

PROVIDENCE ATHENAEUM – Wheaton College student essay, spring 2016.

Excursion View Company, Providence, *Excursion Views of Narragansett Bay and Block Island*, 1878. H. 5 in. x W. 13 ¼ in. (12.7 x 33.65 cm)

The Athenaeum's *Excursion Views of Narragansett Bay and Block Island*, created in Providence and printed in Buffalo, New York in 1878, captures seaside views of Narragansett Bay and views from Rhode Island's Block Island. By means of dual hand-cranked, this moving, mini-panorama served as a kind of precursor to modern motion pictures.

The nineteenth-century moving panorama was introduced as a “new art form ...conceived to create a market for mediated realities and emancipated gazes”.¹ Using a method, developed at the end of the eighteenth century, for constructing accurate perspectives on curved surfaces, the nineteenth century saw the installation of 360-degree images in purpose built sites known as “panoramas”.² Both still and moving panoramas were popular across both Europe and North America as a form of entertainment.³ The normally painted illusions and “virtual spaces” from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries now left the palaces and villas of the wealthy, upper class and entered the public as an early innovation of mass entertainment.⁴ The building, marketing and operating of Panoramas became a lucrative industry.⁵ The spectator was positioned in the center of the panorama, surrounded completely by an illusionistic painting of a type of landscape. However, subjects included a taste of the “exotic and the other” as well as the scenic and sublime – it is the “scenic and sublime” that the Athenaeum's smaller version moving panorama illustrates.⁶ Since panoramas were created for a public audience, it is unusual that the Athenaeum's moving panorama is meant for a single viewer, rather than for a collective audience.

Moreover, panoramas were among the first manifestations of mediated visual culture –capable of transporting audiences to another “location” by representing environments from all over the globe –from Paris and Istanbul to picturesque views of Massachusetts and Rhode Island.⁷ With the increase of transportation through steamboat technology and the spread of the railroads people began to travel more frequently and craved memorabilia reminiscent of their travels or excursions.⁸

Excursion Views of Narragansett Bay and Block Island was created as an expensive souvenir for boosting tourism within Rhode Island, officially dubbed the “Ocean State” a century later.⁹ This device represents a kind of “virtual reality,”¹⁰ allowing the viewer to travel along the shoreline

¹ Erkki Huhtamo. *Illustrations in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles*. (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2013). P. 174

² Martin Lister. *New Media: A Critical Introduction, Second Edition*. (Routledge, 2009) p. 121

³ *Id*

⁴ *Id*

⁵ *Id*

⁶ *Id*

⁷ Huhtamo, p. 176

⁸ *Id*

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 207

¹⁰ Lister, pp. 121-122

without ever leaving dry land. In the nineteenth century, taking steamship voyages between New York and Boston was one of the faster ways of traveling, but ironically this mode was equally prized for the leisure that it implied and a particularly popular route among New Englanders was the voyage from Providence to Block Island; not only did passengers see hundreds of miles of beautiful coastline, but they could also retire to a luxurious salon for food and drink within the steamboat.¹¹

These “Excursion Tours” became so popular that a firm dubbed the Excursion View Company, commissioned artists to draw complete trips as a passenger might see it. The company in Providence commissioned Clay & Co, a printing company in Buffalo, New York to print the panoramic views.¹² The company did not specialize in only these panoramic scenes – they also printed “stationary and fire alarm cards”.¹³ Clay & Co created drawings of the panoramic route and then transferred the drawings to lithograph stones, which were printed in full color panels. These strips were mounted on rollers in a wooden box, so that by turning the handles, a viewer could simulate the entire voyage – in this case, from Providence to Block Island and back. Typically a canvas or lithographic prints were wound from one vertical roller to another behind a framed “stage”, or in the case of the Athenaeum’s object, within a wooden box with one framed opening, allowing the lithographic panoramic scene to pass by as a viewer cranked the metal handles.

The Providence Athenaeum’s panorama takes the viewer along the eastern shore of Providence, starting at Fox Point. Most moving panoramas represented only one shore, printing or painting both sides would have been more costly, and their simultaneous presentation more than difficult. However, the Athenaeum’s moving panorama shows one side but because of the route, the viewer is able to see how the boat travels starting from the eastern side to the western side. The box has two clear sides that allows the viewer to see the panoramic scene as it passes. It is the same, oval route, both split up between the two clear, viewing sides of the wooden box. One side shows of the wooden box shows the view leaving Providence harbor from the east while the opposite side of the box shows the view returning from Block Island back into Providence from the western route.

Many of these moving panoramas came with a paper map attached on the bottom of its wooden frame that indicated exactly the route the steamboat followed from Providence to Block Island and back. Though the Athenaeum’s moving panorama does not contain a map anymore – most likely due to damage – other moving panoramas that depict the same route as the Athenaeum’s still have the map attached on the bottom. The steamboat left the harbor of Providence and passed the following locations from the eastern side: Fox Point, Nayat Point, Bristol Harbor, Bristol Ferry, Mt. Hope Bay, Coasters Harbor, Newport Harbor, Brentons Reef. Then the boat would reach Block Island and travel completely around the back side of the island – the

¹² Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors. Annual Meetings of 1878: Erie County, N.Y. (Courier Company, Printers, Buffalo, 1879). P. 34

¹³ *Id*

panorama depicts notable locations around the island including, Breakwaters, Old Light House, and Block Rock. The boat would continue back to Providence via a western route. Important sites from the boat's return included, Beaver Tail Light, Dutch 1st (South Ferry), Canonicat 1st (west), Canonicut Park, Jamestown, Point Judith, Bonnet Point, Wickford Harbor, Cowest Harbor, Warwick Light, Rocky Point, and Sassafras Point. Because the route went from east to west, *Excursion Views of Narragansett Bay and Block Island* identifies many of the leading shoreline hotels, homes, rivers, industries, rocks, forts and sailing vessels, that were present along this route, and most notably the steamboat that chugs along the Narragansett Bay and outwards into the Long Island Sound, where Block Island is situated.

Technological innovations such the steamboat in *Excursion Views of Narragansett Bay and Block Island* – demonstrates how the United States grew into one of the world's leading industrial powers.¹⁴ By illustrating the innovations in transportation and communications that facilitated this innovation in faster, more efficient travel, the *Excursion Views of Narragansett Bay and Block Island* serves as a visual reminder of American progress during the late nineteenth century.

It is unknown who donated this piece to the library, but it stands to reason that its original owner would have admired its technological ingenuity and celebration of the deservedly famous Narragansett Bay. For its part, the library would have supported its members' interest in tourism, a phenomenon that noticeably increased around the 1870s (indeed, even today travel guides remain central to the library's lending collection). The scenic, calm and serene views of the Narragansett and Block Island waterways would have been enticing as “destination locations”¹⁵ to citizens of the city at a time of rapidly expanding industrialization; this hand-held device provided a form of escape that, like the Athenaeum itself, offered members a sense of retreat from the working world.

Excursion Views of Narragansett Bay and Block Island, however, was not the only panoramic view that the Athenaeum collected. The library owns many prints and views that illustrate the city of Providence in a panoramic style. One particular print that illustrates not only the city at the height of industrial revolution but emphasizes the importance of commerciality through the waterway system is John Badger Bachelder's *Providence, RI, Harbor View* (1858), which the library owns in its collections. Juxtaposing *Excursion Views of Narragansett Bay and Block Island's* emphasis on tourism and leisure, Bachelder illustrated a panoramic scene of the city, which highlights the commerciality and trade through the inclusion of the many commercial boats within Providence's bustling harbor. Like the artist of *Excursion Views of Narragansett Bay and Block Island*, Bachelder was interested in tourism, and noted Providence to be destination spot for summer travel. However, before tourism entered its height around the middle to late nineteenth century, the Athenaeum had been collecting travel literature and maps since the early 1840s.¹⁶ One such example of this is the library's collection of books donated by Holder

¹⁴ Daniel Walker Howe. “America's 19th Century Highway: The River: A new exhibition of American wonders underscores the debt our country owes to its waterways”. *Smithsonian Magazine* (Smithsonian Magazine, Nov. 2011).

¹⁵ Huhtamo, p. 178

¹⁶ Jane Lancaster. *Inquire Within* (The Providence Athenaeum, 2003) p. XXXV

Borden Bowen, a Providence native who actively donated books to the Athenaeum all his life.¹⁷ Bowen was mainly interested in memoirs, buildings, but mostly importantly eighteenth century travel and exploration.¹⁸ His collection of almost 2,000 volumes attests to the library's fondness for collecting literature pertaining to traveling.¹⁹

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¹⁷ *Id*

¹⁸ *Id*

¹⁹ *Id*