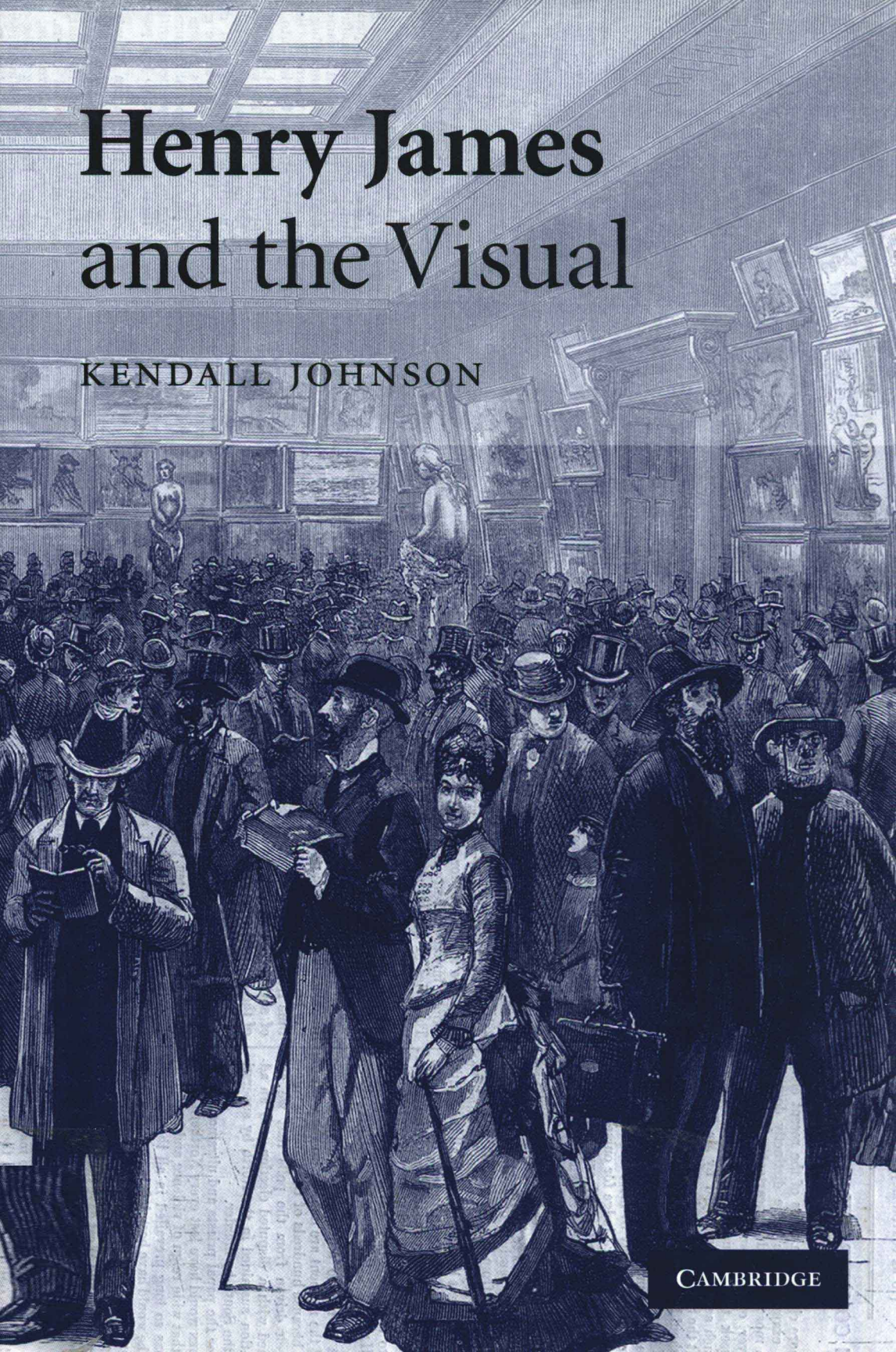


# Henry James and the Visual

KENDALL JOHNSON



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HENRY JAMES AND  
THE VISUAL

BY

KENDALL JOHNSON

*Swarthmore College*



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## HENRY JAMES AND THE VISUAL

In the decades after the Civil War, how did Americans see the world and their place in it? Kendall Johnson argues that Henry James appealed to his readers' sense of vision to dramatize the ambiguity of American citizenship in scenes of tense encounter with Europeans. By reviving the eighteenth-century debates over beauty, sublimity, and the picturesque, James weaves into his narratives the national politics of emancipation, immigration, and Indian Removal. For James, visual experience is crucial to the American communal identity, a position that challenged prominent anthropologists as they defined concepts of race and culture in ways that continue to shape how we see the world today. To demonstrate the cultural stereotypes that James reworked, the book includes twenty-two illustrations from periodicals of the nineteenth century. This study reaches startling new conclusions not just about James, but about the way America defined itself through the arts in the nineteenth century.

KENDALL JOHNSON is Associate Professor of English at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania.

*Dedicated to my parents,  
Frances and Karl Johnson.*

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The one problem with Philadelphia is that it is not near enough to my sisters Christine and Stephanie, my brothers-in-law Sean and René, and four nephews. Nevertheless, Grace's warmth, vivacity, and wit makes Philadelphia feel like home. This book is dedicated to my parents, Frances and Karl, whose pride in my scholarly endeavors is backed by an affirming love.

## Abbreviations

- AM *The American* (1877; New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).
- AS *The American Scene* (1907; New York: Penguin, 1994).
- AU *Henry James, Autobiography*, ed. Frederick W. Dupee (Princeton University Press, 1983).
- B "Honoré de Balzac," in *Literary Criticism; French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition* (1902; New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 31–68. First published in *Galaxy* (December 1875).
- B<sub>2</sub> "Honoré de Balzac, 1902," in *Literary Criticism; French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition* (1902; New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 90–115. First Published in *The Two Young Brides* (London, 1902).
- B<sub>3</sub> "The Lesson of Balzac," in *Literary Criticism; French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition* (1902; New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 115–39. First published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1905).
- CN *Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, eds. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
- DM "Du Maurier and London Society," in *Partial Portraits* (1888; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), pp. 327–72. First published in *The Century* (May 1883).
- DM<sub>2</sub> "George Du Maurier," in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 876–906. First published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (September 1897).
- FAK "Frances Anne Kemble," in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (New York:



- The Library of America, 1984), pp. 1071–97. First published in *Temple Bar* (April 1893).
- FP “Francis Parkman,” in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 568–73. First published in *The Nation* (June 1867).
- GB *The Golden Bowl* (1904; New York: Penguin, 1985).
- HAW *Hawthorne*, in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (1879; New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 315–457.
- HAW<sub>2</sub> “Nathaniel Hawthorne,” in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 458–68. First published in *Library of the World’s Best Literature Ancient and Modern*, vol. XII (New York, 1896).
- IH *Italian Hours*, in *Collected Travel Writings: The Continent* (1909; New York: The Library of America, 1993), pp. 279–619.
- LET *Henry James: Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974–84).
- LON “London, June 1, 1897,” *Harper’s Weekly* (26 June 1897), 639–40.
- LP “A Landscape Painter,” *The Tales of Henry James*, ed. Maqbool Aziz, 3 vols. (1866; Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1973), vol. 1. pp. 57–87. First published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (February 1866).
- L-P “A Landscape-Painter,” in *A Landscape-Painter and Other Tales: 1864–1874*, ed. Roger Gard (New York: Penguin, 1990), pp. 64–98. First published in *Stories Revived* (London, 1895).
- MMF “Mr. and Mrs. Fields,” in *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 160–76. First published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (July 1915).
- POL *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881; New York: The Library of America, 1985).
- REVT “Review of Taine’s *Italy, Rome and Naples*,” in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition* (1902; New York: The

- Library of America, 1984), pp. 826–31. First published in *The Nation* (May 1868).
- REVT<sub>2</sub> “Review of Taine’s *History of English Literature* (1863–67),” in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition* (1902; New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 841–8. First published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 1872).
- REVT<sub>3</sub> “Review of Taine’s *Notes sur l’Angleterre*,” in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition* (1902; New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 831–41. First published in *The Nation* (January 1872).
- REVT<sub>4</sub> “Review of Taine’s *Notes on Paris: The Life and Opinions of M. Frederic-Thomas Graindorge, etc.*,” in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition* (1902; New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 848–51. First published in *The Nation* (May 1875).
- WMK *What Maisie Knew* (1897; New York: Penguin, 1985).
- VMR “Very Modern Rome,” in *Collected Travel Writings: The Continent* (New York: The Library of America, 1993), pp. 752–63. First published in *The Harvard Library Bulletin* (1954).

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## *Introduction: the cultural varieties of visual experience*

A terrible danger is hanging over the Americans in London. Their future and their reputation this season depend entirely on the success of Buffalo Bill and Mrs. Brown-Potter. The former is certain to draw; for English people are far more interested in American barbarism than they are in American civilization.

Oscar Wilde, "The American Invasion," *Court and Society Review*  
(March 1887)<sup>1</sup>

As a boy, Henry James loved cartoons. In the essay "Du Maurier and London Society" (1883), he recalls leafing through issues of *Punch* from the 1850s, when he "played in a Union Square, which was then enclosed by a high railing and governed by a solitary policeman." This young, "silent devotee of *Punch*" felt "transported" by the famous cartoonists to the "London of the First Crystal Palace" of 1855 (DM 327). James then rejoins the present, asking his reader to appreciate Du Maurier's contemporaneous "skill in race-portraiture" (DM 365) and "peculiar perception of the look of breeding, of face" (DM 350).

The term "race" here is not a static category of biological determinism. Instead, it implies that social interactions have physical effects in which the keen observer discerns a visual pattern. Yet the consistency of type, upon which "race portraiture" might ostensibly depend, seems uninteresting to James. Whereas Du Maurier may wish everyone "to be tall, straight and fair," he draws "the whole multitude of the vulgar who have not been cultivated like orchids and race horses" (DM 350). James finds "real entertainment in the completeness, in the perfection of certain forms of facial queerness." He avers that "No one has rendered like Du Maurier the ridiculous little people who crop up in the interstices of that huge and complicated London world" (DM 348).

James directs our attention to "two brilliant, full page" cartoons from the *Punch Almanac* in 1865 (DM 346). The first drawing, "Probable Results of the Acclimatisation Society. – The Serpentine," presents a remarkable



Figure 1: George Du Maurier, "Probable Results of the Acclimatisation Society. – The Serpentine," *Punch Almanack for 1865*, no page number.

afternoon on the grounds between Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens (Figure 1). Children lounge with a hodge-podge of potentially fierce animals in a peaceable kingdom that seems precariously balanced. A whale upends a young man's boat, pitching him high into the air (upper right of figure). The sign posted on the tree to the left reads "NO TIGERS ADMITTED UNLESS LED BY A STRING," but not one animal seems leashed, although a boy is fish-hooked by the seat of his pants and dangles above a crocodile. The snake and toucan enjoy each other's company, while the serene communion of the lion, tiger, and bear belies the return of their appetites. Another boy (at the scene's center) faces us with his hands in his pockets and his eyes downcast in a precocious halcyon daze, unfazed by our interest. The second Du Maurier drawing, "Probable Results of the Acclimatisation Society. – The Streets," transposes the Serpentine's array of wild life to picture the bustling traffic of London's urban center (Figure 2). The man being trotted about in his zebra-drawn rickshaw returns our inquiring gaze with a flat stare of weary tolerance, as if we are the curiosity or an unwarranted distraction. Perhaps our concern is for the





PROBABLE RESULTS OF THE ACCLIMATISATION SOCIETY.—THE STREETS.

PUNCH'S ALMANACK FOR 1865.

Figure 2: George Du Maurier, "Probable Results of the Acclimatisation Society. — The Streets," *Punch Almanack for 1865*, no page number.

bare-footed street sweeper who scurries at the cartoon's center. His ragged little broom seems no match for the elephant, whose hind quarters are plastered with a bank advertisement. One hopes the boy will be paid by the pound. In both cartoons, Du Maurier crowds the landscape with an eclectic blend of potentially menacing animals, and yet the human inhabitants wear expressions of serenity, boredom, or tolerance.

As observers, we stand apart from the charivari, afforded a vantage from which to enjoy the orchestrated calm of the relaxing beasts. However, our Archimedean point is hardly secure. Not only are our eyes met directly by the man's flat stare in "The Streets" (or pointedly ignored by the Serpentine's boy with pocketed hands), but the wit of Du Maurier's assemblage depends on gauging the balance of these antagonistic parts. As spectators, we sense both our distance from and witness to the scene's improbable configuration. Du Maurier's sketches are more than a lampoon of Regent's Park zoo (or Francis Buckland's culinary quirks), but an allegory of the United Kingdom's struggle to subsume various climates, geographies, and cultures in an imperial gestalt of civilization.<sup>2</sup> His