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Book review: Wish you were here: Guidebooks, viewbooks, photobooks and maps of New York City, 1807-1940

reviewed by Rhys Stevens





Mark D. Tomasko. *Wish you were here: Guidebooks, viewbooks, photobooks and maps of New York City, 1807-1940, from the collection of Mark D. Tomasko*. New York: The Grolier Club, 2025. 100p. \$35 US. ISBN: 978-1605831220 (paper).

Mark D. Tomasko's *Wish You Were Here: Guidebooks, Viewbooks, Photobooks, and Maps of New York City, 1807-1940* offers a captivating glimpse into the rich tapestry of New York City's past through its printed ephemera. For the past two centuries, New York City (NYC) has been recognized as the largest, wealthiest, and most influential city in the United States. It is also the nation's most populous and has continuously held this title from the first census in 1790 (pop. 33,131) until the most recent in 2020 (pop. 8,804,190). This massive population influx and the resultant physical growth and development of the City's infrastructure were a major factor in its emergence as a global center of finance and culture. In this insightful publication, Tomasko identifies and describes hundreds of notable visitor publications produced in the 19th and 20th centuries, which were used by tourists and locals alike to navigate, explore, and remember the great metropolis.

Wish You Were Here serves as the catalogue from a Grolier Club exhibition held in April-May 2025, featuring historical New York City-themed souvenir tourist books, maps, and ephemera. The Grolier Club, a distinguished society for bibliophiles, provides an apt imprint for such a collection. Exhibit materials were selected from the private collection of Mark Tomasko, who also curated the exhibit. Tomasko is a historian, author, researcher, and lifelong New Yorker who has avidly collected NYC materials over the course of the past 56 years. The catalogue provides a rare and privileged glimpse into specific items from his private collection, reputedly one of the greatest assemblages of such materials in existence and rivalling the Seymour B. Durst Old York Library at the Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.

The work is organized into two sizable chapters documenting citywide guidebooks (pp. 13-44) and viewbooks/photobooks (pp. 45-59), and a series of shorter chapters (pp. 60-97)

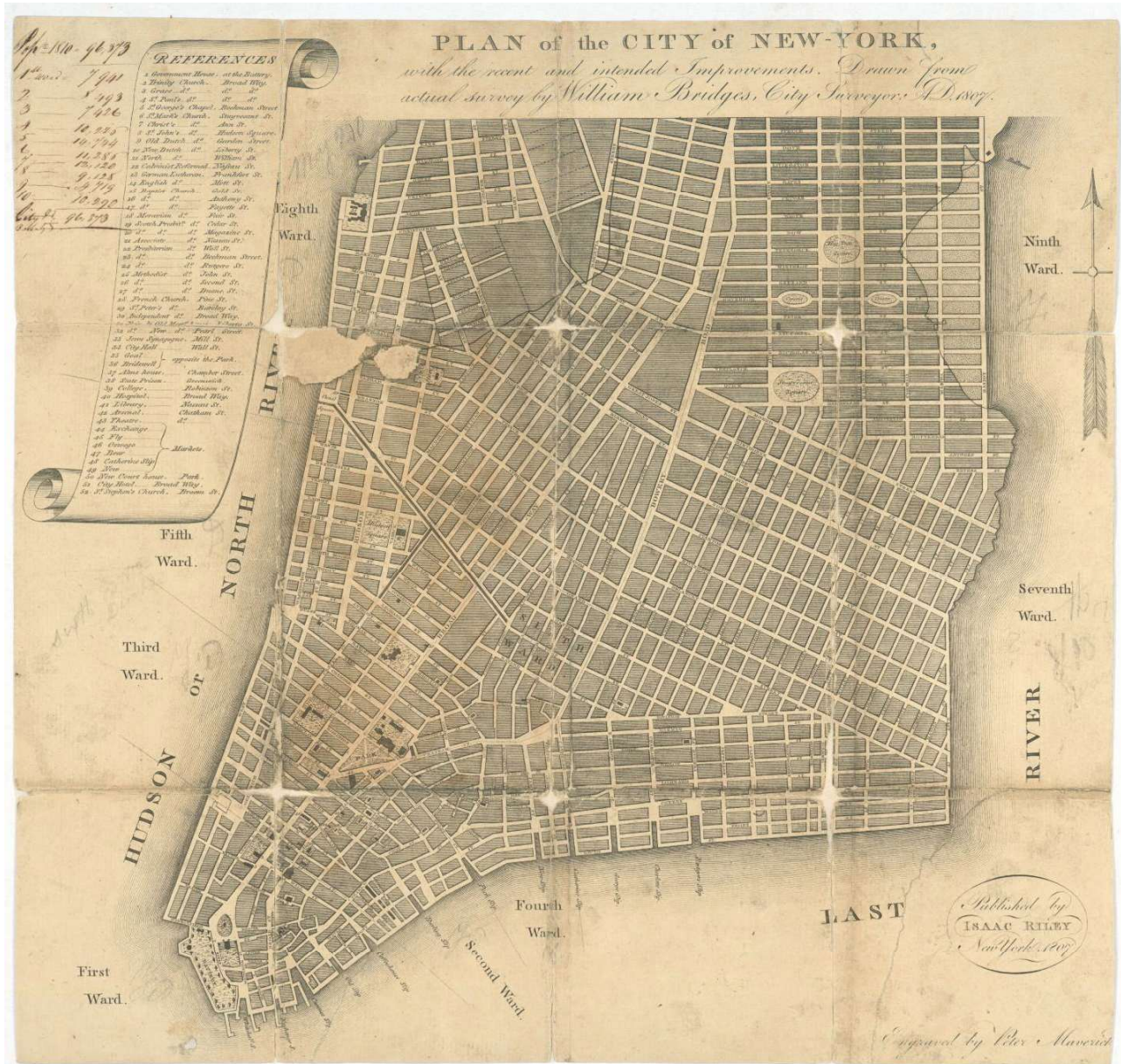


describing sub-types of each and related miscellanea. Included are guides focusing on specific locations (e.g., Central Park, City boroughs, and famous skyscrapers), notable author-publishers (e.g., Moses King), and the maps which frequently accompanied guidebooks. Each chapter follows a similar pattern, with Tomasko providing an overview of several pages in length highlighting the origins and evolution of each *type* of publication. Examples of *specific* publications are then included for those Tomasko deems to be significant in terms of comprehensiveness, utility as a historical reference source, or use of new graphic reproduction techniques. All sources also include attribution details as well as interesting and informative one-paragraph descriptions. These descriptions, corresponding to item labels from the Grolier Club exhibition, are accompanied by 116 high-quality, color images picturing either an object's cover page or a noteworthy illustration contained within. Tomasko's meticulous curation ensures that readers grasp the significance of each item, whether it's a panoramic map revolutionizing urban depiction or a pocket guidebook whose prose vividly captures the street-level experience of a bygone era.

Readers whose specific interest is historical maps should be aware that the Maps chapter (pp. 90-97) largely pertains to those taken from the guidebooks featured in the exhibit. Tomasko's two-page maps overview, though brief, provides context for their creation while also describing several of the curator's favorites. Particularly compelling is the inclusion of items like the *Plan of the city of New-York, with the recent and intended improvements* (1807), which was prepared by William Bridges to accompany the City's first guidebook, *The Picture of New-York* (1807) by Samuel Latham Mitchill. In total, this chapter describes 11 separate maps, six of which are included as images. The author points out that, "Many, if not a majority, of the guidebooks are accompanied by maps, so there are actually a large number of maps in the exhibition but mostly folded up in the guides" (p. 10). Fortunately, there are a variety of other visually interesting maps and panoramas of streetscapes interspersed throughout the entire work. Examples from other chapters include the map drawn by J.P. Maclean included in *Pocket Map and Visitor's Guide to Central Park* (1859) (p. 86) and the chromolithographic street panoramas from *A Pictorial Description of Broadway* (1899) (p. 50). Those seeking a more in-depth examination of NYC maps may be interested in



New York City: Two Hundred Years in Maps (2000), a separate Grolier Club exhibition curated by Tomasko.



Plan of the city of New-York, with the recent and intended improvements (1807). Drawn by Williams Bridges. Image source: NYC Public Library Digital Collections.



Broadway, East Side. 29th to 31st St. Included in A Pictorial Description of Broadway (1899). Image source: The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Wish You Were Here itemizes and describes rare materials highly prized by both antiquarian book collectors and memory institutions. Despite many of these NYC-themed guides, viewbooks, and maps having been previously documented and often digitized and accessible online, Tomasko's work adds considerable value by closely examining the most significant such sources from amongst the entirety of this genre. In doing so, he provides the oft-unknown yet fascinating context and details surrounding their creation, such as revealing the marketing publicity behind "world's tallest" buildings like the Singer Tower or technological innovations such as Louis Glaser's Process that made possible mass-production of viewbooks. Readers will appreciate how Tomasko adeptly reveals the layers of history embedded in these seemingly simple tourist aids.

Wish You Were Here will be of greatest relevance to those seeking to identify primary sources about the built history and urban development of New York City but will also appeal to bibliophiles and others interested in the history of publishing, advertising, and graphic design. Ultimately, this catalogue stands as a unique resource, not just for its core audience, but for anyone captivated by the material culture of urban history and the enduring allure of New York City as seen through the eyes of its past interpreters.



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