

SOCIETY ENGRAVED



A **SPACE** for **DIALOGUE** 94

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH



Based in London, William Hogarth (1697–1764) was a widely influential English painter and engraver whose work, particularly as a printmaker, offered pointed, shrewd, and satirical social and political commentary. Hogarth’s prints depicted prostitutes, unfaithful spouses, the poor, venereal diseases, and death—urgent social issues in his day—in accessible, often humorous vignettes. Because these images reflected the zeitgeist, his work appealed to a broad public, but this popularity created new ethical issues around the production and distribution of prints, the right to profit from artistic labor, and the nature of what constitutes an original work of art.

Hogarth’s prints reflect the philosophical grumblings of the eighteenth century, which can be seen in literature like Bernard Mandeville’s 1714 book *The Fable of the Bees*. People at this time saw the intractability of death and lawlessness, poverty and unfaithfulness, and disease and drunkenness as a threat to their Christian values. As Mandeville writes, and as Hogarth’s work suggests, the pervasiveness of these moral problems was a central concern within society. Yet Mandeville argues that if such problems were solved, there would be fewer productive roles to fill in

society and nothing with which people could occupy themselves. Mandeville also emphasizes that those who complain about the ills of society are themselves contributing to its vices: “All the Rogues cry’d brazenly, Good Gods, Had we but Honesty!”¹ Mandeville further disputes the claim that humans are naturally kind to one another and instead argues that humans are fundamentally self-interested, which can lead to corrupt behaviors like those Hogarth depicts.

For example, in the third of *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (left), a four-print series by Hogarth from 1751, the protagonist, Tom Nero, is obsessed with deliberate acts of cruelty. Nero is shown with objects on his person that suggest his activity as a highway thief, and Hogarth depicts him being questioned about the robbery and murder of a woman. In an earlier four-print series, *The Four Times of Day* (1738; cover), the artist looks at society more broadly, rather than the actions of a single evildoer. *Morning* shows that even outside a church at daybreak, members of society interact in uncomfortable ways that reveal offenses they might have made. The series illustrates dichotomies within and across social classes, often clandestine, at all hours of the day.

Because of their timely subject matter, Hogarth’s prints were in high demand during his lifetime. Legitimate printers wanted to distribute his work, and others wanted to sell unauthorized copies of his prints—issues that arose as a result of the flourishing (and commercialization) of fine art printing. Engraving and etching, practiced by Hogarth, are methods of printmaking that require the artist either to cut into a plate with a tool called a burin or to etch into a metal plate chemically to produce an image that is then inked and printed on paper. This process allows images to be printed multiple times from a single incised plate. While one artist would create the original plate, a craftsman or printer could make a series of impressions not directly printed by the artist. Since they could be reproduced more easily than paintings or drawings and at a lower cost, prints gained popularity with the greater public who previously did not collect works of art. Unfortunately, because etchings and engravings were produced in editions of multiples, they were also more vulnerable to counterfeiting via impressions produced from a copyist’s plate, rather than from the artist’s original.

In 1731–32, when Hogarth produced *A Harlot's Progress*, he wanted to protect his financial interest and found a lucrative model for the sale of his prints. By working on a subscription basis, he could ensure a minimum return on his prints before even making them. He thus made more money for himself and precluded printsellers from distributing the series, since the impressions were essentially made to order. Not long after Hogarth did this, however, reproductions of the series appeared on the market. The artist's prolific biographer, Ronald Paulson, narrates that Hogarth "suffered the double annoyance of seeing large sums of money he felt rightly his still going to other parties, and of seeing wretched copies made of the works he had labored over with such care."² Hogarth did not want to rely on the existing trade structure of London publishers but instead wanted to publish and distribute his own work. Hogarth, as well as other engravers of his time, including George Vertue, George Lambert, Isaac Ware, John Pine, Gerrard Vandergucht, and John Goupy, brought forward the issue to the House of Commons. The legislation that resulted was called the Engraving Copyright Act of 1734, also known as Hogarth's Act. The artists followed the structure of the literary Copyright Act, called the Statute of Anne, from two decades prior, asking that violators surrender all offending material and be "fined 5s a sheet for every copy found, half going to the Crown, half to the injured author."³ They believed that bringing this issue to the House of Commons and instating punishments for copying unjustly would protect the creativity and livelihood of the artist as well as elevate British art and artists as a whole. *A Rake's Progress* (1735; right) was among the first series Hogarth distributed under the new law.

Published between 1800 and 1899, in the century after his death, the book *The Complete Works of William Hogarth: In a Series of One Hundred and Fifty Steel Engravings, from the Original Pictures* is an example of how printmaking technology was and is used to distribute fine art images more widely. This volume, which is reflective of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century books chronicling the works of Hogarth and other artists, shows high-quality, detailed images of Hogarth's prints. The book's 150 steel engravings are made from newly incised plates derived from Hogarth's original works. The result-



ing prints prompt us to question which is the art object and which the copy. Comparing the book with Hogarth's corresponding images, we can see similarities as well as differences that encourage reflection on the value of a print versus a reproduction of a print.

The combination of the mastery of engraving, the pertinence of moral imagery, and the popularity of Hogarth's keen satirizations led the British master engraver to seek legal action to take control of his business. Based on the reproductions of his prints in the nineteenth-century compendium of Hogarth's works, one could argue that not much differentiates the formal qualities of the original print, produced from a plate engraved by the artist who designed the image, from those of the copy by a skilled reproductive engraver (whether made contemporaneously or a century later). Do you think there are specific distinctions between the framed image and the image in the book? Who do you think should decide what is original art and what is illegal copying for the sake of profit?

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NOTES

1. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees or Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, vol. 1, 1732, The Online Library of Liberty, <https://projectintegrity.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/bernard-mandeville-the-fable-of-the-bees-1712.pdf>.
2. Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth: High Art and Low*, 3 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), vol. 2, 36.
3. Ronan Deazley, "Commentary on the Engravers' Act (1735)," 2008, *Primary Sources on Copyright (1450–1900)*, ed. L. Bently and M. Kretschmer, www.copyrighthistory.org; Paulson, *Hogarth*, vol. 2, 37.

CHECKLIST

All works by William Hogarth, English, 1697–1764, except as noted.

A Rake's Progress, plates 1–8, 1735. Etching and engraving on laid paper. Purchased through the Florence and Lansing Porter Moore 1937 Fund, the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund, the Jean and Adolph Weil Jr. 1935 Fund, the Barbara Dau '78 Fund for European Art, and the Class of 1935 Memorial Fund; 2015.9.1-8.

The Four Times of Day: Morning, 1738. Etching and engraving on wove paper. Purchased through the Guernsey Center Moore 1904 Memorial Fund; PR.961.38.1.

The Four Times of Day: Noon, 1738. Etching and engraving on wove paper. Purchased through the Guernsey Center Moore 1904 Memorial Fund; PR.961.38.2.

Bernard Baron, French, 1696–1762, after William Hogarth, English, 1697–1764. *The Four Times of Day: Evening*, 1738, etching and engraving on wove paper. Purchased through the Guernsey Center Moore 1904 Memorial Fund; PR.961.38.3.

The Four Times of Day: Night, 1738. Etching and engraving on wove paper. Purchased through the Guernsey Center Moore 1904 Memorial Fund; PR.961.38.3.

Cruelty in Perfection, plate 3 from the series *The Four Stages of Cruelty*, 1751. Etching and engraving on laid paper. Purchased through the Jean and Adolph Weil Jr. 1935 Fund; 2007.62.3.

The Complete Works of William Hogarth: In a Series of One Hundred and Fifty Steel Engravings, from the Original Pictures. Published by London Print. and Pub. Co., London and New York, 1800–1899. Printed book. Dartmouth College Libraries.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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The exhibition *Society Engraved*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, June 22–August 4, 2019.

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Cover: William Hogarth, *The Four Times of Day: Morning*, 1738.

Inside left: William Hogarth, *Cruelty in Perfection*, plate 3 from the series *The Four Stages of Cruelty*, 1751.

Inside right: William Hogarth, *A Rake's Progress*, plate 8, 1735.

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