

David Bindman.

Hogarth and his Times: Serious Comedy. Exhibition catalogue.

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The painter and printmaker William Hogarth (1697-1764), whose birthday's tercentenary was commemorated by numerous publications and the British Museum's innovatory exhibition organized by David Bindman, is considered the most influential and unique artist of the English Enlightenment. Critics, both in literature and art history, maintain that Hogarth is "England's first great native painter" (Elizabeth Einberg), and, even more generally, the "first modern artist" (Werner Busch).

Most scholarly examinations of Hogarth, as for instance Ronald Paulson's important and insightful studies, focus primarily on the artist in his contemporary social and literary context. The character of Hogarth's graphic oeuvre is generally discussed in this context, and his satiric and moralizing prints are often considered to be „visual literature". Labeled a "Comic History Painter" and described as treating his subjects "like a dramatic writer" by Henry Fielding and Samuel Ireland, Hogarth's posthumous reputation rests mainly on literary reconstructions and interpretations of his paintings and prints. For instance, the popular volume *Hogarth Moralized* (1768), a revised and censored edition of his prints, published by the artist's widow and the Anglican clergyman Dr Trusler, as well as Horace Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting in England* (1780), are attempts at a "sanitized" and thus morally elevated presentation of his work. His Victorian commentators Charles Lamb (*Essay on the Genius and Character of Hogarth*, 1811), and William Hazlitt (*Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, 1841), further advocate the literary perspective on Hogarth's prints. As a result, most early studies in art history follow these opinions, primarily examining the artist's literary relationship with his contemporaries Jonathan Swift, Fielding and Tobias Smollett. However, Hogarth himself, whose painted self-portrait of 1745 depicts the artist resting his arm on volumes of Shakespeare, Milton, and Swift, left virtually no biographical evidence - no notebooks, letters, or other written documents - to reconstruct or verify these relations. Art historians, social historians, cultural and literary critics, nearly all scholars working on 18th-century English culture claim Hogarth as a major witness. Thus it is appropriate to ask "Whose Hogarth?", and David Bindman examines this question in the introductory essay of the catalogue reviewed here.

Bindman offers new and creative perspectives on Hogarth, discussing the artist's reputation as engraver and printmaker, and his audience in a "predominantly literary culture". His focus, however, concentrates on Hogarth's artistic sophistication and intellectual/cultural independence, and Bindman analyzes influences and their visual echoes that stem from Hogarth's literary knowledge, primarily his acquaintance with classical Greek and Roman satire, as well as contemporary authors. He also explores these issues in the political context of early 18th-century Britain, discussing both the religious disputes between the Church of England and the Methodists, and the critical debates on the elevated state of an independent and original English art.

Hogarth's position in the early Georgian "paper culture" (Lichtenberg), as Bindman clarifies, is to be understood as part of a network of artists, printers and publishers. Modern methods of advertising, the rise of journalism, and a growing bourgeois consumer market established books and prints as commodities. Hogarth was clearly no independent painter and engraver, but became a successful member of a flourishing industry. As a consequence, he found himself not only confronted with a large number of unauthorized cheap piracies, but faced numerous imported prints from Italy, France, and the Netherlands, in many ways more appropriate to contemporary English taste than his own ribald satire. Although these issues have been discussed before, for instance in Werner Busch's *Nachahmung als bürgerliches Kunstprinzip (Imitation as Bourgeois Principle of Art, Tübingen 1975)*, in which he examines the influence of imported Rembrandt engravings on Hogarth, or in Alvin B. Kernan's *Printing Technology, Letters, and Samuel Johnson* (1987), and David Daybedeen's *Hogarth, Walpole and Commercial Britain* (1987), Bindman provides new insights into Hogarth's artistic practice with reference to the audience he addresses in his prints and paintings.

Though Hogarth's compassion for the lower classes and urban subculture cannot be disputed, his "most diverting prints" (Hogarth), Bindman argues, should rather be analyzed as aimed at a more sophisticated circle of learned and cultivated "persons of fashion" (again, Hogarth's words). The high price, the outstanding quality of his prints for the entertainment of connoisseurs, and his eclectic ideas of art did not favour the mass production of Hogarth's prints. This dramatically limited their social impact as political pamphlets and made them virtually unattainable for the lower classes. Although he authorized copies of the moralizing series *A Harlot's Progress* (1732) and *A Rake's Progress* (1735) to be sold for a more modest price, his "educational" attitude towards the lower classes remains highly ambiguous.

After the extraordinary success of *A Harlot's Progress*, Hogarth refused the Tory opposition's lucrative offer to print the "Progress of a Minister" as part of a defamation campaign against Sir Robert Walpole. In the artist's critical approach to contemporary theological discourse, for instance, his prints *The Sleeping Congregation* (1736) and *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism* (1762), present themselves as indeterminate and ambiguous. Compared with the biting literary satire or the anonymous political pamphlets of his contemporaries, Hogarth's prints appear more moderate than seditious. Bindman describes this position as a "middle way" between the extreme poles of mercantile individualism and

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commercial libertinism on the one side, and the concepts of benevolence and the common good on the other. In addition, Hogarth's prints reflect the impact of Puritanism and a Puritan work ethic on life in England, with frequent references to Anglican orthodoxy and populist Methodist enthusiasm. Hogarth's early images depict both individual morals and manners, and political and commercial scandals (*The South Sea Scheme*, 1721 and *The Lottery*, 1724). But even in his late *Prints of an Election* (1754-58) and *The Times* (1762) the level of visual satire remains somewhat conventional and clearly bound to a particular political context. As the appointed Serjeant Painter to the King in 1758, his attacks on factionalism and the "Spirit of Party" are executed, not surprisingly, in a chiefly patriotic and royalist spirit. His prints have to be examined in the light of patronage, as Hogarth was dependent on his patrons and supporters in high places, or, as Horace Walpole has put it: "He had all his life avoided dipping his pencil in political contests."

As an artist and entrepreneur, Hogarth established new procedures in advertising. He attracted potential buyers and subscribers by showing painted versions as previews of engravings and prints that he would produce later, according to the demand stimulated by his sophisticated marketing techniques. Thus, he elevated the artist's studio from a private workshop to a prominent part of the "urban spectacle" where it became a part of the extensive "visual culture" of the 18th century. By protecting his prints and original designs by an Act of Parliament in 1735, Hogarth introduced the first effective copyright law in art history (in English literature the first copyright dates back to 1709), an act which raised his status and guaranteed him relative economic independence. But these legal and commercial innovations were limited to engraving and the techniques of printmaking. Before the foundation of the Royal Academy under the presidency of Sir Joshua Reynolds in 1768, four years after Hogarth's death, English painting was mainly dominated by continental taste and aesthetics, particularly French and Italian. Though himself a co-founder of the second St. Martin's Academy in 1735 - an artists society based on "equal subscribers" - Hogarth condemned both French and Italian taste in ballad opera, masquerade theater, popular literature, and classical painting, and their advocates in Britain, primarily the Earl of Shaftesbury and the Burlington circle. This is most apparent in his prints *Masquerades and Operas: The Bad Taste of the Town* (1724) and *The Battle of the Pictures* (1745); in these he openly attacks the idea of connoisseurship based on "foreign" taste and the ignorant disregard shown towards English playwrights and authors (Shakespeare, Dryden, Addison, Fielding, and Johnson) and, naturally, his own "Modern Moral Subjects". Here, he criticizes not only the high status of mass-produced paintings, but in particular contemporary tendencies to treat art as a mere commodity.

Hogarth's striking modernity must be analyzed in a different context, as his artistic practice and his contributions to contemporary artistic and aesthetic theory in *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753) suggest. In this theoretical approach towards art, Hogarth defends the priority of a mimetic rendition of nature instead of the classical concepts of imitation, harmony, and the traditional systems of proportion. By so doing, he claims that aesthetic experience and knowledge are not limited to a privileged and sophisticated circle, but are based on common sensual perception. The *Analysis*, therefore, marks a significant shift in the aesthetic interest and critical theory of 18th-century arts, and a turn towards the individual discovery of beauty and

the "sublime". Until then, paintings had been judged primarily by aesthetic norms based on or derived from literature. John Dryden's *A Parallel between Painting and Poem*, for example, reflects the classical discourse on the supremacy of painting over poetry (ut pictura poesis). A growing interest in the working of the individual mind manifests itself clearly in 18th-century philosophy, as in David Hume's *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* ("Each mind perceives a different beauty.") as well as in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* - and finally in Hogarth's *Analysis*.

Apart from the discussion of art and aesthetics in England in the 18th century, another motive for Hogarth to publish this treatise may have been an attempt at establishing his own artistic and intellectual qualification. The *Analysis* can be seen as a justification of his social standing and his promotion from amateur to learned artist. In *Hogarth and his Times*, David Bindman pairs the first manuscript draft of the *Analysis*, originating from circa 1745, with documents illustrating its reception. Mocked by contemporary artists, Hogarth was ridiculed, his pretensions as a theorist were derided and his obvious inability to compose a painting in the "Grand Style" provided ample material for biting satire. The engraver Paul Sandby, himself associated with the idea of a French-style academy, responded with a series called *The Analysis of Deformity* (1754). It demoted Hogarth's treatise as "senseless, tasteless, impudent, Hum Bugg", and subsequently accused him of having plagiarized Giovanni Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'arte* (1584). The acerbic nature of the argument on classical categories and terms in 18th-century painting highlights the antagonism between academic tradition and its opponents who, like Hogarth, tried to establish a genuine, modern English art.

Although neither Bindman's introductory essay nor the catalogue as such are intended as a general introduction to Hogarth's oeuvre, the excellent and ambitious publication presents an overview and a summary of the current state of research on Hogarth. The quality of the reproductions is excellent, the research is sound, well documented and in its scope both informative and stimulating. It is by far the most interesting amongst the numerous publications celebrating the tercentenary of Hogarth's birth. A short appendix, written by Sheila O'Connell, investigates the history of collecting Hogarth. The catalogue combines 19th- and 20th-century adaptations of some of Hogarth's prints, most notably by David Hockney and William Frith. Also included are prints, manuscripts, and subscription lists, as well as prints by his contemporaries and followers Sandby, Hayman, Picart, Bickham, and Chodowiecki. By thematically arranging Hogarth's prints and by presenting the material in a non-chronological order, occasionally even separating individual prints from their original context/series, Bindman allows for a new, sometimes experimental or even provocative reading of Hogarth's graphic work.

Some of the prints presented in Bindman's excellent catalogue have been restored, revealing long-lost information about their provenance in the process, and Bindman manages to combine both popular and lesser-known prints from Hogarth's vast oeuvre. However, some catalogue entries seem rather sketchy and hover uneasily between analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. The bibliography is kept minimal and the

index, apart from the misspelt Joachim Möller, an eminent Hogarth-scholar, is comprehensive and nearly complete. Bindman opens up new questions concerning the multilayered meanings of Hogarth's work and stimulates further readings and interpretations. He leaves the reader with an awareness that realistic art in general and Hogarth's art in particular is ambiguous and far-reaching - a conclusion that would have delighted Hogarth.

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