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Animated Advertising

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REVIEWS

Ellen G. K. Rubin, *Animated Advertising: 200 Years of Premiums, Promos, and Pop-ups*, New York: The Grolier Club, 2022, 112 p. \$35.00 USD (paperback) ISBN 978-1605831039

Review by ROBERT DESMARAIS
University of Alberta

This illustrated catalogue highlights the collection of Ellen G. K. Rubin, also known as “The Popuplady” (see popuplady.com). As both the collector and curator of the pop-ups, Rubin selected 204 items for the catalogue, which accompanied the exhibition held at New York’s Grolier Club from 1 December 2022 to 11 February 2023. She arranged the items into eleven thematic sections, including pharmaceuticals and health care, food, industrial design and innovation, printing and publishing, automotive advertisements, business, alcohol and tobacco, fashion and beauty, holidays, travel, arts, amusement, and politics. Alongside 250 colour pictures, the publication also features two movables, a volvelle fitted into the cover (with French flaps), a lift-the-flap colophon (noting an edition size of 1,000 copies), a glossary of pop-up and movable paper terms, a selected bibliography, and indexes of names and mechanical devices. Printed on heavy stock covers and glossy paper inside, the catalogue offers a pleasurable reading experience, and the overall design maintains a good balance of text, white space, and images.

The catalogue opens with a two-page piece titled “A Passion for Pop-ups: 40 Years of Wow!” that Rubin adapted from her earlier essay for the exhibition, *Ideas in Motion: The History of Pop-up and Movable Books and Ephemera from the Collection of Ellen G. K. Rubin*, which was mounted at the Sojourner Truth Library at the State University of New York. In this piece,

we learn that Rubin's passion for pop-ups began when she opened *The Pop-up Book of Trucks* (1974) to read to her son. Since then, her "adventure as a collector of pop-up and movable books" became more deliberate after visiting the 1988 Eccentric Books exhibition curated by Gay Walker at Yale's Sterling Memorial Library (11). After graduating from the Physician Associate Program at the Yale School of Medicine, Rubin "sought out book fairs, tag sales, and flea markets in search of pop-up books" (11).

As an avid collector myself, I am always interested in hearing the stories of other collectors and learning how they decide what to collect, to what lengths they go to find desirable items, and how they articulate the significance of their collections. What fascinates me about Rubin's story is her evolution from a novice collector of pop-up and movable books to a serious collector of movable paper ephemera after becoming a member of the Ephemera Society. Thinking about her early ephemera collection, she explains, "I began to realize that many of these "made to be discarded" postcards and advertisements displayed more complex mechanicals than many of my books" (12). She continues with her endearing fascination for interacting with movable paper; she writes, "An object will find its way into my collection if it passes 'The Smile Test' and ranks high in the 'Wow!' factor" (12). Clearly, Rubin's desire for "finding new movables with ingenious paper engineering" extends into how she encourages her website visitors to get in touch if they have *any* books or ephemera with movable elements (12). That said, I would have wanted the author to share more insights into the field of collecting ephemera as well as the research potential of her collection.

Flipping through the catalogue, one certainly gets the impression that Rubin has a vast network of people who regularly alert her to suitable candidates for her collection. The scope of the collection is reflected in the broad range of topics summarized in a twelve-page introduction. However, the brevity of the short descriptions leaves more to be desired; "Household Items" is introduced with three sentences, "Music" is introduced with four sentences, and "Politics" is introduced with only two

sentences. Despite this shortcoming, the catalogue dazzles as a pictorial introduction to movable paper ephemera. Each featured item has a corresponding colour photograph (a few entries have multiple photographs), and their descriptions are clear and concise. The items are so enthralling that, in most cases, I would have enjoyed reading more about them, certainly more than a sentence or two. For example, item twenty-two, located in the food section, is titled “*Thé Lipton: Directement de la plantation à la théière*” (Lipton Tea: Directly from the plantation to the teapot) and described too briefly as “A triple-action volvelle—turn the wheel and the worker picks the tea, factory workers package it, and the teapot lifts to pour the tea” (39). The various scenes depicted in the advertisement, from the idyllic plantation and factory environment to the golden pot of tea and teacups, are loaded with meaning and raise so many questions. For example, the scene of female factory workers dressed in immaculate white uniforms draws attention to their role in the production process, making me wonder if the advertisement served a dual purpose as both a product marketing and recruitment device. It vividly shows how Lipton Tea cultivated a brand identity not only for its tea but also for the company itself. Indeed, the labour-related imagery suggests that it had clear ideas about how to make plantation and factory work look appealing. Exploring such topics and related questions would have added depth to the writing in the exhibition catalogue, giving it a more sophisticated interpretive framework.

There is much to commend in the rare instances where the author offers a robust descriptive paragraph. For example, the first entry under “Promoting Business” is titled “*Cendrillon and L’Équitation*” (Cinderella and The Horseback Rider), which is described as a “chromolithographed trade card” distributed to customers by the Parisian department store Au Bon Marché in the early 1900s (56). Rubin explains that the cards were distributed to customers for free, and from 1895 to 1914, the store “distributed 50 million chromos, each with a circulation of between 100 and 400,000 copies” (56). She adds that many of the cards promoting the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris were especially popular giveaways,

and many of them “extolled new inventions and ideas in France and countries from around the world” (56). This admirably informative yet succinct description works well as a basic introduction to the movable paper device. If only each entry were described to the same informative standard.

Overall, the catalogue is visually captivating with its evocative photographs of movable paper devices. Rubin has certainly succeeded in raising awareness of movable ephemera and conveying her “thrill to the way paper engineers will enhance a story, a product, or an idea by imbuing the subject with movement” (12). In looking at the wide array of movable paper devices, I, too, was thrilled to see paper engineering designs full of inventiveness, originality, and amusement. This book is a useful and compelling catalogue for anyone interested in paper engineering and collectible paper ephemera.

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