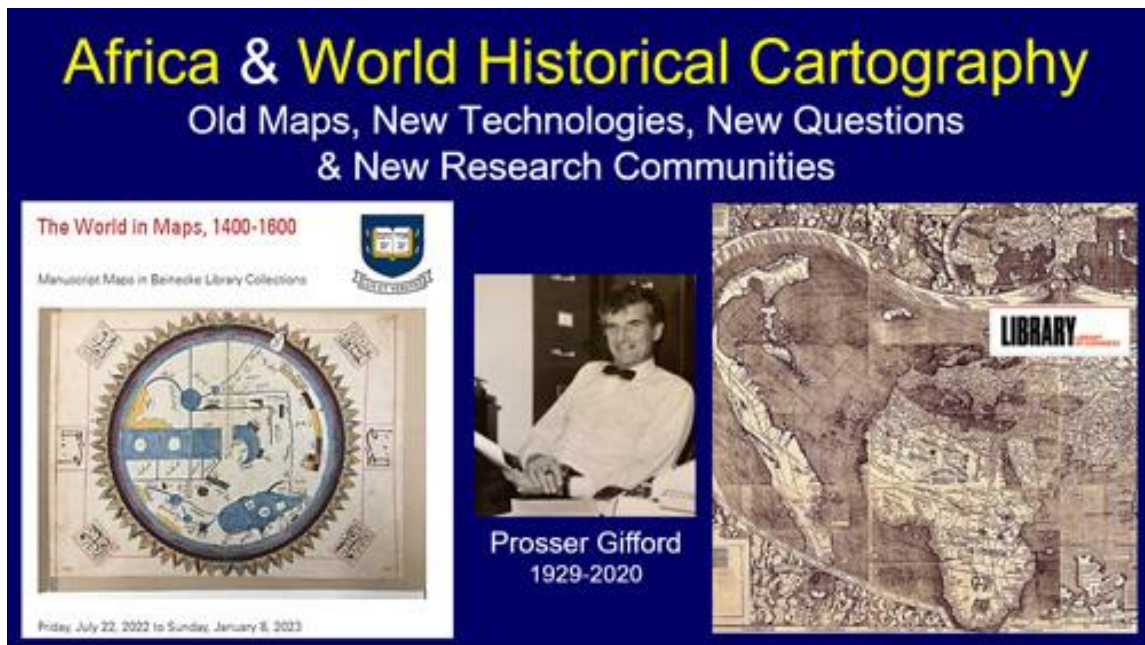


Africa & World Historical Cartography: Old Maps, New Technologies, New Questions & New Research Communities

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[African Historical Graphics Archive](#)



World historical cartography has made significant strides in the last several decades in helping humanity understand it's place in space. The acquisition by the U.S. Library of Congress in 2003 of the [Martin Waldseemuller 1507](#) map of the world launched an important series of international exchanges over the seminal importance of this document.

Following the lead of cartographic experts from the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University and the analytical and conceptual insights elaborated by Dr. John Hessler from the Library of Congress itself the world community learned a great deal about how Europeans in the 15th and 16th centuries came to conceptualize and depict the world as a whole.

As Dr. Hessler has pointed out, this document has come to be called [“the birth certificate of America.”](#) In this regard its contribution to world historical cartography has become paramount both in the minds of scholars and the public at large.

Yet, as Dr. Hessler also emphasized, [maps are inherently complex documents](#). To be understood they need to be approached on several different levels. Like all historical documents each map represents the finished product of a series of judgments, deliberate or unconscious choices and decisions on the part of the map-maker and publisher. To understand a map, therefore, historical cartographers move beyond initial questions of fact about the object itself and attempt to address further questions of provenance, source history, biography, and habits of thought and perception in the map maker's world in order to develop

a picture of the circuits of information flow, knowledge transmission and the epistemology of those involved in the creation of the final map itself.

One of the striking features of early world maps, therefore, stems from the questions the maps themselves pose to both the casual and careful observer. In this sense every map represent an enigma. It poses more implicit questions than it provides explicit answers. Perhaps this is why maps seem infinitely intriguing to both scholars and laypeople alike. Essentially, they invite us to question our own worldview. We are transported from the facticity of the image to the realm of imagination.

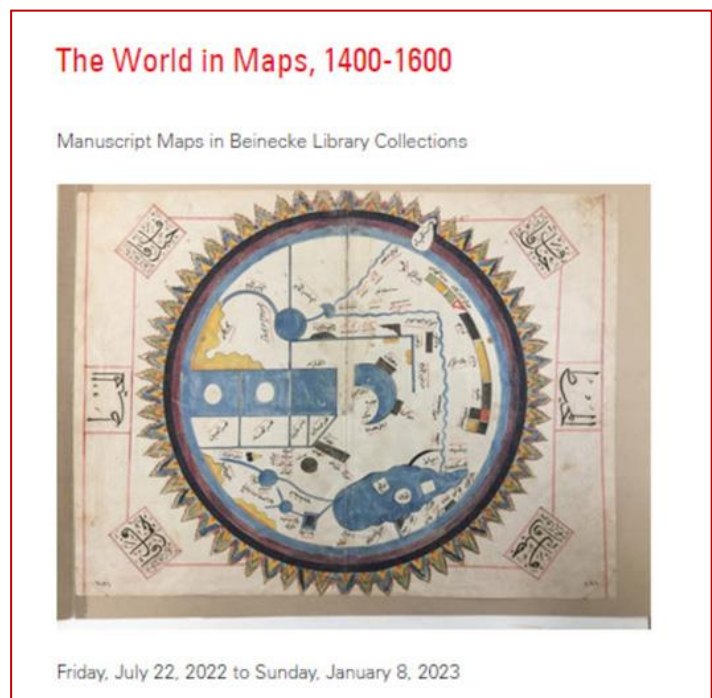
In effect, maps force us to re-examine the problem of “centricity.” Where is the “center” of the map? What is depicted as marginal? What gets put “in the frame?” What is left out? Where is the center of the world from our point of view?

In the case of the Waldseemuller 1507 map, for example, it is clear that although the document has become known as the “*birth certificate of America*,” the visual center focuses upon the continent of Africa. At the time it was created this map of Africa was arguably the most detailed and — in some respects, the “most accurate” — depiction of any of the world’s continents.

This is a fascinating conceptual problem and raises the obvious question: why does the “birth certificate of America” give such prominence to a detailed depiction of Africa? Waldseemuller himself — or any of his associates or contemporaries — could not possibly have known in 1507 of the vital importance of Africa for the subsequent history and development of “the Americas.” Nevertheless, the Waldseemuller 1507 map visually highlights — and, in some sense, presages — the central role of Africa will come to play for the historical emergence of the Americas on the global stage over the next several centuries

These and many other related questions are posed by all public exhibits and discussions of old maps. At Yale, for example, the Beinecke Library is now in the midst of curating and presenting an important collection from its manuscript map collection entitled: [“The World in Maps, 1400 – 1600.”](#)

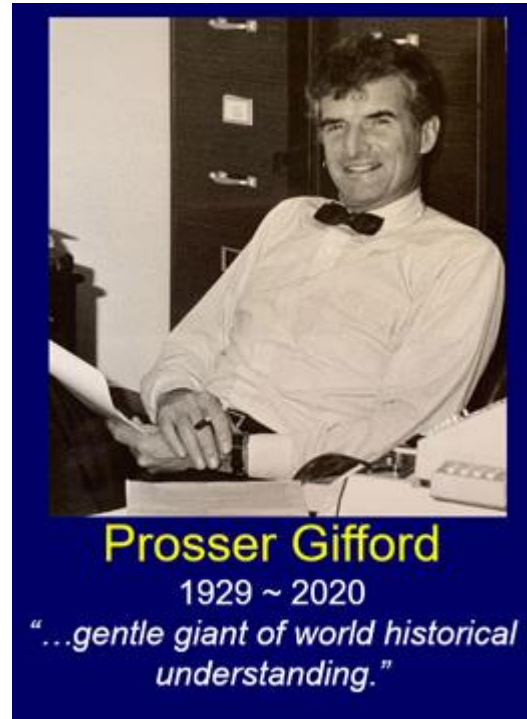
The obvious question raised by the Yale exhibit title itself is simply this: Whose “world” is depicted in each of the maps selected for display? The answers to this question for each map will no doubt be the subject of extended discussion well beyond the termination of the exhibit itself in January 2023. In this sense the current Yale exhibit is a major contribution to an ongoing realm of international cartographic scholarship.



It is important to recognize that recently world cartographic history has been significantly expanded by the rigorous scholarship and generous public discussions of [Dr. John Hessler](#) and [Chet Van Duzer](#) both of whom conducted their research as [John W. Kluge Fellows](#) at the Library of Congress.

In historical terms, it is also useful to recall that the Kluge Fellowships and the John W. Kluge Center itself at the Library of Congress was enabled in part by the work of the Library's **Director of Scholarly Programs, Prosser Gifford**. Further, it is important to recall that [Dr. Gifford](#) began his long and distinguished professional career as an African historian at Yale — in fact, as [Yale's first full-time African historian](#).

Gifford graduated from Yale and received a Rhodes Scholarship to study English literature at Merton College in Oxford, England. After returning to the United States he completed a degree at Harvard Law School and subsequently undertook PhD research in History at Yale University. Upon completing his doctorate in 1964, he was appointed as the first professor of African History at Yale University where he taught until he was appointed as Dean of Faculty at Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts. In addition to his administrative tasks at Amherst, he continued to teach African history and helped to establish a Black Studies program at Amherst and the [Five-College system](#) in central Massachusetts of which Amherst was a part.



After leaving Amherst College where he had served as the Dean of Faculty for 12 years, Professor Gifford became the Deputy Director of the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C. and eventually was appointed to a newly created position in the Library of Congress.

As the **Director of Scholarly Programs** at the Library of Congress Dr. Gifford assisted [James Billington, the Librarian of Congress](#), in the organization and inauguration of [The John W. Kluge Center](#). When Billington, secured the Kluge benefaction as part of the celebration of the Library's 200th anniversary, Prosser Gifford delayed his retirement to oversee the launching of the Kluge Center in 2000. Working closely with the Librarian, Gifford directed the design and construction of the facility, conceptualized and initiated the programs for early career fellows and senior scholars and brought the first scholars to the Center.

Prosser Gifford retired from the Library in 2005, but his impact on both African history and global historical cartography has continued to be important. In 2019 [The Africa Map Circle](#) was founded, in part, as a tribute to the life-long work of Dr Gifford who throughout his long life as a professional historian, academic administrator and innovative librarian at the country's most prestigious library continued to champion the humanities as a means to achieve greater global understanding.

In our day [The Africa Map Circle](#) continues this tradition through the ongoing examination of newly accessible resources in world historical cartography focusing upon the questions they raise about "centricity" in the evolution of humanity's understanding of its place in space. This enduring problem resides at the intersection between science, cosmology and human self-understanding, and it is at the core of the ongoing issues addressed in [Transition Studies](#).

From the most intricate details of [its role as a vector species](#) in the diffusion of microscopic pathogens in global pandemics to its recent discoveries of [the earliest moments of our galaxy in the evolution of the universe](#), the entire human community is now faced with a massive challenge of self-understanding. Our collective problem is now akin to those trying to describe and depict the "new world" that challenged the greatest thinkers in 15th and 16th century Europe. The remaining question for us today is whether or not the best minds in our day can now accomplish what the early cartographers achieved in theirs by imagining and imaging Earth so as to assist us all in "seeing the world anew."

[The Africa Map Circle](#) is dedicated to "seeing the world anew" in the tradition of the life-long work of Prosser Gifford, who posed these challenging questions in a powerful manner as a humanist scholar throughout his long life and distinguished career.

See related material:

- [Seeing the World Anew: John W. Hessler, Chet Van Duzer](#) (former John W. Kluge Fellows, Library of Congress).
- [Waldseemüller's Map of America – John Hessler | C-SPAN.org](#)
- [Warping Waldseemüller: Computer Modeling and the Quest to Understand the 1507 and 1516 World Maps | Library of Congress](#)
- [Library of Congress Officially Received 1507 Waldseemüller World Map | Library of Congress](#)
- [The World of Ptolemy and the Birth of the Cartographic Atlas](#)
- [Early Days in African Historical Cartography: The Imaging of Africa in Portolan Charts & Maps-Part 1](#)
- [Early Days in African Historical Cartography: The Imaging of Africa in Portolan Charts & Maps -Part 2](#)

and

- [How a 1507 German Map Became America's Birth Certificate](#)
- [Exploring Waldseemüller's World: Sources and Texts | Library of Congress](#)
- [Library of Congress Officially Received 1507 Waldseemüller World Map | Library of Congress](#)
- [Schöner Sammelband – Waldseemüller Maps – Exploring the Early Americas | Exhibitions – Library of Congress](#)
- ["Cosmographiae Introductio" by Martin Waldseemüller and Mathias Ringmann – Bookworm History](#)
- [El mapa Waldseemüller](#)
- [OLDEST MAP depicting America!!! 5 Feet Tall!](#)
- [Book TV: Toby Lester – The Fourth Part of the World](#)

as well current and forthcoming:

- [The World in Maps, 1400-1600 | Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library](#)
and
- [The World in Maps: Exhibition Opening Lecture “From Dati to d’Anville: Early Modern Europe and the Birth of the Atlas” by Jim Akerman | Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library](#)

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