

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

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book review of

Aquatint Worlds: Travel, Print, and Empire, 1770–1820 by
Douglas Fordham

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 19, no. 2 (Autumn 2020)

Citation: Patricia Mainardi, book review of *Aquatint Worlds: Travel, Print, and Empire, 1770–1820* by Douglas Fordham, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 19, no. 2 (Autumn 2020), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2020.19.2.8>.

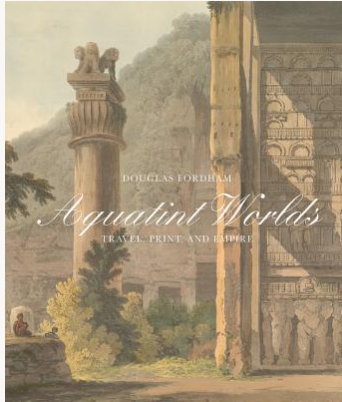
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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Douglas Fordham,

Aquatint Worlds: Travel, Print, and Empire, 1770–1820.

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, Distributed for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2019.

328 pp.; 215 color and b&w illus.; bibliography; index.

\$60 (hardback)

ISBN: 9781913107048

Studies in print history have traditionally focused on valuable “original prints,” not those that reproduce an image first created in another medium, but the overwhelming majority of printed images before photography were, in fact, reproductive and yet often enjoyed immense audiences. Douglas Fordham in his *Aquatint Worlds* investigates one such understudied phenomenon, the aquatint-illustrated travel books popular in England during the Georgian period (1770–1830). Situated chronologically between the earlier media of engraving and mezzotint and their successors lithography and photography, aquatint was always accorded a lower status than copper-plate engraving, being considered cheap and facile. Nonetheless, for several decades in Britain it was the medium *par excellence* for imparting knowledge of faraway peoples, places, and animals. Aquatint travel books enjoyed an enormous popularity, especially during the decades when travel was severely constricted as a result of the French Revolution and its aftermath. Fordham examines these publications from every angle, as both scientific and aesthetic products, as instruments of Empire and representations of colonialism, as well as simple entertainment. As elegantly designed and lavishly illustrated as its subject, *Aquatint Worlds* brilliantly conveys the multi-faceted history of these early travelogues, their production, distribution, and audiences.

Fordham’s project had its genesis in John Robert Abbey’s extensive collection of illustrated travel books, purchased by the Mellon Collection and now housed at the Yale Center for British Art. Abbey published two catalogues of his collection, mostly limited to British publications: *Scenery of Great Britain and Ireland in Aquatint and Lithography 1770–1860* (1952) and *Travel in Aquatint and Lithography 1770–1860* (1956), publications that are still essential for research in a variety of fields. It would be a Herculean task to attempt a study of even a portion of the entirety of British publications, so Fordham has wisely limited his subject to three geographical areas: India, China, and South Africa. What unites these seemingly disparate regions is their identification with British colonial and mercantile interests, often identical in the Age of Empire. His book is comprehensive, well-written, beautifully designed

and illustrated. The only aspect that I would expand is its somewhat insular quality. Because Fordham's focus is so resolutely on British productions, it is difficult to contextualize them even on a superficial level. For example, after an acknowledgment that aquatint, although known earlier, was actually developed in France by the engraver Jean-Baptiste Le Prince (he is referred to in the text merely as "Le Prince"), with his secret procedure eventually making its way to England, there is no further information on its trajectory either in its originating country or anywhere outside of Britain. Britain's long-time rivalry with France goes unexplored, although the strong shadow of the multi-volume Napoleonic project *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–29) lurks over British achievements. Britain had no equivalent large government-subsidized projects, and as a result, British publications had to find a broad market to be profitable. While this imperative limited the scope of artists' and publishers' ambitions, it also resulted in the production and dissemination of popular collections, often with admirable results, such as the subjects of this study.

Aquatint Worlds is superbly organized, with each chapter building on the preceding one. Chapter 1 introduces the medium of aquatint, essentially consisting of adding a layer of resin to an etched plate, then returning it to the acid bath. The grains of resin protect the underlying metal from the acid, and repetition of this process with more of the plate exposed each time results in an increasingly tonal image. When washes of color are applied over this tonal print, the result strongly resembles watercolor. Less labor-intensive than mezzotint or engraving (and for that reason less esteemed), aquatint rapidly transformed book illustration in Britain, although not in France where the Academy continued to supported only the more traditional medium of copper-plate engraving. Ultimately it was another British development, wood engraving, that replaced copper-plate engraving in book illustration throughout the Western world, and by the 1830s aquatint was in decline.

The first British book of views in aquatint was Paul Sandby's *XII Views in Aquatinta from Drawings Taken on the Spot in South-Wales* (1775), followed by numerous others. One of the fascinating lines of inquiry Fordham follows is the relation between topographical drawing and military imperatives, noting that, before photography, topographical drawing was so vital for campaigns that it was widely taught in military schools. Counterbalancing this more scientific pursuit was the British picturesque tradition with its focus on pleasant pastoral images. From these disparate strands of military and domestic, "modern" media and traditional aesthetics, came the aquatint travel books. An intriguing interpretation Fordham develops is that drawing, a polite art practiced by the comfortable (and book-buying) classes, was taught in the same three stages as aquatint technique: a preliminary drawing corresponding to the basic outlines of the underlying soft-ground etching, tonal washes corresponding to the aquatint itself, and both finished with watercolor. As a result, British viewers of these aquatint travel images of faraway places could recognize a comfortable kinship, further domesticating the unfamiliar.

Fordham's second chapter, "Oriental Scenery," is, at least to this reader, the most interesting, focusing on images of India, already largely under British rule. Thomas Daniell and his nephew William Daniell spent nine years in India, returning with 1,400 drawings that they used as the basis for their six-volume *Oriental Scenery* (1795–1808), which included 144 hand-colored aquatints along with descriptive texts. The Daniells focused mostly on architecture, well before architectural historians and archeologists had established chronologies and

stylistic histories. Fordham situates this work at the dawn of architectural history, where the paths of art and science, and more particularly picturesque tourism and scientific observation, had not yet diverged. Aquatint travel books later became aesthetic objects only, but these early works, with their impressively colored full-page plates accompanied by explanatory text, occupy a fluid middle ground.

The third chapter shifts focus from the architecture and scenery of India to *The Costume of China*, the title of a major aquatint publication by William Alexander, the official artist of the British embassy to the Emperor Qianlong. Published in parts from 1795 to 1805, Alexander's book depicts a wide variety of Chinese costumes and customs. The chapter focuses on the rise of costume books in Britain—it would have been fruitful here to point out that the words “costume” and “custom” are, in fact, cognates; it was industrialization and increased class mobility, concomitant with the splintering of sumptuary practice, if not actual laws, that fed the European fascination with this type of imagery. Fordham untangles a web of imperatives here that make for fascinating reading, including a detailed discussion of the export trade, with British artists adopting Chinese motifs, while Chinese artists produced Europeanized imagery of their own landscape and culture. The result of the British fascination with this type of imagery, Fordham points out, was that these images “feminized” non-European peoples by identifying superficial appearance as subjects for consumption. This segues into a revealing discussion of the seepage of the foreign into the domestic with British costume books as the result, when that same proto-ethnographic eye was turned on one's fellow citizens. This happened all over Europe, but Fordham focuses on W. H. Pyne's monumental *Microcosm* (1802–07), which, followed by his *Costume of Great Britain* (1808), employed that eye for difference on his own compatriots.

Travel from Great Britain to India, to China, and to South Africa might seem disconnected, but before the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the only viable route was by sea around the southern Cape of Africa. This strategic location can be seen in the history of colonial rule: Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British all vied for control of the essential port of Cape Town. The British period of domination is the subject of chapter 4, which focuses on Samuel Daniell's *African Scenery and Animals* (1804–05). Daniell, another member of the prolific Daniell dynasty that so dominated aquatint travel imagery, voyaged to South Africa expressly to produce this travel book, whose images Fordham cites as the finest natural-history plates in British printmaking. Part of the charm of *African Scenery*, for its audience, was that it presented southern Africa as a sportsman's paradise and African peoples as existing outside of time and history, untouched by the European colonialism that was then transforming and threatening their very existence. The exploitation of Sara Baartman, known as “The Hottentot Venus,” was contemporaneous to Daniell's publication but not included; Fordham notes that such overt displays of vulgarity and racism were contrary to the determinedly pleasant imagery of aquatint travel books.

Aquatint Worlds closes with the down-market progress of aquatint, with Thomas Rowlandson's *The Tour of Doctor Syntax* (1809) satirizing the British preoccupation with picturesque travel imagery. For Fordham, the age of the aquatint travel book inaugurated by Sandby's *XII Views in Aquatinta* closed with William Daniell's final work, *A Voyage Round Great Britain* (1814–25), where Daniell applied the lessons learned in India to the depiction of the scenery of his native land. The pleasure that these travel books imparted can be shared

even now by the modern viewer, but what is gone is the sense of proprietary pride aroused for British audiences viewing images of the British empire or British mercantile interests. Throughout his study, Fordham teases out the thick dimensions of viewing, noting that in all the images, the viewer is situated at a safe distance from the peoples, animals, and activities, as though viewers had the right to see everything without risking either confrontation or danger. He notes that artists avoiding depicting anything violent or disagreeable, although surely they witnessed much that challenged the sunny optimism of these images. *En bref*, they offered spectatorship for consumption, with the publications themselves serving, in Fordham's view, as the "avant-garde of imperial expansion" (18).

In the introduction to their *Picturesque Voyage to India, by Way of China* (1810), Thomas Daniell and William Daniell spoke of "guiltless spoliations transporting to Europe the picturesque beauties of those favored regions." It might be noted that, during these same years, another British traveler removed the marbles from the Parthenon (1801–12) in a less benign transportation to Britain of picturesque beauties. So the travel books' pleasure was not entirely innocent—nor would Fordham claim it so—but was imbricated in a vast network of attitudes and actions that built and maintained the British Empire.

For the non-specialist, it would have been good to include the modern names of places and peoples cited in the book. Not all readers will recognize that Ceylon is now Sri Lanka, Madras is Chennai, Bombay is Mumbai, Canton is Guangzhou. African peoples, however, are cited with their present names, so, at least for this reader, it was not immediately apparent that Khoekhoe were what were then called Hottentots, or that the region of the Tswana is what is now Botswana. But these are minor cavils.

Aquatint Worlds is a major contribution not only to art history and print studies, but also to the history of visual studies and popular culture. It illuminates the background to much of later nineteenth-century developments in British genre and landscape painting. May it give rise to a legion of further studies extending its reach to travel imagery produced elsewhere in the long nineteenth century.

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