

**Review of Brownlee, Peter John. 2019. The Commerce of Vision:  
Optical Culture and Perception in Antebellum America.  
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.**

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evidence states the opposite (191-92). The section on incantations similarly illustrates how certain commands, including the Kallinikos inscription, could invoke larger stories (*historiolae*)—often directly translated into Latin by Imperial writers themselves—which could also be depicted by simple shapes such as moons or snakes (236). The section clearly reinforces Faroane’s main theory: that amulet wearing was a pre-existent trend that was not on the rise, but rather became more visible in the material record after Roman inscription trends became tied to amuletic practices.

The conclusion considers all three chapters together, reiterating the strength of the main thesis. By emphasizing the long period of use and subsequent transformations, Faroane finally comes to readdress the stereotype of the itinerant sorcerer as a highly skilled ritual worker and craftsman, not a con-artist (257). His evaluation calls into question how classicists and historians have often thought of the eastern Roman empire as exceedingly superstitious under Roman rule,

however this evaluation sheds new light by showing how sorcerers were skilled tradesmen who held a craft long in practice and one that continued well into the Byzantine period (262).

Faroane’s text is a comprehensive survey of a broad range of visual, epigraphic, and material evidence with over 120 images and eight appendices. It is a valuable reference text for anyone with an interest in Mediterranean amuletic practices from the Classical period and into antiquity. More advanced language scholars may focus on the main text but find translations to be less valuable as there are no original language sources present. However, those not well versed in ancient languages will find the text to be a wonderfully helpful primer. Faroane’s monograph is a helpful contribution to the study of the development and use of amulets in the eastern Roman empire and offers a valuable anthropological approach for a functional reading of the material record of bodily adornment.

## SARA SPIKE

Review of

Brownlee, Peter John. 2019. *The Commerce of Vision: Optical Culture and Perception in Antebellum America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Pp. 264, 8 colour and 93 b&w illustrations. ISBN 9780812250428 (hardcover).

The expansive and often apparently overwhelming visual spectacle of the early 19th-century city was a subject of interest for critics, authors, and artists of the period, and it has continued to draw the attention of scholars who have written extensively about its many expressions. With *The Commerce of Vision*, Peter John Brownlee contributes to this literature, focusing on various forms of typographical matter that emerged or expanded in importance within the antebellum period in some of America’s largest cities. The book explores the proliferation of old and new printed forms, including advertising catalogues, outdoor display typography on broadsides and

business signage, newspapers, printed money, and land deeds. In all cases, Brownlee emphasizes that these are cultural artifacts that were enmeshed in the commercial culture and market economy of the period while also exemplifying the ocular preoccupations of the time.

The book introduces fascinating topics and offers strong visual analysis of a range of compelling images. But it is also uneven and its three divergent sections never quite cohere, perhaps owing to a relatively slight engagement with the economic history of Jacksonian America that is ostensibly the shared backdrop of the entire study. The final section, in particular, which

moves away from material artifacts and real acts of looking to metaphorical “seeing” (which is really imagining), diminishes the power of the book as a whole. This shift undermines the book’s most notable contribution, which is nevertheless an important and innovative one: its divergence from most studies of visual and material culture to foreground explicitly how the human eye itself figured in this explosion of print.

What Brownlee calls the “saturation of typographical forms in the urban visual field” (77) took place alongside the professionalization of ophthalmology and the expanding availability of vision aids such as eyeglasses. He argues that representations and ideas about eyesight and the scientific study of the eye were mutually constitutive with the commercial print culture that placed increasing demands on the eyes of urban Americans. Ophthalmologists published tracts and employed professional typesetters to print highly specialized scientific illustrations of the human eye. Optometrists were eager businessmen who embraced the potential of mail-order catalogues, circulating even more images of eyes, and eyeglasses, to the American public. As Brownlee writes, these printed forms made “vision visible” (10).

At the same time, new scientific studies of the eye informed ideas about the ideal shape and style of display lettering for signs and broadsides. Scientists speculated on preferred angles for display, as well as on the challenges of distraction and mobility as targeted readers moved through the dense visual field of the city. Among the most striking examples of this interconnection is revealed in Brownlee’s discussion of the development of “fat face” typographical forms, designed for large-scale display rather than for the printed page. Scientific ideas about vision shaped the development of large display type. In return, the perfection of display type enabled the creation of the first professional visual acuity charts: a series of printed letters of precisely decreasing size, essentially the same as those still in use today.

Beyond the printed matter produced by vision peddlers, Brownlee draws on a wide range of textual and visual materials to support and illuminate his arguments about the ocular focus of antebellum American commercial culture. Literary works by authors such as Poe and Melville are read alongside a fascinating diary

kept by a young clerk who carefully documents his own challenges with vision loss, reflecting on his diminished career prospects as he is fitted over and over again with new glasses and checks out scientific studies of eyesight from the library. Brownlee draws extensively on the path-breaking work of Jonathan Crary, and with this diary he provides a concrete, heart-wrenching example of how the 19th century’s increasing demands for visual acuity and other perceptual norms played out in the life of one unfortunate man.

However, this discussion is regrettably brief, particularly in relation to other disproportionately lengthy sections, for instance summarizing scientific tracts in minute detail or sharing the entire history of sign painting. This lack of logical balance in the writing is coupled throughout the book with excessive structural scaffolding, tediously restating observations made earlier in the text, and repetitive prose even within individual paragraphs. This unnecessary rephrasing and reiterating of ideas muddies what is otherwise sharp, insightful analysis.

Much of the book is devoted to excellent visual analysis and art criticism of a range of interesting works. The first two sections of the book include discussions of scientific engravings of eyes, paintings and photographs illustrating city streets festooned with broadsides and storefront signage, and paintings and cartoons depicting representations of eyeglasses and acts of looking. A discussion of the transparency and refraction of eyeglass lenses in paintings by Rembrandt Peale is a standout.

However, for the last section of the book, Brownlee offers extensive readings of what he unconvincingly calls “pictures about seeing” (213), which, even in his own analysis, are more forthrightly pictures about paper and print culture, or perhaps pictures about reading. (The failure throughout the book to account appropriately for literacy, rather than simply sight, when all of the featured artifacts are typographical, is a significant drawback of the overall work.) Central to this section is a series of genre paintings by Richard Caton Woodville, each depicting newspapers in scenes of everyday American political and commercial culture. The section also features a number of paintings that depict paper money, playing cards, fraudulent deeds for Western lands, and satirical cartoons show-

ing politicians brandishing paper documents. Brownlee argues that all of these paintings depict cultural artifacts that extend their subjects' vision, allowing them to "see" a world beyond their own eyes. For instance, newspapers provide news of the world and deeds are surrogates for imagined places out of view. This may be so, but this turn to a metaphorical form of vision is a tremendous missed opportunity to provide a reading of the same paintings that supports the book's much more interesting attention to material artifacts and real eyesight. Brownlee returns to form with a discussion of the spectral quality of paper money and how the increased circulation of printed paper more broadly challenged the limits of human vision, dovetailing with 19th-century experiments in optical illusion.

*The Commerce of Vision* is an accomplished study of some of the printed forms that strained the eyes of antebellum Americans. It provides useful material histories of display type, broadsides, ophthalmology, genre painting, and other cultural forms, interspersed with compelling analysis that draws them, some more convincingly than others, into a broader conversation about the visuality of American commercial culture. It is an intriguing work that provides a unique perspective on antebellum culture and its ocular obsessions.