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A map is a chart. A tool for navigation. Maps are ancient, but they seem older—it feels as though they have always been.

A map is not something that exists simply to look at to help you find whatever (or wherever) it is you are looking for. Maps don’t just represent north and south, east and west, this road and that road, or “this is where to go.” There is so much more to them than that!

Maps are a tradition. Not just a tradition for navigating the potentially dangerous world, but a tradition that combines those of travel and art. It’s not at all hard to see this, especially going back hundreds of years ago. Mapmaking was a specialized work, the pride of any good mapmaker. It is obvious that such things were considered art by those who made them. Take, for example, Sebastian Cabot’s world map, the Catalan atlas, or the Cantino map: those examples can truly be seen as art. They are beautifully drawn, with obvious effort put into them to describe what the artist knew about the world. They must have meant something to the mapmaker—if they didn’t, well, they wouldn’t be themselves and they wouldn’t seem as worth it. After all, not many people would want to look at a careless and not particularly striking map hundreds of years out of date.

Even maps made more recently seem like more than just that ‘tool for navigation.’ True, they aren’t hand drawn anymore, and therefore there isn’t nearly as much work put into them. In fact, I’m pretty sure that they are made by computers. But that doesn’t mean that they aren’t art, for they are still: just in a very different sense. Perhaps they don’t mean as much to the maker, but they still can mean quite a bit to someone looking at one. It is true that some are nicer to look at than others, but all are still something wonderful. The different colors defining lands, seas, and sometimes elevations. The lines that wind across the paper representing roads and rivers and borders. These elements create more than a knowledge of what is in a spot. They make a picture that can invoke a feeling or a thought, just like any piece of art is meant to do.

To so many people, they represent so much. Some see them to represent the world. They do, after all, form some sort of narrative—or an illustration—of what the depicted places are like.

To some they represent going. The movement that can satisfy even the greatest restlessness, that can give a purpose or fulfillment of… something.

A map is something that is hard to define in words, just as the lay of the land, which they are meant to depict, is hard to describe in words.

This is fitting.

Resources:

Stafoff, Rebecca. The Young Oxford Companion to Maps and Mapmaking. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.