: 300, 100, 50 gulden; . . . Al zijn dieren zijn mooi, maar het geldje is mooier. En ik misgun mijn noble Heer dat grove geld. Maar wees toch maar zo goed de apen te recomanderen, want zonder gekheid, er zijn geen dieren aardiger, wonderlijker en verschillender en vóór alles zo vol gultenstreken."

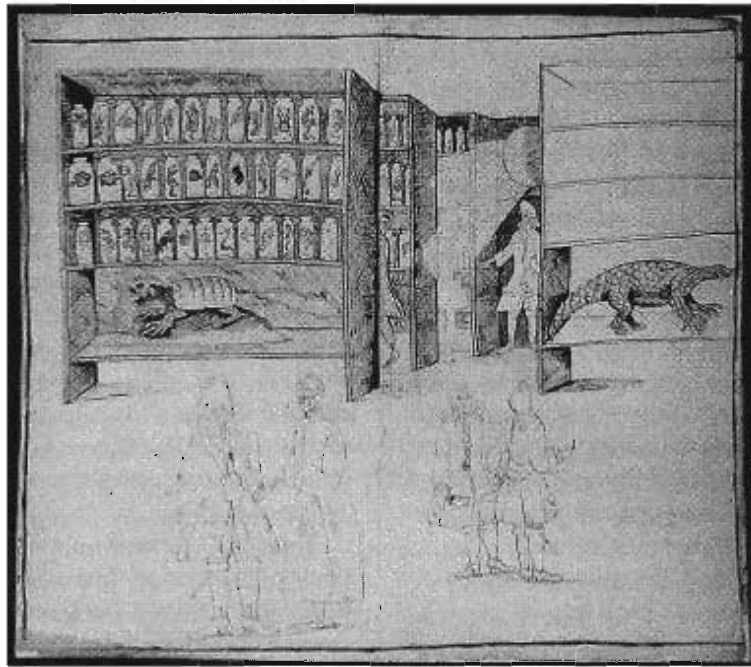


Figure 6. Jan Velten, *The Zoological Cabinet of Levinus Vincent*, pen drawing in *Wonderen der Natuur*, ca. 1700, p. 125. Artis Library, University of Amsterdam.

give way to a flagon of wine, a troupe of performing monkeys, and the earthy language of the streets. Initially, Linnaeus's careful development of taxonomic systems and Velten's haphazard record of all that was wondrous and new seem to represent two extremes among the variety of responses to new phenomena possible at the time. Indeed, the definition of scientific curiosity necessitated the repression of responses such as Velten's unbridled appetite for wonder.<sup>32</sup> However, Linnaeus's recollections also hint at how reactions that ranged from physical enjoyment to detached observation could coexist and possibly conflict within the same viewer.

The public collections of Blauw Jan, the White Elephant, and Levinus Vincent thus made the most of widespread interest in curiosities. Not only did these places offer the novel and unusual to those seeking the

amusements of the fair, but they also catered to the attentive gaze of artists and scientists, the desires of aristocratic and merchant curio collectors, and the inquisitive looking of those in search of education and self-betterment. Notably, these different viewing practices did not divide neatly along stereotypical class lines. Velten, for instance, fashioned himself as an amateur artist and natural historian, who sought to learn from and delight in the excitement of all that he saw. Unlike the wealthy visitors to these collections, he probably could not afford to collect exotic things.<sup>33</sup> However, he did attempt to possess these luxury goods by gathering prints and sketches together in his album. The pictorial representations that he made and collected thus allowed him to keep, display, and repeatedly look at the things that he could not own.

32. As Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park have argued, although there was a change in understanding from wonders as sources of pleasure to objects of scientific discovery, different attitudes coexisted throughout the early modern period. See L. Daston and K. Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Zone Books, 1998), pp. 175–176.

33. Possibly Velten was an amateur conchologist, as the album does make note of some seashells that were given to him. See further Pieters, p. 180 (see note 14), and D. C. Meijer, Jr., "Blauw Jan," *Amsterdamsch Jaarboekje voor Geschiedenis en Letteren* 2 (1889):41–48.

In this way, the sailor Jan Velten grasped the opportunities presented by Amsterdam's various public curiosity cabinets to mingle with the learned and participate in the appreciation of curious rarities. As Velten's comments about his visit to Vincent's cabinet reveal, public displays of unusual sights could forge new bonds among quite diverse people by bringing them together in the shared act of looking.<sup>34</sup> Linnaeus's response to the pleasures of the inn is noteworthy in this regard, as he attempts to differentiate between disinterested scientific study of the natural world and the commercial interests of those like the profit-seeking innkeeper. Indeed, such a distinction works to safeguard the status of science as a discipline that increasingly was set apart for erudite professionals.<sup>35</sup> Linnaeus's comments thus reveal that, although the broad dissemination of new knowledge could generate common interests among a diverse viewing public, it also could threaten social hierarchies, and was met with attempts to discriminate between different ways of viewing and understanding. Linnaeus's mode of scientific rationality and the Blauw Jan's offering up of the natural world for profit were not completely antagonistic impulses, however, for science and commerce were intertwined in the early modern period.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Linnaeus's very familiarity with the inn indicates how its displays fuelled the interests of the new science, for his letter clearly conveys the enthusiasm of a scientist who identifies and observes—perhaps for the first time—species such as the civet cat, porcupine, and anteater.<sup>37</sup>

34. Rosemarie Garland Thomson traces links between the display of anomalous bodies and the rise of democracy in R. G. Thomson, "From Wonder to Error—A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. R. G. Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 5. See also Katherine Park and Lorraine Daston, "Unnatural Conceptions: The Study of Monsters in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century France and England," *Past and Present* 92 (1981):20–54.

35. On the rise of scientists as an exclusive social group of intellectuals in early modern Europe, including Holland, see Carlo Ginzburg, "The High and the Low: The Theme of Forbidden Knowledge in the 16th and 17th Centuries," in *Myths, Emblems, Clues*, trans. J and A. Tedeschi (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990), pp. 60–76. See also William Eamon, "From the Secrets of Nature to Public Knowledge," in *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution*, ed. D. C. Lindberg and R. Westman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 333–365; and Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature. Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 393–398.

36. See the essays in Smith and Findlen (see note 4).

37. The species displayed at the Blauw Jan inn were of some importance for systematic zoology. See Pieters and Bruyns (see note

The exploitation of the wonders of nature for income is especially evident in one of the main attractions of the Blauw Jan inn—its exhibition of human beings. Although it does not coincide with the time that Velten spent there, a print after a drawing by Pieter Barbiers of a Mohawk Indian from 1764 should be considered for the remarkable evidence it provides (fig. 7). A caption runs along the bottom of the image: "A wildman, SYCHNECTA by name, from the MOHAWKS in NORTH AMERICA." In smaller italicized print underneath we read: "He was on display in Blauw Jan 1764." As we shall see, this image of Sychnecta tells us very little about America and its peoples. However, the presence of this man at the Blauw Jan inn does provide significant information regarding the traffic of humans to Amsterdam.

The man pictured was one of two Mohawks who were persuaded by German settlers in New York to accompany them to England. Possibly Sychnecta and his companion Trosoghroga went willingly, enticed by promises of wealth and adventure.<sup>38</sup> Notably, other members of the Mohawk community were suspicious of the trip and asked the colonial administration to intervene. As it turned out, they had good reason to distrust the Germans, for, after being put on display in various pubs in England and Ireland, Sychnecta was abducted by one of the German men and taken to Amsterdam. There, he was sold to the widow Bergmeyer, proprietor of the Blauw Jan inn at the time.<sup>39</sup> When the second German arrived to retrieve Sychnecta, the widow Bergmeyer refused to free him. In fact, she did not even allow him to speak with the German man. Given the number of surviving archival documents that deal with the abduction and repatriation of Sychnecta, clearly this was an unusual case.<sup>40</sup> Probably many of the

26), p. 199. Displays of human and animal curiosities also were grist for scientific pondering in London. See R. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1978), pp. 36–37.

38. G. Hamell, "Mohawks Abroad: The 1764 Amsterdam Etching of Sychnecta," in *Indians and Europe. An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays*, ed. C. F. Feest (Aachen: Alano Verlag, 1987), pp. 182–183. Native Americans who went to Europe may have had various motives including curiosity, trade, and a desire to learn new technologies and languages. See J. Greene, "New Historicism and Its New World Discoveries," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 4 (1991):163–198.

39. Hamell (see note 38), pp. 177, 184–186. The case of Sychnecta is also discussed by M. de Roever, "Een jaar in het Buitenland, de Reis van een Mohawk-Indiaan naar Amsterdam en Terug," *Amstelodamum* 72 (1985):124–128.

40. These sources have been analyzed by Hammel (see note 38), and Roever (see note 39).

people displayed at the Blauw Jan went willingly and had some share in the profits. Indeed, Sychnecta himself may have voluntarily accompanied the German men to Europe. However, once there, it was unlikely that he received any of the imagined benefits. Bought, exhibited, kidnapped, confined, and forbidden to speak, he was treated more like one of Blauw Jan's animals.

And, as the engraving attests, his display and reception followed a similar colonizing trajectory. The carefully rendered details of the image—the pipe, snow shoes, headdress, bow and arrow, and background landscape—contribute to a sense of authenticity. Possibly some of these attributes played a role in the staged display of the man at Blauw Jan, working to evoke a distant “NORTH AMERICA.” However, some of these details are not quite accurate. Few Mohawks would have hunted or fought with a bow and arrow in 1764. By this time, most would have used a rifle. Moreover, the Mohawk are a northern tribe, whose traditional territories certainly are inhospitable to palm trees.<sup>41</sup> These inaccuracies pointedly demonstrate that Sychnecta was not exhibited to encourage European audiences to understand a people and a place different from their own. Isolated from his world and estranged from his new setting, Sychnecta was offered up for attentive looking. The native body thus stimulated visual, rather than cultural interest. The eye lingers, trying to make sense of the many details of the costume. What are the objects that hang around the man's neck? Are his legs bare or covered, and what does he wear on his feet? How is the headdress attached to the rest of the costume, and what is it made of? Does his pipe do double duty as a tomahawk? The image invites, but does not repay the inquisitive gaze. The visual display of Sychnecta presented the curious with a beguiling—but ultimately obscure—vision of the America that he supposedly represented. In the process, Sychnecta himself was reduced to a commodity. As with the tapir, his perceived value in this society was centered on his outward appearance—a fact that is reinforced by the printed image.

Important primary evidence about the reception of foreign peoples in Amsterdam also is found in the Jan Velten sketchbook. On one page, for example, Velten sketches a Chinese man carrying a parasol depicted alongside some shells, a parrot, a guan, a Common

Crane, and two rat-like animals.<sup>42</sup> In a more concerted effort to contextualize, two Inuit men with spears are portrayed on a page along with a kayak, a narwhal, and an Arctic fox.<sup>43</sup> Other pages depict a turbaned Indian mogul seated on a cushion, a fakir in a mountainous setting, and a group of half-naked men with spears who join in a procession with elephants and lions.<sup>44</sup> Velten did not include texts explaining where he witnessed any of these sights. It is likely that some of these sketches were copied from images, or they might represent Velten's imaginative renderings of a distant place in the manner of the tapir and flamingo sketch.<sup>45</sup> Possibly, some of these people were on display at places like the Blauw Jan.<sup>46</sup> Others might have been visiting merchants or dignitaries that Velten encountered in the city's streets or market squares. It is even conceivable that, like so many other visitors to the city, these foreigners visited the Blauw Jan inn where Velten viewed them as spectacles among the spectators. Velten's album thus gives an indication of the intense curiosity that would have greeted non-European visitors to his city. This fascination seems connected to the way that the viewing of foreigners allowed Velten to forge his own sense of identity. For he apprehended these people as specimens—wonders of nature to be added to his collection of curious images. In this way, the sketchbook functioned as a sort of souvenir, allowing him to take the foreign home with him. Thus the narrative that Velten created was not about the people that he came across, but was an active reshaping of his own life and unique experiences in the city's public spaces—an attempt to fashion the worthiness of the self through the perception of difference.<sup>47</sup>

Although Velten's images can be seen as attempts to absorb and domesticate the foreign and thus validate a

42. *Wonderen* (see note 1), p. 71.

43. *Wonderen* (see note 1), p. 32.

44. *Wonderen* (see note 1). These images appear on pp. 106, 107, and 166.

45. For example, it is possible that Velten saw and copied a painting of a Chinese man that once hung in the Amsterdam Doolhof, a public amusement garden. See Jan van der Waals, “Exotische Rariteiten. Afbeeldingen en Voorwerpen van Vreemde Volkeren,” in Bergvelt (see note 15), pp. 154–155.

46. For evidence of previous displays of Inuit people in Amsterdam, see Mason (see note 28), pp. 114–118.

47. The functions of the souvenir are discussed by Susan Stewart, *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 132–149.

41. See Hamell (see note 38), pp. 188–189, and Mason (see note 28), pp. 159–161.

local sense of self, they concurrently reveal the many uncertainties that characterized encounters with the unknown. In some cases this was manifested as an actual physical threat, as evidenced by the number of weapons depicted in the representations of foreigners. More subtle is the way that the foreign imperilled European categories of thought, for sights from unfamiliar contexts could be difficult to subject to interpretation. Velten's image of the fakir is a case in point (fig. 8). Velten depicts a figure whose arms are held at an impossible angle behind him, displaying long, curving fingernails. The man's back is covered in hair, and one has to look twice to see that this mane grows from his head. He wears a short skirt, and his exposed chest and leg appear to be covered with scratches. Beneath the figure, Velten has included this short text: "the portrait from life of a fakir who sat in this manner for two years a mile outside Surat near the village of Oxkay in the year 1702 in the month of September when he was 37 years old."<sup>48</sup> Even with the explanatory text, it remains a bizarre image. Indeed, at first glance this man appears to take his place in Velten's album as some strange beast. Blurring distinctions between people and animals, he seems to occupy an impossible middle ground between the two. Velten's rendering conveys his absorption—his need to look closely at this anomalous body. As it confuses categories, the image reveals how, in some cases, encounters with the new had the power, not to secure identity, but to call into question the very definition of what it meant to be human.<sup>49</sup>

The Velten album communicates a fascination with bodies that violated physical, social, and visual norms.<sup>50</sup>

48. *Wonderen* (see note 1), p. 7: "de afconterfijtinge na leven, van een vackier die twee jaar, op dese manier hadt geseten een mijl buijten Suratte bij het dorp Oxkaj gesein in 'tjaar 1702 in maendt van September hij waar in sijn 37 ijaar."

49. On this and related issues, see Erika Fudge, Ruth Gilbert, and Susan Wiseman, eds. *At the Borders of the Human. Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

50. The body of the "freak" has recently attracted much scholarly attention. See L. Fiedler, *Freaks. Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); R. Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); R. G. Thomson, *Freakery*, (see note 34); J. J. Cohen, *Monster Theory. Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Barry Wind, 'A Foul and Pestilent Congregation.' *Images of 'Freaks' in Baroque Art* (Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1998); and Zakiya Hanafi, *The Monster in the Machine. Magic, Medicine, and the Marvelous in the Time of*

Velten's gouache of a six-toed woman with elephantiasis luridly conveys the captivating powers of bodies that are visually different (fig. 9). The startling pink flesh of the woman's naked body emerges from a dark background. There is a dark sensualism about this image, in which desire seems to mingle with the horror evoked by a body that distorts the contours of the classic nude. This woman's body is so excessive that it seemingly cannot be contained within the sketchbook. The figure sprawls across the page—one arm and leg are cut off at the left edge. Her swollen right leg and six-toed foot are centered and placed right at the surface of picture plane where they appear nearer than the rest of her body, as if they are being held out for careful inspection. All of this is rendered more horrible by the black and greenish blotches on her skin. Velten comes in close; his compulsion to observe and record is conveyed by the immediacy of a drawing that also betrays his disgust at a body that does not conform.

In spite of his attention to detail, one is struck by what Velten leaves out. Notably, the woman's head is disproportionately small, and very sketchily drawn in comparison with the attention Velten has paid to the details of her six-toed foot. Her face is rendered in profile, and one eye seems to look out at the viewer. From this, we have no sense of her as an individual, or as a suffering human being whose disturbing bodily disorders were exhibited for the gaze of curious onlookers. Moreover, the sexuality of the image indicates some of the conflicting desires involved in this sort of looking. Certainly, interest in the woman's interiority is discouraged by this display. Rather, her identity is confined to the surface of her body, which exceeds the limits of what is defined as the norm. Indeed, this body is so excessive that it has the potential to swallow up all of the myriad bodily differences among spectators. In the face of such an exhibit, their bodies can only be validated as "normal." Thus, Velten apprehends this woman, not as a subject that one could ever identify with, but as a socially devalued body.

Captivation with the excessive female body also is exhibited in Velten's sketch of a Norse giantess (fig. 10). The woman stands in the foreground of a room, next to a table with food and drink. In one hand she holds an unidentifiable object, perhaps some kind of food. With the other hand, she lifts her skirt to reveal her booted legs, possibly indicating the sensual pleasures

*the Scientific Revolution* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000).



accompanying the display of anomalous female bodies. As if to highlight the focus of attention, Velten has drawn the giantess in more detail than the three figures surrounding her, who are rendered with simple contour drawings. One of these figures, a man, points to the giantess with one hand while gesturing with the other. Two other figures, a man and woman, look on. As in his sketches of the lions, it seems that Velten has portrayed the staged presentation of an unusual sight. Across the bottom of the page, he has included a textual description that elucidates this:

the portrait of Nordic Giantess True picture of the renowned Nordic Giantess: true size: 8: feet: 7: inches she was very large-limbed, her eyebrows five inches wide; for breakfast she ate half a black bread, and for dinner she had half a quart of groats and in the evening she took the same amount of flour and daily she drank four small pints of gin, or 2 'mingles' of brandy, she was born on the island: Aa:land, in Sweden, and she could be seen at the Kermis in Utrecht.<sup>51</sup>

The details of this description—the woman's exact height, the width of her remarkable eyebrows, the precise measure of her consumption of food and drink, the name of her birthplace—must have been learned from oral and printed descriptions that influenced her reception at the annual fair, or kermis, in Utrecht.<sup>52</sup> We can imagine that the man who points and gestures in the image communicated this information in his carnival spiel. Significantly, with all of the detail that Velten includes, he does not impart a very basic piece of information—the woman's name. Again, this is an omission that tells us as much as what is included. As in the image of the woman with elephantiasis, the Norse giantess is not apprehended as an individual, but as a monstrous figure of excess.

The bodies of monsters or "freaks of nature" had long been viewed as signs or portents—a means

51. *Wonderen* (see note 1), p. 116: "de afconterfeijtinge van Noorsse Reussin Waare afbeeldige van de vermaarde Noorsse Reussin: waar groot: 8: voeten: 7: dueym zijn was heel grof van leeden, haer wijnbrauwen waaren wel een sestienen lanck, voor haer ocht ontbijt at sij een haffe rochgebroot, en middacht een half vierdevat grot, en savons een half vierdevat meel en dagelijcks voor haar dranckt vier milgeken ijannever, ofte twee minchgelen brandewijn, sij waar gebooren op het Eijlandt: A:landt: in Sweeden en waar 't sien op d'Utrechtse Kermis."

52. B. C. Sliggers, "Het Geld is de Leus, voor Dwerger en Reus. Expositiemogelijkheden voor de Wonderen der Natuur," in *De Tientoongestelde Mens: Reuzen, Dwerger en Andere Wonderen der Natuur*, ed. B. C. Sliggers et al. (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1993), pp. 27–32.

by which divine messages were conveyed to the community. In the course of the seventeenth century, monsters and marvels were gradually desacralized, a trend that is evident in Velten's album, where religious or magical meanings rarely are attached to the many wonders recorded. Even after such understandings waned, however, the monstrous body continued to present interpretive communities with pressing questions about the social order.<sup>53</sup> Grotesque and disproportionate, such bodies could function to reinforce social ideals of physical perfection, for the disgust that onlookers experience when confronted with corporeal coordinates that do not conform spurs the repudiation of this type of body.<sup>54</sup> Velten's images seem to demonstrate this. While these bodies have the potential to draw onlookers together by confirming their physical commonality, they also reveal some of the contradictions of this process, as desire conflicts with disgust, and close scrutiny struggles against horrified repulsion. Velten's picture of the woman with elephantiasis in particular seems to be an exaggerated depiction of what he actually saw. As an eyewitness image, it is barely credible. Here, the efforts of the untrained artist seem to accurately record the visceral response that such a sight could elicit.

In this way, while the body that exceeded limits reinforced social norms and created a shared sense of identity among onlookers, in a paradoxical move, it also had the power to reveal the uncertainties of self and community by visually demonstrating the violation of corporeal and social boundaries. Among all of the atypical bodies gathered in Velten's sketchbook, this is perhaps best demonstrated by his depiction of conjoined twins (fig. 11). Velten comes in close to observe this strange phenomenon. He shows a man who holds his shirt open while gesturing dramatically to his chest, where another, smaller head is visible. This gesture is somewhat redundant, since this head is clearly centered on the page, where the eye cannot escape it. The man's other hand is cut off by the edge of the page, and is held out as if to draw the viewer in. It is a confrontational image, and this bizarre sight certainly poses a series of questions. Does this being possess two identities or one? If only one, then how are

53. Hanafi (see note 50), pp. 1–15.

54. The importance of images of grotesque, socially despised bodies in creating the ideal body is discussed by Stewart (see note 17), p. 132, and by Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Invisible World* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).



Figure 8. Jan Velten, *Fakir*, pen drawing in *Wonderen der Natuur*, ca. 1700, p. 7. Artis Library, University of Amsterdam.

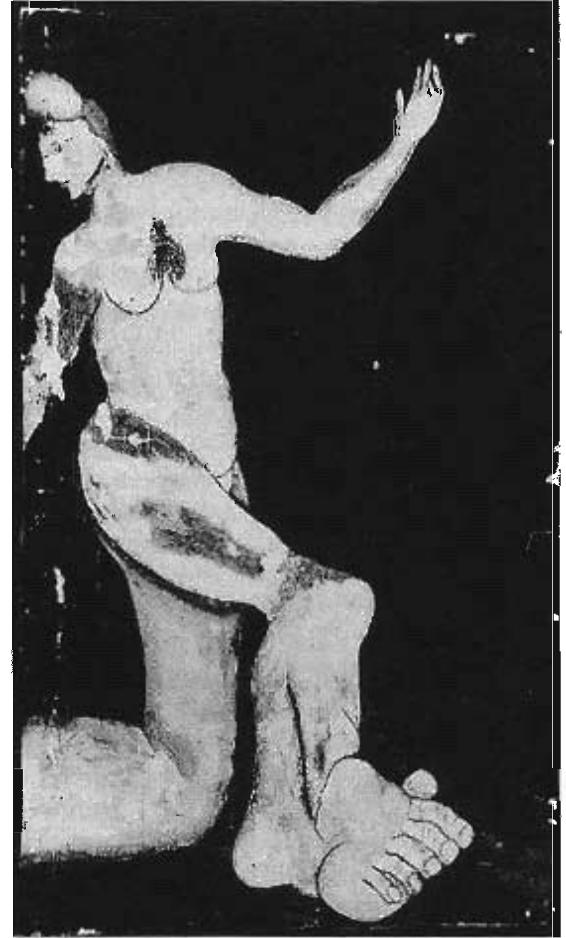


Figure 9. Jan Velten, *Woman with Elephantiasis Legs and Six Toes*, gouache painting in *Wonderen der Natuur*, ca. 1700, p. 74. Artis Library, University of Amsterdam.

we to understand the contours of this body? If two, where does one identity begin and the other end?<sup>55</sup> The boundary of the body, which usually divides one subject from other subjects and objects in the world, functions as the border of subjectivity itself. Thus the man (or men?) displayed here poses an affront to the very notion of autonomy.

As we look again, even more questions are raised. For the flesh that joins the embedded twin to the body resembles two ample breasts, and the hair on the smaller head is tied with ribbons. While the main figure

is clearly male—in another drawing, he is shown carrying a sword—the gender of the parasitic twin is ambiguous. Possibly the more dependent part was purposely displayed with feminine traits. However, this certainly arouses speculation about the sexuality of the whole being. This body conjures up a continuum of identities that range from an individual, singular, and masculine subject to a non-individualized, collectivized, sexually indeterminate, multiple being.<sup>56</sup> Such a body has implications for the broader cultural values of the time, for it visibly exaggerates the notion of a bond between the self and another. Indeed, one can only

55. Elizabeth Grosz, "Intolerable Ambiguity: Freaks as/at the Limit," in Thomson (see note 34), pp. 55–66.

56. Grosz (see note 55), p. 63.



Figure 10. Jan Velten, *Nordic Giantess and Spectators*, pen drawing in *Wonderen der Natuur*, ca. 1700, p. 116. Artis Library, University of Amsterdam.



Figure 11. Jan Velten, *Parasitic Twins*, gouache painting in *Wonderen der Natuur*, ca. 1700, p. 75. Artis Library, University of Amsterdam.

speculate as to the resonance that this body would have had when displayed in a place like the Blauw Jan inn, which drew onlookers from disparate classes, genders, and nations together in the communal act of looking. For such a sight certainly has the potential to call into question the very ideal of individuals coming together into a collectivity.

The anomalous body thus takes its place, exhibited next to bodies that were ethnically and culturally different, and alongside an eclectic collection of animals and birds, strange fish, unusual beetles, and seashells. By setting the new, the bizarre, and the unfamiliar apart, the Blauw Jan inn and places like it segregated certain things as worthy of attentive looking, and this kind of looking became socially validated as an important

means of understanding and possessing the world and the self. Notably, attentive looking was also collective looking: by fostering the desire to apprehend the unusual, such places brought together spectators from widely different social groups, potentially allowing them to participate in a shared sense of identity. Indeed, Velten's album indicates the ways that onlookers could set themselves apart from the ones who were put on exhibit. In this way, local identity could be reasserted in the face of an influx of foreign people, animals, and objects.

However, the album also reveals the troubled underside of the model that links sight with the formation of self and community. For within its pages, we see how strange sights had the power not only to

edify and inform, but also to captivate and disconcert.<sup>57</sup> Such displays often resisted understanding, and even called into question some of society's most basic categories, such as human and animal, male and female, self and other. Repeatedly, curiosity and possessive desires drew viewers in only to be pushed back again by the threat of what was seen. And the knowledge gained from these uneasy encounters with domesticated dangers generated frustratingly incomplete pictures of that which lay beyond the beholder's world. As Velten's album evidences, it is this type of vision—wavering, fragmentary, and attached to the body, with all of its fears and desires—and not the detached vision of the self-possessed Western viewer that characterizes encounters with the unknown. Thus it was the anomalous and unfamiliar that drew Europeans together to look, question, and debate some of their most important, and most fraught, social ideals.

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57. James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in *Out There. Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. R. Ferguson et al. (New York and Cambridge Massachusetts: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and The MIT Press, 1990), pp. 141–190.