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Boosting Chicago: bird's-eye views as maps of progress

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In 1883, the Chicago Varnish Co. created an advertisement that included two contrasting bird's-eye views highlighting the rise of its home city. The top view depicted Chicago as a sleepy trading post in 1833. The bottom view showed a bustling metropolis 50 years later. Sandwiched in between the views, the varnish company logo and product information showcased the company's connection to urban growth and progress. The imagery had special relevance since it dramatically illustrated that Chicago had recovered quickly after the devastating fire in 1871. It also emphasized how important business had been to the city's progress. (Click on the url to access the varnish ad. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pga.00493>)

The bird's-eye views were apt metaphors for a company ad that pictured progress. Views were popular items between the mid-1800s and early 1900s, a time of rapid growth and development in the United States. Providing an aesthetically pleasing and positive picture of a city, views adorned walls of government and business offices as well as homes. They were drawn by artists, often itinerants, and printed as commercial lithographs. The goal was to sell enough copies to recover costs, pay the artist, and make a profit. The view, itself, acted as advertising for the community, the artist, and the lithography company that produced the prints.

"Boosting Chicago" has three purposes. First, it explores the nature of bird's-eye views as visual imagery. Second, it examines views of Chicago between 1857 and 1916 to gauge how the city was depicted during a pivotal time in its history, when it developed into a large metropolis. This depiction remained fairly consistent and indicates how some Chicagoans pictured their city and its future. The third purpose is to suggest ways views can be used in history and social studies classrooms as texts.

An important point concerns accessing the examples discussed in the essay. All examples are on the Library of Congress web site. The highest quality picture is obtained by accessing the views online. A click of the digital id shown in parentheses takes the reader to the view's bibliography page. Except for the varnish ad, a click on the view goes to another page where it is possible to zoom in on details. Though toggling back and forth between the view and the essay may seem disruptive, the clarity of the online version makes it worthwhile.

Bird's-eye views

As is true of visual images generally, bird's-eye views are an expressive medium. They are subjective and incomplete witnesses that combine artistic conventions, commercial purposes, cultural attitudes, and often factual representations of reality to send a specific message about a community's viability. Relatively inexpensive and easy to produce, they were explicitly art for sale. How well they sold depended upon the artist's ability to combine accurate representations and public perceptions to depict a positive, aesthetically pleasing image of the community. As Danzer (1990) commented,

views “had to look accurate to be convincing, but not so honest as to reveal the problems and imperfections of their subjects.” (p. 144) Views were the public face of the community. Often displayed on office and home walls, they had to be pleasing to the eye and to the consciousness of the beholder. Views reflected civic pride not just in the present community but also as to how it might look in the future. (Reps, 1984, p. 65)

There were many beholders. Usually sold by advance subscription so as to pay costs of production, views were marketed to city councils, real estate developers, and other business leaders who perceived these artistic renderings as promoting urban growth. In a sense, views were examples of boosterism by communities. In the period between 1865 and 1914, approximately, business and government leaders as well as writers, among others acted as “boosters” for their city. They sought to enhance their community’s status and power by touting its advantages and future promise, especially economically. The goal was to attract investors, more businesses, and residents so that the community could reach its full potential. Boosterism remains an important aspect of urban development. (Cronon, 1991) Views were an inexpensive, effective resource for boosters to use in promoting their community.

But, as Reps has noted, views also may have served another purpose. Since they could more easily read a picture than a written promotional piece, views might have helped assimilate immigrants to their new homes. (Reps, 1984) In some cases, the beholder was a specific business that paid an extra fee to be highlighted on the view and perhaps in the title. In 1916, Arno B. Reincke created such a view for the Intertype Corporation. The company’s name and location were overprinted in red. (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g4104c.pm001552>) Versions not touting Intertype also were produced. (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g4104c.pm001550>).

The combination of low production costs and strong public appeal made views one of the most popular categories of printed images depicting the United States. Between the mid-1850s and early 1900s, artists produced views of as many as 2,400 communities throughout the nation. The foremost authority on bird’s-eye views, John Reps, considered them, “a democratic art form in that they reflected conditions in urban places of all types.” (Reps, 1984, pp. 3-4)

Yet, bird’s-eye views have neither been studied much by scholars, nor used often in history and social studies classrooms. Regarding scholarship, from approximately the 1960s to the 1990s, the 1984 study *Views and Viewmakers of Urban America* by John Reps remains an encyclopedic masterpiece. Few have followed in his path. Gerald Danzer included an essay on views in Buisseret, *From Sea Charts to Satellite Images* (1990). Some large-scale picture books on views have been published as have scattered articles and dissertations that have included analyses of views, but the literature is sparse and spotty at best.

For both scholarship and educational use, a contributing issue was the low regard accorded views because of their commercial thrust (Reps, 1984) In a sense, views had to prove themselves worthy of study. Difficulty of access and readability also contributed to the lack of educational use. Until recently, original bird’s-eye views were accessible only in local museums, libraries, and historical societies as well as private collections.

Recent advances in technology have changed conditions. Digitization, especially by the Library of Congress, has made hundreds of views accessible by a click of a mouse. As described above, the Library’s zoom in feature allows for easy scrutiny of both details and the large picture. The easy access and improved readability make this study possible.



So what can we learn from bird's-eye views? Generally, as Reps (1984) explained, views are "graphic evidence of how our cities appeared in the last century and the elements that make up their fabric." (p. 66) Some large cities were repeated subjects of views over time, as was true of Chicago. They allow us to examine a central aspect of historical inquiry, change and continuity in a community.

More specifically, views can provide verifiable, factual data about a community. A caveat is that while authenticity and accuracy were strong selling points, not all views were completely accurate. In some cases, important details were omitted. An 1897 view of Chicago does not show railroad tracks along the lakefront even though they were a prominent feature. (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g4104c.pm001523>) Ironically, this view promoted the Chicago Rock Island and Pacific Railway. In other cases, features were included that no longer existed at the time depicted in the view. An 1892 Currier & Ives view shows the Chicago White Stocking baseball team park on the lakefront even though it was torn down several years earlier. (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g4104c.pm001500>) The point is that some views had varying degrees of accuracy. (Reps, 1984; Danzer, 1990)

As already noted, views offer insight into what residents thought about their communities. They illustrated civic pride in an artful way. In a sense, views welcome us into the offices and homes of the past to look at the pictures on the walls and "listen in" to the conversations of government officials, business leaders, and other residents about their city. As Danzer (1991) has noted, growth and activity was a recurring theme in views generally. (Buisseret, 1991) These motifs are readily evident in the Chicago views, but despite seeming similarities each city had its own story to tell. That is certainly true of Chicago.

Boosting Chicago

The Chicago Varnish Co. ad views exemplify those produced of Chicago between 1857 and 1916 by various artists. John Reps calculated that approximately 80 views of Chicago were published between 1857 and 1916. Including the varnish ad, eighteen are on the Library of Congress web site. Most had formats similar to the varnish ad views. Despite some distinctions, they indicate that Chicago's public face remained basically the same throughout the period under study. They depicted orderly though bustling growth based on its central location at the meeting of Lake Michigan and the Chicago River, with the city's future tied to the West.

The earliest and best-known view was by James T. Palmatary in 1857. (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g4104c.pm001460>) Perhaps providing the model for others to follow, Palmatary's perspective was from above, out in Lake Michigan. Soon to be familiar components are readily evident. The orientation is east to west with the city stretching out to the horizon. The port at the center is bustling with steam and sail ships coming and going. Running on a trestle out in the lake, a train approaches the station near the port. The idea of Chicago acting as a hub is highlighted. An interesting aside is that after the Chicago fire in 1871, the area between the trestle and the shore became the city's first landfill. The refuse from the fire was dumped there, connecting the tracks to dry land. (Miller, 1996)

An important aspect of the views concerned the scale at which the city was shown. Palmatary drew the city as seemingly large and expansive, somewhat skewing its size. In 1857, Chicago had approximately 112,000 residents. Its settled area was quite small compared to later years. From the original lakefront to Halsted Avenue is approximately 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 miles. In Palmatary's view, Halsted is located 80 percent of the distance from the port's harbor to the western edge. In the 1850s, Halsted was on the outskirts of Chicago's settled area. The land west of Halsted is shown as open land with scattered structures. While this plotting allowed for a more detailed picture of the city, the general impression is of a larger metropolis than actually existed. Perhaps, the idea was to depict the present city in future terms, as Palmatary and those who bought his view perceived it would grow over the years. The large scale panorama also made it possible to highlight individual buildings and other details of the city.

While the general picture of Chicago remained the same over the years, by the late 1800s and early twentieth century, some aspects changed. A 1916 view of Chicago's central business district by Arno B. Reincke included the familiar perspective of looking down at the city from above out in the lake, maintained the east to west orientation, and the lakefront remained a dominant feature. But the port facilities were no longer showcases. They occupied secondary status at the north end of the view. Instead, the newly developing Grant Park was front and center in the foreground. (<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g4104c.pm001550>)

The consistency of the public face depicted in the views offer insight into the mind set of the Chicagoans during this period. Using location as the foundation and business as the engine, the burgeoning midwest metropolis aimed to be an elite world-class city. Its fortune rested in large part on acting as a hub, a meeting place and gateway where people, goods, capital, and ideas came together. Views showcasing the busy port with ships coming and going combined with the trains speeding into and out of the downtown area stressed feverish movement. As noted, the views also indicated that the key to Chicago's future was the large western expanse that was being settled and developed. This vision became reality when Chicago became the central terminus for many eastern and western rail lines. (Cronon, 1991; Miller, 1996)

Being a world-class city was tied to size. All views pictured Chicago as a large, sprawling metropolis reaching out to the western horizon. The city filled the frame and more, extending north and south beyond the edges of the view. Here, too, movement and growth were stressed.

Equally important, Chicago was laid out on a grid system that served as the blueprint for its own development. As pictured in the views, the grid supplied symmetry, a strong and orderly foundation for the hectic business activity and sprawling community growth. Yes, Chicago was a dynamo, but the grid system channeled that dynamism as it grew from 112,000 in 1857 to over two million by 1916.

Location, hectic business activity reflecting its status as a hub, sprawling growth, and a underlying foundation of order were stable elements of the public face that the bird's-eye views of Chicago presented. The consistent imagery reflected the uniform vision of the city and its future that the city leaders held throughout this period of Chicago as a world-class city. (Miller, 1996)

Views in the classroom: a literacy perspective

Imagine being a civic or business leader and having a view of the city hanging on your office wall. When you look at the view, what picture of Chicago forms in your mind?



How might it make you feel about the city or the future of your business? What if an immigrant striving to do better in the United States was looking at the view? What message of opportunity did the view send to this person? If the immigrant was working and living under poor conditions, how could the reality of life be reconciled with the picture of Chicago in the view? How do the view and the perspectives of the leaders and immigrants fit within the unit of study? These intriguing questions could spawn interesting answers from students, but only if teachers know how to use views effectively in the classroom and students know how to read a view and make sense of it.

Using views effectively in the classroom involves three basic things. First, teacher and student need to understand what bird's-eye views are and their nature as visual images. Second, the view should be integrated into the flow of classroom study so it fits seamlessly within that flow. The tasks and questions should connect the view and the activity to the topic of study. Students need to know why they are studying the view and how it fits in what they are learning. Third, students must be able to read a bird's-eye view. By answering relevant questions, they can engage the view in a "conversation" to identify pertinent content in the view, make sense of that content, connect it to what is being studied, and communicate findings. For that conversation to occur, students need a strategy for reading a view.

The attached inquiry model offers one method for reading a bird's-eye view. It can be adapted for use so students can study bird's-eye views in studying local communities and Chicago in grades 2-3, the rise of cities in the age of industry in U. S. history courses, and perhaps to study urban promotion and development in various social science courses in high school. An intriguing use might be to have students use the inquiry model to examine a contemporary view of Chicago as part of their study of the Haymarket incident of 1886, the Pullman Strike of 1892, and/or the study of Jane Addams and settlement houses. They could compare and contrast the picture of Chicago presented in the view and the image emerging from their study of those topics.

Conclusion

Bird's-eye views are unique windows into the past. Combining art, cartography, and marketing, views can transport us back in time to the community. They can take students to the street level of history allowing them to visit Chicago or other communities at specific moments in time. The nature of views as subjective and incomplete, as showing a decidedly positive picture of city that can contrast with other aspects of its history at that time, enhances their value. They provide another piece of the puzzle for students. Finding that piece and putting it correctly into the puzzle is what learning is all about.

References

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Reading A Bird's-Eye View

INTRODUCTION:

As is true for any document, bird's-eye views require a method for effective reading. Three important considerations are to:

1. Establish a context for the document;
2. Provide an inquiry model to read the document and make sense of information; and
3. Connect the view to the topic/theme being studied.

The method below is a general “template” for reading a bird's-eye view and can be adapted for specific assignments.

I. Establishing the Context

A. Basic Facts

1. Title, community name
2. Date of publication
3. Artist
4. Publisher
5. Place of publication

B. Making Connections

1. Community relation to topic/theme
2. Understanding purpose of reading the view

II. Exploring Content

A. Approaching the View

1. What does the view show? Entire community? Part of community? What part?
2. How is the view oriented? What direction is to the top?
3. What is in the foreground?
4. What is in the center?
5. What is the background?
6. What special features are there? Inset? Pictures? Lists? Other?

B. Summary

1. Describe the community
2. Describe how information in the view contributes to understanding the topic/theme of study.

C. Examining Details

1. What features are highlighted in foreground, center, and background?
2. What is highlighted in inset, pictures, lists, other special features?
3. What do identified features tell us about the community?
4. What features are important to topic/theme of study? Why are they important?

D. Summary

1. Describe role and purpose of features in the community?

2. Describe role and purpose of features of community in contributing to understanding of topic/theme of study.

III. Synthesis

- A. Use reading of the view to answer question(s) related to topic/theme of study.
 - 1. Why do you think the view was created?
 - 2. If you had to draw a bird's-eye view of your community, how would you orient the view? What would you highlight and what would you leave out of the view? Why?
- B. Explain how and why bird's-eye view contributed to learning about topic/theme of study.