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Review Of "French Popular Lithographic Imagery, 1815-1870, Vol. 1: Lithographs And Literature" By B. Farwell

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Recommended Citation

Constance Cain Hungerford. (1984). "Review Of "French Popular Lithographic Imagery, 1815-1870, Vol. 1: Lithographs And Literature" By B. Farwell". *Technology And Culture*. Volume 25, Issue 1. 113-115. DOI: 10.2307/3104675
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-art/24>

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French Popular Lithographic Imagery 1815-1870. Vol. 1: Lithographs and Literature by
Beatrice Farwell

Review by: Constance Cain Hungerford

Technology and Culture, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Jan., 1984), pp. 113-115

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#) and the [Society for the History of Technology](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3104675>

Accessed: 12/01/2015 16:21

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French sources. Professor Habib and his students have already established a firm methodology for continuing studies of that kind.

LOREN MICHAEL*

French Popular Lithographic Imagery 1815–1870. Vol. 1: *Lithographs and Literature*. By Beatrice Farwell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. Pp. ix+104; microfiche illustrations, bibliography. \$55.00.

The proliferation of imagery, in forms as diverse as photo-journalism and advertising, cartoons, postcards, product packaging, family snapshots, art facsimiles, and television, together with the nature of that imagery, constitute a fundamental, though still not fully appreciated, characteristic of the modern era. The perfecting of photography and photomechanical reproductive processes accelerated this development. But it was the invention and commercial application of lithography that inaugurated the revolution. Lithography has hitherto been studied—in historical surveys, exhibitions, monographs on individuals like Daumier and Toulouse-Lautrec, and technical explanations—almost exclusively as a medium of aesthetic accomplishment, a means used by a small number of acknowledged masters to create works of art which subsequently were collected by elite connoisseurs and conserved in museum print rooms. Now Beatrice Farwell, in a publication focusing on France from 1815, when lithography was introduced, to 1870, when it was superseded commercially by other processes, provides the foundation for undertaking a major reassessment of lithography's importance and role in the evolution of modern culture and society.

Lithographs and Literature is the first of a planned twelve-volume series in which Farwell will make widely accessible for the first time an awesome sampling of lithographs from the unusual holdings of the Cabinet des estampes at the Bibliothèque nationale (Paris), which because of copyright laws became the repository not only of works of accepted artistic merit but also of the ephemera mass-produced for a bourgeois and working-class market. It is this "popular" imagery on which Farwell concentrates, using subject and numerical representativeness, rather than aesthetic quality or the fame of the designer, as the criteria for selection and organization. Originating as newspaper caricatures and prints published and sold individually or in sets and then frequently framed and hung on walls, such lithographs encom-

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pass reproductions of art, political satire, pornography, scenes of ordinary life, and depictions of historical events and exotic lands. They may be clumsily executed by anonymous artisans and conventionally sentimental, vulgar, or even offensive in content. But as they “visually record the dreams and realities” (p. vii) of their 19th-century audiences, they offer historians an exceptional resource.

The author, an art historian, has been a pioneer in exploring the “media explosion” (p. 2) and its significance for 19th-century art; she is one of a growing number of scholars who have turned to popular imagery in several media as a source for paintings by artists like Courbet, Manet, and Degas. Farwell is more concerned here, however, with demonstrating the relevance of popular lithography to other fields, among them literature and social history. The 492 lithographs reproduced in this first volume include illustrations to plays, operas, poems, and novels by great writers ranging from La Fontaine, Lesage, Molière, and Shakespeare to contemporary romantics like Hugo, Dumas *père*, Walter Scott, and George Sand. Numbers, though, reveal that literature like the serialized novels of Eugène Sue, the Napoleonic songs of Béranger, and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was even more favored by the public. In addition, Farwell presents abundant lithographs of environments, interests, and customs paralleling those described by 19th-century French authors, notably Baudelaire, Balzac, and Flaubert, together with portraits and caricatures of celebrated writers and images that reflect current attitudes and such preoccupations as the nature of educated women, the bohemian life-styles of writers, and the controversy between classicism and Romanticism.

Farwell says explicitly that this project is not a definitive study but rather is intended to provide a research tool for others, and her essay prefacing the catalog specifications is accordingly a brief twenty-seven pages, classifying and surveying the lithographs. She is nonetheless provocative in bringing forward larger topics, for example, the relationship between “high” literature and that of lesser quality but greater circulation; the relevance of economic, social, and industrial changes that fostered popular art and literature; and the extent to which lengthier descriptions in literature dealing with contemporary life were stimulated by the exposure of authors to prints detailing their subjects.

Future volumes in the series will deal with the themes of portraits and types, urban and military genre, the city, the country, piety and the family, love and courtship, contemporary events and caricature, historicism and exoticism, tourism and travel, pin-ups and erotica, and lithography in art and commerce. Ultimately some 5,000 lithographs will be presented—and at relatively modest cost, since the high-quality reproductions of each work are in microfiche form (usefully accompanied by B.N. negative numbers and instructions for photo orders). Though specialists will still need to journey to Paris to

examine the material of which Farwell is publishing but an estimated 5 percent, her ambitious achievement will indeed establish an indispensable resource for anyone working on 19th-century history.

CONSTANCE CAIN HUNGERFORD*

Fox Talbot and the Invention of Photography. By Gail Buckland. Boston: David R. Godine, 1980. Pp. 216; illustrations. \$50.00.

This is a definitive biography of William Henry Fox Talbot, who invented, in stages, the photographic process that eventually eliminated all rival processes and became photography as we know it today. From its origin in 1835, the camera has been accepted as a machine that enables the user to create images with an aesthetic content strong enough to make them works of art. Historians, critics, the marketplace, museums, and the general public today, almost 150 years after the first images made by Talbot, accept photography as one of the fine arts. Photographers have become world famous as artists, and the camera has also become an enormously entertaining piece of technology for millions who enjoy taking snapshots of everything. Even the advertising of cameras and films focuses on the artistic value of recording events.

Nowhere in this general attitude is there recognition of the fundamental importance of the camera to scientists. Though Talbot believed his invention would be a boon to artists, he was certain that its more important function would be in scientific research. And he was right. In the sciences today the camera is indispensable. If we consider the fact that our civilization is created by our technology, that the enormous population growth of the world since 1900 was dependent on a continuing revolution in technology, and that national goals everywhere are tied to technological developments, and if we accept the fact that modern technology is derived from scientific knowledge of nature, then the camera may be said to be a critical factor in the evolution of 20th-century science, technology, and civilization.

If cameras, films, lighting, and printing techniques had not attained the reliability and precision they had toward the end of the 19th century, the growth of scientific knowledge thereafter cannot be imagined. Its trends would certainly have been arrested in the 1880s. By that time, research was ready to probe into the structure of the atom (then just a theoretical and solid speck), the mysterious dual nature of light, and the baffling relationships shared by matter, energy, magnetism, and electricity. Without the camera, the invisible, near lightning-fast particles and their whirling configurations out of

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