

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1986

***Review of Views and Viewmakers of Urban America: Lithographs of Towns and Cities in the United States and Canada, Notes on the Artists and Publishers, and a Union Catalog of their Work, 1825-1925* By John W. Reps**

Frederick C. Luebke

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, fredluebke@comcast.net

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Luebke, Frederick C., "Review of *Views and Viewmakers of Urban America: Lithographs of Towns and Cities in the United States and Canada, Notes on the Artists and Publishers, and a Union Catalog of their Work, 1825-1925* By John W. Reps" (1986). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 955.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/955>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Views and Viewmakers of Urban America: Lithographs of Towns and Cities in the United States and Canada, Notes on the Artists and Publishers, and a Union Catalog of their Work, 1825-1925. By John W. Reps. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984. Illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, index. xvi + 570 pp. \$89.50.

John Reps, the foremost historian of urban planning in America, has accumulated through the years a mountain of information about the many bird's-eye views of cities and towns in the expanding America of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this remarkable volume, Reps organizes and systematizes his data to provide the definitive statement on these fascinating artifacts of American cultural history.

Following an introduction to the general topic of urban viewmaking, Reps describes how artists studied their subjects, selected a perspective, sketched scores of individual buildings, and prepared their drawing for the lithographer. Next, he reviews the history of lithography and its technological developments and relates them to the production of urban views. Three chapters are devoted to business aspects of viewmaking: subscriptions, sales, advertising, production costs, prices, and profits. Reps then assesses public and private

responses to the viewmaker's art and concludes with an evaluation of the reliability of use of such views for the study of cities.

The second part of the book is a biographical directory in which fifty-one viewmakers are individually presented. Reps includes details about the time, quantity, location, and character of their output. The final section is a union catalog of 4,480 individual views. Entries are arranged alphabetically by state and location and present standardized information on title, artist, lithographer, publisher, date, and locations where copies can be found. In sum, the book is a monumental achievement. It is elegantly designed, handsomely produced, and, like the views themselves, to use a nineteenth century phrase, both useful and ornamental.

Historians will be especially attracted by the chapter on the reliability and accuracy of these panoramic views. Reps convincingly disputes the commonly held belief that they were often deliberate distortions of reality—idealized exaggerations that often represented the hopes of local boosters, real estate promoters, and, on the frontier, townsite speculators. Reps does not deny that viewmakers occasionally introduced anachronistic elements. Indeed, he includes a plate of one such community (Sumner, Kansas) that a contemporary critic denounced as a “chromatic triumph of lithographed mendacity” (p. 69). But such deliberate deceptions were rare. The overwhelming majority, Reps avers, were “substantially accurate in showing the city as a whole as well as showing details of individual buildings and their surroundings” (p. 67). This is not to say that there were not distortions of perspective and size relationships; they were usually the inevitable concomitants of method, technique, or inexperience. Inadequacies of this order do not detract from the utility of urban views as reliable documents of urban history.

FREDERICK C. LUEBKE
Department of History
University of Nebraska-Lincoln