

Fine Arts and Antiques

Collecting History: Antiquarian Georgian & Regency Prints by Abby Cronin

Decorative printmaking in Georgian and Regency England grew in popularity. In the 17th and early 18th centuries many artists chose subject matter which they were able to develop into successful commercial enterprises. Prints from this period are a visual archive of natural history, period lifestyles and genre subjects. Amongst

Frye's Lady Pearl Diadem



the giants in this period William Hogarth is probably best known. The Hogarth retrospective exhibition at Tate Britain earlier this year included the full range of work from his remarkable career. Even if you missed the exhibit, it is likely that you would recognise a Hogarth print. He is best known for his satirical series: *A Harlot's Progress* (1732), *A Rake's Progress* (1735), and *Marriage à la Mode* (1745). Each series focuses on modern moral subject matters of the day.

The story of how Hogarth the painter became an entrepreneurial printmaker is fascinating. Once his family was freed from Fleet Prison for debt, Hogarth (1697-1764) was apprenticed to engraver Ellis Gable in London at the age of 17. He progressed from silver to copper engraving, devoted himself to book illustration, topical prints and began his studies at a newly founded academy of art in London. Having become an accomplished painter in oils, he sought patronage and began to do portraits. Alas, too much work for too little money drove him to launch a subscription for engravings of *A Harlot's Progress* paintings. His approach was to eliminate middlemen and to manage the subscriptions himself so he could keep all the profits. Immediate success met this venture; almost 2,000 sets were subscribed to at a guinea each. Given the commercial admiration for the engravings, Hogarth set about painting another series which were then made into engravings. The famous eight engraving set called *The Rake's Progress* (see image) features the life of a young merchant's son who takes his inheritance, squanders his money, morals, sanity and in the end Tom Rakewell, 'the Rake', ends up in the Bethlehem Hospital madhouse. We learn a great deal about the double-standards and dangers of a morally bankrupt society by studying these masterful sets of engraved prints often described as 'comic histories'.

Thomas Frye (1710 – 1762), a Dublin-born artist, was another flourishing entrepreneur.

Most noted for his 'Fancy Heads' portraits, Frye produced a remarkable series of mezzotints. His 'Fancy Heads' were produced as original life-size prints of men and women in fashionable costumes of the day. Seen here is the image of a Lady with a pearl diadem. He advertised his 'Heads' widely in the London daily press and met with great success. The prints served as elegant decoration for rooms in grand country houses built by the expanding merchant classes. These high quality and expensive engravings were sold as limited editions. Frye's 'Fancy Heads' were recently exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery. Technically, the process of making mezzotint prints is a complex and labour intensive form of tonal engraving. Frye's prints were worked meticulously in subtle blacks and shades of grey on a white base.

Throughout this period printmakers portrayed a diverse range of themes and subject matter. Caricature, a very popular form, is a recognisable image in the print of *Mr. Punch* by Joseph Scholz, a hand-coloured lithograph published in 1860 seen here. Punch and Judy shows were a common form of entertainment then and still are today. We continue to laugh at Mr. Punch's behaviour without asking ourselves why he has a large nose and prominent chin. *Punch*, a shortened form of the English PUNCHINELLO, taken from a character in the



Gould's Bustard



Italian Commedia dell'arte, is the comic servant. There was a tradition of humpbacked hook nosed fools in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries and a revival in 1790s England led to the preservation of Mr Punch. Today Mr Punch is most commonly represented as a marionette and a glove puppet.

The 'Bird Man', John Gould (1804-1881), was an ornithologist who studied local birds early in life and developed into an expert taxidermist. His skill attracted the attention of George IV, a keen animal-lover, for whom Gould stuffed a bustard, two deer and many other exotic animals. Together with his artist wife, Elizabeth, they produced lavishly illustrated books on birds of Europe and the Himalayas in the 1830s. An insatiable ornithological curiosity motivated them to go to Australia in 1838 where they stayed for two years. The publication of his seven-volume *The Birds of Australia*, 1848, was a monumental achievement and contains illustrations of numerous species of birds, many new to science. An example of a Gould print is *The Great Bustard*, a hand-coloured lithograph published in 1862-73 and pictured here.

Natural history also provided endless source material for print artists. Botanical subjects inspired Dr. Robert Thornton to compile a volume entitled *Temple of Flora*, published at the end of the 18th century. It contained

Vue d'Optique: St. James



exquisite examples of familiar and unusual plants such as the *Dr. Thornton Roses* shown here. The plates are mixed-method mezzotints and stipple engravings printed in colours and hand finished. This costly enterprise reduced Thornton to bankruptcy, but he left behind what is regarded as the finest botanical work ever printed in England. By contrast, Johannes Weinmann, 1683-1741, a wealthy pharmacist in Germany, pursued his love of botany. His major contribution was an eight folio volume, *Phytanthoza iconographia*, (1737-1745) which became one of the foremost floral records of the time. It contains over a thousand hand-coloured engravings of several thousand plants. Seen here is Weinmann's Gourds, a colour printed mezzotint. Despite their impressive size, the volumes came in for criticism from more knowledgeable botanists of the day. It was alleged that some of his plant specimens were faked. Nonetheless, the impressive size and scope of Weinmann's work is regarded as a great achievement.

Topographical prints have always had admirers. Here we see *Vue d'Optique St. James*, a hand-coloured copper plate engraving, circa 1760. This is a superb example of "perspective views" which became popular in England and Europe during the 18th century. This method of printmaking developed into a collecting craze. The approach, known as *Vues d'optiques*, was designed to create the illusion of perspective when viewed with a zograscopium or perspective glass. These devices enhanced the illusion of depth in the print. Regarded as a technical revolution in their day, *Vues d'optiques* were found in fashionable drawing rooms and enjoyed by the poorer classes in print shops and travelling fairs.

If you are curious to learn more about Georgian and Regency antiquarian prints, consult specialist dealers in the field. Prints from this period are available and the subject matter is almost inexhaustible. No matter what your preference is, you will find something to suit your taste. It might be caricature, satire, political cartoons, marine, military, sporting life or a variety of topographi-



Thornton's Roses detail

cal, architectural and classical images.

The atmosphere of this period is easily found in central London. Just wander through the streets and alleyways south of Piccadilly. Stroll around the parish district of St James, little changed for over 300 years. This discreet corner of London houses outstanding historic landmarks: St James's Palace, St James's Square, Pall Mall, Jermyn Street and the Wren church consecrated in 1684. The area is a uniquely preserved architectural gem. Many of the original shops continue to flourish today. There are tailors, furnishers, wine merchants, coffee houses, and chemists living cheek by jowl with dealers in jewellery, antiques and antiquarian prints. History happened here and prints serve as a decorative record of it. Take one home and hang it on your wall. You might even want to start a collection. ■



Weinmann's Gourd

All Images courtesy of Issac and Ede. Specialist Dealers in Antiquarian Prints

NOTE the following sources for finding good quality prints:

1. Issac and Ede: Specialist Dealers in Antiquarian Prints, Framing & Restoration 1 Duke of York Street, St James, London SW1Y 6JP www.issacandede.com
2. Antique Print & Map Shops in London: A Guide 2007 www.londonprintdealers.com

To learn more about methods of printmaking consult the following websites:

- www.moma.org/exhibitions/2001/whatisaprint/flash
- www.philaprintshop.com/whataprt
- www.artoftheprint.com/

OR Google *What is a Print?*

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