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978-1-108-07338-7 - The Genuine Works of William Hogarth: Illustrated with Biographical Anecdotes,
a Chronological Catalogue, and Commentary: Volume 2

John Nichols and George Steevens

Excerpt

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BIOGRAPHICAL ANECDOTES

OF

WILLIAM HOGARTH.

I AM now engaged in an undertaking, which from its nature will be imperfect. While HOGARTH was yet an apprentice, and worked on his Master's account, it may be supposed he was not at liberty to affix his name to his own performances. Nay, afterwards, when he appeared as an independent Artist, he probably left many of them anonymous, being sometimes obliged to measure out his exertions in proportion to the scanty prices paid for them. For reasons like these, we may be sure that many of his early Plates must have eluded search; and, if gradually discovered, will serve only to swell the collections they will not adorn.—The judicious Connoisseur, perhaps, would be content to possess the Pictures of Raffaele,

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without aiming at a complete assemblage of the Roman *Fayence* that passes under his name.

In settling the dates of his Pieces there is also difficulty. Sometimes, indeed, they have been inferred from circumstances almost infallible; as in respect to the “Rabbit-breeder,” *etc.* which would naturally have been published in the year 1726. On other occasions they are determined within a certain compass of time. Thus the “Ticket for Milward,” then a Player at Lincoln’s Inn Fields, must have preceded 1733, when he removed with Rich to Covent Garden; and it is equally sure, that “Orator Henley christening an Infant,” and “A Girl swearing a Child to a grave Citizen,” came out before 1735, in which year we know that J. V. Schley, one of Picart’s coadjutors, had re-engraved them both for the use of the fourth Volume of the “Religious Ceremonies,” published at Amsterdam in 1736. But how are we to guess at the period that produced “Sancho at Dinner,” or “The Discovery?”

The merits and demerits of his performances would prove deceitful guides in our researches. As our Artist grew older, he did not regularly advance in estimation;

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for neither the frontispieces to “Tristram Shandy,” the “Times,” the “Bathos,” or the “Bear,” can be said to equal many of his earliest productions. — Under such difficulties is the following chronological list of our Author’s Pieces attempted.

The Reader is likewise entreated to observe, that throughout the annexed Catalogue of Plates, variations, *etc.* such only are mentioned as the Compiler of this Catalogue has already seen *. Alike unwilling to deceive or be deceived, he has suppressed all intelligence he could not authenticate from immediate inspection. He might easily have enlarged his Work by admitting particulars of doubtful authority, sometimes imperfectly recollected by their several communicators, and sometimes offered as sportive impositions on an Author’s credulity. Of this weakness every one possesses some; but perhaps no man

* It may be proper here to observe, once for all, that these preliminary remarks, with almost every line of the Catalogue that appears in the shape of a critique, were the production of my late accomplished coadjutor Mr. Steevens; with the exception, that all such short strictures and annotations noticed in the Catalogue as are distinguished by being printed both in *Italics* and between inverted commas, are copied from the list of Hogarth’s Works published by Mr. Walpole.

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more than he who ambitiously seeks opportunities to improve on the labours of another. It is certain, however, that Mr. Walpole, whom none can exceed in taste and judgment, will be little concerned about the merits of a performance that founds its claim to notice only on the humbler pretences of industry and correctness.

The merits of Hogarth as an Engraver are inconsiderable. His hand was faithful to character; but he had little acquaintance with the powers of light and shade. In some of his early Prints * he was an assiduous imitator of Callot; but deviated at last into a manner of his own, which suffers much by comparison with that of his coadjutors, Ravenet and Sullivan. In the pieces finished by these masters of their art, there is a clearness that Hogarth

* “The earliest attempts of this Pupil of Nature are fraught with a degree of taste and skill unknown even to those of the same profession. To this superiority we may impute his happy selection of a model from a neighbouring country, the celebrated Callot; who is deservedly allowed to have been one of the most skilful and accomplished Artists of the seventeenth century. Hogarth’s partiality for the works of this great Genius has been generally admitted: a strong resemblance of manner, both in their style and execution, is every where so discernible as to confirm the idea.” Mr. Samuel Ireland’s *Graphic Illustrations*, vol. II. p. 3.

could never reach. His strokes sometimes look as if fortuitously disposed *, and sometimes confusedly thwart each other in almost every possible direction. What he wanted in skill, he strove to make up in labour: but the result of it was a universal haze and indistinctness †, that, by excluding force and transparency, has rendered several of his larger Plates less captivating than they

* Mr. John Ireland observes, “ ‘This is very severe: but is it true? If the ‘ Harlot’s’ and ‘ Rake’s Progress,’ the ‘ Enraged Musician,’ ‘ Strolling Actresses,’ ‘ Medley,’ and many other Prints produced by his own graver, are attentively examined, I think the strokes will not be found to be fortuitously disposed: every touch tells, and gives that expression which the Artist intended.” Illustrations, vol. III. p. x.

† “ I believe him to have been a prodigy of industry, but do not discover the result that is here suggested. We may possibly annex different ideas to the word. Johnson describes a universal HAZE, as a *fog*, a *mist*; and INDISTINCTNESS, he defines to be *confusion, uncertainty, obscurity*; faults which were never attributed to William Hogarth: neither have I before heard it said, that the Prints want force; *energy* is in general their leading characteristic. As to *transparency*, if it be meant that they have not that gauzy, glittering stone, which marks many of our modern productions, I humbly conceive the Artist did not desire such distinction; neither did he wish his Works to be classed with such petty performances. He was superior to the tricks of art, rejected all unnecessary flourish, and aimed at amusing the mind, rather than dazzling the eye.” Ibid.

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would have been, had he entrusted the sole execution of them to either of the Artists already mentioned. His smaller etchings, indeed, such as “The Laughing Pit,” *etc.* cannot receive too much commendation.

Mr. Walpole has justly observed, “many wretched Prints came out to ridicule” the “Analysis of Beauty,” He might have added, that no small number of the same quality were produced immediately after the “Times” made its appearance. I wish it had been in my power to have afforded my readers a complete list of these performances, that as little as possible might have been wanting to the history of poor Hogarth’s first and second persecution. Such a catalogue, however, not being necessary to the explanation of his Works, it is with the less regret omitted*.

The scarceness of the good impressions of Hogarth’s larger Works is in great measure owing to their having

* One of these productions may without impropriety be singled from the rest. The Print, intituled, “The Connoisseurs,” was suspected to be a work of Hogarth himself. It is placed with some of his other undisputed designs in the back-ground of “The Author run Mad” (which is known to be one of Mr. Sandby’s performances); and has the following reference—“*A. his own Dunciad.*”

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been pasted on canvas or boards, to be framed and glazed for furniture. There were few people who collected his Prints for any other purpose at their first appearance. The majority of these sets being hung up in London houses, have been utterly spoiled by smoke. Since Foreigners have learned the value of the same performances, they have also been exported in considerable numbers. Wherever a taste for the Fine Arts has prevailed, the Works of this great Master are to be found. Messieurs Torr  have frequent commissions to send them into Italy. I am credibly informed that the Emperss of Russia has expressed uncommon pleasure in examining such genuine representations of English manners *; and I have seen a set of cups and saucers with “The Harlot’s Progress” painted on them in China about the year 1739.

Of all such Engravings † as are Mrs. Hogarth’s property, the later impressions continue selling on terms specified many years ago in her printed Catalogue. The few elder

* The Reader will recollect that this was written in 1785. How lamentably different is the present state of the Fine Arts with respect to the exportation of valuable Books and Prints!

† All these have been since purchased by Mr. Alderman Boydell.

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Proofs that remain undisposed of, may be likewise had from her agent at an advance of price. As to the Plates which our Artist had not retained as his own property, when any of these *desiderata* are found (perhaps in a state of corrosion) they are immediately vamped up and impressions from them are offered to sale, at three, four, or five times their original value. They are also stained, to give them the appearance of age; and on these occasions we are confidently assured, that only a few copies, which had lurked in some obscure warehouse, or neglected port-feuille, had been just discovered. This information is usually accompanied by sober advice to buy while we may, as the vender has scarce a moment free from the repeated solicitations of the nobility and gentry, whom he always wishes to oblige, still affording that preference to the connoisseur which he withholds from the less enlightened purchaser. It is scarce needful to observe, that no man ever visited the shops of these polite dealers, without soon fancying himself entitled to the more creditable of the aforesaid distinctions. Thus becoming a dupe to his own vanity, as well as to the artifice of the tradesman, he has speedily the mortification to find his

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supposed rarities are to be met with in every collection, and not long afterwards on every stall. The caution may not prove useless to those who are ambitious to assemble the Works of Hogarth. Such a pursuit needs no apology; for sure, of all his fraternity, whether ancient or modern, he bent the keenest eye on the follies and vices of mankind, and expressed them with a degree of variety and force, which it would be vain to seek among the satirical compositions of any other Painter. In short, what is observed by Hamlet concerning a Player's office, may, with some few exceptions, be applied to the designs of Hogarth: "Their end, both at the first, and now, was, and is, to hold as 't were the mirror up to Nature; to shew Virtue her own feature, Scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his own form and pressure."

I may add, that, since the appearance of Mr. Walpole's Catalogue, a disposition to attribute several anonymous plates *, on ludicrous subjects, to Hogarth, has betrayed

* Among other anonymous plates ascribed to Hogarth, but omitted in the present Catalogue, is the following, "A living Dog is better than a dead Lion," or, "The Vanity of human Glory; a design for the Monument of General Wolfe, 1760." A medallion of our hero appears on the side of a

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itself in more than a single instance *. A supposition has also prevailed that there was a time when Hogarth had the whole field of satire to himself, and we could boast of no Designers whose performances could be mistaken for his own. The latter notion is undoubtedly true, if real judges are to decide; and yet many Prints, very slightly impregnated with humour, continue to be ascribed to him. It should therefore be observed, that, at the same period, pyramid. On the base of it is the well-known speech of Shakspeare's Brutus.

“ Set Honour in one hand, and Death in t' other,
And I will look on both indifferent:
And let the Gods so speed me, as I love
The name of Honour more than I fear Death.”

At the bottom a dying Lion is extended, while a Dog (with Minden on his collar, and “ Honour's a jest,” &c. issuing from his mouth) is at once lifting up his leg against the noble brute, and treading on a wreath of laurel. “ Here lies Honour,” is also written on the side of the expiring animal. I have since been assured that this Print was by another artist, whose name I omit to mention, because perhaps he would wish it, on the present occasion, suppressed.

* Thus the Frontispiece to “ Taste,” designed, if not etched by Worsdale (for whose benefit this dramatic piece was performed), and “ Sawney in the Bog-house,” an anonymous satire on the Scotch, that made its appearance near sixty years ago, and was revived during the administration of Lord Bute, are at present imputed to our Artist, whose name is already engraved at the bottom of the latter.