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American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism, Volume 30, Number 1, 2020, pp. 22-25 (Article)

Published by The Ohio State University Press



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TARA PENRY

The metaphor of curation draws attention to the ways that periodicals activate discourses of value. Periodicals with overtly curatorial ambitions have enjoyed a remarkable influence in literary history, and indeed their idea of literary value has proven most durable. To identify a handful of well-known periodicals such as the *Gentleman's Magazine* of London and the "quality journals" of the nineteenth-century United States, led by *Harper's Monthly*,¹ as curatorial is to raise questions: Does the form of the magazine itself invoke a curatorial spirit? And how do periodicals express or confer value if not through acts of sorting and preserving the best from the rest?

Although the verb "to curate" emerged only in the late nineteenth century—formed from the nouns "curate" and "curator," or caretaker²—the impulse to preserve or care for the choicest productions of print culture dates further back, at least to the emergence of an earlier metaphor, the *magazine*. In 1731, the founder of *Gentleman's Magazine* explained that his "miscellaneous pamphlet" would be "a Monthly Collection, to treasure up, as in a *Magazine*," which at the time meant an arsenal or storehouse, with still-older verbal roots signifying a place for storing treasure.³ Surveying the number of newspapers in London and beyond, Edward Cave ("Sylvanus Urban") worried that "of late [the newspapers] are so multiply'd, as to render it impossible, unless a man makes it a business, to consult them all." With hundreds of "loose Papers, uncertainly scatter'd about . . . many things deserving attention . . . are only seen by Accident."⁴ *Gentleman's Magazine* sought to remedy the problem by snatching loose and scattered treasures and storing them in the impregnable architecture of a "magazine." To put Cave's problem another way, industrial print was producing such a surplus of *worthy* words and ideas that the form of the newspaper could not properly keep up with all the merit; a sturdy monthly storehouse might do a better job of conferring the sense of value befitting the thoughts and writings of gentlemen.⁵ Other metaphors that characterized the periodical's function as specializing in the preservation of choice materials also appeared in titles such as *asylum*, *museum*, *repository*, and *portfolio*, indicating a widely shared perception that the periodical press needed to do a better job of fixing value on its profuse productions, and might do so with the help of metaphor.⁶

The metaphor most closely associated with acts of selection and preservation today is not *magazine*, which has all but lost its architectural associations, but *curation*. In art galleries and museums, curators sort, select, preserve, and confer value on objects of choice. Additionally, in a commercial and media environment characterized ever more by profusion and ephemerality, curation has leaped its professional bounds to become virtually ubiquitous in twenty-first-century mar-

keting. As the authors of the recent self-help book *Ready, Set, Curate* put it, “If you want quality information, on whose substance you can rely, you need a personal recommendation. What you need is a curator.”⁷

The curatorial impulse has left an indelible mark on Anglo-American periodical history, linking *Gentleman’s Magazine* with the best-known journals of the nineteenth-century United States. More critical of print profusion than *Gentleman’s Magazine*, *Harper’s Monthly* promised to combat “this evil” coming from “scores and hundreds” of “Weekly and Daily Journals of England, France, and America” with a curatorial “remedy”—a magazine offering only items of “permanent value and commanding interest.”⁸ The *Atlantic Monthly* caught the spirit, one contributor in 1877 calling for a university-trained “hierarchy of critics,” marshaling “the entire aesthetic revelation” to reduce the influence of “literary productions wherein every law of art is violated.”⁹ In the accelerated atmosphere of Gilded Age industrial production, not just art and literature but all commerce required curation. Around 1870, “with personal wealth on the rise and a host of new products and brands available to consumers,” argues Mark Noonan, “magazines like *Scribner’s* played a key role in guiding readers in the consumption of goods and ideas.”¹⁰ Offering themselves as guardians of culture and taste, these nineteenth-century treasure houses of print insisted upon value-making itself, the hunt for quality amid the profuse and often ephemeral productions of industrial capitalism.¹¹ These magazines’ obsession with value making, and sometimes disdain for *other* productions of industrial print culture, may be understood as an act of differentiation, one commercial venture setting itself apart from the rest by resourcefully assuming the role of caretaker, preserver, and arbiter of value.

So much has this small group of magazines defined the field of literary value for late nineteenth-century American studies that, at least in this context, it may be difficult to see how periodicals confer value *without* acts of curation. But even within the field of postbellum US monthly magazines with literary and upwardly mobile class aspirations, editorial priorities have not necessarily centered around culling items of “permanent value and commanding interest” from those “wherein every law of art is violated.” At the *Overland Monthly* in San Francisco in 1868, editor Bret Harte explained in a well-known editorial column that his magazine was more concerned with the geographic flow of ideas across the continent than with identifying or preserving fine specimens of profuse industry. “Will not this mighty Nilus overflow its banks and fertilize the surrounding desert?” asked Harte, figuring the transcontinental railroad as a river for goods and ideas, and proposing that “where our people travel, that is the highway of our thought.”¹² At the dawn of the twentieth century, *Colored American Magazine*, launched by a collective in Boston, similarly eschewed the value-making prerogative of the editor-as-curator, instead inviting “the colored people of the United States” to “demonstrate their ability and tastes”—plural—in its pages.¹³ Although “tastes” in “fiction, poetry, and art” might vary, contributions to *Colored American Magazine* would aspire in

common “to develop and intensify the bonds of that racial brotherhood, which alone can enable a people, to assert their racial rights as men, and demand their privileges as citizens.”¹⁴ The *Overland* and *Colored American Magazine* gave primacy to other values than sorting worthy from unworthy articles of print; they pitched themselves to a high class of readers by promising to dignify people or circulate ideas where otherwise they would not flow.

Perhaps this variety of editorial perspectives helps to explain why “curation” emerged in English as a word distinct from the caretaking official or curate. Industrial production demanded acts of discernment and evaluation. Yet, as many nineteenth-century literary historians have noted, industrial print created opportunities for more thought producers than ever to set forth upon the river of ideas; for these producers, the profusion (Bret Harte’s “overflow”) of content was both fertile and brotherly, participation in it the privilege of all citizens. Periodical scholars are accustomed to attending to the race, class, gender, and regional diversity of print sources. The metaphor of curation invites us to attend also to the various values of serial publishers, which do not necessarily map neatly onto other categories of identity. While some set out to protect material of special value from ephemerality—to use serial forms to correct the problems of overproduction resulting paradoxically from those very serial forms—others embrace serial profusion as a great benefit of modernity. Possibly, we do not need the language of *curation* at all to give attention to the diverse values of periodicals, just as we no longer think figuratively about the preservationist architecture of *magazines*.

NOTES

¹ Richard Brodhead uses the phrase “quality journals” to refer to the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner’s*, *Century*, and *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*. *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 124.

² Erin McKean et al., eds., *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 414; David Balzer, *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else* (Toronto: Coach House, 2014), 8–9, 11.

³ *A Dictionary of the English Language: A Digital Edition of the 1755 Classic by Samuel Johnson*, s.v. “magazine,” accessed 8 July 2018, <https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/magazine/>.

⁴ “Introduction,” in *Gentleman’s Magazine; Or, Monthly Intelligencer*, 5th ed. (1731), 1.

⁵ Other eighteenth-century observers shared Cave’s dismay at the overwhelming output of industrial print, finding less of it worthy of attention: “In the periodical press . . . writers warned of too much print, too much writing, too much reading.” Karin Littau, *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies and Bibliomania* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2006), 4.

⁶ Some early periodical titles in Frank Luther Mott’s *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 1, 1741–1850 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931, 1966), include *The Universal Asylum*, *The American Museum*, *The Medical Repository*, and *The Port Folio* (x–xi).

⁷ Ben Betts and Allison Anderson, *Ready, Set, Curate: Eight Learning Experts Tell You How* (Alexandria, VA: ATD Press, 2016), 2.

⁸ "A Word at the Start," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 1 (June 1850): 1–2.

⁹ "Contributors' Club," *Atlantic Monthly* (February 1877): 230–31.

¹⁰ Mark Noonan, *Reading The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine: American Literature and Culture, 1870–1893* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2010), 9.

¹¹ Art critic David Balzer recognizes the "accelerated" "matrix of value-making" as the state of "curationism," or curation multiplied, when "institutions and businesses rely on others" to express and assure value in the context of "capitalism and its cultures" (*Curationism*, 8–9).

¹² "Etc.," *Overland Monthly* 1, no. 1 (July 1868): 99.

¹³ "Editorial and Publishers' Announcements," *Colored American Magazine* 1, no. 1 (May 1900): 60. See also Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Maberry Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of African-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 4–8.

¹⁴ "Editorial and Publishers' Announcements," 60.