

from "Of Cannibals," Montaigne, Michel, circa 1579.

## C. 1579: Brazil

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE  
ENNOBLES THE SAVAGE

I do not believe from what I have been told about this people that there is anything barbarous or savage about them, except that we all call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits. Indeed, we seem to have no other criterion of truth and reason than the type and kind of opinions and customs current in the land where we live. There we always see the perfect religion, the perfect political system, the perfect and most accomplished way of doing everything. These people are wild in the same

*Praise the sea; on shore remain.*

—John Florio, 1591

way as we say that fruits are wild, when nature has produced them by herself and in her ordinary way; whereas, in fact, it is those that we have artificially modified and removed from the common order that we ought to call wild. In the former, the true, most useful, and natural virtues and properties are alive and vigorous; in the latter we have bastardized them and adapted them only to the gratification of our corrupt taste. Nevertheless, there is a special savor and delicacy in some of the uncultivated fruits of those regions that is excellent even to our taste and rivals our own. It is not reasonable that art should win the honors from our great and mighty mother nature. We have so loaded the riches and beauty of her works with our inventions that we have altogether stifled her. Yet wherever she shines forth in her purity, she makes our vain and trivial enterprises marvelously shameful.

With all our efforts we cannot imitate the nest of the very smallest bird, its structure, its beauty, or the suitability of its form, nor even the web of the lowly spider. All things, said Plato, are produced either by nature or by chance or by art; the greatest and most

beautiful by one or other of the first two, the least and most imperfect, by the last.

These nations, then, seem to me barbarous in the sense that they have received very little molding from the human intelligence, and are still very close to their original simplicity. They are still governed by natural laws and very little corrupted by our own. They are in such a state of purity that it sometimes saddens me to think we did not learn of them earlier, at a time when there were men who were better able to appreciate them than we. I am sorry that Lycurgus and Plato did not know them, for I think that what we have seen of these people with our own eyes surpasses not only the pictures with which poets have illustrated the golden age, and all their attempts to draw mankind in the state of happiness, but the ideas and the very aspirations of philosophers as well. They could not imagine an innocence as pure and simple as we have actually seen; nor could they believe that our society might be maintained with so little artificiality and human organization.

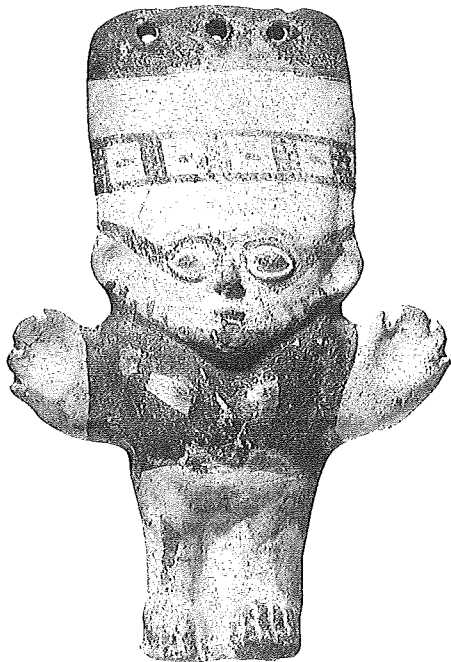
This is a nation, I should say to Plato, in which there is no kind of commerce; no knowledge of letters; no science of numbers; no title of magistrate or of political superior; no habit of service, riches, or poverty; no contracts; no inheritance; no divisions of property, only leisurely occupations; no respect for any kinship but the common ties; no clothes; no agriculture; no metals; no use of corn or wine. The very words denoting lying, treason, deceit, greed, envy, slander, and forgiveness have never been heard. How far from such perfection would he find the republic that he imagined.

They spend the whole day dancing. Their young men go hunting after wild beasts with bows and arrows. Some of their women employ themselves in the meantime with the warming of their drink, which is their principal duty. In the morning, before they begin to eat, one of their old men preaches to the whole barnful, walking from one end to the other and repeating the same phrase many times until he has completed the round—for the buildings are quite a hundred yards long. He enjoins only two things

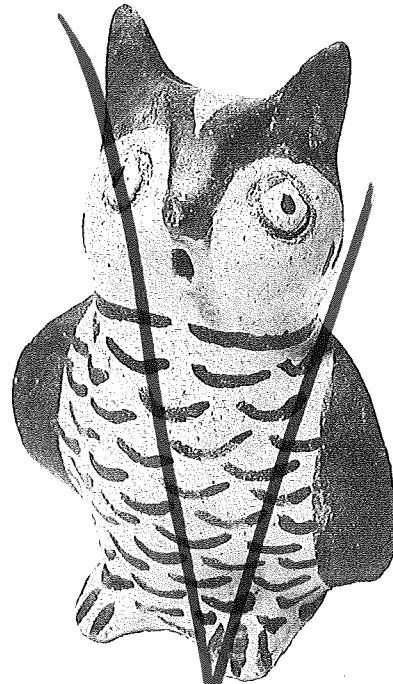
upon them; valor against the enemy and love for their wives. And he never fails to stress this obligation with the refrain that it is they who keep their drink warm and well-seasoned for them.

There may be seen in a number of places, including my own house, examples of their beds, of their ropes, of their wooden swords, of the wooden bracelets with which they protect their wrists in battle, and of the great canes, open at one end, which they sound to beat time for their dancing. They are close-shaven all over, and perform the operation much more cleanly than we, with only a razor of wood or stone. They believe in the immortality of the soul, and that those who have deserved well of the gods have their abode in that part of the sky where the sun rises; and those who are damned in the west.

*From "Of Cannibals." In 1570, at the age of thirty-seven, Montaigne sold his seat in the Bordeaux parliament and retired to write the essays that presented Renaissance Europe with a new literary form. His notion of the noble savage he partly extrapolated from reports brought to him by travelers whom he judged to be either "very honest or so simple" that they had "not the stuff to build up false inventions."*



Peruvian Moon Goddess, Chancay tribe, c. 1100–1470.



Terracotta owl by a Zuni artist, American Southwest.

## c. 750: China

### HEAVY SILK

The red sun fills the sky and the earth,  
And fiery clouds are packed into hills and mountains.  
Grasses and trees are all parched and shriveled;  
Rivers and swamps, all utterly dried.  
In light white silks I feel that my clothes are heavy;  
Under dense trees I grieve that the shade is thin.  
My mat of rushes cannot be approached;  
My clothes of linen are washed again and again.

I long to escape beyond space and time;  
In vast emptiness, dwell alone and apart.  
Then long winds from a myriad miles would come;  
Rivers and seas would cleanse me of trouble and dirt  
Then would I find that my body causes suffering;  
Then would I know that my mind is still unawake.  
I would suddenly enter the Gate of Pleasant Dew  
And be at ease in the clear, cool joy.

*Wang Wei, from his poems. One of China's foremost men of arts and letters during the Tang dynasty, Wang Wei crossed himself in the study of Buddhism and the painting of landscapes near his country villa on the banks of the Wang River.*