Abstract:

Nature and nationhood are intimately entangled in the representation of American landscape. In this paper, I examine the Society for the Advancement of Truth in Art, a collective of architects, artists, and scientists active in New York during the 1860s that focused on the moral implications of drawing, especially sketching plants. They promoted meticulous observation of weeds and wildflowers as a means of democratizing art and society. Society founders, Clarence Cook, Clarence King, Russell Sturgis, John H. Hill, and Thomas C. Farrer—all white Northerners, some immigrants, mostly working class—wanted people to radically accept nature on its own unruly terms, including the weeds and wildflowers that volunteered on city streets. While the idea of “invasive species” was codified in the 1850s, signaling anti-immigrant nativism, the Society insisted that all plants belonged wherever they grew. Gardeners loved imported ornamental plants while amateur artists of the Society recognized the worth of weeds deemed noxious, many of which were also imported but unintentionally. Plants served as an analog for human problems in visual culture during this period and the human role in plant species migration was strategically obscured, naturalizing colonial settlement and its subsequent effects. Within the context of gardening trends and botanical illustration, I show how Society artists exercised radical politics through the symbolism of plants and the practice of drawing, in contrast to the rhetoric of scientific racism in horticulture.