Exotic Knowledge as Commodity: De Bry’s *Historia Indiae Orientalis*

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The engraver and publisher Theodor de Bry and his sons Johan Theodore and Johan Israel compiled, commissioned translations and published, elaborated with opulent engravings, major texts of the European expansion. One of their highly successful publishing projects was the *Historia Indiae Orientalis* upon which I will focus in the following. The inclusion of the famed engravings turned their publications into what has been regarded as the pre-eminent example of the early modern ‘coffee-table’ book. The term coffee-table book evokes the image of the armchair connoisseur: the texts were indeed intended for a lay public without immediate trading or colonial interests in the lands described. The publication of these works turned into a highly profitable business venture. Editions in Latin as well as German made it possible to thoroughly penetrate the market for exotic knowledge while concurrently generating a Europe-wide market for their books.

The *Historia Indiae Orientalis* as well as the *Indiae Occidentalis* series is not valued for its factual information on either Asia or the Americas, nor has it been since the eighteenth century. However, whenever scholarly attention shifts to questions pertaining to the historical representation of Asia or the Americas, the series features prominently. In general, an important role in the creation of a common European horizon of knowledge and imagination surrounding Asia and the Americas is ascribed to the series. With this, the question of Orientalism and the role that the series played in the creation of European attitudes toward the Orient surfaces. The study of representations, especially historical ones, tends to be fuzzy. In most cases it is difficult to decide if a particular representation should be treated as an expression of a given set of ideas or as being actively engaged in the creation of such a horizon of imagination – or, indeed, both.

This scholarly focus on representation has profoundly impacted the study of the *Historia Indiae Orientalis* series and has privileged the study of the famed engravings. Michiel von Groesen’s thoughtful study introduced a distinct book history perspective to this discussion.¹

Van Groesen directed attention to the fact that the series was not primarily an exercise in the representation of the overseas world but a publishing enterprise directed towards specific book markets. The content of the series is thus shaped (besides obviously by authors) by technical and economic decisions, by the editors and translators and, certainly not least, by success or failure in the relevant markets. And even if economic issues are not the prime concern, as is the case in most interpretations of the de Brys’ travel collections, a thorough interpretation benefits from taking the economic questions into account.

An important issue to investigate is what determines entry into and exit from niche markets and how economic success and failure impacts the specialisation of media firms. The de Bry workshop provides an excellent opportunity to observe not only the entry into a market niche but ultimately the creation of such a niche, both lucrative on the economic level and most influential on the cultural level.

Specialisation and Diversification: The Place of the *Historia Indiae Orientalis* Series in the de Brys’ Publishing Strategy

How can the niche that the de Bry workshop created be described? Their works are characterised by lavish engravings of high artistic value. The texts, that formed the *India Orientalis*, as well as the *America* series, were translated not only into different languages but in most cases also into a different jargon, namely humanist writing. The other pillars of the de Bry publishing house, emblem books and humanist scholarship, both fed into the creation of the highly successful series. The publishing strategy remained successful even after the de Bry workshop ceased to exist in 1625 and was continued by its successor firms.

The three pillars of the de Bry workshop were present from the inception of the publishing house in 1590. And both other pillars, emblem books and humanist scholarship, in their turn, shaped the travel series. The de Brys started their publishing business with Thomas Harriot’s, *A brief and true report*, which became the first volume of their *America* series.2 The volume appeared in four languages: Latin, German, French and English. Here we see that the winning formula was not in place from the beginning. All the later volumes were

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2 Thomas Harriot, *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia of the commodities and of the nature and manners of the naturall inhabitants. Discovered by the English colon there seated by Sir Richard Greinuile Knight in the yeere 1585* (Frankfurt, Johann Wechel, sumt. Theodore de Bry, typis Johann Wechel, 1590).