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The Art of Undeceiving

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THE ART OF UNDECEIVING Michael Gaudio

Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America by Wendy Bellion. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2011. Pp. 388. \$45.00 cloth.

Among the many stories about an “early American visual culture of illusion” that Wendy Bellion tells in her essential new study, *Citizen Spectator*, is that of a writing master named Samuel Lewis. In 1808, Lewis donated two items to Charles Willson Peale’s Philadelphia Museum, one of which was a framed trompe l’oeil drawing of a letter rack holding a variety of cards and other printed and handwritten papers. Executed in pen and watercolor, the drawing demonstrates Lewis’s skills with the brush, as well as his protean hand. Its illusionism is stunning: like the dupes in anecdotes about painterly deception, the beholder is tempted to reach out and slip the false papers from their rack. The other item Lewis donated to the museum was a bit more unusual. It was a frame containing the originals—that is, the real letter rack holding the actual papers that provided the models for Lewis’s imitation. If the trompe l’oeil drawing belongs to a venerable tradition of deceit, the gift of the letter rack itself suggests that something special was at stake in Philadelphia in 1808, that there was an urgency for the visitors to Peale’s museum to see originals and imitations side by side so that truth might be distinguished from deception. It is this sense of urgency, felt widely in early national America, that Bellion explores in *Citizen Spectator*.

In six lucid chapters, Bellion traces a “cultural dialectic of deceit

and discernment" (5) throughout the final decades of the eighteenth century and the opening decades of the nineteenth. Against the model of a passive Enlightenment eye upon which were impressed the visual facts of its surroundings, Bellion unveils an early national culture in which paintings, optical devices, and entertainments of all kinds destabilized vision and in so doing produced active and discerning subjects. "Being a spectator in early America," writes Bellion, "meant continually adjusting one's focus" (59). The evidence for her argument is compelling. Trompe l'oeil painting, which experienced something of a renaissance in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century America in works like Charles Willson Peale's *Staircase Group* (1795), Samuel Lewis's *A Deception* (ca. 1805–8), and Raphaëlle Peale's *Venus Rising from the Sea: A Deception* (ca. 1822), is at the heart of *Citizen Spectator* and provides the focus for three of its six chapters. But no less important are other media, from optical devices and entertainments to print portfolios. Bellion's first chapter foregrounds a variety of popular optical devices and entertainments of the period, including solar microscopes, magic lantern shows, phantasmagoria, optical boxes, and cosmoramas (peep shows that created illusions of all parts of the world). Another chapter is devoted to the extraordinarily popular early nineteenth-century

phenomenon of the Invisible Lady, an entertainment that encouraged spectators to unmask the deception behind a disembodied female voice emanating from a glass chest. Yet another chapter examines a series of printed city views of Philadelphia by William and Thomas Birch, prints in which the tension between abstracted and embodied vision disrupts the possibility of a stable perspectival command of the city.

While *Citizen Spectator*, as its subtitle suggests, attempts to make a general argument about "art, illusion, and visual perception in early national America," all six of its chapters are focused, to a greater or lesser extent, on Philadelphia. There is, to be sure, a transatlantic context for much of the material treated in this book, but Bellion justifies her concentration on Philadelphia because of the city's importance as a political, commercial, and intellectual center of the Atlantic world. Beyond this, and in no small part thanks to the presence of the Peale family, whose integral role in Philadelphia's visual culture is reflected in their prominence in *Citizen Spectator*, the city constituted a "laboratory for looking, a place where the visual ideologies of the early republic could be put to the test of objects and experiences" (8). If Bellion's focus on Philadelphia misses some of the wider early modern traffic in illusion and deception, it gains much

by showing how the pleasures and uncertainties of visual deception shaped citizen spectators within a particularized urban context. Yet one does wonder how the story of illusion and deception in early America might change if framed differently. For example, Bellion seems relatively uninterested in the role that religious enthusiasm may have played in the outing of deceptions, a topic that has been explored by Leigh Eric Schmidt in *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (2000). As a result, *Citizen Spectator* is a book with a decidedly secular cast. While Bellion, as her footnotes show, is clearly informed by Schmidt's study, her emphasis is nevertheless on the techniques of politicizing the eye that produced the *disillusioned* spectator of the modern polis.

The primary interpretive movement of *Citizen Spectator* occurs between acts of looking and the sociopolitical sphere of early national Philadelphia. Each chapter finds its own kind of proximity between the two, a proximity that is in some cases striking. For example, Bellion's analysis of Charles Willson Peale's *Staircase Group* convincingly situates the painting amidst the heated politics of 1795, during the public outcry against the secret negotiations surrounding John Jay's treaty. As that treaty was being discussed behind closed doors in Congress Hall, the *Staircase Group* was on display next door in the

Pennsylvania State House as part of the first Columbianum exhibition, challenging spectators to see through its deception. In contrast to this literal proximity between art and politics, other chapters consider the capacity of print in the early republic to create a virtual proximity between localized visual experiences and a wider public discourse about deception, as in the case of printed images that revealed the deception of the Invisible Lady.

While each of Bellion's chapters stands on its own as a self-contained study, there is nevertheless a narrative arc to the book. Marking one end of her story is the moment of national formation itself: Philadelphia as the site of the Revolutionary and Continental congresses of the 1770s and 1780s. Those events raised the questions that constitute Bellion's point of departure: What would it mean to be a citizen in the new republic? What kind of self-awareness would be required? Marking the other end of her story is a shift away from an early national dialectic of deceit and discernment that Bellion associates with the emergence of Jacksonian democracy and the Second Great Awakening. Between these bookends, *Citizen Spectator* maps a period of self-aware vision, one whose key figure is the self-referential *trompe l'oeil* painting: "*Trompe l'oeil* objects thematized artifice and illusion, training spectators' eyes on the differences that separated actuality

from virtuality, truth from deception” (324). But this is a relatively short-lived self-awareness that, as Bellion argues in her final chapter, is lost during the 1820s. Comparing Raphaëlle Peale’s deception, *Venus Rising from the Sea*, to his brother Rembrandt’s *Patriae Pater* portrait (ca. 1824) of George Washington, Bellion argues that whereas the former painting remains consummately self-aware of its own means, the latter belongs to a different aesthetic (and perhaps to a different ethic, as well). Employing illusionism in order to return Washington from the dead, Rembrandt Peale does not ask his viewers to be critical of his painterly act of resurrection; he asks only that we enter willingly into the fantasy.

What is the value of self-aware perception? This seems like an essential, if unarticulated, question raised by *Citizen Spectator*. And I do not mean the value of self-awareness for the early national subjects of Bellion’s study (that value is made abundantly clear in

the book), but for the cultural historian who is out to recover the early national past. To what extent is Bellion’s own investment in her subject matter, and the way she clearly values *trompe l’oeil*’s self-referentiality, bound up with her own representational task? Or to put the question differently, might we see Bellion’s inquiry into early American spectatorship as a kind of *trompe l’oeil* in itself, one that offers a convincing illusion of the “original” but also thematizes its own scholarly means, and in doing so asks us—as critical readers—to recognize the limits and instabilities of the historian’s task? *Citizen Spectator* is an impressive act of historical representation, but all the more interesting for the productive questions it raises about our own self-awareness.

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