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New rare map exhibit opens at Sonoma museum

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When Henry Wendt looks at one of his maps, he's not looking for the nearest I-5 on-ramp. He's gazing into the distant past.

Poring over one woodblock print map from the late 1400s, he points out the continents of Europe, Africa and Asia, and way over on one side, a tiny sliver of land. That was the part of North America that European explorers had found so far.

"This was the world as it was thought to be at that time," the map collector and retired executive explained.

That's just one of the insights offered in "Envisioning the World," a new exhibition of nearly 30 world maps from 1450 through 1700, opening Friday, Oct. 2, at Santa Rosa's Sonoma County Museum.

Another map from the 15th century shows Jerusalem as the center of the world, with portraits of Biblical figures at three of the corners.

"Christian theology dictated that the world was populated by the three sons of Noah," Wendt explained. "Japhet went to Europe, Sem went to Asia and Cam to Africa. There was not a fourth son."

So, when the New World was discovered, and natives were found there, that posed a problem.

"They could not be descendents of Noah, and if they weren't, by Biblical tradition, they could not be human," Wendt added. "So this map portrays what one could find beyond the borders of this map — these weird creatures."

To Wendt, a map is not just a chart with destinations marked on it. It's a window into the minds and hearts of another time.

"This exhibit is an intellectual history," he explained. "It's geography, but it's a lot more. It's the evolution of man's understanding of the planet Earth."



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / Press Democrat

Henry Wendt's collection of rare maps are featured in the Sonoma County Museum exhibition "Envisioning the World". Behind Wendt is a map of the world by Abraham Ortelius from 1570.

At 77, Wendt has come a long way from the eight-year-old boy on Long Island who became fascinated with the nautical charts he spread on his bedroom floor.

Wendt went on to sail his own sloop, but he also excelled in business. He retired 15 years ago as chairman of pharmaceutical giant SmithKline. Three years ago, he sold Quivera Winery in Healdsburg, which he and his wife, Holly, founded in 1987. Now the Wendts live in the San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington State.

Henry Wendt traces the beginnings of his collection back to his visit to Tokyo's used-book store district in 1962, where he discovered a 1742 map of South Asia.

Since then, he has carefully built his collection, working with trusted dealers in New York, London and around the world. The age and authenticity of the maps, almost all originals, is determined by the type of paper used, among other tests. Wendt also must be certain the maps he buys have been acquired legally.

"I had one of my maps recalled because there was a suspicion that it been stolen from a library in Seville, cut out of its frame with a razor blade," Wendt said. "It turned out the map wasn't stolen. It was cleared by Interpol."

In 2004, the Sonoma County Museum presented its first exhibit of maps from the Wendt collection, "Mapping the Pacific Coast."

While the earlier exhibit illustrated the ultimately fruitless search for the imagined Northwest Passage to the Far East through North America, the new exhibit deals with European civilization's perception of the world and how it changed as explorers brought back new information. Wendt believes maps are a unique way to illustrate these ideas.

"Maps display intellectual history in a way that I think is uncommon," he said. "I cannot suggest another format that would equivalent. Maybe there is one, but I can't."

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