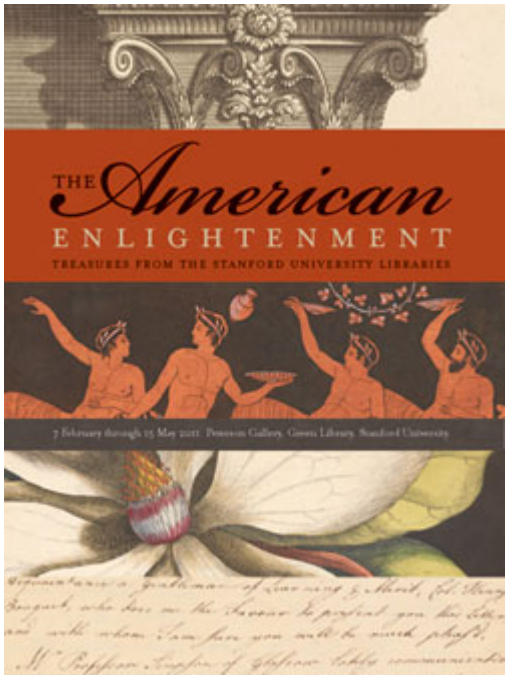
Enlightenment in the Margins



Caroline Winterer describes America as “a vast Enlightenment laboratory” but one cannot easily imagine Winterer’s exuberant, capacious and eclectic American Enlightenment locked away behind laboratory doors. This Enlightenment may indeed have been a laboratory experiment, but it was also a classroom lesson, a fashion show, a gardening experiment and a backcountry adventure. Winterer is the first historian in a generation to take a real shot at interpreting the American Enlightenment. The collection of “books published by Americans, books owned by Americans, and books about America” that she recently exhibited at the Stanford University Library seems to suggest new solutions to the American Enlightenment’s two central problems: one, whether there was there anything fundamentally American about it; and two, whether the American Enlightenment was really anything more than a sideshow to the main (i.e. European) production.

The first problem, the Americanness of the American Enlightenment, became visible in the mid-1970s, when historians last made a major effort to describe the movement. Most 1970s scholars conceived of the Enlightenment as an intellectual project, and they struggled to identify anything uniquely American about it. Henry May made what was probably the bravest effort by dividing the American Enlightenment into four phases: the Moderate, the Skeptical, the Revolutionary and the Didactic. Ultimately, though, this schema seemed to raise more questions than it answered.

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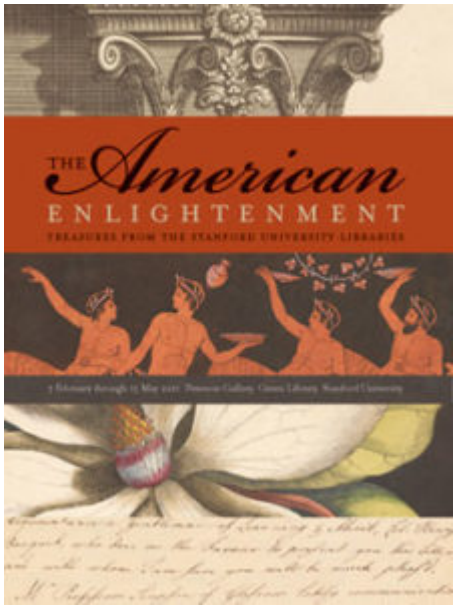

Winterer, sensibly, sidesteps the problem of the American Enlightenment's intellectual essence, choosing instead to characterize the Enlightenment as a set of projects and encounters in American settings. The most literal encounters on display in the exhibition are those described in the journals of Lewis and Clark, which describe a physical journey across the continent. But as Winterer demonstrates, Americans worked in many other ways to locate their continent within a larger mental and physical world. Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book* contains a lengthy list of city and country names from around the globe. American pupils practiced their spelling by copying the tidy columns of names ("Ex e ter, Mer ri mak, Hat te ras, In di a…"). As they did so, they brought the New World in line, literally, with the Old.

Many books in the exhibition are drawn from the Founder-centric collection of the late Stanford Professor Jay Fliegelman, which has never before been exhibited to the public; the broad scope of the material (combined with other Stanford holdings) allows the Founders to play a variety of roles in the exhibition. A letter in which Benjamin Franklin describes his experiments with conductivity practically sizzles with scientific curiosity. By contrast, two books belonging to John Hancock are presented, unapologetically, as Americana: the viewer is invited to admire how Hancock's signature evolved from modest origins into the "flamboyant" autograph that graced the Declaration of Independence. The crown jewel of the Fliegelman collection is a copy of *Paradise Lost* signed by Thomas Jefferson (once) and by James Madison (five times!). The viewer must decide for herself whether this was a complex act of appropriation or whether Madison was simply testing his pen.

Since the advent of cultural history, scholars of the Enlightenment have drawn attention to the pathways and practices through which Enlightenment ideas operated in the world, and Winterer offers several lovely examples. A copy of John Newton's evangelical *Olney Hymns* has been dog-eared by its anonymous owner to Newton's most famous hymn, "Amazing Grace." The hymnbook, Winterer notes, has been "loved nearly to death," its tattered binding reinforced with strips

of gingham cloth. Here is an Enlightenment in which there is no gulf between ideas and practices. Quite the contrary—it was through routine practices like singing and sewing that Americans demonstrated their commitment to evangelical ideas.

Exhibit cases devoted to architecture, fashion and style emphasize the ways in which Americans made the Enlightenment manifest in their homes and on their bodies. Noting that Jefferson called Monticello his "essay in architecture," Winterer shows us some of that essay's sources, such as Andrea Palladio's handsome *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura.* Less majestic but equally compelling is the 1809 issue of Rudolph Ackerman's *Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashions, and Politics*, which invited Americans and Britons to express the spirit of improvement by upholstering their furniture in bright pink fabric with polka dots.

On the whole, this exhibit sets out to complement earlier scholarship rather than to upend it. Winterer finds space for ideas *and* practices, for august Founders *and*anonymous readers. As a result, the exhibit is rather eclectic. Its nineteen exhibit cases are not organized hierarchically, and they do not need to be viewed in any particular order. It is worth noting that this approach stands in rather stark contrast to the ultra-formal categorization scheme used by Thomas Jefferson to organize his own library. Where Jefferson imagined an orderly universe of information that one might hope to master, Winterer's approach helps us understand the Enlightenment as the messy work in progress that it really was.

Only on rare occasions does the exhibition's cheery accessibility seem to obscure something significant about the Enlightenment in America and beyond. Consider, for example, a copy of Charles Rollins' *History of the Arts and Sciences of the Ancients*, which has been opened to an illustration of a Roman castle under siege. The castle's defenders have attached a fearsome-looking pincer to a sort of crane, and they have used this contraption to pluck an ascending enemy off a castle wall. Winterer, noting that the castle looks far more medieval than Roman, describes the scene as "charmingly anachronistic." However, I found the image more ghastly than charming. The unarmed man dangles helplessly in the pincers as the defenders of the castle prepare to drop him to his death. Charles Rollins comments blandly, "Many may imagine this [crane] a very mysterious machine, but the plate sufficiently shows that nothing is less so." In other words, he expected his readers to muse about how such a device might be built. Enlightenment thinkers were not just interested in improving the condition of mankind. They were also extremely interested in discovering better ways to kill each other.

The American habit of writing in books is such a persistent motif in this exhibition that we come to sense that something important must be at stake. Some inscriptions seem to represent American claims to knowledge: the apparently possessive Oliver Ellsworth signed one book "Oliver Ellsworth's," adding on the next page, for good measure, "Oliver Ellsworth his property." In

other cases, writing in books could be a part of auto-didacticism. New York lawyer James Kent, for example, wrote lengthy notes to himself in his copy of the proceedings of New York's constitutional convention. Writing in books could also be a way of educating someone else, as we see in the case of Charles Thomson, who annotated his *own* translation of the Bible for the benefit of his niece. Inscription could even be an act of political defiance, as when Henry Laurens, denied pen and ink as a prisoner in the Tower of London, somehow managed to sign his name in a rat-bitten copy of a radical political tract, *The Judgment of Whole Kings and Nations*.

But did all this scribbling amount to anything? Here I return to the second question I raised earlier: whether the American Enlightenment was anything more than a sideshow to the main European event. Even devoted Americanists must admit that America's direct contributions to Enlightenment libraries were relatively meager. The arts and letters of the American colonies paled in comparison to those of France; American print output was dwarfed by that of London. American knowledge was built on European foundations, and American discoveries were rapidly assimilated into European knowledge projects. All told, it would be very easy to categorize the American Enlightenment as marginal.

Thus Winterer makes an important move when she shows us how much was going on in the margins of Enlightenment books. Americans writing in the literal margins of European books come to represent Americans acting in the figurative margins of the European Enlightenment. After showing us how lively these margins really were, Winterer seems to suggest that the margins were, in fact, critical to the core Enlightenment project—that is, that Enlightenment knowledge as a whole was a hybrid production in which printed text and handwritten marginalia were both essential. Seen in this light, America's importance is in no way diminished by its marginality.

Perhaps the clearest example of America's centrality-through-marginality is an exhibit case in which Winterer has placed a Philadelphia copy of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* side by side with a copy from London. The nervous London printer has omitted a particularly seditious phrase—("the royal brute of Britain")—from the text, but an unknown reader has inscribed the missing words with a pen. Here the traditional flow of knowledge has been reversed: an important text from America has been brought to England for inspection. Even more interestingly, these two copies of *Common Sense* show how Enlightenment knowledge circulated not only within printed texts but around them, alongside them and in their margins. The handwritten comment amplifies the power of the printed text; "the royal brute of Britain" seems far more provocative in manuscript than it would have seemed in print.

Stanford University, a tech-happy campus where a lot of people are thinking very hard about how to transmit knowledge, is a perfect host for this exhibition. The library's Digital Libraries Systems and Services Group has created lovely pigment print reproductions of fragile plates such as those in

Mark Catesby's *Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*. Both bright and subtle, these images replicate the originals faithfully while embodying the kind of progress that Enlightenment thinkers celebrated. Better yet, the tech team has made the entire exhibition available online and viewers are encouraged to download its high-resolution, public-domain images for classroom use.

About the Exhibition: "The American Enlightenment: Treasures from the Stanford University Library" ran at Stanford University's Green Library between February 7 and July 15, 2011. A printed exhibition catalogue can be purchased through the Stanford Library. The online version of the exhibition will remain available indefinitely.