

Title slide

(Slide 1)

The Library Company of Philadelphia holds over 1700 stereographs, a quintessential form of later nineteenth-century parlor entertainment that graced the majority of the era's middle-class homes.

(Slide 2 & 3)

A unique visual medium, stereographs were composed of a double-sided photograph mounted on card stock that when viewed with an instrument known as a stereoviewer created a three-dimensional image a century before the 3-D fad of the 1950s and today.

(Slide 4)

Issued commercially in England in 1852 and first published in the United States in 1854 by pioneer Philadelphia photographers William and Frederick Langenheim, stereographs cost 25 to 75 cents each and depicted land and cityscapes; ethnographic views; images of historic sites; sensational events; and genre scenes.

An estimated 5 to 6 million titles were published in the United States between 1860 and 1890. The first mass photographic medium, the photographs usually included explicative titles or descriptive narratives that epitomize the evolving visual culture of the period.

(Slide 5)

Philadelphia, a center of early photography, also served as a center of early stereograph production. Many of the pioneer Philadelphia photographers issued their work as stereographs, including John Moran who specialized in city and landscape views that documented the changing architecture of the city

(Slide 6 & Slide 7)

Stereographs were purchased through a variety of venues, including from opticians, photographers, stationers, dry and fancy good stores, and door to door canvassers.

(Slide 8)

Occasionally, these photographs were also used for advertisement purposes or as a promotional item. The image itself, such as the interior or exterior of a storefront, could serve as the advertisement, or an advertisement was pasted on the back.

(Slide 9)

Stereographs and stereoviewers should not be confused with stereopticons – 19th-century projection devices used in public exhibitions to show a series of glass transparencies, i.e., lantern slides, which convey a story, such as the exploration of a foreign country.

(Slide 10)

However, stereographs did serve to replicate the experience of cycloramas - panoramic, cylindrical paintings that provided spectators with 360-degree views of life-like dramatic historical scenes. This view is from a cyclorama depicting key sites in Jerusalem related to the Crucifixion.

(Slide 11)

By the later nineteenth century, stock publishing houses, not the photographers of the works whose negatives and rights they purchased, dominated the stereograph trade. In addition, the photographs, produced in the tens of thousands, more often depicted comic, genre, and sentimental tableaux vivants than previously; and often in series, possibly to compete with the ever more commonplace nickelodeons.

(Slide 12)

The library's collections contain a number of these types of views by such prolific distributors as Keystone View Company established in 1892 by Meadville, Pa. photographer B.L. Singley; Underwood & Underwood established by brothers Bert and Elmer Underwood in Ottawa, Ks. in 1882; and Griffith & Griffith established by George W. Griffith and his brother in Philadelphia circa 1896.

(Slide 13)

William Rau, a respected Philadelphia commercial photographer for the Pennsylvania Railroad, photographed numerous, typically evocative genre stereographs, primarily issued by the stock house Griffith & Griffith. The often racist and sexist themes of his and his contemporaries' genre and comic pieces provide a window onto the race, gender, and class tensions of the later nineteenth century.

Case in point, Rau's wedding themed view is staged quite differently when African American, as opposed to white models. The greenery disappears and crumbling plastered walls are substituted as the backdrop.

(Slide 14)

Another provocative stereograph regarding race in the library's collection depicts a satiric visual trope first utilized in the 1830s in the print series 'Life in Philadelphia.'

Mocking the city's antebellum black community's aspirations of a middle class life, women were often depicted with mannish features. In this vein, the stereograph publisher retained a male actor to portray a woman.

(Slide 15)

The married New Woman proved another popular target in comic stereographs. Portrayed as an emancipated woman who wore pants, rode bicycles, smoked, and forced the man to perform her homemaker duties, this character appeared in over 30 variants of similarly staged stereographs marketed internationally circa 1875 through circa 1906.

(Slide 16)

This image shows one of the earlier depictions of the married New Woman in a stereograph. The husband character simultaneously cooks, holds the baby, and maintains a tranquility that allows the cat to rest undisturbed in the corner. Maybe it was not so unnatural for a man to do the housework?

(Slide 17)

These stereographs are variant versions of the same title issued by the Keystone View Company, the firm established by B.L. Singley. The image must have proven popular to be re-photographed and republished within a few years' time. The male model appears the same in the later version, but not the woman, whose face is visible in the mirror of the sideboard.

(Slide 18)

Many of the female models in the New Woman stereographs have their heads turned away from the camera. Such an arrangement causes the viewer to focus on the indignant face of the male model. This view goes so far as to use a prop to completely obscure the character's face. Although not easily visible, the New Woman character reads the *Ladies' Home Journal*, the popular 19th-century women's magazine originally published in Philadelphia. Stereographs depicting this New Woman scenario often contained "Wash Day" in the title.

(Slide 19)

Occasionally, New Woman stereographs were photographed as a series of genre scenes. This one complemented another with a set up similar to the previous that shows a woman with her feet up and reading as her husband toiled at the wash. The extreme portrayal of the contradicted wife, as physically abusive is unflattering, but was probably a fantasy moment of more than a few 19th-century housewives tired of living up to the ideals of the many domestic manuals published at the time.

Perhaps, instead of dismissing the New Woman, some of the past female viewers of this imagery saw past the hyperbole of the negative depictions of them, and became one.

(Slide 20)

The publication of stereographs like those described waned by the early 20th century and the dominance of the nickelodeon.

Keystone View Company absorbed the other major publishing companies and focused production on educational series designed for classroom use, such as interior views of government buildings - in this case the Philadelphia Mint. Informative descriptions about the content of the images were included on the back of the stereographs, followed by a series of questions to be relayed by the class instructor. The educational tools were issued into the 1930s before the demise of an industry that added a third dimension to 19th-century visual culture and our understanding of it today.