Prints, drawings or paintings that incorporate high-level perspective: the viewer has the sensation of looking at the ground from the clouds. Views taken from just above roof-level and map-views—pictorial maps that have a consistent scale—fall outside this category. Bird’s-eye views have also been called ‘aeronautical views’, ‘balloon views’ and ‘aero-views’. The advantage of the high angle is that more detail can be displayed, as the foreground does not obscure the background. This has made the bird’s-eye view the ideal medium for representing battlefields, a purpose for which it was first used in the Classical period (see Rome, ancient, §IV, 1, (iv), (b)). It has also been found useful for depicting proposed urban developments, such as estates, docks and railways, and for landscape garden plans. It has been widely used for depicting palaces and country houses and, in the 19th century, for individual factories, the choice of the bird’s-eye medium being motivated by landlords’ and capitalists’ pride of ownership. Civic pride has contributed to the even more widespread use of the method for depicting towns and cities.

Although there are some 15th-century bird’s-eye views of towns (e.g. the images of Rome, Florence and Jerusalem in the Nuremberg Chronicle, 1493), the first significant town view was a six-sheet woodcut view of Venice (1500) by Jacopo de’ Barbari. In its wake came a view of Constantinople (1559) by Melchior Lorck; Bruges (1562) by Marcus Gheerhaerts the elder; Ancient Rome (1574) by Etienne Dupérac; and a view of Amsterdam (1638) by Jan Christaensz. Micker (c. 1600–64), in which passing clouds cast shadows over the townscape. Such views were generally considered cartographic; mapmakers published them to supplement or substitute for town plans. Consequently many such views are to be found in town atlases such as the six-volume Civitates orbis terrarum (1572–1618) of Georg Braun (1541–1622) and Franz Hogenberg.

Bird’s-eye views of palaces and their gardens seem to have originated in France, where Jacques Androuet Du Cerceau l’aîné produced a series of such engravings for the first volume (1576) of his Les Plus Excellents Bastiments de France. In the 17th century the genre continued to flourish in France. Pierre Patel l’aîné, for instance, painted a bird’s-eye view of the Château of Versailles (1668; Versailles, Château), and drew a bird’s-eye view of the Château of Fontainebleau (c. 1670), which was engraved. The genre was also established in the Netherlands; the foreground of the Dutch
views frequently featured an imaginary hill, with tree stumps, gesticulating figures or a carriage heading for the subject of the image.

The bird’s-eye view portrayal of houses with their estates was introduced to England by Dutch artists working there in the last quarter of the 17th century. Jan Siberechts’s output included oil paintings of Wollaton Hall and Park (New Haven, CT, Yale Cent. Brit. A.), the Grove at Highgate (see Harris, p. 73) and Cheveley Park (1681; Belvoir Castle, Leics). His compatriot Jacob Knijff, with his brother Leonard Knijff, embarked in the 1690s on an ambitious project of drawing and engraving noblemen’s and gentlemen’s seats, beginning with those of John Holles, Duke of Newcastle (1662–1711): Nottingham Castle, Bolsover and Haughton. Soon afterwards he produced views of the royal palaces of Whitehall, St James’s, Hampton Court and Windsor Castle. In 1701 Knijff announced that he had drawn 60 seats to date and that his series of engravings would eventually total 100. A large number of them appeared in Britannia Illustrata or Views of Several of the Queen’s Palaces, as also of the Principal Seats of the Nobility and Gentry of Great Britain (1707). This work was reissued in several volumes at various dates by a variety of publishers, sometimes with the title Nouveau théâtre de la Grande Bretagne, and the engravings were simultaneously marketed as independent prints. Knijff produced oil paintings of a few of the seats, including one of Windsor Castle (Windsor Castle, Berks, Royal Col.), but most of the bird’s-eye view paintings attributed to him are copies after engraved originals. Many of Knijff’s plates were engraved by Johannes Kip, who also drew and engraved bird’s-eye views of seats in Gloucestershire for the Ancient and Present State of Gloucestershire (1712) by Sir Robert Atkyns (1647–1711). Kip engraved many of the views of seats for the History of Kent (1719) by John Harris (c. 1666–1719) and drew, engraved and, in 1720, published the largest of all British bird’s-eye views: a 12-sheet representation of London, looking east from a point above St James’s Park. English followers of the Dutch topographical artists included Thomas Badeslade (fl 1712–c. 1742), John Stevens (d ?1722), John Harris the elder (fl 1693–1719) and John Harris the younger (1715–55), whose finest paintings are a suite of four bird’s-eye views of Dunham Massey Hall (1751), Cheshire, the seat of George Booth, 2nd Earl of Warrington (1675–1758).

In the 1750s the bird’s-eye view declined in popularity. Printed general views of towns now tended to be accommodated on single rather than multiple sheets, and most views of necessity were distant ones. The first manned hot-air balloon flight in 1784 and the invention of the panorama around 1785 led in the early 19th century to a revival of the use of bird’s-eye perspective. It was used to show proposed urban developments, such as the Brighton developments of Kemp Town and Brunswick Square (1824), a number of cemetery layouts (e.g. the design by Francis Goodwin (1784–1835) for a Grand National Cemetery) and towns, such as the Aeronautical View of London (1831) by Robert Havell jr, which showed the city from a point 402 feet above the Thames. Lithographs of balloon views were
especially popular in France; French artists, engravers and publishers produced views of many European cities and some North American ones. In the 1840s Jules Arnout (b 1814) issued *Excursions aériennes*, a series of remarkably accurate town views, on each print of which a small balloon features just above the horizon. In the 1850s A. Appert (fl c. 1840) and Alphonse Testard (b 1810) published a series of *Vues générales*, which included views of *Paris, Rome, Naples, London* and *St Petersburg*. The most prolific of the Parisian bird’s-eye-view artists was Alfred Guesdon (1880–76), who was a non-practising architect from Nantes. His lithographed views of towns appeared in several series: *Voyage aérien sur la Loire et ses bords* (c. 1846), *L’Italie à vol d’oiseau* (1849) by Hippolyte Etiennez, *L’Espagne à vol d’oiseau* (c. 1854–5) and *La Suisse à vol d’oiseau* (c. 1858). The trade in such prints was less developed in London than in Paris, but in 1847 Ackermann & Co. published attractive bird’s-eye-view steel engravings of *Liverpool* and *Birmingham*, as did J. H. Banks a *Cosmoramic View of London* (1843) and a *Balloon View of London* (1851). Nathaniel Whittock (1791–1860) published lithographic bird’s-eye views of *Oxford, London, Hull* and *York* and of *Melbourne*, Australia, while wood-engraved views appeared in the illustrated journals, particularly the *Illustrated London News* and its rival *The Graphic*. Some of the finest *Graphic* views were the work of W. L. Wyllie. During the Crimean War bird’s-eye views of the battlefields appeared regularly, many of them published by Stannard & Dixon.

John Bachman, American, 1850–1877; Printer: A. Weingartner; Publisher: L. W. Schmidt: *The Empire City*, lithograph printed in colours with hand colouring, sheet: 28 1/8 x 38 1/4 in. (71.5 x 97.1 cm) image:
23 1/4 x 33 7/8 in. (59.1 x 86 cm), 1855 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Edward W. C. Arnold Collection of New York Prints, Maps, and Pictures, Bequest of Edward W. C. Arnold, 1954, Accession ID:54.90.1198); photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

After the American Civil War bird’s-eye views of towns became very popular in the United States and Canada. From the 1840s Edwin Whitefield (1816–92) had been producing town views, but most of these were taken from a low altitude. In the 1850s Edward Sachse (1804–73) and John Bachmann (fl 1849–85; see fig.), printmakers of German origin, adopted a higher angle in their views. Sachse’s firm produced at least 73 views and Bachmann’s 53. Albert Ruger (1828–99), who began drawing town views in 1866, produced over 250. Thaddeus Mortimer Fowler (1842–1922), originally Ruger’s assistant, issued 426 views, the last in 1922. Oakley Hoopes Bailey (1843–1947), at one time Fowler’s associate, issued 374, the last in 1926. Most of the North American views were of new communities, frequently quite small towns; they were intended to demonstrate that these communities were well served by railways and enjoyed the expected range of facilities, such as banks, hotels, churches and schools. These views thus became a useful tool for land speculators, helping to encourage migration to the West. Most of them were single sheets, measuring typically 340×500 mm, but some striking multi-sheet views were published for major cities, including J. C. Laas’s Bird’s-eye View of Syracuse, New York (8 sheets), Sachse’s National Capital, Washington (3 sheets) and Bird’s-Eye View of Baltimore (12 sheets), Galt and Hoy’s City of New York (4 sheets) and that of St Louis (118 sheets) drawn by Camille N. Dry (fl 1871–1904).

No comprehensive manual exists to explain how a bird’s-eye town view was drawn, but it is possible to derive a notion of the process from artists’ notes, advertisements and the few surviving preparatory sketches. The normal practice was for the artist to make general sketches from one or more elevated points, usually church towers, town halls, public monuments or neighbouring hills, though very seldom from balloons. The artist would then make sketches of the façades of buildings; a sketchbook of Whitefield’s survives in a North American private collection, and the sketchbooks of Cecil Brown (1903–83) for the Tribute to London (1945) are in the Guildhall Library, London. These sketches were used to make the preliminary drawing, the information being adjusted if necessary to make it seem that the scene was being viewed from above. Separate, more detailed drawings were usually made of important landmarks—from the 1860s reference photographs of landmarks were frequently used—and this information was also transferred to the general view. The final watercolour drawing was passed to the engraver or lithographer, while another copy of it might be exhibited in the publisher’s premises. Advertisements were then placed inviting the public to inspect the drawing and take out a subscription; further advertisements would appear on publication.
Despite their realism, bird’s-eye views did not necessarily show the scene precisely as it was. Since the information in the background was as important to the user as that in the foreground, atmospheric perspective could be kept to a minimum or totally dispensed with. Maps were used as an aid at more than one stage of production, but, in order to accommodate everything the purchaser expected, topographical information sometimes had to be grossly distorted. Some North American views show cities more as it was hoped they would become rather than as they actually were on the date of publication. Nevertheless, the majority of bird’s-eye views carry a vast amount of dependable information and represent an important historical source.

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