

BOOK REVIEWS

*W*endy Bellion. *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). Pp. xviii, 388. Illustrations, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$45.00.

Wendy Bellion's project in her finely crafted book, *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America*, is to show how pictorial and optical illusions, when considered alongside Enlightenment theories of sensory perception and discernment, shaped notions of American citizenship, representation, and subjectivity. To investigate practices of seeing, Bellion delves into the production and reception of *trompe l'oeil* paintings, optical devices, and popular spectacles of deception created between 1780 and 1830. With a focus on Philadelphia, Bellion considers how illusionistic objects could be politicized and marshaled to help Americans hone their skills of looking. Bellion calls this period the beginning of a "pronounced ideological equation between keen vision and patriotism" in which the ability to discern truth from falsehood in

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the material landscape became a sign of able citizenship (15). Yet, illusionistic objects are rarely stable and straightforward; they can at once reify, contradict, and parody contemporary ideologies of political looking. In exploring how “a cultural dialectic of deceit and discernment” played out in the material culture of illusion, Bellion deftly teases apart the layers of political and social meaning hidden within her chosen objects and demonstrates how illusion can make us self-aware spectators—as much then as now (5).

Bellion builds her six chapters like case studies, around an individual or group of related objects. She presents canonical paintings alongside prints, maps, trade cards, architectural and perspectival drawings, optical instruments, and the illustrations and textual pages of books in a material culture approach that dissolves barriers between fine arts and the vernacular and allows her to demonstrate how issues of vision emerged across a broad visual and material landscape. Bellion employs a diverse array of visual evidence and methodologies. Although she draws extensively on the field of visual culture studies, with its interest in charting the practices of seeing and theories of sight, she also engages with literary studies and embraces contextualization, now essential in social and political history. Her interdisciplinary approach offers a model for integrating the pictorial arts within a framework of material and print culture and illustrates the ways in which our understanding of canonical paintings may be enhanced and even challenged when viewed through new lenses.

In her opening chapter, Bellion introduces readers to Philadelphia’s “culture of visual curiosity” and shows how an awareness of, and interest in, visual perception was pervasive in American society by the mid-eighteenth century. Informed by the Common Sense philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment, Americans believed in an individual’s ability to train the senses—especially vision—to perceive truth or uncover deception. Natural philosophers, museum proprietors, artists, and itinerant showmen alike used the tools (lecture courses, publications, *trompe l’oeil* paintings, museum installations of optic devices, and theatrical demonstrations of perceptual tricks) to enlighten their fellow citizens on the laws of physics and the possibilities of sight. Through a range of optical devices, such as magic lanterns and optical boxes, Americans engaged in many different ways of looking and thereby practiced discernment. Bellion argues, convincingly, that the diversity of these devices and the different viewing experiences they enabled meant that “no single modality of vision prevailed” in early America. Individuals who attended these optical exhibitions or read about them in newspapers “learned to look in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways” (56).

With this overview of visual theory, Bellion lays the groundwork to examine how various ways of looking influenced artistic production and were implicated in the political process. In chapters 2 and 4, Bellion uses *trompe l'oeil* pictures, Charles Willson Peale's *The Staircase Group*, and Samuel Lewis's less-known watercolor and ink drawing *A Deception*, to demonstrate different ways artists could model discernment. For Peale, the lesson came in the allegories and political references hidden in plain sight: in his sons' poses, emblems, and attributes, and in the symbolic act of displaying the painting in the Philadelphia State House, Peale communicated the importance of perceptual vigilance and the right of Americans to look at and judge their world. Lewis, in contrast, installed original objects (papers attached to a framed letter rack) adjacent to *A Deception*, a *trompe l'oeil* representation of those objects, and invited viewers to exercise their judgment by locating the similarities and differences between the two objects. In both examples, the artists found novel ways to use illusion, imitation, and deception to instruct their audience in the art of spotting misrepresentation.

In the remaining chapters, Bellion changes tack slightly as she considers the ways that visuality can become subjective and at times unpredictable in the hands of artists and showmen. In chapter 3 she re-evaluates the creation, publication, and reception of William and Thomas Birch's collection of prints, *The City of Philadelphia*; in chapter 5 she tells the story of the most popular illusionistic spectacle of the nineteenth century, a mechanical instrument called the Invisible Lady; and in chapter 6 she looks at such *trompe l'oeil* paintings as Francois-Marius Granet's *The Choir at the Capuchin Church in Rome*, Rembrandt Peale's *Patriae Pater*, and Raphaele Peale's *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception* to explore shifts in the form and function of pictorial illusion. Through these pictures she engages questions of embodiment, the gendered nature of discernment, voyeurism, and the limits of discernment itself when objects exist beyond sight. Considering the breadth of her material evidence, one may regret that Bellion did not engage with illusionistic decorative arts. Although she rightly views this area as a study unto itself, one might yet wonder how she would contextualize and theorize illusionistic wallpapers or painted furniture, or how expanding her discussion to objects in the domestic realm would allow a deeper exploration of gender and the role women played as discerning spectators of both their public and private worlds.

Citizen Spectator will appeal to a diverse audience. Art historians will appreciate Bellion's fresh and nuanced interpretation of Charles Willson Peale and the impact he and his sons Raphaele and Rubens had on the nation's burgeoning art communities and institutions. As Bellion's evidence is decidedly

regional, scholars of early Philadelphia will welcome her contributions to the political, cultural, and scientific histories of the city; and those with an interest in the national will benefit from her discussion of print culture and the role of literature in spreading these ideologies of vision far beyond the confines of Philadelphia. Finally, with Bellion's focus on the public arena and the intersection of art and vision, *Citizen Spectator* is a welcome addition to the scholarship on early national politics and culture.

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Philip D. Zimmerman. *Harmony in Wood: Furniture of the Harmony Society* (Ambridge, PA: Published by The Friends of Old Economy Village and distributed by University Press of New England, 2010). Pp. x, 214. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$65.00.

In this beautifully illustrated and impeccably researched study, Philip Zimmerman breaks exciting new ground in his exploration of Harmonist furniture. Followers of nineteenth-century German mystic and visionary George Rapp, Harmonists have not received the same scholarly attention for their furniture as their utopian contemporaries the Shakers and Zoarites. Like those communities, the Harmonists developed a distinctive style over the first half of the nineteenth century that blended locally available resources, communal needs, and traditional ethnic forms and construction practices. The result is a body of work that is stylistically innovative, fundamentally functional, and often aesthetically pleasing.

Initially founded at Harmonie, about thirty-five miles north of Pittsburgh, in 1804, the Harmonists moved to New Harmony, Indiana, in 1814 and back to Economy, Pennsylvania, in 1824. In time, the community grew to more than eight hundred members and developed a remarkable manufacturing industry. Following Rapp's lead, the community practiced the communal ownership of land and advocated (but did not require) celibacy as they awaited the Second Coming. Zimmerman provides a succinct overview of the community's history, but more attention to the influence of the community's religious beliefs on the productions of the Harmonists would have been helpful. The community closed in 1905, and a little over a decade later the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission purchased six acres of