

Seeing a Different Visual World



Graphics in nineteenth-century America

From the vantage point of our twenty-first century, so saturated with visual media, it is hard to imagine that the nineteenth century experienced one of the greatest visual revolutions in history. Technological innovations—from the invention of photography to the development of a variety of mechanized processes for reproducing images on a scale never before imagined—coupled with expanding transportation and communications networks, engendered a veritable avalanche of pictorial publications and products. The vast effusion of graphic materials confronting the nineteenth-century American included an ever-increasing range of illustrated periodicals; the blossoming of the political cartoon; individual decorative, portrait, comic, and genre prints; trade cards; greeting cards; sheet music covers; theater and campaign posters; and overbearing billboards. Indeed, faced with what the historian Jean-Louis Comolli has termed “the frenzy of the visible,” nineteenth-century cultural conservatives such as *Nation* editor E. L. Godkin decried the leveling of American taste to the common denominator of “chromo-civilization”—a metaphor for diluted “pseudo-culture” named after the popular color print so ubiquitous in household parlors.

Until relatively recently, this resplendent or horrifying (depending on your perspective) nineteenth-century visual culture was of little note to

historians. Or, to be more accurate, its history was relegated largely to illustrations tipped into the binding of published monographs (usually not even gathered by the authors) or used as mildly informative decoration in survey texts. Trained with a decided bias in favor of the Word and against the suspiciously inviting Image, historians' orientation to the past remained largely logocentric, or as the art historian Barbara Maria Stafford put it, "anti-ocular." The visual realm of U.S. history was left to the art historians, who in turn left the *popular* graphic world to largely unrecognized collectors and aficionados of ephemera.

We owe a great deal to the latter for creating the foundation upon which recent scholarly work on the popular visual world has been built. The twelve essays in this special issue of *Common-place* reflect the "visual turn" in U.S. historiography over the last decade. They also suggest the stunning range of topics and approaches characterizing the field of visual history, including: caricature and woman suffrage; the visualization of the industrializing city; the impact of pictorial publications on national identity; the role of portrait prints in the invention of public personas; the visual manifestations of popular political metaphors; the transformation of craft and credo in wood engraving; the visualization of progress in the antithetical figure of the Chinese worker; women engravers' struggle for representation in their trade and in illustrations of women workers; the emergence of alternative African American political cartooning; the unintended vernacular uses of published ephemera; and the creation of graphic archives during the Gilded Age.

In short, as this collection of essays attests, embedded in the seemingly regimented lines, archaic visual codes, and quaint pictorial conventions of nineteenth-century graphics is a universe of actions and ideas that the realm of text often fails to capture. In their explorations of that universe, historians have begun uncovering the myriad ways popular graphics engaged with, embodied, and shaped the tumultuous culture, society, politics, and economy of nineteenth-century America.

This special issue of *Common-place* comes at a propitious time for the American Antiquarian Society (AAS), one of the journal's underwriters. In 2005, the society's governing board approved the creation of a Center for Historic American Visual Culture. The AAS is eminently suited for this activity because of its experience in hosting workshops, seminars, and conferences for scholars in many disciplines. The fellowship program, established in the early 1970s, is well regarded and has for the past decade had two fellowships specifically for scholars using prints or studying visual culture. Recent generous support from AAS member Jay T. Last and his wife Deborah enables the AAS to offer an increased number of fellowships for those studying visual culture. The graphic arts collection at the AAS includes prints published from the late seventeenth century through the nineteenth century as well as engraved, printed, and lithographed ephemera, much of it pictorial. There are illustrated sheet music covers, maps of the United States, drawings, and photographs as well. Among the activities planned for the center are workshops for secondary-school and

collegiate teachers on interpreting visual evidence for the classroom, lectures for the general public, additional fellowship programs, and conferences focusing on the visual dimension of American history.

But the connection between this special issue of *Common-place* and the new Center for Historic American Visual Culture is more than a happy accident. There is a profound technological convergence that makes both enterprises possible. In much the way that new printing technologies revolutionized the nineteenth-century visual world, so digital technology is revolutionizing our study of that world. Now, on-line journals such as *Common-place* can recover and communicate the experience of past visual culture by publishing much more than just textual analyses of visual experience. Unconstrained by the costs of reprinting high-quality images, we are able to present a range of visual materials and (by linking images to larger versions) afford a level of interaction inconceivable for an ordinary print journal. We hope you take full advantage of this opportunity to observe pictorial details and techniques. And we look forward to the many ways the new Center for Historic American Visual Culture will further the project, so beautifully articulated in the work presented here, of bringing together old worlds of print and new worlds of digital technology.

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