Abstract:

In nineteenth-century America, Italians who sold small plaster sculptural reproductions were often called “image peddlers.” Studying representations of these figures provides a way to trace the circulation of images of classical and Renaissance sculpture through time and place; it illustrates the consumption of art reproductions by middle class Americans; and it illuminates the history of Italian artist-migrants. The character of the image peddler also reveals contradictions in the status of the arts in America. While Old Master “fine art” was appreciated, it was also under suspicion as the production of a Catholic society. This paper examines the sources and formats for visualizing this contradiction in American culture through studying the figure of the image peddler in genres of children’s books: the Cries, depictions of street vendors dating back to the Renaissance; abecedaries, alphabetized information instructing children in religion and other subjects; and geography texts that spread knowledge about the world. The paper concludes with a new interpretation of Francis W. Edmonds’s 1844 painting the Image Pedlar, for the first time identifying the central figure as an Italian image seller, using archival sources to reveal Edmonds’ close connections to these immigrants to New York, starting in the 1830s. In Edmonds’s work, the elision of the Italian image seller with the conniving Yankee peddler, the narrow selection of figurines made for sale, and the definition of some small sculptures as toys spoke to the discomfort of American Protestant culture with aspects of Italian art. The artist neutralized the peddler’s ethnicity, immigrant status, and Catholicism by removing references to the vendor’s nationality in the painting’s title. This allowed viewers to appreciate Edmonds’s painting and its subject of an American family enjoying a variety of arts, without confronting long-held tensions.