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book review of

Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion & Visual Perception in Early National America by Wendy Bellion

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Wendy Bellion,
Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion & Visual Perception in Early National America.
Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011.
388 pp.; 12 color and 83 b&w illus.; notes, index.
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Wendy Bellion, associate professor of art history at the University of Delaware, centers her study within the history and politics of Philadelphia by focusing on the natural history museum and the art of the Peale family (Charles, Titian, Rembrandt, and Raphaele). The author explores the cultural function of visual perception and deception articulated in *trompe l'oeil* paintings (hyper-realistic oil paintings designed to visually “fool the eye”), optical devices intended to aid vision, and spectacular hoaxes. Explored together, these three categories of objects (none of which originated in nineteenth-century America) nonetheless helped develop a shared visual literacy among Americans who did not necessarily share a common verbal language. Importantly this education of the senses took place in a multitude of *spaces* capable of separating social classes and political affiliations: taverns, gardens, museums and national exhibitions. The purveyors of visual deception similarly operated in a space where artistry, science, and pure showmanship overlapped.

As one would expect, the book opens with a discussion of Charles Willson Peale’s iconic painting *Artist in His Museum* (1822, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia), which captures a retrospective of his pursuits in both art and natural history, and highlights, through its representation of visitors to the museum enacting awe, curiosity, and intellectual enlightenment. Less well known, but still significant to the study, is Charles and Titian’s watercolor depiction of *The Long Room, Interior of the Front Room in Peale’s Museum* (also 1822, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit), whose sharp single-point perspective was later heightened by its pairing with a piece of optical equipment (a small “cosmorama”) in the museum, creating an early type of illusionistic virtual space.

Chapter 1, *Theaters of Visuality*, moves back in time to explain that by the eighteenth century, Philadelphia already had a strong culture of “looking”, fostered by microscopes, camera

obscuras, and magic lanterns. Why was Philadelphia the center? This city held both Revolutionary and Continental congresses and was, in the 1790s, the seat of the federal government, thus a place that fostered and publicized political debates. It had a diverse population and burgeoning print and economic cultures. To some “Art” was suspected as a frivolous and expensive pursuit capable of creating political illusions, but also capable of illustrating moral examples. The illusion allowed the viewer to become *undeceived*, a way of recovering personal agency. But the author also alludes to the increasing conversations, held at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, about truth and beauty that art posed. Optical illusions and pleasures also existed in the form of painted storefronts and shop signs, as well as displays of an ever-wider range of goods. Bellion is able to give ample historical examples of the importance of appearance and the act of looking, noting that even George Washington was guilty of “gazing, in mute unutterable admiration” (9); of course that term *gaze* has greater weight and gender implications today than it did in nineteenth-century American life.

Chapter 2, *The Politics of Discernment*, takes as its focus Charles Willson Peale’s *Staircase Group*, of 1795 (Philadelphia Museum of Art), whose *trompe l’oeil* illusion was heightened and blurred into the architecture of the Pennsylvania State House with the addition of a real step and doorframe. Its placement in this location, where it became an important part of the Columbianum exhibition, literally gave it a simultaneous artistic and political visibility. It was created in a period when the utility of visual perception was publicly debated and was paralleled by partisan insistence on political transparency (both in person and in print). Bellion chronicles the debates surrounding the formation of a national artistic academy that would be somehow inspired by the British model, but without being subjected to government control that mimicked the monarchy.

Chapter 3, *Sight and the City*, explores drawings and engravings by William and Thomas Birch designed for the publication of *The City of Philadelphia, in the State of Pennsylvania, North American; as It Appeared in the Year 1800*, or *Birch’s Views* (1800), whose alternate title indicates the personal and fractional vision akin to Charles Baudelaire’s *flâneur* (a personal ownership of spaces articulated through looking) that these images revealed. The plates for this series of urban views were constructed with extreme attention to linear perspective, aided by the angles of the buildings in vistas on High Street and Arch Street, and interior spaces such as the High Street Market. For example, the plates of “The House Intended for the President of the United States” and “The Water Works in Centre Square” are shown at an angle to create a two-point linear perspective. Bellion contextualizes the plates with maps of Philadelphia to demonstrate how a bound volume of prints could take the reader on a gridded journey through the city. The author relies on the tradition of the picturesque as well as the twentieth-century perceptual psychology of J. J. Gibson to explain the success of Birch’s plates in depicting specific locations while still conveying an experience of being in the city of Philadelphia; careful details further reveal both economic and political realities specific to their locations.

Chapter 4, *Imitations and Originals*, explores Samuel Lewis’s set of *trompe l’oeil* works titled *A Deception* (ca. 1805–08, private collection) with the original papers it depicts donated to the Peale museum by the artist. The contrast between the actual documents and the painted illusions creates a play between reality and perception and highlights an important paradox in the use of multiple manners of representation (not just visual but also textual—letters, books, newspapers—and graphic, as in the case of maps and diagrams). Careful study of the original

and the copy trained viewers to educate and exercise their judgment—a judgment that translated from works of art to political arenas. Bellion brings the discussion of illusion back to Peale’s museum, explaining the displays that blended natural history facts with fabricated fictional elements, of, notably, the mastodon skeleton featured prominently in the painting *Artist in His Museum*. Raphaelle Peale’s 1813 *Catalogue Deception* humorously illustrates the artifice typical of both paintings and natural history museums.

Chapter 5, *Looking for the Invisible Lady*, moves from strictly optical illusions to a famous example that combined vision and hearing. This illusion, unlike the previous examples, was more likely to occur in a vernacular place as opposed to a museum as a place of learning, and while ventriloquism provided a precedent, this spectacle of French origin depended on technology. Audiences would hear usually a woman’s voice seemingly coming from a trunk (and then increasingly small containers) when in fact a female performer located a significant distance away used an elaborate contraption (equivalent to a microphone and speakers). Although Rubens Peale saw a version in London, his father was not persuaded to add the illusion to his museum, but soon there were many other places in the east, notably Salem, Massachusetts, and eventually Philadelphia, where visitors could attempt to use their eyes to decipher what they were hearing. Bellion again uses accounts from actual visitors and illustrations of several different versions of the device, then juxtaposes its operation with the rise of the purely visual panorama. In the *Invisible Lady* illusion, the presumably male gaze was thwarted by a woman using technology in a period, as Bellion explains, when women’s bodily or audible presence (especially in politics) was the cause of anxiety, fostered by some significant examples of cross-dressing.

Chapter 6, *Phantasmagoric Washington*, explores vision colored by nostalgia as illustrated by François-Marius Granet’s *Choir of the Capuchin Church in Rome* (1814–1815, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and Rembrandt Peale’s *Patriae Pater* (1824, National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC), a portrait of George Washington presented as if behind an illusionistic painted masonry porthole with drapery spilling over its bottom edge. Raphaelle Peale’s *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception* (1822, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO) famously caused his jealous wife to claw at the canvas to reveal what she was sure was a nude woman. This illusion not only presented an inversion of his father’s famous painting, and satirized a society offended by artistic nudity, but it also demonstrated that the *purpose* of illusion had changed by the time his father painted himself in his museum, theatrically pulling aside a velvet curtain to reveal a site/sight of equal amounts of intellectual curiosity and trickery (after all, none other than P.T. Barnum would eventually acquire the New York iteration of Peale’s museum).

Bellion concludes her text with a textual exploration of a painting that no longer exists, Charles Willson Peale’s 1823 *Staircase Self-Portrait*, which was commissioned by Rubens Peale and was in scale comparable to *The Artist in his Museum*. It contained some common elements with both that painting and the *Staircase Group*, but a portrait of Peale himself, replete with symbolic objects that provided a catalogue of his biography, replaced depictions of his sons, Raphaelle and Titian. The painting reportedly had multiple levels of deception, guaranteeing that each viewer would be fooled by at least one aspect of the representation. Far from being a revival of Peale’s earlier works, the *Staircase Self-Portrait* demonstrated how vision as well as the connection to Philadelphia political culture had changed. While there were some other

examples of illusionistic painting later in the century, for instance John Neagle's *The Studious Artist* (1836, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts), *trompe l'oeil* painting would largely disappear until William Michael Harnett, John Haberle, and John F. Peto revived the practice later in the nineteenth century with a spate of new inventions including the stereoscope.

Bellion uses the term spectator with the intent of suggesting the well-educated 'ideal' viewer characterized in the early-nineteenth British periodical the *Spectator* by writer/publisher Joseph Addison. Here the author means to leverage the concept of a person who looks passively (as embodied in not only that periodical but other literature of the beginning of the eighteenth-century in Britain) as a contrast to the active (both in the political and visual sense) construct that evolved in Peale's Philadelphia.

Some of Bellion's connections between vision and what it meant to be a citizen seem forced and tenuous. The chapter on the Invisible Lady has a poor connection to the rest of the book (ostensibly it is the fact that Rubens Peale saw one that provides the rationale for its inclusion). The presence of gendered discussion in this chapter begs the question of the absence of such an analysis in the overwhelmingly masculine focus of the rest of the book. Bellion admits that culture (gendered or not) in Philadelphia was not a stable concept, so she set a task for herself that could not completely be successful, and this reviewer wonders if a less-catchy title would mitigate the expectations it establishes. But Bellion does utilize eyewitness accounts of artistic, scientific, and entertainment illusions to put into sharp relief the idea that the symbolic ownership implied by vision did not belong to all citizens equally. The author acknowledges that not all the devices covered in the book operated in the same way or for similar purposes—sometimes they existed for illustration or for sheer entertainment, at other times they were intended to actually *parody* a political way of looking.

The study originated as a dissertation, remnants of which remain in the use of footnotes, sometimes painfully long, that create some disruptions in reading. But the use of archival research is impressive; Bellion conducted work at, for instance, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the American Antiquarian Society, the Archives of American Art and the Winterthur Museum and Library. While there are few color plates, they are put to good use and the wide variety of illustrations found in the Library of Congress, ranging from scientific to satirical, make this book an important visual resource. In sum, this book represents a concerted effort to broaden the scope of intellectual discourse by examining areas and ideas seldom broached. It makes a significant contribution to the discipline of art history.

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