The Historoscope and the Milton Bradley Company: Art and Commerce in Nineteenth-Century Aesthetic Education

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The parallel emergence of early childhood education and art education in nineteenth-century U.S. schools created a new market for the commercialization of educational toys and materials for children. The Germanic educational philosophies of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel were imported to the United States beginning at midcentury, resulting in the establishment of kindergartens focused on play-based learning. An important component of the new educational model involved teaching children aesthetic principles of form and color. Aesthetic education had both practical and ideological implications, meeting the growing need for skilled draftsmen and laborers that accompanied the industrial revolution and attempting to mold schoolchildren into model American citizens, workers, and consumers. By the 1870s a new market began emerging for the sale of educational toys and materials, some of which, as we shall see, presented images modeled after famous paintings. These nineteenth-century educational artifacts can be seen as a kind of hinge media between fine arts and mass culture, copying earlier and more established image motifs and presenting them in an impersonal style that was ready-made for later art and cultural forms to reinterpret and remediate.

The Milton Bradley Company of Springfield, Massachusetts, is best known today as a game manufacturer (the company was purchased by Hasbro in 1984, which continues to maintain it as a separate brand). But in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the Milton Bradley Company was one of two important early school supply businesses. The company began in 1860 when Milton Bradley, a lithographer, began marketing his first board game, *The Checkered Game of Life*. In 1869 Bradley was introduced to Froebel’s educational methodology when he attended a lecture by the prominent American educator Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, and his company soon began producing Froebel’s series of kindergarten “gifts”: twenty different educational objects presented in a specific order to stimulate a series of play-based lessons. Bradley’s gifts were not exact copies of Froebel’s models but were altered slightly; these were sold to teachers for classroom use. The educational materials were not profitable for the company at first, but as the kindergarten movement took hold in the United States by the 1880s, Bradley’s Froebel gifts proliferated, and the company began manufacturing additional educational products. As early as 1879, Peabody herself complained, “The interest of manufacturers and merchants of the gifts and materials is a snare. It has already corrupted the simplicity of Fröbel in Europe...
Bradley may have claimed altruistic educational motives in his publicity, but he was a businessman by trade, not an educator. As his biographer (and sometime president of the Milton Bradley Company) James J. Shea wrote in 1960, “The impulse to serve was as strong in Milton Bradley as the desire to sell.”

In the decade before it began producing the Froebel gifts, the Bradley Company focused on board games, puzzles, novelties, and optical toys, including the zoetrope. The company continued to manufacture these games and toys alongside the educational materials after 1869, and according to several accounts, the games subsidized the educational materials for a number of years. Bradley's games and toys are described in the company's catalogs—separate catalogs were issued annually marketing games and toys for home use, and educational materials for school use—and a few of the original artifacts survive in various archival collections today. The Getty Research Institute (GRI) holds a copy of The Historiscope: A Panorama and History of America, a toy panorama manufactured by the Milton Bradley Company about 1870 (fig. 1). This toy is part of the ongoing tradition of illusion and spectacle that constitutes the history of the moving image. As a pre-cinema device marketed to children along the lines of the thaumatrope, the phenakistoscope, and the magic lantern, the Historiscope offers a different kind of moving picture: episodic yet totalizing; static yet interactive.

The Historiscope depicts over two dozen scenes from American Revolutionary history in a colored lithograph panorama mounted on rollers inside a small box. The user manipulates the panorama by turning a small peg or handle inserted into a hole at the top of the box. The box itself measures 14 by 21 centimeters (5½ × 8¼ in.), but the images are a bit smaller, unspooling inside a proscenium that frames them. This proscenium consists of an arch and a stage (complete with footlights) framed by a balcony at right and left. Two figures sit in each balcony watching the unfolding narrative that moves across the screen; their gender is somewhat obscure, but at least two (and perhaps all) of them are female. The bottom left and right of the stage are flanked by putti representing art and the nation. The toy also contains a small box holding customizable tickets that read “Historiscope: Admit One. ______, Proprietor.”

The Historiscope originally came with an educational lecture, but this is missing from the GRI’s copy. I have been able to obtain this lecture from another institution, however; it proves to be a dense, eight-page dramatic description of all the images in the moving panorama, characterized by a lively tone and filled with numerous attempts at humor. It begins, for example: “LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: Owing to a severe and sudden indisposition, Prof. Easelpalette is unable to appear before you at this time, and therefore trust I shall have the indulgence of the audience while I endeavor to entertain and perhaps instruct you for a few minutes.”

Each of the Historiscope’s twenty-five images depicts an incident in early American history. Scenes include Pocahontas saving the life of John Smith, the landing of the Pilgrims in Massachusetts, George Washington at Valley Forge, the surrender of the Earl of Cornwallis’s army at Yorktown, and many other iconic events. Many of these scenes...
Fig. 1. The Historiscope: A Panorama and History of America (Springfield, Mass.: Milton Bradley & Co., ca. 1870), cover. Toy panorama with colored lithographs, 14 × 21 cm (5 1/2 × 8 1/4 in.). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (1364-988)
are based on famous paintings or popular lithographs; scene two, for example, depicts Columbus landing in the West Indies in 1492, based on John Vanderlyn’s 1846 painting at the U.S. Capitol Rotunda (fig. 2). Given that a version of this painting had been issued as a 15-cent stamp in 1869, it was extremely well known at the time of the Historiscope’s release. Scene twenty-four, the arrest of Major John André, is based on a painting of that name by Asher Brown Durand. This image’s nineteenth-century renown stemmed largely from its circulation as a lithographed print, for the painting was only briefly on view in 1845 at the American Art-Union in New York City, which selected it for distribution to its members as an engraving. The Historiscope presents a gallery of images copied from more famous sources; the arrest of Major André (and several other images based on popular chromolithographs) is thus a copy of a copy, twice-removed from the original (fig. 3). Several other scenes are more generalized and lack clear source material, however, such as scene twelve, which depicts a palisaded (fenced) house to defend against Indians (fig. 4). This shifting between well-known images and generic imagery follows the model of popular nineteenth-century chromolithography, which likewise shifted between copying famous paintings and presenting generic images of scenes and types. The Bradley Company’s manner of copying and idealization in the Historiscope creates a kind of anonymous art history and an impersonal style. Yet these images, based
Fig. 3. The arrest of Major André. From The Historiscope: A Panorama and History of America (Springfield, Mass.: Milton Bradley & Co., ca. 1870). Color lithograph, 14 × 21 cm (5 1⁄2 × 8 1⁄4 in.). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (1364-988)

Fig. 4. A palisaded house to protect against Indians. From The Historiscope: A Panorama and History of America (Springfield, Mass.: Milton Bradley & Co., ca. 1870). Color lithograph, 14 × 21 cm (5 1⁄2 × 8 1⁄4 in.). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (1364-988)
on celebrated events and fine-art sources, lay claim to what we might call an industrial aesthetic authority.

Unspooling in roughly chronological historical order (with a few minor exceptions), these scenes present American history as a linear narrative of discovery and conquest. Native life is shown (or alluded to) in only six of the images, and for the most part appears as either a threat or a group ceding territory. The exception is scene one (fig. 5), with its depiction of a generalized group of American Indians in full regalia before the arrival of Columbus, which does evince a curiosity about Indian culture. But most of the scenes focus on the famous historical events of early European explorers, colonists, and revolutionaries. In this child’s toy, we are presented with a series of familiar, nationalistic lessons about the “great” moments in American Revolutionary history. The choice of scenes is perhaps less remarkable, however, than the medium in which these lessons are delivered: an optical toy.

Rather than presenting a single landscape from an overview perspective, as in a full-sized panorama, this toy panorama presents an episodic survey of events that unspool one by one. This episodic organization of history is characteristic of what scholars have called the nineteenth century’s “panoramic” form of perception. 15 Describing the life-size panoramas after which such toy panoramas were modeled, Dolf Sternberger writes, “the shiny new element emerging from these crucibles was: the captured historic moment.” 16 This observation echoes the ad copy for the Historiscope in Milton Bradley’s Game and Toy Catalogue, which proclaimed, “History repeats itself a great many times in the family where the Historiscope has once gained a foothold. There is no toy that is more thoroughly appreciated by a little child in the half-hour before bed-time, as he sits on mamma’s or papa’s knee and turns the key which moves the pictures, meanwhile multiplying eager questions about each one.” 17 Like the large panoramas popular in the nineteenth century, this toy panorama asserts the veracity of a singular or “proper point of view” for given historical events. 18 The Historiscope is a device with a linear, episodic logic, whose fixed point of view is literalized by its unchanging frame.

Color is an important part of the Historiscope’s appeal. Although it is faded, the GRI’s copy retains at least seven distinct colors: green, yellow, red, blue, tan, black, white. In fact, Bradley was deeply invested in developing new lithographic techniques for mass-producing color images. He successfully created new color standards for the industry, which he marketed for school use along with the Froebel gifts in the form of colored papers for the classroom. Bradley’s establishment of these color standards, which were also disseminated in the form of watercolor sets and crayons issued in six standardized pigments, is symptomatic of just this tension between commerce and art education. In addition, in later years, the Bradley Company published a number of books about color as an educational tool, including the following titles held at the GRI: Color in the School Room: A Manual for Teachers (1890) and Elementary Color (1895) by Milton Bradley, Class-Book of Color (1895) by Mark Maycock, and A Note on Color for Teachers of Elementary
Fig. 5. American Indians in full regalia before the arrival of Columbus. From *The Historiscope: A Panorama and History of America* (Springfield, Mass.: Milton Bradley & Co., ca. 1870). Color lithograph, 14 × 21 cm (5 1/2 × 8 1/4 in.). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (1364-988)
Fig. 6. Milton Bradley, *Elementary Color* (Springfield, Mass.: Milton Bradley & Co., 1895), frontispiece. 18.5 × 13 cm (7¼ × 5⅛ in.). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (92-b19132)
Schools (1912) by Caroline West van Helden (fig. 6). Such books articulate the aesthetic dimension of progressive education in a more programmatic fashion than toys such as the Historiscope.

The Historiscope is just one of several toy panoramas manufactured by the Milton Bradley Company in the late nineteenth century. Other panorama subjects included The Myriopticon: A Historical Panorama of the Rebellion (depicting the Civil War), the Menagerie and Aquarium (a box with two panoramic scrolls depicting zoo animals on one side and fish on the other), and Panorama of the Visit of Santa Claus to the Happy Children. Stephan Oettermann argues that “the pictorial panorama was in one respect an apparatus for teaching and glorifying the bourgeois view of the world; it served as both an instrument for liberating human vision and for limiting and ‘imprisoning’ it anew.” Toy panoramas such as the Historiscope also served as interactive visual lessons consumed in the space of the home. The anonymous educational aesthetic of optical toys such as the Historiscope demonstrates how certain visual motifs, or topoi, can be made available for repetition, absorption, and citation by later art forms and different media.

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Notes


3. The other was the Prang Educational Company.

4. The Checkered Game of Life was Bradley’s first big commercial success, essentially bankrolling the company in its early years; a later version is still sold today as The Game of Life.


8. The Historiscope is part of the GRI’s panorama collection.

9. “Historiscope Lecture,” in The Historiscope: A Panorama and History of America (Springfield, Mass.: Milton Bradley & Co., ca. 1870), 1. I would like to thank Emily L. Schulz, deputy director and curator at the Society of the Cincinnati, Anderson House for sharing a copy of this lecture with me.

10. Milton Bradley Company advertisements claimed the Historiscope contained different numbers of scenes (advertisements I have seen claimed either thirty-two or thirty-five scenes), but the GRI’s copy has twenty-five individual images. Other extant copies have the same number of images, which leads me to surmise that later versions may have added more scenes (or that the ad copy exaggerated); I
believe the GRI’s Historiscope, which seems to be an early edition, is complete. The GRI’s copy also features different coloring and less color fading than other extant copies.

11. A digital image of Vanderlyn’s painting, on permanent display at the Capitol Rotunda, can be seen here: http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/historic-rotunda-paintings/landing-columbus.

12. A digital image of an engraving of Durand’s painting, in the collection of the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama, can be seen on their website: http://www.artsbma.org/collectionitemdetails?searchtitle=The%20Capture%20of%20Major%20Andr%C3%A9&showform=0&ordering=popular&searchphrase=any&areas[0]=portfolio&areas[]=portfolio&searchlayout=details&limit=1&start=0.

13. Thus far I have identified sources for nine out of twenty-five images. In addition to the two identified above, scene four depicts Hernando de Soto discovering the Mississippi River in 1541 (from William Henry Powell’s 1853 painting at the U.S. Capitol Rotunda), scene seven depicts Pocahontas saving the life of John Smith circa 1608 (similar to a popular chromolithograph but not an exact copy), scene ten depicts William Penn’s treaty with the Indians in 1683 (after Benjamin West’s 1772 painting of this event, or from an engraving of this painting), scene sixteen depicts the Battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775 (after a popular engraving titled The First Blow for Liberty), scene seventeen depicts the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775 (after the John Trumbull painting at the Yale University Art Gallery), and scene twenty-five depicts the surrender of the Earl of Cornwallis’s army at Yorktown in 1781 (based on a popular Currier & Ives lithograph of the subject).


