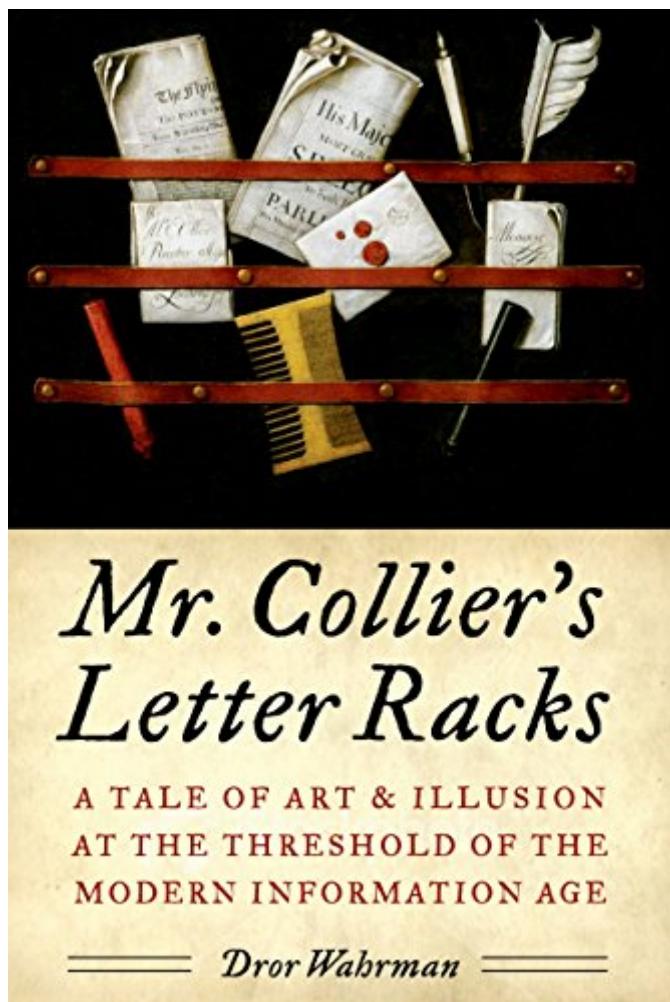


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Mr. Collier's Letter Racks: A Tale Of Art And Illusion At The Threshold Of The Modern Information Age



Synopsis

Three hundred years ago, an unprecedented explosion in inexpensive, disposable print--newspapers, pamphlets, informational publications, artistic prints--ushered in a media revolution that forever changed our relationship to information. One unusually perceptive man, an obscure Dutch/British still life painter named Edward Collier, understood the full significance of these momentous changes and embedded in his work secret warnings about the inescapable slippages between author and print, meaning and text, viewer and canvas, perception and reality. Working around 1700, Collier has been neglected, even forgotten, precisely because his secret messages have never been noticed, let alone understood. Until now. In Mr. Collier's Letter Racks, Dror Wahrman recovers the tale of an extraordinary illusionist artist who engaged in a wholly original way with a major transformation of his generation. Wahrman shows how Collier developed a hidden language within his illusionist paintings--replete with minutely coded messages, witty games, intricate allusions, and private jokes--to draw attention to the potential and the pitfalls of this new information age. A remarkably shrewd and prescient commentator on the changes unfolding around him, not least the advent of a new kind of politics following the Glorious Revolution, Collier performed a post-modernist critique of modernity long before the modern age. His trompe l'oeil paintings are filled with seemingly disconnected, enigmatic objects--letters, seals, texts of speeches, magnifying glasses, title pages--and with teasingly significant details that require the viewer to lean in and peer closely. Wahrman does just that, taking on the role of detective/cultural historian to unravel the layers of deceptions contained within Collier's extraordinary paintings. Written with passionate enthusiasm and including more than 70 color illustrations, Mr. Collier's Letter Racks is a spell-binding feat of cultural history, illuminating not only the work of an eccentric genius but the media revolution of his period, the birth of modern politics, and the nature of art itself.

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Customer Reviews

This is a fun read. First, Wahrman's work is certainly thought provoking. His argument regarding "Print 2.0" has me thinking about ephemera in the press from the turn of the eighteenth century, helping me realize some assumptions I had about how the history of print emerged. I hadn't considered what it might mean to contemporaries to have the press change as it did. Second, Wahrman takes the reader on a careful and painstakingly detailed trip through the playful artistic games of a painter. His investigation is Holmesian in character, as he brings tiny details in the painting to the foreground for the viewer to see the illusions that have been hidden for the past two-plus centuries. Just when you think there are no more surprises or clues, another is revealed. Third, the chapters are easily divided into quite manageable sections. I found the book quite entertaining going-to-bed reading. I think the book will appeal to anyone who likes a good painting, anyone who likes a good mystery, and anyone who likes to read history. While the first two chapters start a bit slow (not so the introduction, which is a romp), quickly the book gathers speed and it is hard to set down.

Wow--don't know why there hasn't been more of a fuss about this original, deeply and imaginatively researched, highly readable book. The argument about the use of trompe l'oeil at a point of mass-media transformation is brilliant and very suggestive for our own moment.

What an unexpected joy: Wahrman's book on Collier! A fluent, charming and erudite blend of art history, intellectual history and English history, with a little speculation here and there and a delicious dab of sly seventeenth-century gossip from Holland - the best kind of gossip there is. And the illustrations are fabulous, too, the next best thing until the Metropolitan gets around to a Collier retrospective, which he deserves. An unlikely event, meanwhile Wahrman did an exceptional job of

tracing dozens of Colliers, correlating and explaining his oeuvre, his feints, references and allusions. A virtuoso performance. Also, congratulations to OUP for publishing it.

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