

Marin Independent Journal

The land of imagination

*By Leslie Harlib
IJ reporter*

Thursday, January 22, 2004 - New exhibit paints portrait of Pacific before Lewis and Clark

How did early explorers find the information that inspired them to investigate the mysteries of planet Earth?

Through maps. The painstakingly hand-drawn, hand-painted maps that we now hang on walls and admire as art were essential tools for world exploration a couple of centuries ago. They served seafaring adventurers from the 1500s on, and were as essential to such men as Francisco Magellan, Capt. James Cook, and Sir Francis Drake as the Internet has become for us today.

Now, for the first time, the Quivira Collection, one of the most comprehensive collections of early maps of California and the Pacific Ocean region, will be on display at the Sonoma County Museum, with the exhibit set to open Saturday. The maps are owned by Henry and Holly Wendt of Dry Creek Valley's Quivira Winery, and they also underwrote the exhibit.

Called "Mapping the Pacific Coast: from Coronado to Lewis and Clark" the collection contains 33 maps. The earliest is from 1544; they range up to the late 1700s. Most are no bigger than a page of a newspaper - 11 by 17-inches. They are in pristine condition because most of them spent hundreds of years hidden away in the pages of first-edition books printed in the 1500 and 1600s - early enough to be cousins to the Gutenberg Bible.

"All these maps tell stories," says Henry Wendt, who bought his first map, printed in 1544, in the early 1960s for \$16. Today, he says, they're worth thousands.

Early maps were as much about fantasy as they were practical tools for navigation. They are, to be sure, stunningly illustrated charts of land masses and sea currents, as accurate as the hand-held compasses and astrolabes of the time could make them. But they also portray sea monsters, galleons under full sail, native peoples (frequently nude), exotic

flora and fauna, even the heads of gods to blow fair winds to speed navigators on their way.

"The Wendts' maps shed significant light on the historic context that compelled Thomas Jefferson to send the Corps of Discovery on their famous journey," says Ariege Arseguel, acting executive director of the Sonoma County Museum. "Many of the stories told in the collection are particularly relevant to Sonoma County, with references to figures like Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, Sir Francis Drake, Captain James Cook, and the Russians, all of whom left their mark on the Sonoma coast."

The Wendts have been collecting maps for more than 40 years. They named their Dry Creek Valley winery, Quivira Estate Vineyards, after a mythical mystical kingdom called Quivira that frequently shows up on 16th- and 17th-century maps of the Pacific region.

Quivira was a legendary kingdom thought to be enormously wealthy and cultured. From the European point of view, it was imagined as a highly civilized society that operated lucrative trade routes to China and the Orient. The idea of Quivira was enticing, not only because of its supposed wealth, but because it also offered the hope that a new trading route could be opened from North America to the Far East.

The Wendts, who discovered their own Quivira in the rich grape-growing soil of Sonoma County, made the decision to work with the Sonoma County Museum and put their collection on display for the first time because their maps point up the surprising deep watershed of background information that helped inspire the Lewis and Clark expedition.

"I believe very strongly in local philanthropy: Think globally but act locally," says Wendt. "The Sonoma County Museum seemed the right place to start. It's close to home. The bicentennial of Lewis and Clark affected the timing considerably. When I started to bring it all to closure, I was thinking of the question 'What did Jefferson know when he made the decision?' And this exhibit answers much of that question."

Wendt also feels that what maps say about the human desire to explore the world becomes even more vital today in contrast to our dependence on high-tech tools such as computers, electron telescopes and satellites.

"The first map that we know of dates back to 6500 B.C., on a clay tablet discovered in Anatolia. It's a bird's-eye view of a village. The urge to make maps is ancient. It must be in our genes," Wendt says.

"We hope the exhibit informs people, particularly in light of the accumulation of knowledge and readings about Lewis and Clark, about how much came before them. We want to make people aware of the craft of map-making and how it depicts the craft of seafaring," explains Wendt, an avid sailor since age 10. "Every map tells a story. Its beauty is also a blueprint to get a group of people to another place. Finally, they are great works of art, and we wanted to share them with the community."

The Sonoma County Museum, currently in the midst of a capital campaign to expand the museum from 3,000 square feet to 11,000 square feet over the next five years, was the right venue for the Wendt collection, says curator Natasha Boas, a Mill Valley resident. The 1909 Beaux Arts building, with its lofty lobby, ornate lighting fixtures and soaring arches, is rich in grandeur. It conjures up the eras when kings on thrones or tycoons in armchairs ponied up funds to send swashbucklers around the planet and bring back booty.

"We wanted this exhibit to tie into our larger curatorial vision to connect Sonoma County's rich history with contemporary, cultural and artistic currents," says Boas. "Our underlying theme for the museum is 'Where Land Meets Art.' The Wendts' collection seemed perfect for this."

In addition to the Quivira Collection of antique maps on display, there are immense blow-ups of a few key maps so visitors can see just how much detail went into their creation. The museum's second-floor exhibit explores the impact of contemporary navigation tools. Hands-on exhibits will help visitors see how people make maps today. There will be information on satellite navigation, and there will be an art component, as well. Artist Morgan O'Hara, for years a Sonoma County resident but who now lives in New York, has created an installation on mapping the human face to tell the story of a person. An audio tour, narrated largely by Wendt and produced by Antenna Studios in Sausalito, is available to accompany visitors through the exhibition and make each piece come alive. In addition, there is a thick catalog for sale, with beautifully produced copies of all the maps and the story behind each one.

"It is so wonderful to mount an exhibit like this," says Boas. "We look at everything from land use to land art to mapping in history to the history of utopias to environmental issues in the past and present. The maps show how people imagined the frontier and the Pacific Northwest. Half the information on these old maps is made up. California as an island, for instance, is pure fantasy. But that didn't stop people from using them. These phenomenal maps capture the stories of territorial ambition."

When the exhibit closes in June, the collection will go on to other museums in the United States, including, the Wendts hope, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. When it returns to Sonoma County, most of the maps will go on permanent display at the winery.

Contact Leslie Harlib via e-mail at lharlib@marinij.com.

If you go

"Mapping the Pacific Coast: from Coronado to Lewis and Clark, the Quivira Collection," will open tomorrow and run through May 30, at the Sonoma County Museum, 425 Seventh St., Santa Rosa. The museum is open Wednesday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. For information, call 707-579-1500 or go to www.sonomacountymuseum.org. This Saturday there will be an opening party from 4 to 6 p.m., free to the public. On Sunday, from 1 to 3 p.m., artist Morgan O'Hara will give a free lecture on

self-portraiture using a mapping method to tell a personal story.

Copyright and permissions