

EARLY MODERN PRINT MEDIA AND THE ART OF OBSERVATION

Early modern printmakers trained observers to scan the heavens above as well as faces in their midst. Peter Apian printed the *Cosmographicus Liber* (1524) to teach lay astronomers their place in the cosmos, while also printing practical manuals that translated principles of spherical astronomy into useful data for weather watchers, farmers, and astrologers. Physiognomy, a genre related to cosmography, taught observers how to scrutinize profiles in order to sum up people's characters. Neither Albrecht Dürer nor Leonardo da Vinci escaped the tenacious grasp of such widely circulating manuals called *Practica*. Few have heard of these genres today, but the kinship of their pictorial programs suggests that printers shaped these texts for readers who privileged knowledge retrieval. Cultivated by images to become visual learners, these readers were then taught to hone their skills as observers. This book unpacks these and other visual strategies that aimed to develop both the literate eye of the reader and the sovereignty of images in the early modern world.

A specialist of early modern printmaking, Stephanie Leitch received a collaborative research fellowship from the ACLS for a new project about the role of copied images in early modern travel narratives. Her book *Mapping Ethnography in Early Modern Germany* (2010) won the Roland Bainton Book Prize in Art History.

EARLY MODERN PRINT
MEDIA AND THE ART
OF OBSERVATION
TRAINING THE LITERATE EYE

STEPHANIE A. LEITCH

Florida State University

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Training the Literate Eye
Stephanie A. Leitch
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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India

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For Astrid, may the stars hold ample secrets for you

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One February evening during the passing of the evasive “green comet,” my child tells me that this is the day that no one is born. Deep into my project about the connection between the stars and printed books, it was heartening to hear echoes of the early moderns alive and well in my kitchen. While few of us scan the heavens on a daily basis, the moment a lurid comet sweeps across the sky, the amateur observers come out in force. Unfamiliarity with the stars today perhaps arises from not knowing what to look *for* when we look up. After all, the constellations never appear quite the way the cartographers of the heavens have pictured them. And light pollution today is complicit in knocking out most of the stars that early moderns used to connect the dots of Leo.

Peter Apian, a printer at the heart of this study, keenly sensed that celestial uncertainty was what prevented most people of his day from scanning the sky. So he produced the *Cosmographicus Liber*, a book that could teach audiences to read the starry vault from the sublunar world. While he was shaping this into a book of printed instruments the amateur stargazer could use, he dispensed this same knowledge in the form of shorter pamphlets that made general predictions for astronomical events of the year. These so-called *Practica* had practical applications and were very much like the *Old Farmer's Almanacs* that now gather dust at the checkout at Lowe's. In a manual and a related publication on the comet of 1532, Apian used the word “observation” to describe his sightings and he encouraged his readers to look for themselves. For quarter-moon viewings, a group of local astronomers assembles in Tallahassee's Cascades Park with telescopes, rushing in after the skies have cleared, hoping to catch a glimpse of the moon, the stars, or other bodies on the ecliptic. Without them and their venerable ancestors whom Apian addressed in his book, this knowledge would remain locked away in university or monastery libraries.

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