

British Humour: Satirical Prints of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

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Controversial cartoons have sparked public outcry and even violence in recent years. We need think back only a little more than three years ago to the attack on the office of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* to recall the very real consequences of trenchant parodies. More recently, in July 2018, the owners of One Grand Gallery in Portland, Oregon received death threats for displaying a poster that represented Donald Trump with a bloody nose and a knife to his throat, advertising an exhibition titled “F**k You Mr. President.” How can images be so powerful as to incite threats and acts of violence? *British Humour* will engage with this question and consider the purpose of cartoons in democratic societies, the power of controversial images, and the role of the artist as critic by interpreting innovative examples in the history of art—the satirical prints of William Hogarth (1697–1764), James Gillray (1757–1815), George Cruikshank (1792–1878), and their contemporaries.

Hogarth has been called the “grandfather of the political cartoon,” for he lampooned the mores and behaviors of the elite, ruling classes. His works also present general social critique as much as specific political commentary. His series *Marriage à-la-Mode*, originally rendered in 1743 as a set of six oil paintings (all National Gallery, London), spins a tragic tale of the demise of a young wife from the affluent merchant class and her husband, a lecherous viscount. The title of the series puns on the French phrase *à la mode*, which can mean “in the current fashion” or refer to the side of ice cream for a dessert,

setting the stage for the irreverence of the artist’s treatment. In *The Marriage Settlement*, the first image from the series, the young woman’s father negotiates the marital contract with Earl Squander, the aged, gouty father of the groom-to-be. Essentially, the earl is transacting this marriage for his syphilitic son, who is oblivious to his fate as he narcissistically admires himself in a mirror, in order to acquire a substantial dowry from the *nouveau riche* merchant. Meanwhile, the miserable fiancée listens to the persuasive attorney, appropriately named Silvertongue. As the pair of dogs chained



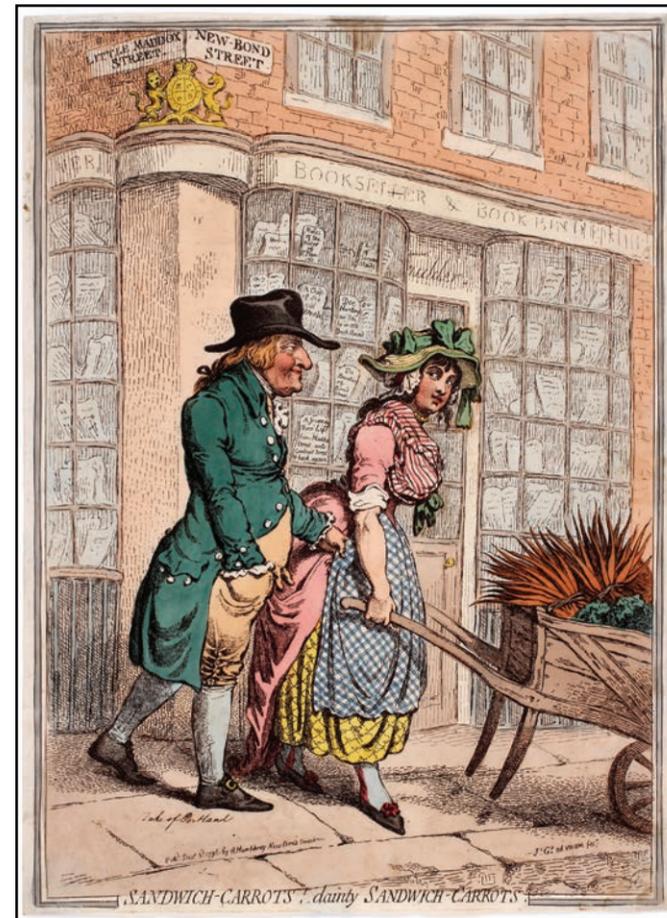
William Hogarth (British, 1697–1764)
The Marriage Settlement, from the series *Marriage à-la-Mode*, 1745
Engraving
Gift of Museum Associates (2008.16.1)

together at their feet implies, this is not the start of a loving relationship but a prison sentence.

James Gillray likewise lambasted the behaviors of the aristocracy as well as singled out individuals for derision, and his exaggerations established a style of caricature that cartoonists still use. The cover image of this magazine shows Gillray’s ribald pillory of the 5th Earl of Sandwich, but a scene that the artist claims he observed “*ad vivum* (from the life).” He grasps the apron of a curvaceous, young woman pushing a cart full of carrots, while he makes a lewd gesture with his other hand in his pocket. The carrots pointed up at the woman reinforce the work’s libidinous connotation. The caption’s phrase “dainty Sandwich-Carrots” is clearly an attempt to ridicule the earl by insulting his physical attributes and sexual prowess.

A generation after Gillray, George Cruikshank was praised during his lifetime as a “modern Hogarth.” The son of a caricaturist, Cruikshank was prolific as a designer of editorial prints and book illustrations. He famously illustrated *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens and publically claimed to have made significant contributions to the authorship of that work. The Museum holds four of Cruikshank’s illustrations of signs of the zodiac for *The Comic Almanack for 1846*. His parody for Virgo, subtitled “Unmatched Enjoyment,” presents six unwed women having tea in a salon overrun with pets. In addition to the five dogs, the cat, and the parrot in the room, two portraits of dogs hang on the wall behind their gathering. This mockery of “old maids,” whom the servant ironically calls “young ladies,” appears to be a nineteenth-century version of the “crazy cat lady” trope of contemporary culture.

Citing Hogarth in defense of cartoons that ignited controversy in 2013, art critic Jonathan Jones argued that Hogarth “offends the whole of humanity. And that is true of all great cartoonists” (*The Guardian*, January 30, 2013). Indeed, as the satirical prints of Hogarth, Gillray, and Cruikshank suggest, few escaped their observant eye and caustic wit. ■



James Gillray (British, 1757–1815)
Sandwich-Carrots! dainty Sandwich-Carrots, December 3, 1796
Hand-colored etching
Published by Hannah Humphrey, London
Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2015.1)



George Cruikshank (British, 1792–1878)
Virgo—Unmatched Enjoyment, from *The Comic Almanack for 1846*
Published by David Bogue, London
Gift of Bette Weiss (97.8)