

HOGARTH'S LONDON

*Prints by William Hogarth
from the collection of McMaster University*



ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

Preface and Acknowledgments

With this selection of Hogarth prints we have attempted to give the viewer the essence of the artist's witty and captivating style of social commentary.

Set against the backdrop of 18th century England, these prints afford us insight into the London of the day, its physical character and the people who flavoured it. The pictorial elements provide us with a sense of time and place; they also work like theatrical devices, amplifying the evolving drama and preparing us for the underlying message. Although 20th century circumstances might appear to date the subject matter from which Hogarth drew his inspiration, there are still relevant lessons to be learned from his portrayals of society's ills, people's misfortunes and human foibles.

These prints come from the collection of McMaster University. I would like to thank David Taylor, Curator, and George Wallace, Director, of the McMaster University Art Gallery, for their cooperation in the loan of these works.

Conservation work on the Hogarth prints was done under the supervision of Mervyn Ruggles, Professor of Fine Art Conservation, Master of Art Conservation Programme, Queen's University. It was of great benefit to us to have been associated with Professor Ruggles through this project and to have had his invaluable expertise. I would further like to thank Thea Jirat-Wasiutynski, conservation intern, Queen's University, who carried out the conservation treatment and prepared detailed examination and treatment reports on each print.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation for the work done by my assistant, Beverley Watters, who researched the prints in the exhibition and prepared the catalogue entries.

Reissa Schrager

The Prints of William Hogarth

The Art Board of McMaster University is particularly pleased that through the initiative of Extension Services of the Art Gallery of Ontario this selection of Hogarth prints is being circulated to various centres in our Province. Over the past eighteen years the Art Board has built up a large collection of works of art, believing that it is essential for students of art and art history to study at first hand as much of the subject matter of their discipline as possible. Our collection is particularly rich in prints. While the treasures contained in university libraries and art collections are assembled primarily to help students and scholars in their work, we all benefit by these acquisitions. The remarkable growth that has taken place in this respect in the province of Ontario over the past twenty years enriches us all and should help to ensure an even greater flowering of our educational system in the future. I hope that the enjoyment of this small exhibition will make clear to a wide audience some of the value of such university collections.

At first glance the prints that you find displayed in this exhibition may seem colourless and rather gloomy, yet closer examination will show them to be much less sombre than they at first appear. In a sense they are very remote from us for they illustrate the lives of Englishmen, more particularly Londoners, from a time almost two hundred and fifty years ago, but the stories of vanity, pride and greed which they describe are similar to events we hear of almost daily. Our technology may be different but our natures are not. Above all, the humour and irony expressed in these prints speaks to us with the same directness that it did to Hogarth's contemporaries. How perceptive is Hogarth's judgment when he wrote in the early 1760s, near the end of his life, "The prints I have published within these thirty years past will be instructive and amusing in future times when the customs, manners, fashions, characters and humours of the present age in this country may be altered and perhaps in some respects be otherwise unknown to posterity, both at home and abroad." Our picture of what 18th century England looked like is to a most remarkable extent determined by Hogarth's prints, for from 1732 for more than a hundred years they enjoyed great popularity and were produced in large numbers so that very many of them have survived to the present. From them we gain an impression, unequalled in its vividness and variety, of the architecture of London and its suburbs; the decoration of the interior of churches, public buildings, the houses of the rich and the hovels of the poor, their furnishings and accoutrements. Above all, this world is crowded with an amazingly busy throng of people from every walk of life and in every mode of dress and dishabille.

William Hogarth was born on November 10th, 1697 at Bartholomew Close in the city of London. The city then had a population of about three quarters of a million citizens and showed dramatically the contrasts between wealth and ostentation on the one hand, and desperate poverty on the other. Throughout the 18th century London was to become increasingly important and its trade and wealth was to grow enormously. It was to experience a building boom which greatly enlarged the west end of the city, and the cultural life of Londoners was to become increasingly varied and sophisticated. As the century proceeded foreign writers, musicians and artists came to think it worth their while to visit London. However, in spite of this growing wealth and power London was a dirty city with a high mortality rate, particularly among the poor, so the population grew

relatively little throughout the century. It was into this boisterous, often turbulent and increasingly self-confident city that Hogarth was born.

Hogarth's father was an unsuccessful schoolmaster who had published some school texts and had also spent some time in debtor's prison. With the assistance of his brother, a successful victualler, he apprenticed his son to Ellis Gramble, a silver plate engraver. In the circumstances William was fortunate that through the support of his uncle, who was related to Gramble by marriage, he was able to be admitted to an apprenticeship, even though he did not seem to have enjoyed the routine copying involved in this decorative engraving. In 1720 he terminated his apprenticeship and set himself up as an engraver, decorating pieces of silverware and also producing shopcards and bookplates. After 1723 he produced an increasing number of book illustrations. By means of these competent but in most cases unremarkable pieces of work he made a living until 1727. However, during this time another development was taking place in Hogarth's career. The newly established engraver joined an art academy in St. Martin's Lane. He later transferred to a similar academy run by Sir James Thornhill, who was apparently unwilling to become his father-in-law in 1727. His ambition to escape from engraving into the imaginative world of large history pictures was probably inspired by Thornhill's decorations of the cupola of St. Paul's Cathedral and the ceilings of the Upper and Lower Halls at Greenwich, which he began to work on in the first decade of the century. This ambition to become a history painter in the grand manner continued throughout his life, but it was as a portrait painter and especially as a painter of conversation pieces, or as he came to call them "modern moral subjects," that he made his reputation. One of his first successes in this manner was a beautiful painting of a scene from John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* of 1728. The pictorial format which he uses here, where the picture frame becomes a proscenium of a theatre and the action takes place as if upon a stage, was to be used by him time and again. He extends its dramatic possibilities by showing a series of scenes through which the story is gradually unfolded.

In 1731 he painted the six paintings of the *Harlot's Progress* which showed poor Molly Hackabout, newly come to London, and what subsequently happens to her after being seduced into prostitution by an old bawd. Similarly Tom Rakewell, who sadly enough never seems to enjoy himself, comes into a fortune, moves to the city, quickly loses his money and ends up a madman in Bedlam. In this series there is a secondary story of Tom's girlfriend, Sarah Young, whom he has deserted but who remains faithful to him throughout. A drama of much the same kind is acted out in *Marriage a la Mode* and in a less elaborate form in the other sets of paintings and prints made by Hogarth. These pictures need to be very carefully "read" for almost everything that appears in them makes a comment upon the drama that is being acted out. The pictures on the walls of the rooms, the writing on books and scraps of paper, the behaviour of animals in many of the scenes, all provide additional insight into what is going on.

When these pictures first appeared they had the further attraction of containing recognizable portraits of celebrities. The old bawd who seduces Molly is a portrait of the procuress Mother Needham, while the unpleasant man in the doorway of the inn is the notorious rapist and fornicator, Colonel Francis Charteris. Similar identifications can be made in other scenes of the *Harlot's Progress* and particularly of the strange characters in the second plate of the *Rake's Progress* and at the Countess's Levee, the fourth plate of

the Marriage. Hogarth and other caricaturists of the 18th century were fortunate to live in a society so intimate that celebrities both good and evil were widely known and their distinctive peculiarities recognized. Such once-public jokes are now lost to us but there is much that we can do to increase our enjoyment of these prints by taking the time to study their varied detail.

Most of the prints in this exhibition with the exception of Beer Street, Gin Lane and the Stages of Cruelty are copied from Hogarth's paintings. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, engraving was one of the methods widely used to reproduce paintings and the professional engravers became very skilled in reproducing the tonal contrasts as well as the varied textures of Baroque and Rococo painting. Reproductive engraving of this kind, in which the French excelled during the 18th century, was often the product of a team of specialist engravers who, each in turn, worked on the plate. One man specialized in draperies and brocades, another in wigs and hair, another in faces, still others in landscape backgrounds and so forth. The technique that Hogarth had learned from Ellis Gramble was similar to that used in pictorial engraving. In both cases the burin or engraver, a square steel rod fitted into a handle, its tip sharpened at a forty-five degree angle, was used to cut grooves into the surface of the metal. The work cut by silversmiths to decorate plates tended to be linear and ornamental. By contrast pictorial engravers cut lines and textures of dots into polished copper plates so that when these lines were filled with ink and the surface of the plate was wiped clean repeated impressions of the picture could be taken on paper. As you can see from these prints the effect is comparable to a very careful and tight pen drawing. The aim of reproductive engraving has always been to get many impressions as quickly as possible. Engraving is a skilled and a time-consuming process and during the 18th century etching was used to shorten the time taken to make plates. Etching involved covering the surface of the plate with a thin layer of hard wax and scratching through that with a needle. When this drawing with the needle was complete, acid was applied to the surface of the plate and, penetrating the scratched lines, ate into the metal. This chemical process is obviously quicker than the technique of engraving; however, the lines so produced are different in character. The engravers of the 18th century took great pains to reproduce in their etched work the fine parallel hatchings which they used in their engravings. They further worked over the preliminary etched surfaces with the burin to give the necessary precision and delicacy of modulation. Engraving tended to be associated with a more expensive market and in general the more engraving there was in a plate, the more expensive prints from it would be. In this exhibition the two methods can be contrasted in Gin Lane which is strongly etched with little engraving while any of the Marriage a la Mode plates show an etched base elaborately worked over with the burin. Nowadays we greatly admire the bold drawing of Gin Lane but it was intended for a large popular market and was looked down on by contemporary connoisseurs.

Hogarth was an exceptionally beautiful painter with a delicate sense of colour and tone. He applied oil paint dexterously in unlaboured, buttery layers which can be particularly enjoyed in his painting of women's dresses. By contrast neither he nor the professional engraver he employed to work for him showed similar skill in their plates. However, the remarkable popularity of his prints, their humour and inventiveness and the fact that they

were superior to other prints being produced in England at the time meant a great stimulation to print sales in general and a steady improvement in printing technique.

Hogarth also made a specific and decisive contribution to the welfare of printmaking through the Copyright Law of 1735. This resulted from his experience in publishing the *Harlot's Progress* which was sold to subscribers who paid half a guinea to view the paintings and received an engraved ticket which entitled them, on payment of an additional half guinea, to the six engravings in the series. In these circumstances Hogarth had complete control over the sale of his prints. However, when he subsequently distributed them to the printsellers he found that, because of their popularity, they were within a few days pirated—that is copied—and sold at a lower price. In many cases the printsellers connived in this cheating which meant that Hogarth, when he came to collect from the printsellers, was returned the remainder of his prints and told that unless he reduced them below the price of the pirated editions they could not sell them. In February, 1735, Hogarth and other artists petitioned Parliament and the Copyright Law resulted which did not eliminate pirating but made it more difficult. From then on all prints published in the British Isles had to show at the bottom of the plate the date of publication and the name and address of the publisher.

One can not but admire Hogarth, for though we know little of detail about his life, from what we do know we are presented with a most attractive man. How admirable was the ambition and determination with which he transformed himself from an engraver into an important and successful artist; the business skill he showed in his dealings with his clients and the printsellers; his love of companionship and pleasure and above all his curiosity, humour, irony and the sympathy with which he viewed his fellow men. He thought of his prints and paintings as mirrors in which the people of the time might see themselves reflected. These mirrors are now almost two hundred and fifty years old. However, in their sometimes grim, sometimes humorous surfaces we may perhaps still find something of ourselves reflected back to us.

George Wallace

Professor Wallace is Chairman of the Department of Art and Art History, McMaster University. He is also Director of McMaster University Art Gallery.