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If we believe 16th-century accounts, Amerigo Vespucci's exploration of what would become known as the Americas mainly involved getting intimate with natives and brawling.

But in the midst of all that, it occurred to Vespucci that this wasn't Asia, despite what Christopher Columbus proclaimed when he bumped into Caribbean islands in 1492.

"We discovered many lands and almost countless islands . . . of which our forefathers make absolutely no mention," one account attributed to Vespucci reported. He hypothesized that this was an unknown continent, a "New World."

One of the first to take notice was the German cartographer Martin Waldseemuller, who was so impressed by Vespucci's claims that in 1507 he published the first map showing the lands of the Western Hemisphere as a new continent, separate from Asia.

"America," he called it, "after Amerigo, it's [sic] discoverer, a man of great ability."

We all know the broad outlines of this tale. But "Journeys of the Imagination," an exhibit at the Boston Public Library in Copley Square through Aug. 18, presents a less familiar finale.

Near a facsimile of Waldseemuller's 1507 map, the library displays its print of his 1513 revision [SEE ATTACHED CORRECTION]. Waldseemuller had a change of heart about Vespucci's claim. So he stripped his name and reglued North America to Asia. Successors, however, adopted the name America, and it stuck.

Drawn from the library's Norman B. Leventhal Map Center, the 40 maps and two globes ranging from tiny book illustrations to 7-foot-wide panoramas, from the late 15th century to today show Europeans and Americans struggling to envision the earth. A wonderfully illustrated catalog accompanies the exhibit. (If only the tall open gallery so flattered these great maps.)

Much art comes of people trying to make sense of the world, but here the challenge is literal. The drama is watching them cobble together the world we know today and North America in particular from reports, dribbling back from explorers, tall tales, and guesstimates.

Since the second century, Europeans had adhered to Greek geographer Ptolemy's view. A woodcut from a 1482 edition of his "Geographia" depicts a world that is primarily land (Europe, Asia, a bit of Africa) with pockets of sea. The discovery of the Americas and the realization that the Atlantic and Pacific were separate oceans caused cartographers to reimagine the Earth as a place dominated by water and dotted by great islands.

Sebastian Munster and Hans Holbein's 1555 woodcut follows Waldseemuller's 1507 map, with South America labeled "America" and the "New World." It is the epitome of the map as lavishly decorated art object. See the mermaids and angels; beware the angry elephant, winged serpents, and hungry cannibals.

Henri Abraham Chatelain's 1719 map offers Western Hemisphere vignettes of dancing beavers, tobacco plants, a "savage" ripping the heart from some poor fellow's chest. He depicts California as an island and fudges the Pacific Northwest, then still mysterious, by hiding it under portraits of Columbus, Vespucci, and Ferdinand Magellan. In these maps, we don't find the West Coast really falling into place until the late 18th century.

Subsequent maps delight with their particular concerns. A mid-19th century Chinese woodcut (oriented vertically instead of our familiar horizontals) portrays a giant China, ringed at the top by the Great Wall, mountains, and the Gobi Desert. Europe is shoehorned into the northwest corner. An 1851 map charts the best waters for hunting whales.

Many visitors are surprised by a 2002 map distributed by the Amherst company ODT Inc. It turns the world upside down and locates Africa at the center, reminding us that aligning north with up and south with down are simply conventions adopted by European cartographers who placed themselves at the top of the world. The convention has taken on the air of the natural order of things, but the topsy-turvy map asks: How do such assumptions continue to muddle our vision of the world?

[PUBLISHED CORRECTION - DATE: Wednesday, July 12, 2006: Correction : Because of a reporting error, a review of the Boston Public Library exhibit "Journeys of the Imagination" in last Wednesday's Living/Arts section mischaracterized a 1513 map by German cartographer Martin Waldseemuller. The map does not depict North America. It shows only part of South America and the Caribbean islands and does not indicate where they are relative to Asia.]

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Author: Greg Cook, GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

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