



Novissima et accuratissima totius Americae Descriptio per N. Visscher, 1658 (undated)
 17 x 21 in (43.18 x 53.34 cm)

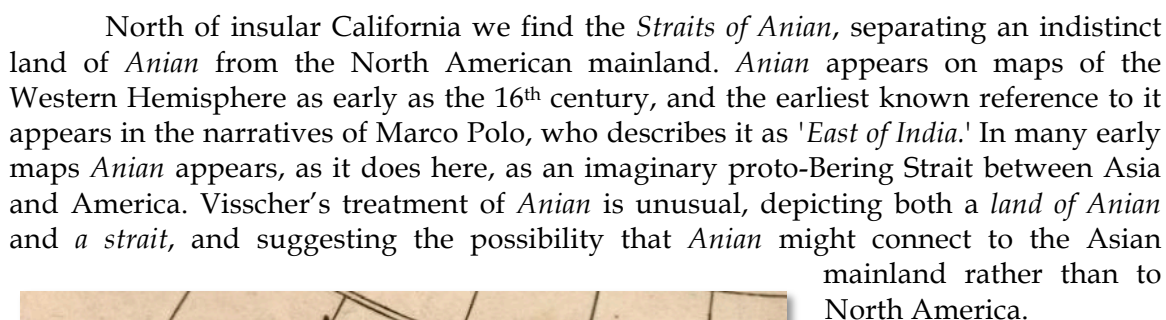
This is a circa 1677 example of Nicolas Visscher's 1658 map of America. Depicting all of the New World, including part of the Atlantic coasts of Europe and Africa, and a scattering of Pacific Islands, this map enjoyed a long print run and was shamelessly copied by several competing Dutch publishers. The map itself is cartographically based on information drawn from the 1648 Joan Blaeu world map. Thus, Visscher's map was a conduit for Blaeu's American geography to spread throughout the map publishing world. By far this map's most striking cartographic elements deal with its unusual treatment of North America, with California represented as an island, the Great Lakes rendered as a single body of water open to the west, and the strait of Anian appearing far to the north.

This is one of the most attractive Dutch Western Hemisphere maps to depict California as an island. The concept of an insular California first appeared as a work of fiction in Garci Rodriguez de Montalvo's circa 1510 romance *Las Sergas de Esplandian*, where he writes "Know, that on the right hand of the Indies there is an island called California very close to the side of the Terrestrial Paradise; and it is peopled by black women, without any man among them, for they live in the manner of Amazons." Baja California was subsequently discovered in 1533 by Fortun Ximenez, who had been sent to the area by Hernan Cortez. When Cortez himself traveled to Baja, he must have had Montalvo's novel in mind, for he immediately claimed the 'Island of California' for the Spanish King. By the late 16th and

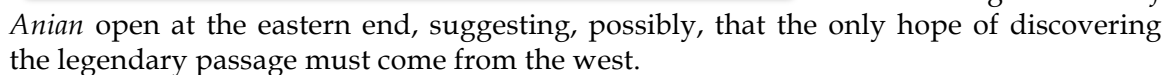


early 17th century, ample evidence had been amassed, through explorations of the region by Francisco de Ulloa, Hernando de Alarcon, and others, that California was in fact a peninsula. However, by this time other factors were in play. Francis Drake had sailed north and claimed 'New Albion' near modern day Washington or Vancouver for England. The Spanish thus needed to promote Cortez's claim on the 'Island of California' to preempt English claims on the western coast of North America. The first map to show the island of California in detail, the 1625 Briggs, was an English map (#461). Visscher's map here presents the island following Briggs' model.

Visscher's rendering of the Great Lakes as a single body of water open to the west is one of the clearest borrowings from the younger Blaeu's 1648 wall map. It represents one of the first depictions of any lake associated with the Saint Lawrence River. It shares with the Blaeu the text originally appearing on the 1611 Jodocus Hondius wall map of the world, in relation to the *Sea of Verrazano*: *Lacus iste quantum ex accolis college potui trecenta ut minimum miliaria en longitudinem pateat* ['This lake, as far as can be learned from the inhabitants, stretches at least three hundred miles in length']. The *Sea of Verrazano* was a 16th century speculative body of water extending to the Pacific through the center of North America. Blaeu appears to have conflated this fictional sea with reports of the Great Lakes, and Visscher here presents Blaeu's interpretation in full. Later iterations of this map would see this great inland sea replaced by a more sophisticated rendering of the Great Lakes, drawn largely from French sources.



In many period maps and literature, *Anian* is associated with the Northwest Passage: John Donn wrote '*Anyan if I go west by the North-West passage.*' Visscher's treatment of the Northwest Passage is most curious, for he intentionally and fully closes the Hudson Bay while leaving the *Strait of*



Visscher appears prescient in his rendering of mountains in the western part of North America. Since these parts of America were almost entirely unexplored by

Further south the cartography of South America is nearly as confused as that of North America. Though by this point in history, the general outlines of South America are well established by regular circumnavigations of the continent, like North America, the interior of South America is entirely speculative. Even the great Amazon River is poorly and inaccurately rendered both regarding its general orientation and its connection with other large South American river systems, most notably the Paraguay. Visscher also recognizes two popular misconceptions regarding the mythical kingdoms of the *Amazon*, *El Dorado* and *Xarayes*.

In Visscher's time many Europeans believed that the most likely site of *El Dorado* was the mythical city of *Manoa* located here on the shores of the Lake Parima, near modern day Guyana, Venezuela, or northern Brazil. *Manoa* was first identified by Sr. Walter Raleigh in 1595. Raleigh does not visit the city of *Manoa* (which he believes is *El Dorado*) himself, nonetheless, he describes the city, based on indigenous accounts, as resting on a salt lake over 200 leagues wide. This lake, although no longer mapped as such, does have some basis in fact. Parts of the Amazon were at the time dominated by a large and powerful indigenous trading nation known as the *Manoa*. The *Manoa* traded the length and breadth of the Amazon. The onset of the rainy season inundated the great savannahs of the Rupununi, Takutu, and Rio Branco or Parima Rivers. This inundation briefly connected the Amazon and Orinoco river systems, opening annual and well-used trade routes. The *Manoans*, who traded with the Incans in the western Amazon, had access to gold mines on the western slopes of the Andes, and so, when Raleigh saw gold rich Indian traders arriving in Guyana, he made the natural assumption for a rapacious European in search of *El Dorado*. When he asked the Orinocans where the traders were from, they could only answer, '*Manoa*.' Thus did *Lake Parime* or *Parima* and the city of *Manoa* begin to appear on maps in the early 17th century. The city of *Manoa* and *Lake Parima* would continue to be mapped in this area until about 1800.



Further south Visscher maps a large and prominent *Laguna de Xarayes* as the northern terminus of the Paraguay River. The *Xarayes*, a corruption of 'Xaraiés' meaning 'Masters of the River', were an indigenous people occupying what are today parts of Brazil's *Matte Grosso* and the *Pantanal*. When Spanish and Portuguese explorers first navigated the Paraguay River, as always in search of *El Dorado*, they encountered the vast *Pantanal* flood plain at the height of its annual inundation. Understandably misinterpreting the flood plain as a gigantic inland sea, they named it after the local inhabitants, the *Xaraies*. The *Laguna de los Xarayes*, accessible only through the Gate of Kings, almost immediately began to appear on early maps of the region and, at the same time, took on a legendary aspect. The *Lac* or *Laguna Xarayes* was often considered to be a gateway to the Amazon and the *Kingdom of El Dorado*. Here Visscher's rendering suggests exactly that, with a wide navigable *Rio De La Plata* leading directly to the Paraguay River and connecting clearly to the *Lago de los Xarayes* and thus the Amazon itself.



The map is dedicated to Cornelius Witsen, whose arms appear in the beautiful dedicatory cartouche, flanked by a trio of angels triumphant over a fallen devil and an Indian - whose allegiance in the conflict is not abundantly clear. Cornelis Jan Witsen (1605 - 1669) was an important figure in Dutch politics, holding a post as governor of the Dutch West Indies Company and membership in the Dutch Admiralty.

