

Caricature: The Loaded Drawing

The taste of the day leans entirely to caricature. We have lost our relish for the simple beauties of nature. We are no longer satisfied with propriety and neatness, we must have something grotesque and disproportioned, cumbrous with ornament and gigantic in its dimensions

Morning Chronicles 1
1, August, 1796

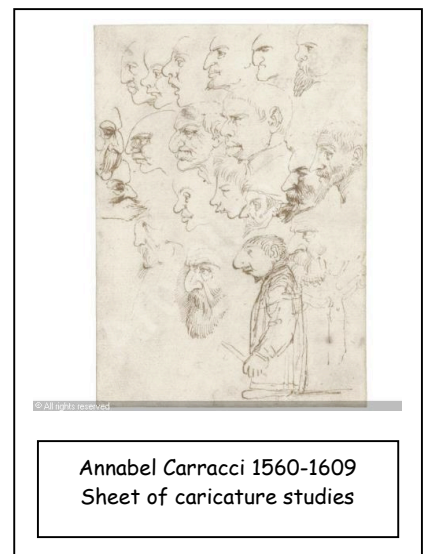
Exaggeration in visual expression is found in nearly all cultures and throughout most historical periods. What this paper will discuss is the use of caricature to communicate satirical/humorous content in visual genres of Western Europe and specifically 18th Century England by highlighting the work of James Gillray.



Caricature of Libyan leader
Muammar Gaddafi held by
protestors on 2. 27. 2011.
Source: NY Times online

Caricature is a form of visual exaggeration/distortion that generally pertains to the human face and/or figure drawn for humorous, critical or vindictive motives. As the title suggests, a particular facial part is exaggerated to catch the viewers' attention and relate that quality to underlying aspects of the personality - hence a caricature is a portrait that is loaded with meaning rather than mere description. The centuries old premise to this interpretation is that outward appearances belie personality traits. A second interpretation of caricature - and the one this paper focuses on - combines the transformative aspects of caricature rendering techniques with satire to produce graphic images that provoke meaning in political, social and moral arenas.

A verbal cousin to visual caricature is satire. Satirizing the human condition is as universal as exaggeration, and while found in early Greco-Roman art and literature wanes through the medieval period. Satire was kept alive in illiterate populations of Europe through the music of minstrels and bards and theatre. However, it was not until the Renaissance Period in Italy that we found a resurrection of exaggeration/distortion used in visual expression. The artist Annabel Carracci [and his relatives] studied facial features, and used these techniques to improve facial expression in emotive and psychological traits for visual communication. Other European artists after the Carracci's used both the portrait and the caricature of all body parts for amusement, including the lewd and erotic, for limited and wealthy audiences. This art form spread to France and Europe for private audiences and continued through the 17th and 18th centuries as an upper class amusement, these images included symbols and emblems relevant only to the users. Today, a viewer of these esoteric images needs to be 'well informed to understand' _the meaning of the image.



Annabel Carracci 1560-1609
Sheet of caricature studies

The next major resurrection of caricature in visual form comes with the printing



Title page of Carolus' [Relation](#) from 1609, the earliest newspaper [quatro sheet – double folded broadsheet]

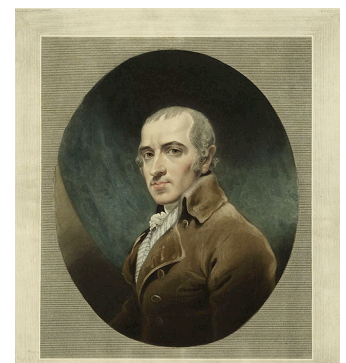
and distribution of broadsheets, newspapers printed as early as 1618 in Holland. These single sheet papers included small satirical cartooning in their editions by mid to late 17th century. Early newspapers spread to large cities throughout the continent. These broadsheets initially served to inform readers of local business dealings and events and current religious and political affairs, however, later into the next century they were used to sway opinion in educated groups. Stories were paid for by governing or business interests to promote campaigns, views or change attitudes. As the technology dictated, the medium of the image was either wood block or copper plate etching; artists received payment to render a caricature

that promoted or lampooned a viewpoint or satirized an important person for straying from public virtue. Near the

end of the 18th century, even the American colonies felt the affects of unreliability in their broadsheets as Thomas Jefferson had this to say about the press/political journalism; "The most effectual engines for [pacifying a nation] are the public papers... [A despotic] government always [keeps] a kind of standing army of news writers who, without any regard to truth or to what should be like truth, [invent] and put into the papers whatever might serve the ministers. This suffices with the mass of the people who have no means of distinguishing the false from the true paragraphs of a newspaper." _ The concept of an independent press to serve the common good or be independent or objective did not exist at this time. As the broadsheet's reputation diminished through mid to late 18th century, monthly journals/publications raised the integrity of journalistic standards in both writing and satirical cartooning. One such monthly was *London and Paris* published in Germany. In a 1798

London & Paris article, written by a German resident of London commenting on the popularity of James Gillray's caricatures, writes how Londoners 'pay dearly' for his prints and "the tolerance of caricature in Britain suggested a freedom of opinion, and an indulgence on the part of authorities, which educated Germans marveled at...envied"._ While most artists engaged in political cartooning at this time were mere 'hacks' paid by taskmasters, what elevated James Gillray's work [and to a lesser degree his contemporaries Cruikshank and Williams] to become the most

recognized print artist/caricaturist in Europe by 1800? What were the liberties of English satire and how did these artists succeed while others were mere 'hacks'?



James Gillray: Self

While London had its share of disreputable broadsheets and newspapers influencing those able to read, Great Britain also had a confluence of political, economic, legal and technical circumstances that elevated Gillray's satire and caricature prints into prominence and respect during his lifetime and by the 20th century into an art form. Briefly, the country produced the Magna Carta and parliamentary government earlier than most other countries thus indirectly over time created a populace with a larger literacy rate than other European countries. Important to commerce and ownership rights, Great Britain created laws supporting commerce, particularly copyright laws that eventually gave an artist some rights over his own production. Printing technologies also excelled in London. Lastly, and most significantly to the topic is the abundance of parodies begun during the reign of King George I as the powers of the monarchy began to diminish while parliamentary powers gradually increased.

Temperance Enjoying a Frugal Meal (1792)



William Hogarth, predecessor of and influential in the life of James Gillray, was also a painter, printmaker, pictorial satirist, social critic and editorial cartoonist and is credited with pioneering western sequential art. Hogarth is most famous for his moralizing series on the transgressions of the English wealthy and ruling classes. James Gillray, coming from an educated and strict Moravian background, was a natural fit to follow Hogarth. He independently studied and graphically satirized the behaviors, actions and hypocrisies of parliament, the prime minister and other members of the ruling class during the reign of King George III without payment from a 'taskmaster'. He earned his living by selling his art directly to the publishing houses.

A Voluptuary under the horrors of Digestion (1792)



Two hand colored etchings of Gillray's that the English Gallery at Mint Museum Randolph displays are shown here: the top image satirizes the frugality of Queen Charlotte and King George III and the bottom image disparages the excesses of their son - the prince regent. Both were printed in 1792 and exemplify his style; attention to detail and skill in exaggeration. He spent time perfecting his stylistic skills as shown in Gillray's facial studies of members of parliament, shown on the right.

Gillray satirized both houses of parliament and the political factions within them as well as the public activities of the monarchical class. After spending many years satirizing the Whigs he easily switched over to lampooning the Tories as he wrote that he could make money from both sides. He also produced a number of general social commentaries as well. During his productive years, from 1792 to 1810 he would walk to parliament and sit in the upper galleries and watch the daily



proceedings while parliament was in session; he produced a hand colored print about every 4 to 6 weeks. Unlike Hogarth, he did not produce any series; rather his work responded to events of the day. The details of the day (period) are carefully crafted into each of his prints. His images are guided by actual events, speeches and his own ironic wit as he made his daily sketches in the house of parliament. His body of work does not appear to be overly slanted, as he was equally feared by all political factions since he used real events and actual words to lampoon. The only significant bias I found is that while he supported the American Revolution and French independence and other acts of social justice, he did not support the independence of Ireland. His work was highly valued and anticipated during his lifetime for it was reported that on the day in which a new print was to be released, large numbers of customers waited outside the shop door to purchase a print and often the publishing house was sold out within three days.

In reading the details of his life, reading his own words and the opinions of others about him, I believe that the success of Gillray can be found in the transitional and turbulent time he lived as the 18th century moved into the 19th century. While Gillray, as a student respected the esteemed head of the Royal Art Academy, Joshua Reynolds; he did not agree with Reynolds views of an ideal scientific approach to painting/composition. Gillray was attracted to the Romantics; viewpoints from artists such as Goya, Blake and Fuseli who believed art takes its shape from an uncertain and doubtful beauty. However, what Gillray did acquire from Reynolds was the belief that the artist should "know all you're presenting" _ to your audience. As with many transitional figures before and after Gillray, he did not work under a narrow perspective or framework that defined his art, but rather he picked from competing views and created his own visions.

1 Christiane Banerji and Diana Donald, trans, *Gillray Observed: The Earliest Account of his Caricatures in 'London & Paris'* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

2. Thomas Jefferson to G. K. van Hogendorp, Oct. 13, 1785. (*) ME 5:181, Papers 8:632

3. Draper Hill, *Mr. Gillray: The Caricaturist, A Biography* (London: Phaidon Publishers), 1965

Draper Hill, Ed. *Fashionable Contrasts: Caricatures by James Gillray* (Greenwich: Phaidon Press, date)

James Wright and Robert Harding Evans, *Historical and Descriptive Account of the Caricatures of James Gillray* (Great Britain, General Books, 2009)