THE CELEBRATED MR. GRAVELOT

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Hubert François Gravelot, well known as one of the leading book illustrators of France in the eighteenth century, made his reputation in England. Unlike his compatriots, Cochin, Eisen, and Moreau le jeune, he did not establish himself in Paris by way of formal French academic training and apprenticeship in one of the big engravers’ studios such as that of Le Bas. Instead, after working abroad, he returned to Paris, a middle-aged man of note, with a rather unconventional career behind him.

In his youth Gravelot studied art in Paris and even started out for Rome, subsidized by his father; but he spent so much time and money on books, the theater, and dissipation that his father sent him to Santo Domingo, where he made maps for a time. At the age of thirty he returned to France to work in the studios of Restout and Boucher. About 1732 a French engraver in London, Claude Dubosc, sent for Gravelot, who was then about thirty-three, to help him in his English edition of Picart’s Religious Ceremonies.

At this time art in England was just beginning to emerge from a period of mediocrity, and was busy and eclectic. The long domination of foreign court painters had ended with the death of Sir Godfrey Kneller in 1723; but foreign artists continued to come to London and to be successful. There were no great public names among the artists, though men like Rysbrack, Arthur Pond, Jonathan Richardson, and Sir James Thornhill made transient reputations that are now almost forgotten. A vain, quarrelsome, robust little man named William Hogarth, discouraged with the lack of revenue from his painted portraits and conversation pieces, was just publishing in prints the first set of his “modern moral subjects,” The Harlot’s Progress. There were no public exhibitions, no museums, and no places to see or to copy from old masters except in such private collections as were open to students. An art school, descended from the one founded by Kneller and others in 1711, was flourishing in St. Martin’s Lane. This was later, with royal patronage, to develop into the Royal Academy.

There was apparently no lack of business opportunity for a versatile foreign-trained talent like Gravelot’s, which could be used for all kinds of published engravings. Gravelot designed fashion plates, gold and silver ornaments, bookplates, and political satires. He illustrated a number of English classics—Gay’s Fables, Dryden’s dramatic works, Richardson’s Pamela, and two editions of Shakespeare. Occasionally he engraved both his own drawings and those of other artists. A number of entries concerning Gravelot appear in the notebooks of George Vertue, an engraver and art historian whose observations furnished the information for Sir Horace Walpole’s Anecdotes of Painters. In 1733, shortly after Gravelot had arrived in London, Vertue wrote: “His Manner of designing neat and correct much like Picart. A very curious pen & writes neatly: he has been lately in Glocestershire where he was imployd to drawn Antient Monuments in Churches & other

Design for a box lid. Drawing by Gravelot.
Fletcher Fund, 1944. Width 3 3/4 inches
Antiquities. . . . He has tryd at painting a small piece or two which gives some hopes of his succeeding in small history & conversations. If he here continues he will be rare inter aves.” In another entry, of 1741, Vertue says: “Mr. Gravelot whose drawings for Engraving and all other kinds of Gold & Silver works shews he is endowed with a great and fruitful genius for desseins, inventions of history and ornaments . . . is a Man of great Industry and diligence. Causes himself to be well paid for his works—and deserves it.”

Gravelot soon became prominent in the artistic society of London. He helped run the Academy in St. Martin’s Lane, serving on its committees, and had an art school of his own at the sign of the Pestle and Mortar. One of his pupils was Thomas Gainsborough, then a poor young man, in London for the first time. Gravelot is said to have employed Gainsborough to work on the decorative borders for Houbraken and Vertue’s Heads of Illustrious Personages, a book which was one of the few in Gainsborough’s possession at the time of his death. Garrick was a friend of Gravelot’s and corresponded with him after his return to France. Later, when the actor saw Mlle Clairon on the Paris stage, he commissioned Gravelot to draw her portrait, which was engraved by Le Mire. An incident presenting Gravelot in an unfavorable light was reported by Vertue in 1739. Gravelot, he says, “lately had given himself some Airs (as it is called),” and “at Slaughters Coffee house, a rendezvous of persons of all languages & Nations, Gentry, artists, and others, where he holds forth with much vehemence & Freedom for or against whom he pleases, speaking often very slightly of others and extolling his own merit,” he provoked a quarrel with another foreign artist. The latter “gave him a stout box on the face, telling him he deserved that justly; and should have more if he liked it. The other took it, and pass’d it off; but came no more as he used to do every evening.”

The Museum has recently acquired a number of Gravelot’s drawings for illustrations and ornament, among them twenty-three for Songs in the Opera of Flora, published in London by George Bickham in 1737. The Opera of Flora, presented at the Covent Garden Theatre about 1730 by John Rich, the producer of The Beggar’s Opera (1728), was a comic opera of the type that Rich had made so successful. It was adapted from Thomas Doggett’s Country Wake.
by John Hippisley, a comedian who had played Peachum in Gay’s opera and who also played a role in his own work. A sequel, Flora, or Hob’s Wedding, appeared in 1732. The title to the book of songs reads: Songs in the Opera of Flora With the Humorous Scenes of Hob Design’d by ye Celebrated Mr. Gravelot & Engrav’d by G. Bickham junr. It is dedicated to John Rich, as follows: “The Presumption of laying this small Treatise before you is a crime I am too conscious of, especially as it has been so long in Print. But as the Town hath given it so frequent & favourable a reception I thought I might venture to add ye small improvements I am capable of by Engraving the Musick Songs & proper Designs to each Subject in the manner it now appears. . . .” One of the twenty-four plates was engraved by Gravelot himself.

The Bickhams, senior and junior, were responsible for a number of engraved picture books accompanied by text, which was often engraved too. George Bickham the elder was perhaps best known as a writing master, but both were draftsmen, engravers, and publishers who, like others in their profession, made use of whatever designs and prints came to hand. Gravelot furnished a number of drawings to the Bickhams, some of which were probably engraved without his name. He made drawings for Bickham’s Musical Entertainer (1737–1738), the frontispieces for The British Monarchy (1743), and the second edition of The Universal Penman (1743). The first edition of the Penman (1741) has two vignettes copied without acknowledgment from the Flora engravings.

As is shown in his many existing drawings, Gravelot worked up his illustrations carefully from rough sketches to finished drawings for the engraver. His brother, the geographer D’Anville, says in an eulogy written after Gravelot’s death, that sometimes he modeled his figures in clay, “persuaded that in order to draw a figure small it is necessary to be able to draw it big.” Besides, D’Anville continues, “He had made at London mannequins about 15 pouces high, for both sexes, capable of movement in all the joints down to the finger tips. Each of his mannequins was provided with different styles of dress, and the Roman Toga had a place in this wardrobe. A body upholstered in a tissue of knitted silk could be dressed suitably for any subject and become under the Artist’s hands an adequate model for figures of small or medium height.” In the narrow setting of the small
ABOVE: Progressive drawings for an illustration by Gravelot. Height: left, 5 1/4 in.; center and right, 4 7/8 in. Fletcher Fund, 1944

ON THE OPPOSITE PAGE: The Humours of the Lottery, drawn by Gravelot after Marchant and engraved by N. Parr. Width 19 1/2 in. Gift of Mrs. Bella C. Landauer, 1944
octavo volumes that Gravelot habitually illustrated, his little figures, often limited to two or three, were carefully posed in their frames. Sometimes he rearranged them several times in order to get the best composition.

The main traits of Gravelot's character as described by his brother seem related to his choice of book illustration as a profession. “An extraordinary sensibility towards what he read or saw represented on the stage burst out in enthusiasm for what elevates the soul, or in sobs choking speech for what moves the heart.” Reading was such a passion that Gravelot always had a pocket Montaigne or some other book with him even in bed, in case of insomnia, and discussed them when his friends came to visit.

In 1745, when France and England were at war, Gravelot returned to France after a hazardous journey. He brought back with him, it is said, a considerable fortune, and with it a reputation which assured him a career of continuous illustrating up to his death in 1773. A later French critic wrote that Gravelot had acquired “ce je ne sais quoi d’élégance anglaise,” and that his native country welcomed home enthusiastically “ce talent qui leur arrivait transformé par son séjour d’outre-Manche.”

Just how reciprocal the influences between Gravelot and his English contemporaries were it would be difficult to judge. Gravelot's style may well have left some effect in England; but French prints were so widely circulated and copied that the French sources of English illustrations and ornament are often hard to determine. English book illustration was not remarkable when Gravelot went to London and did not become so for another fifty years. On the other hand, Gravelot's drawing, at first rather precise, became easy and fluid in England. The Goncourts describe the Humours of the Lottery, a large print drawn by Gravelot, as drawn “dans un esprit d’Hogarth coquet.” Gravelot must have known Hogarth at St. Martin's Lane and at Slaughter's Coffee House, and both had their drawings engraved by Grignion, one of Gravelot's pupils, and Scotin, who came over to England at the same time as Gravelot. Although Hogarth never had Gravelot's elegance, nor Gravelot Hogarth's bite, there was a certain similarity in their work, be it merely of time and place. This gradually disappeared after Gravelot settled down in France to be a typical French eighteenth-century illustrator, and with it went much of the picturesqueness and variety which make his English period so interesting. His illustrations to the French version of Tom Jones, published in Paris and London in 1750, are as lively and original as anything he did, but his later work, translated into the smooth formula of French academic engraving, is often scarcely distinguishable from the illustrations by other artists with which it was published.