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Darrell Sapp/Post-Gazette

The ENDLESS DISCOVERY of CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

Christopher Columbus wrote voluminously about his voyages of discovery, his messianic purpose, and his ultimate goal, the conquest of Jerusalem. He was sparing, however, with details about his family's identity and social class. Scholars have long debated the motive for his caution. Perhaps he wished to hide a secret. Maybe, as an emissary of Spain, he felt self-conscious about his Genoese origin. Or, again, perhaps he was not Genoese.

He never wrote in the Genoese idiom. He wrote in Spanish, but linguists have discovered traces of the Catalan dialect in his word choices. Some surmise he came from a Catalan family that fought Queen Isabella's realm of Castile. Others have posited a Portuguese identity, pointing out that prior to arriving in Spain Columbus lived and worked in Lisbon, that his brother remained there, and that he referred to Portugal as his homeland.

Still others claim a secret Jewish heritage, basing their view on Columbus's occasional use of cryptic letters that resemble Hebrew, a reference to the Jewish High Holidays, his obsession with the Old Testament, and the bizarre way he signed his name after 1492. Yet other secret identities have been proposed.

From all these discussions, one seemingly indisputable fact emerges: Christopher Columbus continues to fascinate.

Whoever we think he was, most of us regard him as important. Even this obvious point, though, is subject to debate. Detractors claim he did not play a significant role in history. Native Americans, they argue, discovered the Western Hemisphere well before he did. So did Leif Ericson. So, perhaps, did the Chinese. If Columbus had not crossed the Atlantic, someone else would have done so.

I find these arguments silly. No matter who "discovered" the New World before Columbus, or who might have sailed here later had he not, it was his 1492 voyage that ushered in the age of exploration and European expansion. The role Columbus played on the stage of history remains one of the most important ever played by anyone.

Of those who achieve such prominence, we long to fashion icons. Hitler, Einstein, Mother Teresa ... in the pantheon of our secular gods, each of these complex human beings comes to represent an idea: "evil personified," "genius," "saintliness." Because we know so little about Columbus, however, and because our vantage point — the culture from which we view him — changes over time, our way of seeing him evolves. A look at the different ways we have treated Christopher Columbus tells us a good deal about who we are and how we have changed.

Until recently, even his physical likeness remained a mystery. All the major biographies assert that no contemporaneous portraits exist. While researching my historical novel "By Fire, By Water," I visited the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy, where I saw a canvas by the 16th-century portraitist Cristofano dell'Altissimo, which purports to be a copy of an earlier work that has been lost. It depicts a sad-looking man with thinning gray hair, wearing ecclesiastical garb. His eyes tell us he has seen more of the world than most, and that what he saw was not pretty.

Several other early paintings share this doleful quality, which derives from Columbus' own self-description.

During the latter part of his life he felt the monarchs of Castile and Aragon, Isabella

and Ferdinand, had wronged him. He died a disappointed man.

Columbus, the hero with heft

Other images are familiar to most of us: the massive doors of the Capitol rotunda in Washington, imposing statues in Barcelona, New York City, Miami and innumerable other locales, including our own Schenley Park.

These depictions harken back to what I call the heroic view of Columbus, the strong and courageous mariner who pushed civilization forward through sheer effort of will and farsightedness.

This heroic Columbus became enshrined in the American consciousness as early as 1792. On Oct. 12 of that year, the 300th anniversary of Columbus's 1492 voyage, Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia, The Society of St. Tammany in New York and Jeremy Belknap in Boston publicly created the American myth of Columbus as a Founding-Father-before-the-fact, embodying the all-American qualities of resilience, entrepreneurship and defiance of monarchs.

The United States took possession of Columbus' legend — even though he had never alighted upon the shores of North America.

In 1828, with the publication of Washington Irving's bestselling "Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus," the romantic Columbus came into being, amplifying his heroic attributes while denying him moral failings. Irving made of Columbus not only a man of courage and determination, but also an infallible visionary. To the religious fanatics who oppose him, insisting the world is flat, Columbus asserts that the world is round and sets out to prove it.

This is not history, it is hogwash. It was the size of the Earth, not the Earth's shape, that was at issue. Nevertheless, U.S. textbooks parroted Irving's invention through generations because it fit neatly with a myth we cherished.



Getting ready for Columbus Day? **Mitchell James Kaplan** (author of a historical novel about Columbus' financier, Luis de Santángel) explores the ever-changing narrative about the man who yearned to do more than 'discover' America

Columbus, on the other hand ...

The heroic and romantic Columbuses kept city founders and monument builders busy. Universities, municipalities, counties, rivers and parks, hoping to capture a glint of his illustriousness, borrowed his name, as did the District that encompasses our nation's capital.

The Columbus legend continued growing. But cracks began to appear.

One of the first 19th-century doubters was John Abbott, who with his brother Jacob wrote history books for children. While Abbott admired Columbus, he allowed himself to question his "exalted religious enthusiasm, which seemed sometimes quite sublime, mingling with a very eager appetite for worldly wealth and power." Thus, with subtle sleight-of-hand, began the modern project of extricating Columbus from his medieval context and re-evaluating his character in the light of post-enlightenment values.

After colonialism fell into disfavor, the romantic Columbus gave way to its inverse: a cynical, rapacious proto-conquistador.

In the wake of the civil rights movement and the reevaluation of indigenous peoples, Christopher Columbus became a symbol of all the evil that Europe inflicted upon the Americas. This slide from grace reached its nadir in works by Carl Sauer ("The Early Spanish Main," 1966) and Kirkpatrick Sale ("Conquest of Paradise," 1990). Call this revised Columbus "post-modern."

As this post-modern Columbus emerged, his

predecessors, the heroic and romantic Columbuses, vied against him. Samuel Eliot Morrison produced a well-researched biography that placed Columbus' moral failings to the side, focusing instead on his prodigious navigational skills. Italian-Americans, asserting pride in their countryman, lobbied for Columbus Day to become official starting in 1958.

Despite these efforts, the influence of the post-modern Columbus continued to grow. Visitors to Schenley Park may have noticed that during the last several years, vandals have celebrated Columbus Day by painting the monument's hands blood-red and scribbling graffiti on its base. The "progressive" city of Berkeley, Calif., has renamed Columbus Day "Indigenous Peoples Day." Howard Zinn opened his best-selling People's Chronology with an angry rant painting Columbus as a murderous psychopath.

We tend to confuse accomplishment with moral worth. Perhaps this tendency derives from the Puritan notion that God makes good people prosper and that therefore, worldly success is a sign of God's favor. As a result, when we discover moral flaws in people of great accomplishment, we sometimes want to belittle or even condemn their achievements.

For us today, it is difficult or impossible to imagine the late-medieval mind, the conviction that conquest, religious and geographical, is not only a God-given right

but also a moral responsibility. In order to hold this view, one has to believe that one's culture is inherently superior to others, morally as well as technologically. From our secular, deconstructionist vantage point, it is difficult to see the culture we have inherited as morally superior to the indigenous cultures of the Americas. Thus, Columbus' achievement loses its value.

The blackening of the Columbus legend tells us more about ourselves, how our views of history and our role in the world have changed, than about the explorer. One thing it tells us is that no matter how smart we may think we are, we like to simplify people and history.

Sure, Christopher Columbus was ambitious, greedy, proud and, as governor of Hispaniola, inept. He was also an insatiably curious autodidact, a man of deep and unshakeable convictions — and a brilliant sailor.

Finally, a man larger than the myths

In the 1980s another portrait of Columbus came up for sale in Genoa, Italy. As far as we know, it had been privately held for centuries. An American collector purchased the painting. Chemical analyses, conducted by independent laboratories in Italy and the United States, prove that it dates to the 15th century.

The great Italian art historian Maurizio Marini has confirmed that this painting (shown above) is an original work by Pedro Berruguete, the court painter of Isabella and Ferdinand. All evidence suggests it is the one surviving likeness of Christopher Columbus. After five centuries, we finally know what he looked like.

This portrait has never been shown in public. When I first saw it, it took my breath away. The style rings true to its late-gothic / early renaissance provenance. But a great deal sets this canvas apart, besides style. As someone who lived with Columbus for years while researching and writing "By Fire, By Water," I was profoundly moved when I first set eyes upon it.

Berruguete's portrait speaks of a man so much larger than all the heroes, myths and icons. The suffering is in those eyes, but also wisdom, determination and seriousness. Despite the fine robes, one discerns more than a hint of asceticism in the gaunt cheeks. This is not the young Columbus I tried to resurrect in my novel, but a man 10 or more years older who has achieved greatness and found it to be merely another port of departure.

Mitchell James Kaplan, a writer and translator, lives in Mt. Lebanon (mitchelljameskaplan.com). His novel "By Fire, By Water," published last year by Other Press, received the 2011 Independent Publishers Award Gold Medal for Historical Fiction.