

Denise Blake Oleksijczuk

The First Panoramas: Visions of British Imperialism

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 222 pp., 4 color and 56 b/w illus. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 9780816648610; \$90.00 (cloth) ISBN 9780816648603

No other book on the medium of the panorama has examined its first decades as closely and contextually as Denise Blake Oleksijczuk's *The First Panoramas*.¹ The author questions the predominant characterization of the medium as propaganda tool that she observes in earlier studies of the panorama as well as in some of the more recent painting-specific studies. She suggests a close connection between the medium and ideology developed only over time with "Barkers' panoramas [shrinking] the world as they enlarged Britain's place in it" (171). She sets out to explore the different ways audiences would have experienced specific panoramas. Benefiting from the insights of visual culture studies, she seeks to provide nuanced interpretations of the potential readings of the panoramas with the help of exhibition paraphernalia (keys, descriptive sheets, and reference booklets) and other textual sources, such as diaries, letters, reviews, and advertisements.

The book is organized chronologically around the study of Robert Barker's first panoramas, and presents in a final fifth chapter the overall development of panorama keys until 1819. In the introduction, the author turns to Barker's patent of 1787 to thoroughly describe the specifications of the panorama exhibition space, and to interpret the novel sensory experiences it offered. While Barker's early panoramas depicted city and battle spaces, she identifies a shift in their subject matter in the first three decades of the patent to the movements of the British military.

One of the distinctive aspects of the book is the way it shows how nationalism and imperialism became imbricated with the panorama. The first two chapters examine Barker's first panorama, the *View of Edinburgh and the Surrounding Country from the Calton Hill*, exhibited first in Edinburgh in 1788 and in London in the following years, and his second panorama,

View of London from the Roof of Albion Mills, exhibited in London from 1791 to 1794, respectively. In both cases, the author argues that the images would have been read differently by groups with British or Scottish political alliances. One prominent reading would be that the panorama of Edinburgh portrayed the modernization of the city and celebrated Scotland's incorporation within the British union. This is a complex and contested national history: over time, the Battle of Prestonpans of 1745, where the Jacobite Scottish successfully rose against the Hanoverian government in London, came to be mythologized in Scottish art and culture. Although the *View of Edinburgh* had no direct reference to the battle, a last paragraph on the battle in its pamphlet as well as the history of the sponsoring group (Archers) leads the author to suggest that the painting would have allowed certain viewers to "take [back] ownership of the city" (46). In a similar vein, the view of London exhibited in 1792–93 depicted a scene from the roof of the technologically advanced Albion Mills, designed by a Scottish engineer. The mill and some of the other key buildings depicted in the panorama showed "how Scots had risen in the English metropolis" (65) and simultaneously "[fostered] pride in British achievements" (65). She suggests that the choice of subject matter implied a nod to Scottish Jacobite sentiments. By following the political cleavage narrated by mainstream histories, e.g., Jacobites versus Hanoverians, she proposes that the viewers' political alliances shaped their experience of the panoramas rather than showing how the panorama as spatial technology could have worked to create new kinds of associations. Visual representations can become ways of rendering possibilities, of conversation between individuals. The debate about the status of the panorama painting as an innovation on the form of perspectival painting or a delusive spectacle, that the author narrates, is such a conversation through which social stratification is articulated.

Examples show the complex international context of the panoramas. The famous Panorama building on Leicester Square was designed by architect Robert Mitchell with two panoramas at different

levels, the smaller one on top so that both could receive natural light from the roof. It opened in 1793 with an exhibition of the *View of the Grand Fleet Moored at Spithead*. The painting represented the assembly of the British fleet in 1791, which was part of a British effort to coerce the Russians to settle their territorial disputes with the Ottomans several months after Britain had declared war on France, another country that had aggressed on Ottoman territories. Within this political climate of British and Ottoman alliance, Constantinople became the first foreign city exhibited at the Leicester Square Panorama in 1801–2 and it was shown in two panoramas, from viewpoints on opposite sides of the Bosphorus, displayed simultaneously in the upper and lower levels of the building, enabling viewers the opportunity to compare.

What its producers intended the panorama to mean never fully corresponded with the diversity of meanings and understandings spectators brought to the images. The panorama did not necessarily offer an empowering experience that reinforced visitors' straightforward identification with the imperial state; many found it to be destabilizing and overwhelming. While suggesting the panorama had an important "role as a context for formulating new subjectivities," (19) the author also acknowledges the difficulty of recovering and tracing audience readings and responses. A great example arrives in the final and longest chapter, on the keys to panoramas exhibited at the Leicester Square Panorama from 1793 to 1819, where inscriptions and annotations by viewers challenged the authority of the painting, and helped position themselves in space and time.

The First Panoramas is a beautifully produced book. A color foldout reproduces the aquatints of the three city views discussed, Edinburgh, London, and Constantinople, and offers a useful timeline of panorama exhibitions from 1794 to 1821. In its careful reading and contextualization of select panoramas and in its effort to relate the analysis to the broader literature on vision and visuality, from sociology (e.g., Henri Lefebvre) to psychoanalysis (e.g., Jacques Lacan), *The First Panoramas* makes a very important contribution to the study of panoramas, which are once again

being built with nationalist subjects. The book invites reflection on the experiential and ideological repercussions of the medium today.

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Note

1. Pioneering studies of the medium from the late 1970s and 1980s have tended to provide broad overviews. They coincided with the emergence of experiments and writings on virtual reality, visual culture studies, and the rediscovery of the history of the panorama as the first mass medium and they called for the conservation of surviving panoramas, leading to the establishment of the “International Panorama Council” in 1992. Some of these studies are Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978); Stephan Oettermann, *Das Panorama* (Frankfurt am Main: Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1981); trans. as *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (New York: Zone Books, 1997); Ralph Hyde, *Panoromania!: The Art and Entertainment of the “All-Embracing” View* (London: Trefoil, in association with the Barbican Art Gallery, 1988).

Stefan Weber

Damascus: Ottoman Modernity and Urban Transformation (1808–1918)

Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2009.
2 vols. Vol. 1: text, 464 pp., 646 illus. (some in color); vol. 2: catalogue, 664 pp., 666 illus. (some in color), 1025 ground plans, 7 city plans folded in back pocket. \$245, ISBN 8779344240

Stefan Weber’s monumental two-volume study of modern Damascus is an extraordinary contribution to the study of urbanism and architecture in the modern Middle East, as well as to the study of Mediterranean urban history generally. It is the product of years of fieldwork, of architectural and urban surveys, of archival research, and most of all, of thoughtful analysis. At two hefty volumes, the work dwarfs any other study on modern Arab cities, literally as well as figuratively.

Damascus, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the world’s oldest cities, is best known to architectural historians as one of the most important centers of the

classical Islamic world. Over the course of the long nineteenth century, however, Damascus, like many provincial centers of the Ottoman Empire, underwent a tremendous transformation. Modernization altered its development by adding new neighborhoods, large thoroughfares, urban squares, public buildings, commercial infrastructure, and domestic architecture. Zeynep Çelik’s recent book, *Empire, Architecture and the City*, presents an overview of these developments throughout the empire, and shows how the Ottoman center staged its visions of empire through the construction of public space in its Arabic-speaking provinces.¹ Weber’s book places Damascus, a provincial capital, at the center of analysis, providing a history of a single city and its buildings and people with an unprecedented degree of richness and depth. His book highlights the links and distinctions in urban and architectural practices between Damascus and Istanbul, the empire’s capital, and between Damascus and many Arab cities to which it relates, including Beirut, Aleppo, and Salt (in present-day Jordan). Yet we also have unexpected comparisons, as with Bitlis (in present-day Turkey).

It is no accident that the historic photographs on the cover of both volumes prominently feature people. Volume 1 shows a public street, the Darwishyya, around 1890, with a crowd of mostly men eyeing the photographer curiously, conveying the sense of an emerging public sphere, while volume 2 features an image of mostly women and children at home, forming a tableau of domesticity in the interior courtyard of Bayt Lisbuna around 1900. Throughout the book Weber emphasizes the social dimension of urban change and architecture: he follows those who make spaces, those who use them, and those who alter them. Likewise, the book is in conversation with other recent urban studies of the former Ottoman provinces that seek an alternative to metropole-centered methods for the study of empire and those that privilege the nation-states that succeeded the empire.² Like these studies, *Damascus* highlights the negotiation between capital and province, and emphasizes Ottoman centralization as well as local agency, cooperation, and resistance. Thus Weber

skillfully introduces individuals such as the modernizing Ottoman governor Husayn Nazim Pasha, who spearheaded the development of the new residential neighborhood of al-Muhajirin (1895–1911), where he built himself a modern villa on the slopes of Mount Qasyun, with unobstructed views of Damascus (1: 98–103). Members of local notable clans such as the Mardam Beks seized new opportunities to secure their family’s ascendancy, reflected in the choices made in constructing their businesses and homes (1: 58–63). Fatima and Ahmad Mukhtar Mardam Bek modeled the new mores of the age when they had their photographs taken together, she with her face uncovered (1: 62, 1: 408). We encounter powerful individuals who instigated change, such as the Christian scholar and diplomat Mikha’il Mishaqa, who successfully mediated among Ottoman, European, and American economic interests (1: 68–69), but also anonymous everyday urbanites who used the new tramway, asserted new notions of citizenship, relaxed at the riverfront cafes, and attended some of the Middle East’s earliest purpose-built movie theaters (Shahbandar Cinema, built in 1916, survives in good condition: 2: 48).

The book’s most absorbing sections showcase Weber’s skills as architectural historian, historian, and detective. He follows the large urban projects of the period, such as Marja Square, strategically sited, designed for new traffic patterns, centered on a monument and a fountain, and surrounded by civic and commercial buildings that are emblematic of modern Damascus (1: 114–70). Weber shows how Damascenes made use of the new buildings and institutions, along with new forms of political participation and leisure activities. Transformation is also illustrated by novel choices in domestic architecture. A new urban house type in the second half of the nineteenth century, which Weber calls the “*konak* house type,” centered on an interior hall that governed circulation within the home, and asserted a presence on the street with ornate façades accentuated by large windows (1: 331–51). Weber shows how this new domestic architecture, so distinct from earlier house types with their open interior courtyards and unadorned street façades, did not derive from local older