PANORAMA
Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art
ISSN: 2471-6839

Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America

Jennifer Roberts

University of California, 2014

240 pp.

$60

ISBN 978-0520251847

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While recent scholarship on the history of American art has benefited significantly from the study of material and visual culture, methodological questions remain concerning the relationship between these fields of inquiry. For example, as the analysis of visual and material cultural production is not mutually exclusive, how might scholarly examinations of the physical "thingness" of objects enhance iconographic studies? In *Transporting Visions: The*

Movement of Images in Early America, Jennifer Roberts provides a compelling framework for understanding how art's iconography and physicality intersect to produce multiple layers of meaning. Through close readings of works of art created by John Singleton Copley, John James Audubon, and Asher B. Durand, this insightful and important book demonstrates how "pictures could and did register the complications of their own transmission" through visual references to their status as mobile commodities (1). To support her argument, Roberts synthesizes image analysis with factors surrounding the transport of art typically excluded from traditional forms of art history. For example, Roberts writes that her approach "assumes that the significant sites in the life of a work of art include not only those of its production and reception, but also the intervals between these more art-historically propitious locations" (2). By arguing for a history of images that values the temporal and literal spaces in the history of art that scholars often ignore, Roberts reveals a fascinating relationship between early American material and visual culture.

This investigation of the physical movement of images provides a fresh understanding of the challenges artists faced in British America and the early United States. Scholars of the era often note the scarcity of artistic training opportunities and the small number of wealthy patrons. Despite these and other limitations, Roberts demonstrates how artists creatively addressed the young nation's expanding geographic space and associated logistic shipping concerns long before the Civil War. Her argument is strengthened with numerous visual and material sources, including prints, drawings, news reports, and artists' correspondence and diaries. Roberts also provides theoretical grounding for her analysis by drawing on the work of material culture scholars, including Bill Brown and the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. The philosopher Pierre Bourdieu is an additionally important influence who, as Roberts writes, "admonished scholars looking back on historical exchanges not to 'abolish the interval' that originally separated the actions in question" (15). By inserting mobility and related concerns of information delivery into the study of image production, Roberts' text demonstrates how early American artists made transportation and distance central, if sometimes subtle, themes in their work.

This generously illustrated book progresses chronologically across three chapters that each examines the work of a single artist. The first chapter examines how Copley's *Boy with a Squirrel* (1765) and *Watson and the Shark* (1778) address issues associated with the movement of art across the Atlantic. The former work depicts Henry Pelham, Copley's half-brother, in profile and playing with a pet squirrel. Roberts notes how Copley, who completed this canvas in colonial Boston, employed several strategies to appease London critics while addressing themes of distance and transport. First, by depicting Pelham's profile Copley referenced the classically-inspired prints that served as his educational tools while also alluding to medallions and coins, objects embedded with status and themes of mobility. Second, Copley subverted the typical conversation piece format by positioning a highly reflective tabletop between Pelham and the viewer. By doing so, Roberts argues that the tabletop becomes a "surface of active relay" between disparate spaces (33). This notion is reinforced through additional details, including the (flying) pet squirrel and the curiously anthropomorphic forms that suggest sight and sound found in the curtain behind Pelham. These effects generate a "metapictorial intensity" not seen in Copley's earlier work that allows the painting to "deliver cohesive sensory experience from afar" (34). Roberts theorizes, therefore, that *Boy with a Squirrel* demonstrates Copley's use of iconographic details to connote concepts of communication and distance across the Atlantic.

Porter, Austin. Review of *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America*, by Jennifer Roberts. *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 1 no. 1 (2015). https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1513.

Conversely, Roberts argues that *Watson and the Shark* (1778) exhibits the artist's frustration over a failure to assuage Colonial political tensions before the Revolutionary War. To articulate this link, Roberts convincingly aligns the disconnection and violence in *Watson and the Shark* with the Boston Tea Party. While stating clearly that Copley's canvas is not a direct commentary on the Tea Party, Roberts notes that the similarities should not be ignored. Copley had knowledge of the threatened shipping business following his marriage into a wealthy merchant family, and he expressed interest in memorializing the Tea Party in paint. Conversely, Brook Watson, who commissioned the painting that depicted the loss of his lower leg in Havana Harbor, shipped tea to Boston that was later destroyed. Moreover, Copley attempted to prevent the violence of the Tea Party by acting as an arbitrator before his Loyalist sympathies led to his flight from Boston. Roberts argues that Copley's regret over his inability to prevent Revolutionary hostilities thus reappeared in this rendering of nautical violence and separation. For example, she builds upon Albert Boime's well-known reading of the scene's racially-charged component by suggesting that Copley's frustration is referenced by the awkward, disconnected position of the black sailor at the apex of the crew attempting Watson's rescue. The perspective of this black figure, an outsider who witnesses but cannot resolve the violence, mirrors that of Copley and other viewers of the contemporary political disorder. More than an allusion to slavery then, she posits this sailor represents "the blocked, impotent, dis- or misembodiment that characterized transatlantic material relations during the Revolutionary crisis" (66).

The second chapter focuses on the material and theoretical complications surrounding Audubon's *The Birds of America*. Created during the 1820s and 1830s, Audubon's project required the artist to find, shoot, pose, and paint his subjects before the mechanical reproduction of the 435 prints in the series. Well-known for its depiction of life-size subjects, Roberts describes *The Birds of America* "as impressive a shipping and distribution project as it was an artistic project" (71). Though Audubon's related promotional materials emphasized his accuracy in scale, Roberts argues that the artist was less interested in suggesting an "overwhelming grandeur" of size than "something more precise, uncanny, and ultimately unsettling to the regime of visual representation" (80). Indeed, Audubon's demand to create a lifelike correlation between subject and image created an indexical rigidity that raised unique material and theoretical issues. The artist experienced difficulties in physically transporting his work, and few subscribers had the means to easily store and view the bound volumes. Additionally, Audubon's project suggests a separation from traditional forms of Western representation by suppressing spatial depth and instead emphasizing the actual size of each bird. As Roberts notes, Audubon's devotion to accuracy in scale arguably converted individual pages from a window implying illusionistic recession into a container for more accurate visual information.

The indexicality of *The Birds of America* leads Roberts to suggest that, like other entrepreneurs, Audubon feared the potential loss of accuracy and value resulting from the strains of long-distance transport. She notes how *The Birds of America* "belonged to a transatlantic history of formal transmission where scaling was associated with informational decay. Scale, like insects or mildew, *attacked* actual-size objects in transmission" (108). Audubon's insistence on life-size representation thus preserved his subjects against the possible deterioration of their visual veracity. Contemporary fears of misinformation derived from exaggeration and distance were common, and included Western tall-tales and discrepancies over the value of printed bank notes resulting from an unstable national monetary system. Just as *The Birds of America* referenced avian types from across the nation,

paper money also suggested great distances as regional banks often printed their own bills. Roberts argues that the inequities between these semiotic referents—life size prints to birds and bank notes to specie—suggests that Audubon offered a reliable system of "long-distance representation that would not be 'discounted' or dismissed as mere speculation" (114).

The third and final chapter considers how Durand's work addressed cultural anxieties resulting from the tenuous relationship between geographic distance and technological innovations during the mid-nineteenth century. Roberts first asserts that in his early career as a bank note engraver, Durand deterred counterfeiters through decorative vignettes and classically-inspired figures that later reappeared in his print *Ariadne* (1835). This reproduction of John Vanderlyn's controversial oil painting of the same name from 1809–14 depicted the mythical nude following her abandonment. Here Roberts builds upon the work of scholars such as David Lubin by arguing that Durand's *Ariadne* engraving is composed of a series of meticulously crafted, code-like marks that suggest a labyrinth-like "metacritical image" alluding to the narrative surrounding Ariadne's plight (134).

While themes of distance and transport are central to *Ariadne*, Roberts argues that these issues reappear in Durand's later landscape paintings in response to the cultural impact of the telegraph. Increasingly popular by the late 1840s, telegraphy, like prints, relied upon a system of marks on paper characterized by "questions of coding, transmission, flight, and materiality" (143). Yet this new technology significantly complicated the relationship between art and communication. Roberts explains how telegraphy generated anxieties concerning abstract notions of distance, time, and nationality that ultimately challenged landscape painting's dependence on the presentation of space through measured, sequential details. In short, while the telegraph defied spatial limitations, landscape painting relied heavily on the representation of distance to suggest temporal advancement through details such as rolling hills. Still, since telegraphy could not transmit images, Roberts argues that the permanence of painting gained a new significance. She notes that Durand's later work demonstrates an important negation of depth at the same time that telegraphy forced a reevaluation of space as potentially limitless. Indeed, by the 1850s Durand's landscapes became tightly cropped, flattened, meditative images that allude to an incremental passage of time through the depiction of moss growing on trees. While telegraphy made verbal communication instant, Roberts writes that paintings simultaneously began to seem "heavier, slower, and for lack of a better term, 'stickier' than they had before…" (159–60). Thus, Durand's later landscapes provide surprisingly active yet quiet commentary on painting's importance during a period of critical change in communication technology.

Roberts' analysis of the relationship between images, distance, and transportation hinges significantly upon the ability of early American art to generate meaning through self-referential iconographic details. This self-awareness brings to mind more contemporary forms of art, a connection that Roberts makes with impressive results. While her text focuses squarely on early American art, periodic references to postwar artists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Morris effectively connect past to present. For example, Roberts notes that Audubon's *The Birds of America* suggests conceptual similarities with twentieth-century painting through a modernity akin with that promoted by Clement Greenberg. She writes that Audubon's project is noteworthy for "its stark, near-abstract treatment of contour, its quasi-monochromatic color scheme, its 'tautness'…or expressive tropism toward the flat picture plane, and above all its exquisite ambivalence about its own status as both an

illusion and an *object* occupying real space" (101). Similar references force a reevaluation of work by well-known artists while simultaneously revealing connections between early and contemporary American art, including concerns tied to international economics and questions of nationality. Despite these fascinating links, some questions are left unanswered. For example, the book's emphasis on early American painting leaves technological developments in mid nineteenth-century image production unexamined, including the importance of daguerreotypes and commercial woodblock printing. Yet such questions only demonstrate the capacity of this rich text to encourage further exploration. Thus, scholars with a variety of interests will benefit from Roberts' skillful ability to reveal surprising connections between early American art and transportation through this fascinating analysis of material and visual evidence.

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