

Vaudeville

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Step 1: Description of Artifact

- Where might this artifact have appeared?
- Who might have created it?
- Who was the intended audience?
- What does this artifact tell us about the life and times of the people who made it and used it?
- How would this technology be different today?

Step 2: Background and Analysis of Artifact

The artifact pictured here is a broadside, or poster, from around 1900 in Montpelier. These posters were produced in various sizes, ranging from oversized circus posters pasted to barn walls to the more common smaller broadsides like this one, which is somewhat smaller than a regular sheet of paper. They were put up at the store or in other public spaces to advertise upcoming popular entertainments.

These ranged from local theater productions to traveling circuses, slapstick plays described as "comic farces," and blackface minstrel shows. The minstrel show evolved in the late 19th century into a form of entertainment called "Vaudeville," which included comic sketches, dancing, musical performances and other novelty acts. The poster pictured here is an advertisement for a traveling Vaudeville show. Vaudeville and other kinds of traveling productions were an essential experience for many Vermonters (and other rural Americans) because they brought local people, who seldom traveled far from home, into contact with people, images and ideas from all over the nation.

Step 3: Critical Thinking

1. The poster depicts an Irish couple, and advertises Irish-themed entertainments. Why do you think the Irish would be a subject for popular entertainment at this time?
2. Judging from the words and images on the poster, how would you describe the portrayal of Irish Americans you would expect to see at such a show? Would it be favorable? Explain.
3. Use ten adjectives to describe the man portrayed in the poster—judging from his appearance, what kind of person is he supposed to be? Support your thoughts with details.

Step 4: Commentary

This poster is a small part of the national discussion about citizenship that was a major preoccupation, and ongoing challenge, in the Gilded Age. A massive wave of immigration after the Civil War brought many new ethnicities and cultures into the "melting pot" of the U.S. at this time, especially into the cities, where exploding industries were creating thousands upon thousands of low wage jobs. But even though the economy was expanding rapidly in these times, the growth was often chaotic, and job security for many individuals and groups of workers was far from assured. In the cities, the immigrant groups often kept to themselves, living in ethnic enclaves and (at least for the first generation) still speaking their native languages. The "melting pot" took time to actually blend groups together through gradual assimilation, and in the meantime, competition for jobs, together with fear and prejudice, caused tension between the various immigrant groups and between the immigrants and the established population.

{gallery}gilded-age/vaudeville{/gallery}

"Native" Americans (not Indians, but Europeans whose own families had come to America in recent generations) were particularly prejudiced when it came to the Chinese and African-Americans, and both of these groups endured serious levels of violence and discrimination during the Gilded Age. With both of these groups, the logic of race was a convenient way to justify their inferiority and their mistreatment, and both were relentlessly caricatured in racist images (like cartoons), and in popular entertainments (like Vaudeville). These racist images worked to dehumanize Chinese and African-Americans, and this dehumanization helped make discrimination, exploitation and violence (most notably lynching) possible.

When the wave of Irish immigration came in the second half of the 19th century, the native born population had the same motivations for prejudice: the Irish immigrants were poor, of a foreign culture, and were competing for jobs. But the Irish weren't as racially distinct as Chinese or African-Americans, so the logic of race had to make a stretch in order to

be effective. In order to understand this twisted logic, we need to take a closer look at African-American stereotypes.

Through the long history of slavery, a whole cast of stereotypes had evolved around African-Americans. There was the happy slave (the Sambo); the ridiculous freed black man trying to act civilized but coming off as a buffoon (Zip Coon); the loyal nanny and house servant (Mammy); the violent, drunk, sexually aggressive brute with a razor, and many more. These stereotypes all worked together to reinforce the idea that servitude was the proper place for a black person and that a black man was both preposterous and dangerous when free to participate in society on equal footing with whites. These ideas helped create the circumstance that even though African-American males had legal citizenship throughout the Gilded Age, they were in fact second-class citizens until the Civil Rights Movement. Even today shadows of these stereotypes remain, and African-Americans remain disproportionately poor, imprisoned and marginalized.

The Irish are an interesting lesson in American racism because even though they were white, the Irish were still stereotyped and dehumanized with old racist images. In the case of the poster shown here, the Irishman is portrayed in a manner very similar to the old Zip Coon stereotype. The Irishman is dressed up in fancy cloths, with a waistcoat, top hat, and bowtie, but his body language betrays that he is unfit for these cloths and for the position in society that they suggest. More subtle but also clear is the way the Irishman is portrayed physically—his face is shaded very dark and looks somewhat African (or “negroid” as racists of the time would say) in its features. These similarities might seem coincidental, but when viewed in context, alongside other dehumanizing depictions of the Irish, the identification of the Irish as equivalent in racial stature with African-Americans is undeniable. One often-cited and telling example is the Thomas Nast cartoon, “The Ignorant Vote”, which depicts a black man and an Irishman, both represented with ape-like features, weighing against each other on a scale, which is perfectly balanced: both men are unworthy of true citizenship; both represent a lesser strain of humanity.

Another piece of the entertainment mentioned on the poster is important, and points toward the complexity of such entertainment’s role in the evolving society of the Gilded Age. The poster advertises the “Great Double Irish Jig”, a dance number. Most likely this was an exaggerated and humorous version of the traditional Irish dance style, but it was also a legitimate musical entertainment that worked to incorporate Irish culture into mainstream American consciousness. Blackface minstrel shows are the ultimate example of this phenomenon: even as they mocked and demeaned African-American culture, these entertainments engaged with black music and dancing in a way that was more than just superficial, with the result that American music and dance has always been influenced strongly by rhythms and styles that originated in the plantations and sharecroppers’ shacks of African-Americans.

Even though they lived far from the cities or the South, Vermonters, like all Americans, were concerned with the chief national issue of the time, which was reconciliation. First, in both chronology and priority, there was the reconciliation that followed the Civil War, and the poster suggests this concern with the “Blue and Gray Reunited” sketch. But more broadly, the country was struggling to reconcile its emerging national identity with the challenge of mass immigration. America was a privileged society, an upward bound democracy. Who was going to be allowed to join the club? How were the freed slaves going to fit into the new order after the Civil War? Could the Irish simply step off the boat and into the voting booth? Did other Americans have any responsibility for the poorest of the immigrants? These questions are still pertinent today, and today, as then, we work through the discussion by way of humor, of (sometimes racist) mockery, and by the gradual incorporation of foreign traditions and ideas into mainstream American culture. Vermonters still live far from the places where these issues are most urgent (as in Arizona and illegal immigrants) and still rely on the media, and entertainment, as a window into the national dialogue.