

Cartoon Network

The Georgian era was the great age of cartooning. Satirical prints from the time are affordable, amusing and highly decorative, writes Dr Stewart Abbott

Spectators at a print shop in St Paul's churchyard, 1774. An extravagantly dressed woman points a fan at a mezzotint droll in a print-shop window while a small dog looks up at her. Hand-coloured mezzotint



Between 1770 and 1830 more than 20,000 satirical prints were published in London. The subject matter of these prints fell broadly into two categories: political subjects (including the ruling elite, elections and wars with France) and modern culture and fashion. The variety of the prints was immense. Small black-and-white images could be purchased for a few pence, while hand-coloured images printed on textured paper were sold for two shillings each or more and collected as a series. Of course, many prints had a broader circulation beyond the people who initially bought them. Prints were swapped and shared among friends and relations, while print-shop windows attracted huge crowds when new editions went on sale.

Right *Mirth and Friendship*, c.1770, hand-coloured mezzotint. A group of six drinkers, one wearing a cocked hat over a thick white wig



COLLECTING PRINTS

There is more to 18th-century prints than those produced by Hogarth. Most of Hogarth's print works came from his paintings and continued to be reprinted over a long period of time. Here we are dealing with a selection of prints created as mezzotints and engravings aimed at the popular market at reasonable cost.

The late antiquarian Christopher Lennox-Boyd, who had one of the largest collections of British mezzotints in the world, did a great deal to keep them accessible. I have collected them since the early 1970s and enjoyed their humour and insight into the 18th century. The prints have decorative quality and do not need to be explained to be appreciated.

Prints look good in most spaces and can fit into period decorative schemes, as well as add a focus in a contemporary setting. They are generally small in size (limited by the size of paper available to the printers) and look good in groups.

Each collector approaches prints in an individual manner, some go for eye appeal, some for historical associations and others for cultural or personal interests. The older the prints are, the rarer they are. This is due to many factors: the prints were produced as ephemera and for immediate consumption; the paper was not always of a quality that would last, as they were fashion items. Those surviving today have mainly come from collections and later reprints on better paper. There are a number of specialist print dealers who regularly exhibit at antique fairs. With the decline of interest in prints of this period, now is a great time to start a collection.

FASHION FOR 'DROLLS'

Mezzotint was the medium by which British prints swept continental markets in the late 1760s and 1770s, becoming the most fashionable of all print formats at that time.

These prints were a significant part of our export trade, and a means by which British art and (to some extent) culture became known abroad. The mezzotint 'droll' records an area of British popular 18th-century culture. The term has changed its meaning over the years and these prints reflect the term "as a dry or wry sense of humour frequently bordering on satire". These were visual ephemera, often produced on poor quality paper for instant visual consumption, the fact that many have survived is amazing. Subjects ranged from scientific endeavour to ridiculing the outrageous fashions of the younger generation. How little times have changed.



Left *What is this My Son Tom?* Published in 1774 by Sayer & Bennett. Mezzotint print with some etching and hand colouring

Right *Fatal Curiosity* Published in 1784, by R Sayer & J Bennett, No. 53 Fleet Street. Size 34.5 x 25.5cm

Below *Fatal Curiosity*, mezzotint with some etching



Below *What is this My Son Tom*, 1774 mezzotint, uncoloured

Below right *Sweet Echo*. Printed in London, for R. Sayer and J. Bennett, Map and Printsellers (sic), No. 53, Fleet Street in 1781



Below *Sweet Echo*, 1781, published by: Sayer & Bennett, mezzotint with some etching



FATAL CURIOSITY

Fatal Curiosity shows a parental concern of 1784. The expression 'beware of fast women and slow horses' may be more recent than this print but expresses its message. A young man is stepping into an animal trap, set out for poaches and vermin and long since banned. He tries to get closer to a beautiful young woman who wishes to beguile him, sitting on the bank of a river in the left foreground and looking away from him but expecting attention, playing hard to get while the man's companion stands behind him, wringing his hands in anxiety.

SWEET ECHO

Sweet Echo is a mezzotint with some etching and hand-applied colour. Every copy I have seen is coloured differently, indeed I have two very differently coloured copies of this print.

It shows a young woman with hair dressed high wearing a large hat, sitting in a garden holding up a sheet of music; with a waterfall on the right flowing into a stream running past her. Her large hat is comic and showing exaggerated fashion of the day.

The print is inscribed below the image with the title and lines of verse from the 17th-century poet John Milton's 1634 work *Comus*. The inscription reads *Sweet Echo, Sweetest Nymph That liv'st unseen Within thy Airy Cell*. Interestingly there is a 19th-century print by Arthur Rackham of the same subject testifying to the endurance of the theme.

WHAT IS THIS MY SON TOM?

From the late 18th century until the onset of WWII, fashion illustrations were one of the key means of circulating and identifying new styles of dress. *What is this My Son Tom?* is a fashion plate as well as a droll. It is satire on fashion: on the right a country farmer has come to town to see his son. He stands back amazed to be greeted by his son dressed as a Macaroni with huge wig topped by a small tricorne hat and carrying a tasselled cane and sword.

In Georgian times urban male fashion was as extravagant as female dress, in contrast to fashion of the countryside. London fashion has always been different to country fashion, and country living was often referred to as rural retirement, a life apart from fashionable reality and embracing nature. The inscription reads: *Our wise Forefathers would express Ev'n Sensibility in Dress The modern Race delight to Shew What Folly in Excess can do. The honest Farmer come to town Can scarce believe his Son his own If thus the Taste continues Here, What will it be another Year?*

'Prints look good in most spaces and can fit into period decorative schemes, as well as add a focus in a contemporary setting. They are generally small in size (limited by the size of paper available to the printers) and look good in groups'



Above John Collier (1708-1786) *Convivial Drinking*, etching with hand colouring

Below *The King, Queen and Court Viewing a Balloon Let Off in the Garden of Windsor Castle*, engraving with hand colouring but without the detail of the drolls

CONVIVIAL DRINKING

The British satirist John Collier (1708-1786), using the pseudonym Tim Bobbin, “developed his trade as a painter ... producing inn signs, painted panels, and grotesque caricatures which were widely distributed, reaching the American colonies via a Liverpool merchant. He promoted and distributed his own work, travelling all over northern England collecting orders and commissions for books and pictures.”

In 1773 he published *Human Passions Delineated*, an upmarket edition of his caricatures which acted as a catalogue for his work. He described himself as the Lancashire Hogarth while the Victorian antiquary W. E. Axon considered his pictures “execrable ... gross and cruel”. The *Dictionary of National Biography* found them “grotesque” and “absolutely devoid of artistic merit.”

THE KING, QUEEN AND COURT VIEWING A BALLOON LET OFF IN THE GARDEN OF WINDSOR CASTLE

Sometimes 18th-century prints show significant events, as does the engraving (right) by James Basire (1730-1802) of King George III and Queen Charlotte recording a balloon being let off in the gardens of Windsor Castle on November 5, 1783. It was one of the first hot air balloon experiments in England and the print was published in London in 1784.

As well as being decorative, the rare, surviving print is a typical of the Age of Enlightenment, celebrating as it does the development of science and knowledge. Basire was one of a family of engravers, he also trained William Blake, the poet and artist.

Dr Stewart Abbott, from the dealership S & J Abbott Ceramics Plus, has collected satirical prints since the late 1960s and is a regular on the fairs circuit. For more details go to www.sandjabbottceramicsplus.co.uk.



The art of the mezzotint

Mezzotints, which first developed in Amsterdam in the second quarter of the 17th century, found an appreciative audience in Georgian London. Following the 1660 Restoration, many Dutch mezzotint engravers arrived in the capital to share their knowledge.

By 1700, England boasted several talented mezzotint engravers, including William Sherwin; the printmaker and publisher Isaac Beckett; the theatrical designer Robert Robinson and the miniature painter Bernard Lens II.

In the mid- to late-18th century, the technique dubbed *la manière anglaise* experienced a golden age. While the earliest mezzotints reproduced the works of past masters, living painters soon seized upon the form to promote their own work.

Since a mezzotint can be made more rapidly, and less expensively, than a line engraving (although with fewer impressions), it soon became a favourite means for the quick dissemination of timely images. In the second half of the 18th century, leading British portrait painters worked closely with mezzotint engravers to create reproductions of their work, which were frequently shown alongside their painted prototypes in London’s annual art exhibitions.

Mezzotints circulated widely, sold in a variety of sizes (including ‘royal’, 24 x 19in, ‘large’, 18 x 24in, ‘posture’, 14 x 10in, and ‘small’, 6 x 4in) intended to fit standard-sized frames, and were offered in a range of prices calculated to suit every budget.

By the mid-1770s, as framers and gilders (rather than publishers) came to dominate the trade in prints, the mezzotint began to lose favour to another tonal intaglio printmaking technique – stipple engraving, which was first developed in France in the 1760s.

Faced with this competition, mezzotint printmakers and publishers changed tack. Some pursued methods of colour printing while others extended their range of subjects and issued luxurious series of mezzotints directed towards elite collectors.