
The legacy of Irish artist and inventor Robert Barker is only slightly known among historians and artists, but Oleksijczuk (assistant professor of Art and Culture Studies at the School for the Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University) has remedied that oversight in a marvelous new book on Barker’s panoramas. Barker was making a living as a portrait painter in Edinburgh in the late eighteenth century when he refined an idea to paint a 360-degree view of his subject, initially a view of Edinburgh. Obtaining a patent for the concept in 1787, he first displayed his work in November, 1788. Barker moved the work to London and View of Edinburgh opened in March of 1789. Termed a panorama, his painting was housed in a rotunda designed by Scottish architect Robert Mitchell in Leicester Square in London by 1792. The building came to be known simply as the Panorama. Although rival exhibits appeared in London and nearby towns when Barker’s patent expired in 1801, his legacy was firmly established by the time of his death in 1806. Barker, combined with his son Henry Aston Barker, painted and exhibited over two dozen successful panoramas.

Oleksijczuk’s well-designed and executed text aptly details Barker’s art and invention, the success he enjoyed, and the relationship between panorama and audience. She concludes the panoramas left an impact of British imperialism, as subjects included not only city landscapes but views of the Royal Navy and noted sea victories, including Lord Nelson’s great naval victories. The scope of the panoramas allowed viewers to experience scenes far beyond what the average Brit could imagine, thus creating national and social pride.

The author’s final chapter centers on the keys to the panoramas—printed “keys” or guides that both informed and led visitors through the exhibits. These keys, many of which are reproduced in the book, were not only informational but often seen as keepsakes of the exhibit to be valued. The chapter on the keys is a fitting contribution to art and social history.

As with many works of art history, the illustrations and notes here represent significant contributions to the final work. Mostly in black and white, the generous illustrations not only complement the text but provide visual examples of what viewers experienced. The notes serve a vital purpose and include contemporary accounts of some of the exhibits. A bibliography and useful index conclude the volume. In all, Oleksijczuk has made a remarkable contribution to British life and art in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The result is a handsome cloth book, aimed at art and social historians, a valuable contribution to the growing interest in panorama studies, and a must have for art libraries.

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