



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Orality in Nineteenth-Century American Visual Culture

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This dissertation examines issues of narrative and storytelling as they apply to nineteenth-century visual culture, focusing particularly on objects produced between 1830 and 1870. Genre paintings, historical scenes, landscapes, illustrations, sculptures, and even ephemera-like games and advertisements produced during this time period often relied heavily on narratives to enchant viewers and communicate specific messages. It is easy to oversimplify such images because of their popularity or perceived sentimentality; however, they allow for analysis of narrative as a structural force, as well as viewers' multiple reactions to visual representations of narratives.

The project focuses on understanding viewer involvement with these works and the values and meanings that such objects signified in their time period. There are three main subjects for investigation: 1) the American viewer's experience of objects and the propensity to tell stories about and in front of works of art; 2) storytelling as a process engaged in by the artist, with particular focus on self-conscious works constructing stories about telling stories; and 3) stories about art and the ways in which nineteenth-century art criticism and popular fiction treated images and objects. An analysis of narrative as process and an investigation into the cultural history of sound and orality as part of the multisensory experience of an artwork will serve as the theoretical underpinnings of this approach. Ultimately, this dissertation aims to answer the basic questions of why storytelling emerged as a subject for serious artistic representation between 1830 and 1870 and how the viewing process might be seen as interactive, learned, and multisensory.