“The fairest sight in all the world...”: Five Centuries of Mapping Haiti

Title quote from: The Voyage of Christopher Columbus: Columbus’ Own Journal of Discovery, trans. John Cummins (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992), 136.
Upon reaching the Hispaniola in December of 1492, Christopher Columbus dispatched some of his men to survey the surrounding countryside:

They also told me that the land they saw was so kindly and lovely that the finest areas of Castile are not to be compared with it. This I know myself from the lands I have seen and the country here, but they told me that what I can see here does not approach the fairness of that valley, which exceeds the beauty of the countryside around Córdoba as the day exceeds the night...

— Excerpt from The Voyage of Christopher Columbus: Columbus' Own Journal of Discovery, trans. John Cummins

New York: St. Martin’s, 1992, 138-139

In these maps, Haiti is dotted with European towns and criss-crossed by colonial jurisdictions. These images convey a sense of control and ownership over Haiti that was largely a product of the European colonial imagination. As the inscription on the Atlas Universel explains, “All the animals and plants brought there [to Haiti] from Europe have taken well and multiplied.” For these cartographers—and the worldview that they were reproducing—Haiti was not its own entity capable of self-sufficiency, but a land to be filled by European colonial aspirations.
What kinds of Port-au-Prince do these maps depict? How do their intended users shape what the map looks like, and what they highlight?

PLATE 68: ENVIRONS DE LEGONE ET DU PORT-AU-PRINCE

Jacques Nicolas Bellin
Le Petit Atlas Maritime vol. 1
Gould Library Special Collections

This seventeenth-century French maritime atlas would have been used by an ambitious merchant. For him, atlases such as this were on the cutting edge of geographical knowledge and would have provided him with a sense that the world was at his fingertips.

“How?” or “Who?” but not “Why?”

HAITI EARTHQUAKE: SOME WFP LOGISTICS

United Nations World Food Programme
http://www.reliefweb.int
January 26, 2010

MASSIVE EARTHQUAKE REVEALS ENTIRE ISLAND CIVILIZATION CALLED ‘HAITI’

The Onion 46:4
January 25, 2010

These maps vividly illustrate two contemporary attitudes toward Haiti: Aid and Ignorance. The World Food Programme map is concerned with airports, runways, helicopter range, road quality, and port capacities - it is all about “how” to transport food aid most efficiently, and takes the need and method for granted.

The Onion’s satirical discovery of Haiti, on the other hand, highlights international disinterest in the island nation. The Onion article puts these words in a U.S. official’s mouth: “They must have had no way of communicating with the outside world, because had we known about these Haitians, we would have done everything in our power to help them...of that I have no doubt.”

In both cases—as with all of the maps in this exhibit—Haiti functions as a geographical “container” into which observers pour content relevant to their own interests. Ultimately, this prompts the question, “Do these maps help us better understand Haiti or its people?”
This map of Santo Domingo was created for Samuel Hazard’s travel book on Hispaniola published in 1873. In contrast to previous maps that emphasized the island as a source of goods for the colonial system, Hazard presents the island as a land forgotten by civilization; in fact, much of the island is labeled as “debatable ground,” unclaimed and left behind by both Santo Domingo and Haiti. Despite the political stability, urbanization, and intellectual production underway in Haiti at the end of the 19th century, Hazard implies to his Western audience that Haiti is still an unclaimed and wild country ready for incursions by white adventurers.

Similarly, the colorful map produced for an early twentieth-century trade exhibition in San Francisco shows Haiti as a place devoid of industrial production. It is clearly not a place for urban development or intellectual engagement, but instead a tropical land full of exotic produce and rum. These maps, along with the illustration that accompanies the author’s note to Hazard’s book show Haiti as a tropical paradise created for westerners’ leisurely lounging.
Foreign Users and Maps of Port-Au-Prince

PORT-AU-PRINCE 2216: PROPOSED OLYMPIC VILLAGE SITE

The Onion 45:56
September 4, 2009

PORT-AU-PRINCE: CATALOGUE OF OBSERVED DAMAGED BUILDINGS THE 15TH OF JANUARY, 2010

Services and Applications for Emergency Response, European Union (SERTIT)
http://www.emergencyresponse.eu.
January 18, 2010

PORT-AU-PRINCE AND PÉTION VILLE GUIDE MAP: COURTESY OF NADER’S ART GALLERY

PORT AU PRINCE: NADER’S ART GALLERY, 1978
Accessed via Ball State University’s GIS Research and Map Collection
http://www.bsu.edu/library/collections/gcmc/

Both the Nader and SAFER maps assume a foreign user. Yet whereas the latter’s purpose is to guide the deployment of foreign aid after the 2010 earthquake, this one is intended to guide a foreign tourist. Accordingly, while both depict Port-Au-Prince, Nader’s portrays a seemingly different place altogether. The “Places of Interest” in the bottom right corner and the “Distances” in the bottom left show a city filled by locations that might interest a Western visitor. Called out here are places to stay (the Splendid Hotel and the Santos Guest House, among others), places to learn about Haitian culture (Museums of the Haitian People, of Haitian Art, and of Ethnology), places to spend (the Casino and, of course, Nader’s Gift Shop and Showroom) as well as places to seek out the comforts of home (Kentucky F. Chicken, the French and American Embassies, and the Steak House Canadien). In this way, Nader’s map shows Port-Au-Prince as a city to explore, rather than a city to fix.

The Onion map similarly targets a foreign reader. While the Nader and SAFER maps have an explicit use - to navigate the city - this map satirizes common assumptions and stereotypes (gang violence, specific turf location, the prevalence of malaria and the absence of tourism) held by a foreign, Western audience. There is no implicit understanding that the readers of this map will ever visit Port-Au-Prince. Yet while this is the case, the map nevertheless reflects the actual city coastline and grid-based layout. Despite its satirical purpose, this map, like the other three, still crafts our perceptions of Port-Au-Prince.