

Making Maps

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Voyages of exploration have often included cartographers, or mapmakers. Cartography is the science of representing a geographical location in a visual or graphic form. Sometimes this involves adding political boundaries or other nongeographic divisions.

People have been making maps in some form for thousands of years. By the 1300s, making charts—or maps for sea navigation—became even more important. Written descriptions, and then charts and maps, replaced the tradition of pilots passing along instructions and directions by talking.

On voyages in the 1400s and 1500s, paid mapmakers often traveled with surveyors to draw and paint by hand maps of the new lands discovered. Their maps seem like artwork today, and they are full of information. These old maps often include decorative features such as cartouches (fancy frames around titles) or the coats of arms of patrons or landowners. Sea monsters, dolphins, and flying fish are common. The maps may use a compass rose or wind rose to show the cardinal directions: north, south, east, and west. (Modern maps often use a single arrow pointedion.)

As science and math progressed, mapmakers developed new techniques for depicting a curved surface on a flat surface. Engraving and printing advances also changed maps. In more recent years, aerial photography, satellite photography, computers, and Global Positioning Systems (GPS) have changed the way people make and use maps.

Try comparing historical maps to modern maps of the same region. What differences can you spot? How do you explain them?

