



Smithsonian American Art Museum

“The Imagery of the Ear”: The Visual Culture of Sounds and Sound Technologies in America, 1848–1948

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My dissertation examines images that depict sound (or non-sound) in terms of the contemporary historical, cultural, and scientific issues surrounding noise, sounds, and the act of listening. From 1848 to 1948, America’s soundscape underwent tremendous changes, not only in terms of the inventions of the telephone, phonograph, and radio, but also because of the increased noise heard in the city streets, factories, and in the nearby countryside. Listening to period voices and looking closely at paintings, advertisements, prints, and other graphic material, I will investigate the complex relationship between visual representation and sonic experience. Chapter one argues that Richard Caton Woodville’s chatty townsfolk and straining listeners iterate the invention of the telegraph and newfound medical interest in the ear. My second chapter will consider how Thomas Eakins transcribes the visual and sonic physiognomy of his sitters at a time when the phonograph was boasting mimetic accuracy. In chapter three, I will explore how Winslow Homer displays his discomfort with new sound technologies like the telephone by emphasizing the power of the human voice and the old-fashioned use of bells and horns in the countryside and out at sea. Chapter four examines Edward Hopper “whiting out” the noises of New York City with his spare, lonely scenes, in contrast to the visual cacophony of Ashcan artists like William Glackens and Everett Shinn. And lastly, chapter five considers Jacob Lawrence’s proud depictions of African American oral traditions during the period when the hugely successful radio show, “Amos ‘n’ Andy,” mocked them.