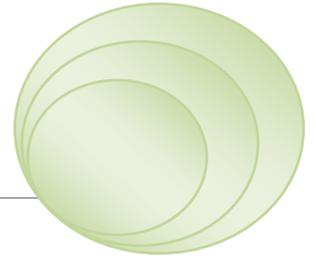


Hogarth and the Role of Engraving in Eighteenth-Century London



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The city of London in the eighteenth century felt an urgent need to show itself to the world, to be recognised as the vibrating cosmopolitan place that it was becoming. This was a period when graphic art suffered an outburst and the streets of London were flooded with foreign engravings and etchings that inspired many natives to establish themselves and produce work that would compete with the one being imported. It was a time to redefine art and those who wanted to be part of its history as a way of representing the nation and the British.

This century was prolific in change and the arts proved to be no exception. The rivalry between styles like Neo-classicism and Romanticism increased the need felt in certain European countries to create Academies that would both teach and defend the Arts. Britain was no different, and in 1768 *The Royal Academy* was founded by George III following the model of the French *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*. The creation of such a national school emerged from a necessity to promote the arts through education and exhibition, since the way in which people in general were looking at art in the 18th century seemed to be ideal to encourage public interest and also to improve their little knowledge on the topic. It was no longer the case of providing artists with a place to show their work,¹ but to give proper training to the ones who wanted to follow a career. Simultaneously, the public sphere gained a place in Europe and with that artists also saw their works assuming different purposes and themes.

This paper aims at reflecting on the impact Hogarth's art had upon Londoners and their city in such a way that it could be seen as part of eighteenth-century journalism, where Hogarth was not only able to tell the story of a place and its inhabitants but also to satirize their surroundings. This was, in fact, one of



engraving's most significant aspects, the reflection of true scenes of everyday life which were very familiar to most people. The other powerful aspect was the price of each engraving, since many of them, being considered mere reproductions, were quite affordable.

In the light of the above, it seems crucial to focus on the concept of art and its changing meaning throughout time. We acknowledge the lack of a precise and universally accepted definition, but also assume that this discussion allows a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of engraving in Hogarthian London. What was considered art after all? Was engraving seen as an art? And, if so, were engravers considered artists? Considering both Kant's statement in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* that art is "a kind of representation that is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for social communication" (306), and Hegel's views that "art expresses the spirit of particular cultures, as well as that of individual artists and the general human spirit" (I, 531), then Hogarth's work would definitely have been considered art. If this was the case, then what was the significance of the Copyright Act of 1735, many times described as Hogarth's Act, which defended the arts of engraving and etching and their producers? Did this mean that engravers were not respected as artists? Or that they were about to be?

In order to answer the questions raised, a brief introduction will be made to the history of engraving as a way of better explaining the role it assumed in the artistic field of the time. Even though some insist on describing Hogarth as a printmaker (see Simon), the work of this author as an engraver has always been widely recognized, allowing engraving to be acknowledged as an art. The truth remains, however, that few were able to depict eighteenth-century England, its conflicts and highs and lows, as he did, and not many were given the privilege of labeling an era.

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The scope of the word *Art* is enormous and can hardly be dissociated from other words like *culture* and *history*. This is why to go back to the etymology of the word *art* one enters a voyage in time. In Latin “ars” meant knowledge and skill associated directly to notions of beauty, whereas in Greek “tékne” was closer to what we know as craft, being associated to mastering the production and creation of something by using a special technique. However, it is only in the 13th century that the word finds its way into Middle English, deriving from Anglo-French usually applied to the skill in scholarship and learning.²

In the beginning of the 17th century the word *art* is for the first time associated to creative arts such as painting and sculpture, and it is exactly at this time that the great academies of art like the French *Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture* emerge. These European academies would devote themselves to the so-called *Fine Arts*, although only painting and sculpture found a place, since there was a clear distinction between *art* and *craft*. Indeed, only in the second half of the 16th century was there a need to clearly distinguish the fine arts from the applied arts. The latter would be considered subsidiaries that lacked genius. What was engraving then? An *art*? Or a *craft*? According to Antal:

Only two types of artistic tradition, neither of great productive output, existed in England when Hogarth began his career. The one, the baroque art favoured by court and aristocracy, was employed for their portraits and decorative frescoes. The other tradition in England which Hogarth inherited was that of the popular engraving. (36)

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As has already been said, it is impossible to deny engraving its cosmopolitan power (see Auerbach; Cust; Hind) not only because it made art much more accessible, but also for its way of communicating to a very large audience. When stating this we are not focusing solely on its impact in the 18th century but looking back on its history, since, as Hind states, engraving “is no discovery of the modern world” (19).



Engraving had its first roots in the professions of goldsmiths and metal-chasers who used it as a means to ornament their craft. Although the engraving line can be traced back to the 12th century, this has little resemblance to the engraving art as it was known after the development of paper. Only in the 14th century did the Arabs export paper to Europe and in 1389 Ulmann Stomer, in Germany, with the methodology passed from the Arabs established a paper mill with two waterwheels allowing paper to be produced in larger quantities (see Cust; Hind).

In fact, it is around the beginning of the 15th century that engraving assumes an artistic side through its religious and leisure impact. Woodcuts and religious cards sold at shrines or pilgrimage spots made this kind of reproductive engraving quite prominent. An outburst in this technique would not have been felt were it not for the significance that Gutenberg's printing type assumed,³ since, until then, paper could not be found in large quantities.⁴ After this turning point, the art of printing was able to spread information and knowledge to common people.



Fig. 1: **Meister der Spielkarten**, Raubtier Neun, 1435-1455.

However, even if Europe was delighted with the developments of this technique and the improvement of paper quality, papermakers were struggling with the costs of equipment and machinery and the money that was (not) generating. As a result, many of these went out of business. In the 15th century the art of engraving was actually allowed to flourish due to the significant role assumed by card playing. In 1446, the Master of the Playing Cards (Fig. 1)⁵ is acknowledged to have been the “chief centre of influence on the technical character of engraving”



(Hind 20), being then followed by one of his students The Master of the Year 1446 and E.S., the latter already part of the second group of German engravers.

The engraving of cards (Fig. 2) deserves some attention, since two significant connections can be established with 18th-century engravings by Hogarth: the first lies in the way it could reach large audiences (even if some of the decks were so expensive that they were offered as wedding gifts); the second is the way it also portrayed political satire⁶ and other topics which were part of everyday life, many of these with an educational purpose.

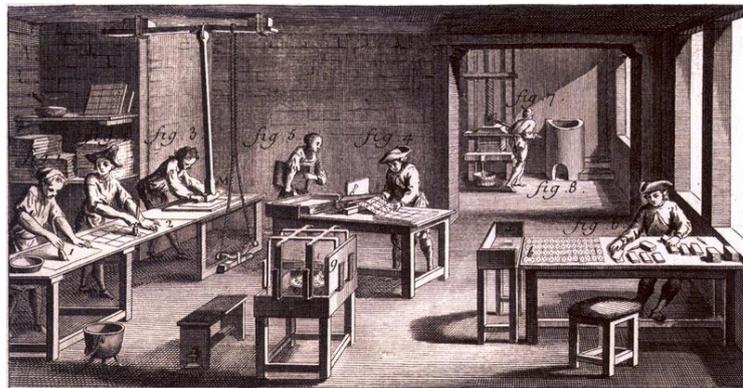


Fig. 2: **The Cardmaker**, from *L'Encyclopedie* by Diderot and d'Alembert, Paris, 1751.

Depending on the material used, hand-made, woodblocks or stencils, cards became very popular in Europe. Some were produced from engravings in copper and had greater detail, others were luxury hand-painted decks that could not be bought by everybody. One thing leaves no doubt, artists like The Master of the Playing Cards or E.S. (the latter considered one of the greatest influences in the progress of the art of engraving; see Hind 25), followed by Schongauer and Dürer, were pioneers in their technique, which, at the time, coexisted with the Italian engraving that was less proficient but more aesthetically concerned.

In the first half of the 16th century, in Italy, Dürer's work had great impact on artists such as Raphael and Titian who saw it as a way of spreading their own work. In fact, the former was "the first of the great painters to realize the market value of popularity by pressing an engraver of first rank entirely into his service" (Hind 96). On the other hand, Dürer's influence was enormous on engravers such as



Marcantonio, Agostini de Musi and Marco Dente. Unfortunately, the second half of this century was not a good one for engraving, as it came to a standstill – were it not for the collection created by Mathew Parker,⁷ the Archbishop of Canterbury, who gave the first impulsion to the engraver's art, and for Rubens's⁸ works and his wants of an engraver, the art in England might have never found its course. With the appearance of copperplate engraving almost only a century later, England was far behind all the other European countries. This was, in fact, the main reason why the vast majority of work sold in the streets of London was foreign in its origin. Even fifty years later, when engraving gave its first steps in England, artists were mainly visitors or Protestant refugees from the Low Countries, this being reflected until the eighteenth century, as stated by Murray:

Dutch printers emigrating to England for religious, economic, or other reasons brought with them a knowledge and skill in printing far superior to that of their English colleagues. English printers were dependent upon Dutch type foundries until the eighteenth century. [...] Dutch influences altered the patterns of English life in both basic and trivial matters. New industries meant new commodities; new tools and scientific instruments made new tasks possible. New ideas emanating from Dutch thinkers gave direction to British thought. (849)

Between the late 16th century and the 18th century, the art of portrait engraving flourished. Van Dyck, who became the leading court painter in England, introduced etching⁹ as applied to his portraits, soon realizing that the finishing product should be left to professional engravers. His and Rembrandt's works gave a great impulse to engraving at the time. William Faithorne, known as the first English portrait engraver alongside with David Loggan and Robert White, made difficult to deny French and Flemish influence in the early stages of engraving in England. Despite this, the art of English engraving was about to suffer drastic changes, both in form and aim.

When we finally reach the sophisticated artistic 18th century, engraving takes a whole different purpose, mainly in England, where satirical engraving stands almost on its own.



In this sense, William Hogarth's work explains Auerbach's statement that considers engraving as a "branch of art which, though a craft in the proper sense of the word, was because of its widespread circulation of the utmost importance" (326).

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In his *Autobiographical Notes*, William Hogarth presented himself as "the visual interpreter of contemporary urban life." This autobiographical description seems to fit the concept under which engraving should be seen in England at the time – an artistic tool that allowed every branch of society to experience art in a meaningful way, allowing them to feel close to the work itself.

Indeed, one if not the most relevant role of Hogarth's work, was to give the chance to people from several ranks in London society to get acquainted with foreign artists (through the reproductions of their works) and, later, to see the everyday reality of the city and country depicted in his engravings. As we have already seen, when compared to painting, engraving with its system of mass production was a low-priced way of allowing people in general to buy art,¹⁰ and Hogarth would come to know how to take advantage of this.

An apprentice to a silver engraver, later a copper one, our artist soon realized that this would be too limited a field for him. In fact, in his *Autobiographical Notes*, Hogarth explicitly acknowledges the lost time "till I was three and Twenty" in apprenticeship, such was the limited nature of the art. The fact that Hogarth never finished his apprenticeship, and by April 1720 decided to quit (Paulson 51), can be seen as the reflection of his constant dissatisfaction with the little engraving (in its primitive reproductive stage) had to offer him.¹¹ Hogarth, as many of his fellow engravers, had to deal with the prejudice felt in relation to engraving, which made people see it as a craft and not an art.



Fig 3: William Hogarth's **Trade Card**, 1720.

Hogarth described the early stages of his activity like this:

Engraving on copper was, at twenty years of age, my utmost ambition. To attain that it was necessary that I should learn to draw objects something like nature, instead of the monsters of heraldry, and the common methods of study were much too tedious for one who loved his pleasure and came so late to it... (*Autobiographical Notes* 200)

One should, however, consider Hogarth's apprenticeship as extremely relevant as far as his career was concerned. Even if it was something that demotivated him at times and gave him a sense of not owning his work and/or skill, the fact is that not only did it initiate him into the Great Masters, but also allowed him to gain a skilled knowledge as well as introduced him to some of the circles where he would later have to move. It is nonetheless true that the work of engravers in England at the time was not an easy one since their art was not yet considered as such and the London print trade seemed a rather "inhospitable and unpromising place to make a career" (Hallett 11). Hogarth was quite aware of this, judging from what he wrote in his essay *Britophil*:

But here again I had to encounter a monopoly of printsellers, equally mean, and destructive to the ingenious. [...] I found copies of [the first plate I published] in the print-shops, vending



at half-price, while the original prints were returned to me again; and I was thus obliged to sell the plate for whatever these pirates pleased to give me, as there was no place of sale but at their shops. (6)

Having learnt from what had happened to his father,¹² Hogarth soon realized that the act of merely copying would not take him anywhere nor allow him to pay his debts. In this line of work, as in the one of his father, he would do all the work and the print shop owners would get the money. In April 1720, Hogarth made his own shop card and decided to go against what was obvious. Later that same year, in October, he was about to join the new art academy to open in St. Martin's Lane.

Hogarth's beginning was not much different from that of some other engravers at the time, who usually started, as previously stated, engraving silver and then copper and doing book illustrations.¹³ It was not the craft that made Hogarth different, it was what he intended to do with it and how he accomplished it. Until then, engraving was a mere reflection of Italian, Dutch and French artists' work ending up by being the result of what print shop owners decided to import. English people had not yet learnt the taste for British Art and were devoted to this foreign fashion that allowed many to "travel" overseas; people were given an insight into foreign reality through the images they were able to see and purchase.

Even if the influence of French engravers was strongly felt at the time Hogarth started working, it is acknowledged that he was quite familiarized with the European tradition due to one of his great qualities: his passion for knowledge. Hogarth was curious and, like his father, he wanted to learn more; at coffee-shops and artists' studios he was able to absorb most of the knowledge which could later be traced in numerous of his works. According to Antal (37), his strongest influence came from the Dutch printmaker Callot,¹⁴ from whom he borrowed some motifs he then transformed by giving them a distinct personal touch.

In fact, one of the common characteristics between Callot and Hogarth was the way they were able to vividly describe their surroundings and paint scenes where people would be able to recognize themselves, the ones who surrounded them (in politics, the arts, the church) and the events that were happening at the



time. Antal has described them as “innovators in the reporter-like interest they manifest in such wide fields of everyday life.” This way, as I have already mentioned, of making journalism was revolutionizing the epoch and drawing people’s attention to this new branch of British art.

Hogarth’s marriage to the daughter of Sir James Thorhill¹⁵ undoubtedly contributed to his success. Moreover, he was starting to be noticed by his works and ambitious character alongside his fresh look upon the city of London and its inhabitants.

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The streets of London seemed to be tailor-made for Hogarth’s work and style, since most of his engravings were, according to him, the product of what he kept in his “mind’s Eye without drawing upon the spot”. Even if this was generally true, mainly because Hogarth was forced to train his memory every time he had the chance to witness something worth retaining (either a row in the street or a sketch in a shop window), it is said that he had the habit of drawing on his nail small details he was afraid of forgetting.

Having been born and raised in the centre of London all his life, Hogarth spent his childhood and teenage years surrounded by the hectic activity of the cosmopolitan trading city that London was becoming. He was able to witness the most different types of scenes from everyday life – from prostitutes on the street to politicians strolling about, he was able to tell the story of what was happening around him and his fellow Londoners.

Areas and familiar places of London such as the Smithfield Market, Covent Garden, Holborn, Bridewell Prison, Bethlehem Royal Hospital, Cheapside, Tyburn and Charing Cross can easily be seen in Hogarth’s engravings. Hogarth had always been a good observer, a characteristic that he found essential in his work; to this he added his mocking tone plus his satirical wit, which ended by being the key to his



success, the launch pad to engraving and the place it was about to assume in English art.

The *South Sea Scheme* (1721) was one of his first adventures in the city which allowed him to combine symbols of the church and the state alongside his satire of the frenzy for money and the race for stocks alluring corruption. Another example which was not less important were his moral series like *The Harlot's Progress* and *The Rake's Progress*. The success of the former was so huge among people from all social classes that it ended up by being wretchedly copied by unskilled people. With the latter, Hogarth decided to use a different strategy – he held back his last engravings from the series of eight, hoping that the law would finally offer him and other visual artists authorial protection.

The Engraver's Copyright Act of 1735, also called Hogarthian Act, emerged then as an expected consequence of numerous years without any kind of rights concerning the visual arts. The pressure of a group of artists headed by Hogarth who were tired of seeing their works being badly reproduced had as its main aim the protection of many of those who had been, for over forty years, continuously deprived of their rights, being nothing more than mere spectators of their fate. Exploited by their publishers and copied by unskilled people, artists were, from that moment on, given exclusive rights on their creations for fourteen years,¹⁶ which prevented them from having their works copied. For engraving it was the giant leap to recognition in the Academy and society.

Throughout his numerous descriptions of the city of London and his moral subjects which he was able to make accessible to most people, Hogarth granted engraving the power to reach the *high* and *low* cultures. Through topics such as trade, crime, poverty, West End elites or the stories of people in influential circles, the art of engraving was being used to play a social and moral role in 18th-century London. Hogarth described his skill and uniqueness like this:

I had one material advantage over my competitors, viz., the early habit I acquired of retaining in my mind's eye, without coldly copying on the spot, whatever I intended to imitate. [...] Instead of burdening the memory with musty rules, or tiring the eye with



copying dry or damaged pictures, I have ever found studying from nature the shortest and safest way of obtaining knowledge in my art. (*Autobiographical Notes* 202)

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The 18th century could be set as the century of change in many areas of English life where the *Arts* were no exception. The creation of the Royal Academy of Arts can be considered the best example of this, as it publicly acknowledged authors and simultaneously made art available to a larger audience through its impact on education. Under the influence of the European tradition, namely Italian, French and Dutch, English artists were able to learn more about their fellow artists at the same time as they learnt innovative techniques and apprehended new motifs. Moreover, the number of French immigrants that London received at the time was also a good help diffusing the work that was being done overseas. A great deal was learnt from these artists and from the engravings they brought to London, which reproduced the Great Masters and their favourite scenes.

The *craft* was soon to be seen as *art* with the impact it was slowly gaining on the windows of many printshops. William Hogarth, divided between his love for painting and engraving, found on the latter the key to, not only (later) worldwide recognition, but also the trait that would give engraving the power to communicate to the masses in the 18th century, thus allowing art to be closer to people and, simultaneously, deal with relevant subjects such as poverty, corruption and war.

What does not cease to surprise us is that, as Brewer says, Hogarth's "place in the heritage (which now seems so self-evident) had to be invented, not out of whole cloth but from the crazy quilt of 'yours' and 'mine' " (2000: 26).

¹ In this case, the role Hogarth played in the creation of the Society of Artists and the permanent exhibitions at The Foundling Hospital already allowed this.

² According to <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=art>, accessed 2nd April 2011.

³ Gutenberg also started his career as a goldsmith.



⁴ Papermaking spread to Belgium in 1407, Holland 1428 and Switzerland in 1433. Between 1450-55 book printing in Europe started when Gutenberg's Bible was produced. In 1470 a bookseller's advertisement issued by Peter Schoeffer was the first poster printed upon paper to be produced in Europe. Paper making was introduced in England in 1490 and was made by John Tate of Hertfordshire. In http://www.paperlinx.com/cpa/htm/htm_paper_history.asp?page_id=56, accessed 9th April 2011.

⁵ According to Helmut Lehmann-Haupt, Gutenberg worked directly with him on his first engravings.

⁶ *The Knavery of the Rump*, published in 1679, was a deck of cards which was a satire on Oliver Cromwell's government.

⁷ Even though the Archbishop's main aim was to prove the supremacy of the Church of England over Rome, the fact is that because of this he employed many cutters, painters, bookbinders and drawers in his house. For further information see Cust.

⁸ Rubens was knighted by Charles I of England in 1630 and lived in London for some time afterwards, having been awarded a Master of Arts degree by Cambridge University.

⁹ The difference between these methods is how the plates are made. In engraving, special tools of varying thicknesses and shapes are used to cut lines in the plate. Etchings, on the other hand, use a chemical process in which the plate is first covered with an acid-resistant "ground", and then worked with an etching needle. In <http://www.collectorsguide.com/fa/fa096.shtml>.

¹⁰ According to Antal, many of these cheap engravings would cost more or less a shilling each, which made them more accessible than the literary periodicals. This was extremely relevant in Hogarth's case, since his engravings, being part of a series or not, always ended by telling a story.

¹¹ If it is true that the whole procedure of the engraver's apprenticeship was an issue taken very seriously and that could encompass 8 years to be fully accomplished, it is nevertheless a fact that most of it would have as main purpose the sole reproduction of European Masters as well as engraving coats of arms.

¹² Hogarth's father was both a schoolmaster and an author, later opening a coffee-shop where he was able to join the cultural activities he liked with the essential one of making money. He worked very often for book printers making revisions of the texts, which included improvements, and he made almost no money for that.

¹³ The illustrations for Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* (1725) were probably the most famous produced by Hogarth, giving him a quite unexpected notoriety.

¹⁴ Antal describes Callot's influence in engraving like this: "In all Dutch engravers of actualities of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century we find a strong undertone of Callot from whom, indeed, they all fundamentally derive" (37).

¹⁵ One should bear in mind, even if not undermining Hogarth's talent, that Thornhill's success as an artist was envied by many English artists since he was one of the few to compete with some European masters. Hogarth was also a pupil at his drawing school in Covent Garden, which gave him the possibility to know people in the right circles.

¹⁶ I find it interesting that for Hogarth's wife this period was extended for another 20 years (Paulson 44).

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