
While the triumphs of artist William Russell Birch (1755-1834) are well-known to devotees of American and British art and architecture through his legacy of view books, the trials of his career may be less familiar. Both are laid out in this detailed biography of Birch’s life as an artist and landscape designer, from his early years in England to the latter half of his life in America.


The chapters that comprise part one tell the story of Birch’s life and career in a linear fashion, yet the information presented is richly contextualized. The reader is taken from England to the United States at a pivotal period. Independence from Britain was still recent, and the city of Philadelphia was on the verge of losing its status as the nation’s capital. In addition to being an enamel painter, Birch published three view books: Délices de la Grande Bretagne (London, 1791); The City of Philadelphia (1800), and The Country Seats of the United States (1808). A full chapter is devoted to each of the view books, and each provides an abundance of information on the recruitment and diversity of the books’ subscribers, the selection and strategic arrangement of views, and the varied reception for each.

A compilation of primary source material, the majority of which has not previously been published, comprises the second part of the volume. Authors Sherk and Cooperman thoughtfully edited and merged two slightly different copies of Birch’s autobiography. The resulting single, inclusive version is clear and effective, delightfully allowing the by now well-prepared reader to hear Birch’s story in his voice. Appendices provide details on his patronage, a list of the enamel paintings he completed, subscribers to his view books, and more.

As the first biography of Birch, Picturing the American Scene provides long-awaited insight into the politics of patronage and social mores that directed Birch’s career. Ample color illustrations, including many previously unpublished watercolors, enamels, and engravings by Birch, are clearly printed and, in most cases, positioned near the corresponding text. While fans of Birch and his view books will delight in reading it cover-to-cover, the clearly defined chapters and appendices allow it to serve as a comprehensive reference resource on the life of Birch. Recommended for academic libraries with collecting interests in British and American art.

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