

Conserving Reflections of the Civil War: A Case Study of a Nineteenth-Century Panorama Box

ABSTRACT

The panorama box is one of many types of objects known as peep-shows. The Italian painter and theorist Leon Battista Alberti first introduced peep-shows in the fifteenth century. Over the centuries peep-shows have developed into many forms. They are unusually designed art objects that present the observer with a unique viewing perspective. One example is the polyrama panoptique, which uses manipulated paper supports and transmitted and reflected light to produce day and night effects of the same image. Another example is an anamorphic view, which is an extremely distorted image when viewed on a flat plane that appears in focus when the image is viewed from a very acute angle or with the aid of an instrument such as the reflective surface of a highly polished metal cylinder.

The panorama box provides its own unique effect as well. It incorporates a series of vignettes to illustrate a story or subject such as the scenes from an historical event. One can think of the panorama box as a shallow box with a cut-out window front where the illustration appears. There is no back panel on the box, but an open space. Wooden spindles are placed within the box at both ends. Adhered to the spindles is a continuous roll of paper, which is made of single sheets that have been attached to each other end-to-end. The attached single sheets are hand-colored prints. The resulting roll may be anywhere from eight to twelve feet long or more. A crank is used to turn the spindles, which allows the illustrations to move across the window of the box. Sometimes a complex mechanical system is used to wind the dowels. In this way different parts of an image, such as the lower and upper portions of a face, can be interchanged with the twist of a few knobs.

Many well-known panorama boxes were produced in England during the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century. Sometimes they were crude in their

design and appearance. Others were very elaborate and richly decorated with fancy paper covers and gold. Thomas Rowlandson, English artist and caricaturist, created panorama boxes. Panorama boxes were produced commercially in the United States during the last half of the nineteenth century. They often accompanied children's books. Panorama boxes were produced well into the twentieth century but soon disappeared.

In this conservation case study, treatment was performed on an extremely damaged nineteenth-century panorama box, which depicts important scenes from the American Civil War (1861-1865). The Milton Bradley Company produced the panorama box sometime between 1868 and 1870. The object is a small box (31.1 cm h. x 20.7 cm w. x 5.5 cm d.) with long strips of paper attached end-to-end. The twelve-foot long paper strip (when assembled) is attached to wooden spindles. The rear of the box is completely open and the front has a large cut-out window, through which the hand-colored lithograph scenes are viewed. Adornment around the window opening is a hand-colored lithograph scene. The paper strip was torn and separated into many pieces. Attempts had been made in the past to repair the paper strip. The paper-covered cardboard box had surface losses due to abrasion.

Conservation included detaching the individual sections of the paper strip locally as well as through complete immersion in calcium-enriched deionized water. Some sections required an enzyme treatment to remove old repairs. The sections were reattached to each other and the spindles. The box received a minimum amount of attention to assure that its aesthetic integrity was kept intact. Since the repaired paper strip was still fragile to handle, a color reproduction facsimile of the entire roll was produced. A custom-made storage box houses the panorama box in one compartment and the facsimile in the other. The user is urged to use the fac-

simile instead of the original to insure the continued preservation of the object.

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