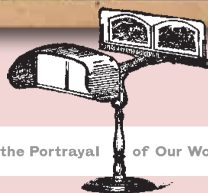
Victorian Narrative STEREOGRAPHY: 1855•1910



A Most Wonderful Invention for the Portrayal of Our World Today in Three Dimensions

Curated by Dr. Melody Davis

Little Gallery ~ Sage College of Albany

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Gallery Hours for this Public Exhibition are Sunday through Friday, Noon 'til 4 p.m.

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The Stereograph

Stereography was born in 1838 when Charles Wheatstone was driven to understand why he saw flat patterns on wallpaper in three dimensions. He began to experiment with simple line drawings, such as a cube drawn from the position of each eye, respectively. He placed these in a device which positioned each drawing at the nether end of a rail.

Sir Charles Wheatstone's Stereoscope c. 1838

The viewer placed his nose adjacent to two mirrors on a 45 degree angle and thus could see one drawing with one eye each as it was reflected in its mirror. Looking into two mirrors that separated the eyes, the viewer saw a slightly different picture for each eye, resulting in the perception of a figure in three dimensions. Depth perception was created from two dimensional drawings. Thus, Wheatstone proved the divorce of binocularity (two eyes working in tandem) from stereopsis (seeing in 3D). Stereoptical vision is independent of objects. It can be created, because, as Wheatstone sensed, it is a neurological construct based on retinal disparity (the fact that our two eyes see two different pictures). This is the same principle in use today when you see a film in 3D, only the method has changed.

Stereography may have halted there—as an experiment with profound implications—had not a photographic method, the Daguerreotype, been announced to the world the following year in 1839. Paper processes soon followed, as did the joining of stereoscopy and photography.

David Brewster thought Wheatstone all wrong and had a different theory about stereoptical perception being a matter of retinal projection into space. Unfortunately, Brewster was wrong, but his research led him to create a device, the lenticular stereoscope, which did not advance science but did offer a practical instrument for viewing photographs stereoptically. An industry was born.

Sir David Brewster and the Brewster or lenticular stereoscope

Brewster's stereoscope, using eye-piece lenses, focused vision forward, crossed the eyes slightly, and magnified an object in short focal range. A stereoscopic Daguerreotype pair made by Duboscq and Soleil in Paris was placed at the other end of the box from the eye pieces. By lifting a hinged hood to admit light, the viewer could see the stereoscopic photographs—one per each eye—in three dimensions. Brewster took this instrument to the 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition along with stereoscopic Deaguerrotypes, and Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were enchanted. Brewster presented to them a set of views and a stereoscope.

Where the Queen goes, popularity follows, and The London Stereoscopic Company enthusiastically proclaimed "a stereoscope for every home!" Other companies followed suit, such as D. Appleton in New York. In the formative years through the 1870s, there are discernable styles for narrative views according to country, as is evidenced in panels 1-4. Oliver Wendell Holmes, physician, writer and founder of the *Atlantic Monthly* had a keen appreciation for stereography, which spurred him to design a lighter and more economical stereoscope. Joseph Bates of Boston, an optician, added the sliding rail and supplied the lenses.

The Holmes-Bates Stereoscope, designed 1859

The Holmes-Bates stereoscope became the standard instrument for stereograph viewing. Holmes offered his design to the world free of patent or restriction. Stereoscopes could be luxurious, but most sold for as little as twenty-five to fifty cents. By the 1890s, it was rare for a home to be without one.

Beginning in the 1870s, stereography became a dominant form for picture viewing. Its popularity was such that companies like Underwood and Underwood, in the 1890s, sold 10 million stereoviews per year, marketed mainly for family consumption. Stereographic companies covered every corner of the globe and every subject.

Why the narrative view?

Predecessors to the narrative stereoview are to be found in cartooning and novels, especially sentimental literature called "Women's Novels." The Victorians enjoyed the detailed evocation of environment, for it provided an an active process of reading into the scene and the cooperative construction of meaning

between viewer and view. The culture was oriented to the careful reading of nuance, and it placed great faith in the powers of observant viewing and listening. It was a more patient time, one that placed relational values in high regard and understood that time to dream was also time well spent. The century was also characterized by rapid change and "paradigm shifts." Gender roles went from being considered Nature, something steadfast, to topsy-turvy confusion for a people who believed that they could infer from details Truth and the order of things. In a way, we are still Victorian, full of optimism in our powers of perception and laughing at ourselves when the patterns fall apart. Please enjoy a Victorian experience in our adjacent parlor. You may handle the stereoviews and use them in the stereoscopes, as our ancestors did.

Exhibition Panels

I: BRITISH AND FRENCH STEREOVIEWS 1855-1868

Stereographic publishing in the 1850s and 1860s was dominated by British and French companies, such as the London Stereoscopic Company. The leading stereographer there was James Elliott (# 1-3), whose hand-colored views remain second to none in composition, conception and subtlety of coloring. Hand-coloring was almost always executed by women staffers at the publishing houses.

Narrative subjects present sentimental and comic genres: grandfather reading to grandson (#1), covert love letters (#2), a jealous lover who bites his glove (#3), a baby left on the doorstep of an old bachelor (#4), and the inconvenience of crinoline (hoop skirt) petticoats on public transportation (#5). Crinolines were a staple of cartooning as well.

French production had its peak in the 1860s, prior to the Franco-Prussian war. Typical are *tableaux vivants* (living pictures), often hand-colored or on tissue, such as the female love-letter writer (#6), an iconography that dates back to the 18th Century.

II: FRENCH TISSUE

French tissues are illuminated from behind to reveal the delicate hand-coloring and pin-pricks that allow spots of brilliance. The example on the pedestal by Adolph Bloch (B.K.) is a *diablerie* from a series that illustrates the sports of hell, complete with skeletons with glowing red eyes. The photographed figures are clay models. This example shows hell's version of a popular café concert known as "El Dorado." It's good to know that even in hell one can enjoy beer and song!

III: AMERICAN STEREOVIEWS OF THE 1870s-1880s

Not a great deal is known about the Melander Brothers (L.M. and S.P. Melander) of Chicago, who published narrative scenes in the 1870s and 1880s. One view (#8) represents the joke of provincial people visiting an art gallery, as the wife points to a picture of a woman at work, while the husband is ogling the nude statuary. Their thread-bare country clothes and his antiquated breeches give them away. It is theorized that the gallery owner in the picture is L. M. Melander himself. The second Melander view (#9) depicts a man holding a "Dear John" letter, while the double printing on the background reveals the unfaithful lover with her new dandy.

One of the first narrative stereographers in the U.S. was F. G. Weller, of Littleton, New Hampshire, a town which produced four stereographic companies to cater to the White Mountain tourist trade. Weller is best known for his charming views of children, comics, and sentimental scenes beginning in 1871. Several of his titles are sequentials, introducing the narrative across two scenes, as in (#9) *Bliss Disturbed*, which is the second view following that of two lovers in an embrace, *Bliss*.

Inscriptions of collectors were common stereoviews from 1855-1880. Four views in this show are inscribed and represent a 4:1 ratio of women to men collectors. This ratio reflects the gender balance of collectors identified by inscription, which is a 3.5:1 ratio of women to men.

Temperance is the theme of (#11), *Strike at the Real Cause, Doctor*, a hand-colored view with a liquor bottle on the table as a visual cue to the real illness. Mamie Hughson inscribed her name on verso, giving an indication that temperance was important to her, as it was for many Victorian women. (#12) represents the happy home, a British view that depicted what many felt was the "cure" for the intemperate male—a good woman. *Married and Happy* depicts the husband contented at home, inscribed here by Edith N. Mitchell.

IV:: GERMAN AND AMERICAN VIEWS OF THE 1870s–1880s

Excellent German views began in the 1870s with the firms of Loescher and Petsch and Sophus Williams, later E. Linde (#13- 15). Known for their close-range compositions, crystalline light and technical perfection, these views were exported around the world, often under the Loescher and Petsch title "Gems of German Life," which specialized in genre scenes. James Cremer was a Philadelphia stereographer of scenic views who distributed European views under his imprint without credit to the photographer. *Guess Who It Is?* (#15) was originally a view by Sophus Williams here imprinted by Cremer. Pirating was very common during the economic downturns of the 1870s.

M. M. Griswold, of Washington D.C., was celebrated for his sentimental views of children. Here is a blowing bubbles theme (#17), iconography that dates back to Dutch 17th Century painting. The Victorian era transformed this Dutch symbol of the ephemeral nature of life to one that represented the ideal of carefree childhood. Victorians felt that children were innocent and so considered their naughtiness to be cute or comical, picturing it with wistful regularity. Stereoviews were marketed to families, and this fare provided a rosy mirror to its patrons, usually households with many children and sometimes several generations. Ben Kilburn, the original photographer of the Kilburn Brothers Company, took this early view of a boy caught sneaking an apple and a cookie, here inscribed by Hattie Taylor (#18). The Kilburns, of Littleton, N.H., built the largest stereoscopic factory in the world by 1872. It continued in operation for 44 years with a staff of mainly women workers.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE AMERICAN STEREOVIEW, 1890–1910

The 1890s in stereoview publishing was characterized by large publishing houses and equally large sales forces. Door-to-door canvassing was the norm, as well as mail-order and store sales. Stereoviews reached into every hamlet that could be accessed within a couple day's ride from a rail road. This was a vast territory, filled with prosperous farmers experiencing an economic boom. The views were sold to families, especially to women, and the top-sellers were those that reflected how the middle class wished to see themselves—moderately prosperous, with bourgeois values, plenty of humor and coded suggestiveness. Women were courted as matrons by being shown as authorities at home, with a no-sense attitude towards misbehavior. Children, men, and courting couples were continually being set straight by these stereoview matrons. A few, however, made comic choices of their own. Views were marketable types which were repeated from company to company as concepts. As companies bought-up the stock of other companies, we can read the history of mergers, mega-corporations, and market developments such as personality profiling that are indicative of modern business. Views in this section were published by Underwood and Underwood, New York, NY; B. W. Kilburn, Littleton, N.H..; Keystone View Co., Meadville, PA; Strohmeyer and Wyman, New York, NY; the Littleton View Co., Littleton, N.H.; H. C. White, N. Bennington, VT; William Rau, Philadelphia; and C. L. Wasson, Decatur, IL.

V: FAMILIES

The Floor Walker by Day (#20) repre-

sents the male manager at one of the new department stores as he gives orders, while (#21) represents him at home—not so authoritative. (#24) depicts the trope of the umbrella, sheltering a husband home late from the club as he meets due correction, while (#25) *And only to think me father wanted me to be a Praste!* depicts the beleaguered daddy of twins, with an Irish immigrant twist. Notice the passion of Christ pictured behind his head.

VI: COURTSHIP

The trials, tremors, felicities and embarrassments of courtship were favorite subjects of American stereoviews. Note the depth offered by the mirror on (#26)—an imagined future sequence. A "Boston Girl," (#31) is code for an educated woman, who befuddles her suitor with excess erudition.

VII: THINGS SEEN AND NOT SEEN

The history of photography exhibits a recurring faith in the notion of the limitlessness of visibility. The "magic" of photography seems to suggest that invisible subjects will appear through the applications of devoted practitioners. The very epistemology of seeing itself is evoked time and again. *Just One, Darling, While His Head is Covered Up* (#32) is a courtship scene that comically plays on misconceptions of photographic visibility.

Two titles, the British, *An Optical Delusion—Things Seen and Things Not Seen* (#33), and the Strohmeyer and Wyman, An Optical Delusion (#34) are clever interpretations of the theme of the traveling salesman "on the make." In stereography's version, the deceived husband has his attention glued to the stereoscope, a Brewster style in the British and a Holmes-Bates style in the American. The British *Optical Delusion* has a sequential kiss-and-make-up scene for the husband and wife.

In case funds were short for paying such salesmen for their services, stereoview companies slyly advocated *Collecting from a Slow Customer* (#35), that is stealing from the sleeping husband's pockets!

The theme of servants whose interests are extra-curricular to housekeeping is a staple of both stereoviews and comic cartoons. The notion that servants were sexually available is a trope of British and, to a lesser extent, American stereoviews (# 36, 37).

VIII: THE FRENCH COOK

The ever popular "French Cook" was serial stereoview set published by nine different publishers. These series demonstrate the taste for mildly risqué or erotic subject matter that was part of the visual culture of nineteenth-century families. Stereographic sequencing and themes decidedly influenced the subjects and mise en scène of early cinema, but, following the introduction of Edison's kinetoscope in 1894, cinema in turn influenced stereographic publishing by pushing sequential views from their standard 2-3 scenes to 6-12 views in a series. Vision could fast-forward in an automatic fashion.

IX: EXPOSED!

Eroticism Victorian-style would scarcely receive notice today. For stereoviews, eroticism offered only mild exposure but far more suggestiveness, providing an invitation to fantasize. Dependent on coded information, eroticism remained open for readings according to age, experience, and orientation. Such scenes could therefore be embedded in family life and assume plural meanings depending on how one reads the codes.

Two Keystone views—*Oh, You're a Peach* (#44), a corset tightening scene, shows the cooperative muscle involved in Victorian couture, while *Murderation! Molly, Be Aisy!* (#45) offers sadistic visual pleasure as the wife rips a mustard plaster off her husband's back. Note the spatializing mirrors and the Irish accent for *Murderation!* A staple type was the

surprised male bather, the most nudity that commercial photography generally offered, as a maid foils a gentleman's relaxing bath—*Did You Ring for Hot Water, Sir?* (#46).

In "The Professor" series, note that the "Professor," slang for a traveling side show huckster, is a woman.

X, XI: THE NEW WOMAN AND THE REAL WOMAN

A fiction created in response to 1890s "New Woman" novels that explored gender inequity, the "New Woman" in cartoons and stereographs was a figure for parody. Ranging from blue-stockinged termagants to bloomer-wearing and bicycle riding gad-a-bouts, the "New Woman" was sure to unseat male authority and leave the henpecked man to do the laundry!

X:

In the Strohmeyer and Wyman series (#50-55), she has assumed an equal-opportunity stance on crazed behavior.

XI: THE NEW AND REAL WOMAN

It is untrue that most Victorian women were housewives leading lives of leisure. Most women in the 1890s were working—as typists, school teachers, and on factory and department store floors.

Occupational views were less popular among Victorians but offer a wealth of historical detail for us today. This view of women workers at a Holyoak paper factory floor (#56) means to communicate "clean" and "organized." College education was on the rise for women at the end of century, but most women could only fantasize about it. So, the titillating view of girls at a late night (forbidden) dorm party—which could also occur in Holyoak (#57)—was perhaps liberating as well as erotic. Unfortunately, college educated women in 1902 found few professions open to them, and the ones that were had lower wages than men. A typist, also called typewriter, was a job reserved for women. This view of a fired typist is one of a two view sequence (#58); in the first she has propped her feet on the desk, thus occasioning her dismissal.

The New Women views, by contrast, show a fantasy of rebellion—women who ride about on bikes, smoke, refuse their chores, and appear to be femme fatale barbers. While these were meant as satirical roasts of "unnatural" females, they likely held satisfaction of another order for some, as they were quite popular.

XI: STEREOGRAPHY AND ETHNICITY

Stereoview markets were no better than their m/patrons, and, when it came to ethnicity, racism and stereotyping were a steady diet. The Irish were considered inexhaustible subjects for the portrayal of comic drunkenness, temper, violence and ignorance. A title "How Biddy Served the Tomatoes Undressed" was published by nearly every company. It depicted the ignorant Irish maid servant who undresses herself, rather than leaving the dressing off the tomatoes she serves.

The most virulent racism was reserved for Africans and African-Americans. A painful supply of titles depict blacks as thieves and cheats, unattractive, simpletons, and always looking to dodge trouble or falling in it (#65). Scholars today are returning to this difficult material in order to understand the history of racism. Some views, however, seem to depict in a more documentary manner (#66, 67) and may offer a narrative that deviates from that of purely racist construction. To these interstitial spaces scholars are also turning to understand how subjects construct and influence their view under forces of oppression, and how such oppressive forces slip under the strain of maintaining power, revealing fault-lines, destabilization, and gaps for critical attention.

Melody Davis

Melody Davis is an Assistant Professor at the Sage College of Albany, where she coordinates the Art History program. Her doctoral dissertation treated the subject of women in narrative stereography, focusing both upon the depiction of gender and women as patrons of the medium. For her studies in this field, she was awarded a full fellowship in American art from the Henry Luce Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies. Her article, "The New Woman in American Stereography," 1870-1900, was recently published in The New Woman International: Photography and Film, 1890-1930 *(University of Michigan Press, 2011). This Spring, she will be chairing a panel on "The Other Histories of Photography" at the College Art Association's Annual Conference. She has published widely in the fields of the history of photography and contemporary art. "Victorian Narrative Stereography" at Sage's Little Gallery marks her curatorial debut.*

The Little Gallery is a program of the SCA Department of Visual Arts, featuring the work of student, alumni and faculty artists and curators.

Gallery coordinator: Crystal Marlin
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