



Editorial

OUR June 2014 issue takes up the human predilection to plot, map, and fix—activities that follow from our need to exert control, whether over errant or chaotic emotions, over environments, over our own or another’s body, or, most broadly, over the more amorphous concepts of time and space.

We begin with Peter Stoneley’s exploration of Harvard professor and art collector Denman Waldo Ross (1853–1935), who famously proposed a theory of pure design. Captivated by the notion of balance in art (and in life), he believed that training and discipline should take precedence over pleasure and sensuality. But focused on design as intently as it was, Ross’s theorizing became detached from any explicit moral scheme, thus opening the door for abstraction and expressionist distortion in the artistic realm as well as free association in the sexual and social realms. Actively resisting such modernist, bohemian impulses, Ross instead participated in the mainstream, anthropological-colonialist practice of his day in which “others” are described, assessed, portrayed, reported on, and (in one sense, at least) collected.

The voyeuristic contemplation of others was manifested in antebellum America in a strange fascination with blindness, a trend Justin Clark seeks to demystify. In 1829, a school was established in Boston to train those deprived of sight, and children such as Laura Bridgman, whose skills and infirmities were on display at fundraising fairs, became period celebrities. The blind had a special interest for the city’s Unitarian reformers, who valued the senses for their role in supplying and evaluating the “moral evidence” upon which rational Christianity was properly founded. In explaining how they used their other four senses to navigate through life, blind authors, whose autobiographies were avidly read, advanced the Unitarians’ efforts to debunk the era’s ecstatic visionary religious culture as well as to challenge religious skepticism,

which denied that the divine could be inferred from tangible phenomena.

If a blind child could find his way through Boston's labyrinthine streets, then certainly tourists could be instructed to do so as well. Moses Kimball, who founded the Boston Museum in 1844, and P. T. Barnum, who established the American Museum in New York City in 1850, were quintessential promoters who profited from sightseers' curious fascination with the city. Each staged William H. Smith's *The Drunkard*, a wildly successful temperance melodrama that depicted specific urban geographies and notorious street types. Replicating and at times revising the goals of contemporary tourist literature, Michael D'Alessandro explains, *The Drunkard* imaged the city as potentially corrupting and yet, because mappable, as fully knowable and approachable, a proposition at once delightfully thrilling and dangerously false.

The epitaph, generally carved onto a gravestone sunk into a particular spot of ground, is tied to its materiality, its fixedness. In *Battle-Pieces* (1866), Jillian Spivey Caddell shows, Herman Melville adopts and adapts this familiar, workaday genre to theorize about the ways in which the Civil War had unmoored American lives, stranding the bodies of its casualties in unfamiliar places. Disrupting the typical epitaphic relationship among the dead person being remembered, the poem itself, and the reader who encounters the epitaph and is often addressed by it, Melville suggests that just as the old forms of grief and burial did not fit the new horrors of war, so too did the old forms of poetry come up short.

In our memoranda and documents section, you will find Cotton Mather engaged in a different kind of plotting—that is, how to discredit or upstage all competitors for the position he both sought and feared, the presidency of his alma mater, Harvard College. Although his personal ambitions seem not, perhaps, commendable, their grounding in laudable religious and educational principles—as evident in the edited documents Kenneth P. Minkema presents—cannot be denied.

As is appropriate in an issue devoted to visualizing and navigating, we offer an unprecedented number of illustrations, signposts along history's byzantine byways. We are fortunate to have talented authors as our guides to help us analyze what we see and read.

—LINDA SMITH RHODS