An extraordinary 60-sheet manuscript world map made in 1587 by Urbano Monte located in the David Rumsey Map Collection at Stanford University. At 10 foot square, this map or planisphere is the largest known early map of the world. It was hand drawn by Monte in Milan, Italy, and only one other manuscript copy exists.

Monte's map reminds us of why historical maps are so important as primary resources: the north polar azimuthal projection of his planisphere uses the advanced scientific ideas of his time; the artistry in drawing and decorating the map embodies design at the highest level; and the view of the world then gives us a deep historical resource with the listing of places, the shape of spaces, and the commentary interwoven into the map. Science, art, and history all in one document. Until digitized by Brandon Rumsey, Monte’s manuscript map was seen as a series of 60 individual sheets. The only assembled version is the small single page key sheet of the series. The assembled map, just over 10 feet in diameter, is one of the largest—if not the largest—world maps made in the 16th century. The degree of detail and decoration is stunning and the entire production is surely unique in the history of cartographic representation.
Monte made his map to serve not only as a geographical tool but also to show climate, customs, length of day, distances within regions - in other words, to create a universal scientific planisphere. In his dedication on Tavola XL he specifies how to arrange the sheets of the planisphere and makes it explicit that the whole map was to be stuck on a wooden panel 5 and a half brachia square (about ten feet) so that it could be revolved around a central pivot or pin through the north pole. This was never done, but now it can be done virtually - Monte’s 60 sheet world map digitally assembled into a 10 foot planisphere: The projection, more than nine feet in diameter, is made up of 60 smaller maps, with the North Pole at the center.

Born near Milan in 1544, Urbano Monte lived a life of leisure and luxury. For him, such freedom meant scholarship, and the accumulation of a library renowned in the region. In his early 40’s, his interests turned to geography, and a mammoth 20-year effort to synthesize and consolidate everything known of the world’s geography into a few volumes. More than that, he wanted to make a planisphere map of the world “to show the entire earth as close as possible to a three-dimensional sphere using a two-dimensional surface,” writes map collector and scholar David Rumsey.

Monte envisaged the component maps—60 in all—being stitched together, and so left detailed instructions for how to turn them into one giant representation of the world, over nine feet in diameter. Included in the four volumes are also charts showing the lengths of days at different times of year and an extended geographical treatise on the world and cosmology. Unlike many modern maps, which use the Mercator projection from around the same time, his map shows the world from directly above the North Pole. Today, this perspective is known as the north polar azimuthal projection, most famously used on the logo of the United Nations.

Once assembled, the map shows a lush, highly personalized take on the world, with a surprisingly large collection of real and fantasy beasts carousing and cavorting on land and sea. This is one largely forgotten or overlooked map by cartographers and scholars.

Monte did not come by his geographical knowledge by traveling the world. Rather, most of the map is sourced from others already floating around, and long texts describing the journeys of early voyagers, so it pulls in their various misconceptions about far-flung places, particularly around South America. It’s hoped that more study will reveal precisely which texts he drew from. His Japan, on the other hand, was the product of sustained individual study and conversation with visitors from Japan from the 1580s. While it bears no real resemblance to any modern map (and seems to be the wrong way up), the level of detail is impressive.

Monte’s depiction of Japan, probably drawn from information provided by the Japanese Embassy to Milan and Italy, is, however, advanced for the time.

Throughout the world, Monte took time to sketch exotic fauna—crocodiles, camels, lions, and more. Near a coast labeled “Terra Incognita” (somewhere around Alaska), a wolf with a cub looks watchfully over its shoulder. Elsewhere there are more fantastic beasts, including griffins and what looks like a huge bird clutching an elephant. The seas feature many-tailed mermen and fleets of well-armed ships. Political leaders, including Philip II of Spain, also make an appearance, as do several portraits of Monte himself. Early mapmakers of the time didn’t like empty spaces, filling in many places that they did not know the names of towns and locations, with trees, monsters or text.

Detail of Tavola Nona (Japan)
Monte would likely be excited to learn that his little-viewed map is finally getting the audience it deserves. At Stanford University, members of the public can see the manuscript itself, still vividly colored, a full-scale reproduction from the scans, and an interactive digital version of it. It is also available to explore online. In the meantime, researchers are looking closer at this rare masterpiece and the treasures it holds.
Details of Tavola Seconda, Tavola Ottava, and Tavola Setima (Northern Siberia, Central Asia)
Detail of Tavola XXIII (South America, Venezuela, Guyana)

Tavola XI (Eastern United States, Florida, Cuba)