

Art in Transit



Jennifer L. Roberts, Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014. 240 pp., \$60.

Exploring the materiality of early American paintings and prints, Jennifer Roberts' excellent new book spans the 1760s to the 1850s in three fascinating case studies, each involving the complex transport of art. *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* examines the ways that art and artists anticipated and responded to movement, first in the trans-Atlantic passage of paintings by John Singleton Copley, then shifting to the production and distribution of John James Audubon's huge *Birds of America*, and finally examining the links between Asher B. Durand's varied careers as an engraver of banknotes and fine art and as a landscape painter in the telegraphic age. As Roberts writes, "pictures in early America ... were marked by their passage through space—not only by crushed corners, craquelure, and other indexical injuries that they may have sustained along the way, but also by their formal preprocessing of the distances they were designed to span" (1-2).



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With few existing art historical tools to analyze the transportation of art in eighteenth and nineteenth century America, Roberts culls concepts from a range

of disciplines, including semiotics, philosophy, anthropology, economics, and science studies. This theoretical diversity is one of the book's many strengths. Another is the author's integration of ideas in modern art, which inform her approach to motion and transit in early American pictures. The topic of the transportation of and in art provides a focus that is at once rather narrow and yet broadly ambitious, offering Roberts a means to bridge theoretical gaps between disciplines. While art history focuses on illusionism, representation, and iconography, often overlooking materiality, material culture frequently attends to "thingness" at the expense of representation. The transport of pictures opens up a sort of sweet spot between the two disciplines, examining how movement activates and materializes images in ways that scholars have not considered. Utilizing the term "phatic" from semiotics, meaning those aspects of language that refer to channels of communication rather than the primary message, Roberts seeks the phatic aspects of pictures. As eighteenth-century letters, for example, often expressed uncertainty about when and if the recipient would actually receive them, so too did paintings register artists' fears of delay and damage in transit. *Transporting Visions* "develops an approach to the phatic richness of pictures, arguing for the centrality of the phatic" in modernity (7). Examining the events and passages of time in between production and consumption—those delays and interstices that art historians have generally ignored—Roberts finds a great deal of meaning.

Chapter one explores John Singleton Copley's efforts to participate in London's academic exhibitions remotely from Boston, laboriously packing and sending paintings on long overseas voyages, then receiving belated news of his work's reception, all in all a process fraught with delay, tension, and the possibility of loss and damage on the high seas. Copley registered the challenges of this spatial and chronological distance in the paintings themselves, Roberts argues. They can be seen in Copley's stylistic eccentricities and in his aesthetic of transmission derived from models of Atlantic exchange and transport. Roberts' keen analysis of Copley's pivotal 1765 [A Boy with a Flying Squirrel](#), painted for submission to the Society of Artists' exhibition in London, was published in part in the *American Art Journal* (Summer 2007). Roberts incorporates considerable new material in the book chapter by examining a wider range of Copley's work. Her reading of [Watson and the Shark](#) as a direct response to the events and the political upheaval of the Boston Tea Party is particularly fruitful. In contrast to Copley's earlier tabletop portraits, which Roberts reads as agents of sensory synthesis and transmission, *Watson and the Shark* offers a vision of misalignment, its precious cargo overboard and in grave danger, indicative of a larger breakdown in Anglo-American material relations.

Chapter two analyzes John James Audubon's ambitious [Birds of America](#) project of the 1820s and 1830s. Audubon was determined to publish it with life-sized images of American birds, despite the enormous costs and logistical challenges of doing so. Emphasizing the materiality of Audubon's pictures and the physical problems associated with producing and distributing them, Roberts notes that the images ironically navigated the landscape with much greater difficulty than

the birds they depicted. Audubon's insistence on real-life scale derived in part from his desire for accuracy and pictorial preservation in the transatlantic realm of natural history. His emphasis on indexical accuracy is also seen as a reaction to the instability of credit and currency in the early republic. Roberts connects the *Birds of America* project to Audubon's previous career as a western merchant, emphasizing the traumatic effects of the bank panic of 1819, when Audubon lost everything and was forced to declare bankruptcy.

The third chapter addresses art in the telegraphic age. While words and images had previously traveled at the same rate, with letters, newspapers, and objects journeying together as cargo on boats and wagons, the telegraph conveyed coded words at lightning speed, leaving pictures behind. Roberts posits that Asher B. Durand's *plein air* landscape studies of the 1840s and 1850s articulated this difference and celebrated the qualities of slowness that images had newly acquired. Durand's early career as an engraver—of banknotes and then fine art—left him particularly attuned to issues of reproduction and transmission and to tensions between surface and depth in an era of collapsing differentiations in time and space. Linking Durand's engraving of John Vanderlyn's [Ariadne](#) with his later up-close studies of mossy rocks and trees, Roberts finds visual and thematic connections to materiality, to the labyrinth, and to surface attention that resisted the dematerializing tendencies of telegraphy.

An extraordinarily useful and influential contribution to art historical scholarship, *Transporting Visions* will shift how Copley, Audubon, and Durand are studied. More important is the book's demonstration and assertion of the significance of the communication and transportation revolutions in early American art. These new and provocative interpretations leave the reader wanting more—wishing for a fourth chapter that might have investigated Samuel F. B. Morse's fascinating career as an artist, academician, and inventor, for example, addressing his career shift from painting to inventing the electromagnetic telegraph. Despite this omission, Jennifer Roberts' nimble prose and keen insight offer the first sharply focused consideration of the impact of transport on and in early American art.

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