

National Park Service
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Salem Maritime National Historic Site
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Historical Musings from Salem Maritime NHS



An Englishman in the Derby House

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On the cover: Plate 7 of William Hogarth's series of prints *Industry and Idleness: The Idle 'Prentice Returned from Sea and in a Garrett with a Common Prostitute*.

William Hogarth and 18th Century Politics

On exhibit in the Derby House, among the fine furniture, exotic ceramics, kitchen utensils and artwork, are several popular works by the innovative British artist William Hogarth. Prints and paintings by Hogarth are beautiful, humorous and cutting. At first glance you may appreciate the skill and talent that it took to engrave the copperplate print or paint the magnificent portrait. After examining a piece further, you might smile at the subtle humor of the main characters in the work and at the equally important details. But Hogarth's art is best appreciated when you fully understand the complexity of his messages: the multi-leveled themes simultaneously appeal to and make fun of both the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated.

William Hogarth was born in 1697 to a poor family in the ever-changing and growing city of London, England. The economic hardship of the family, following the death of his bankrupt father, forced him to work as a silver-plate apprentice at age 16, engraving for Ellis Gamble, a distant relative. By 1720 he emerged as an engraver and painter with his own business and within ten years had published several popular prints. His success was due in large part to the dozen illustrations he had engraved for a new edition of Samuel Butler's satirical, anti-Puritan poem *Hudibras*, in 1725. The work was well received and it was here, perhaps, that Hogarth acquired his first taste of cynical social commentary that would permeate his future works. Hogarth continued his success with *A Harlot's Progress* in 1732 and *The Rake's Progress* in 1733-35, both moral lessons on the various evils society had to offer.



Left: one of Hogarth's illustrations for Samuel Butler's poem *Hudibras*: Sir Hudibras and Ralpho in the Stocks.

The Artist as Political Commentator

Despite his outspoken views of all classes, Hogarth associated with politicians and artists alike. Around this time he pressed friends in political power to pass the Engravers' Copyright Act, also known as Hogarth's Act, to prevent print sellers from selling an artist's work without paying royalties. The year the act passed, 1735, Hogarth also created St. Martin's Lane Academy, a school for young artists and a meeting place for those already established.

Besides desiring to be taken seriously as an artist, Hogarth wanted to expose hypocritical and ridiculous behavior among the wealthy. In the series of paintings and engravings entitled *Marriage a la Mode* (1745), Hogarth mockingly presented the progression of an arranged marriage filled with infidelity, disease, murder and suicide. Hogarth's attacks on the rich did not mean that the lower classes were immune; he studied ordinary life of the poor in the series *Beer Street and Gin Lane* (1750-1751), and *Four Stages of Cruelty* (1751). Here he exaggerates how the consumption of gin leads to destruction and debauchery and how cruelty is evident in London through the savage beating of animals in the streets and the dissection of human bodies behind closed doors.

Politicians were also favorite targets of Hogarth's, attacked in such works as *The Election* (1755), and *The Times* (1762). The latter, an anti-war piece, created a stir in government and was publicly criticized by John Wilkes, a prominent politician. Ever bold and passionate, Hogarth used his medium to fight back with the print *John Wilkes, Esq.* (1763), showing the politician with hair resembling horns and hiding under a crown of liberty.



Hogarth's popularity during his lifetime was extensive; his prints were widely reproduced and often reduced in price to appeal to more individuals. They hung both in private residences and on the walls of coffeehouses, reaching the whole spectrum of classes. While his contemporaries accepted his skills as an artist, they were not enthusiastic about his choice of subjects, mostly because his work seemed sympathetic to the lower classes, a revolutionary idea at the time. It was not until after his death on October 26, 1764, and the change of attitudes and ideals brought about by the French Revolution in 1789, that artists, particularly the Romantics, embraced his art and regarded him as one of the most talented and influential British artists in history.

Prints and paintings from this celebrated artist can be found on exhibit in museums and galleries worldwide. London 1753, a current temporary exhibition at the British Museum in London, showcases several Hogarth prints, including plates from *Marriage a la Mode* and *Industry and Idleness*, along with other contemporary works to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the museum. A Hogarth exhibition was recently held at the Haley & Steele gallery on Newbury Street in Boston. But the best place to view excellent Hogarth prints in a historical setting is right here at Salem Maritime, in our very own Derby House.

William Hogarth in the Derby House

On exhibit in the Derby House are some of the *Industry and Idleness* prints published in 1747. The series depicts two apprentices: one works hard and excels, marries his master's daughter and eventually becomes mayor of London; the other, however, gambles, associates with whores, and, in the end, is executed for his crimes. Because Hogarth intended the prints to be a lesson for young men, they were inexpensive and more affordable than some of his other work; even so, they were probably bought by masters instead and hung on the walls of shops. These prints were very popular and sold well, but whether young apprentices were ever able to study and learn from them cannot be said.

Descending the stairs in the Derby House are the first six plates of the series: plate 1, *Fellow 'Prentices at their Looms*; plate 2, *Industrious 'Prentice Performing the Duty of a Christian*; plate 3, *Idle 'Prentice at Play in the Church Yard*; plate 4, *Industrious 'Prentice a Favourite and In-trusted by his Master*; plate 5, *Idle 'Prentice Turn'd Away and Sent to Sea*; and plate 6, *Industrious 'Prentice Out of his Time and Married to his Master's Daughter* (plates 8-12 are in museum storage) The next time you admire the hand-carved balusters on the stairs, or the clock on the landing, take a closer look at the prints on the wall: there is humor in the situations and in the expressions on people's faces, and no detail is accidental. Consider plate 3, *Idle 'Prentice at Play in the Church Yard*: Notice how the skulls around the coffin and the diseased men gambling with the apprentice foreshadow his doomed future. Or plate 7, *Idle 'Prentice Returned from Sea and in a Garrett with a Common Prostitute*, illustrated at the beginning of this paper: the young man is in trouble as indicated by the guns on the floor and is so terrified of getting caught that he jumps as the cat falls down the chimney. Meanwhile, the woman he is with—the prostitute most likely to have turned him in to the authorities—is perfectly calm, and, by the look on her face, possibly enjoying the situation. Hogarth rewards those who explore his work and attempt to understand its many meanings.

Opposite: plate 10 of the *Industry and Idleness* series; *The Industrious 'Prentice Alderman of London, the Idle One Brought Before Him, & Impeach'd by His Accomplice*



Engraved and the Block Copied by W. Hogarth. To the Right Honourable Henry Fox Esq. &c. &c. This Plate is humbly Inscrib'd by his most Obedient, Humble, Serv't W. Hogarth.

Above: plate 1 from the *Election Series: An Election Entertainment, or The Feast*

Another famous Hogarth print hangs in the Derby House study above the Salem Marine Society certificate. This is the first plate from *Election Series* (1755), a four print series based on the corrupt Oxfordshire election of 1754 whose details are so extensive that Hogarth had to hire extra help to engrave them. It captures the candidates engaging in any act, degrading or hypocritical, that might secure them a win. Our particular print—*An Election Entertainment, or The Feast*— is based on Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, indicated by the accompanying quote: “He that dippeth his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me.” The print reverses “normal” society: the candidates on the left are forced to endure the actions of the common people— including kisses on the cheek and drunken handshakes— as they canvass votes, despite physical contact normally being out of the question between the classes. Meanwhile the voters themselves, instead of the politicians, are depicted as the greedy crooks.

John Derby and William Hogarth

Also, in the Derby House study are two volumes of the 3rd edition of Butler's *Hudibras*, published in 1772, with the dozen Hogarth prints inside. Unlike the *Industry and Idleness* prints, which were purchased by the National Park Service to furnish the house, and the *Election* print, which is on loan, the *Hudibras* books are period pieces directly tied to the site. Just as fascinating as carefully turning the pages to view the engravings is opening the front cover to

reveal the printed bookplate of John Derby, Elias Hasket Derby's brother, the man that brought news of war to England and peace to America. His portrait hangs in the study next to the shelves of books, some of which he once owned.

Does owning a copy of Butler's anti-Puritan poem *Hudibras* allow us to assume John Derby held certain political or cultural opinions? Did he understand the complexity of William Hogarth's work, his social and political beliefs, or were the engravings, to him, simply illustrations to the story? It is no secret that the Derby family was very pro-American and anti-British; this reason alone could disqualify a popular British artist from gracing a wall or bookshelf in a Derby household. Yet Hogarth himself stood for many of the same ideals the Derbys held: a less oppressive government, charity, and hard work. John Derby, an intelligent and well-read man, as evidenced by his choice of reading material, would have understood this. So although the *Industry and Idleness* prints in the house now were not there (as far as we know) when Elias Hasket Derby lived there, the choice to hang them here is an appropriate and effective furnishing. We can be certain that at least one 18th century Englishman is welcome in the Derby House.

For further reading

Bindman, David. *Hogarth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

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