Rowlandson's England

by A. HYATT MAYOR Curator of Prints

A show of Rowlandson's England will open on February 23 and will continue through the close of the exhibition of British Water Colors on June 3. The showing will consist of prints, book illustrations, and water colors by Rowlandson and his contemporaries. Most of the Rowlandsons come from a large collection formed by Francis Harvey in the 1860s and 1870s, which the Museum purchased in 1959 out of the estate of Dyson Perrins. The linecuts scattered through this article come from an untitled set of Rowlandson's etchings (Whittelsey Fund, 59.533.1017).

Painters and sculptors have made the peep-holes through which we glimpse the past, and blessed are those artists who opened the view onto wide and lively panoramas. When we try to imagine England in the early eighteenth century we see it through Hogarth, and when we move on to the age of our Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, we see England through the thousands of prints and water colors of Thomas Rowlandson, who was born in 1757 and died in 1827.

Rowlandson came to manhood in the mellowing afternoon of the eighteenth century, and had the luck to die just as the first railroads scarred the heaths and fields, and before the dark satanic mills began to belch their smoke. Yet the Victorian apocalypse was germinating during his entire lifetime, for he was ten when the first cast-iron rails were laid at a minehead for horses to pull dumpcarts. He was twelve when Watts patented his steam engine, and in his teens when waterpower began to drive machinery in cotton mills. When he was nineteen, the United States declared their independence, England began to import wheat instead of exporting it, and Adam Smith established modern economics by publishing his Wealth of Nations. He was twenty-two when England built the first iron bridge, which still bears traffic today. When he was thirty-six, revolutionary France started nearly twenty years of war with England, during which the violence of the Jacobins and the drastic destruction by Napoleon frightened English humanitarian reformers just as their energies were most needed to protect the new, uprooted class of factory workers and to plan order and sanitation for the miniature slums that were beginning to sprawl in squalor around the new industrial towns. He was fifty when Robert Fulton established the first regular steamship service, and fifty-seven when George Stephenson built the first practical locomotive. Two years before he died, the first short steam railroad began its regular runs. In the year of his death, London University opened its classrooms without any religious sanctions in order to help those who had the ambition to help themselves through practical courses of instruction. The scramble of democracy was on.

This sounds as though Rowlandson had a sweatshop to draw, but these implications of deep change did not dull the sparkle of the surface. All the eighteen years of war with France damaged England less than one month of the

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For a century Londoners had been going to these public gardens on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings from late May through August. On the bandstand, which held fifty performers and an organ, concerts began at eight P.M. and paused at ten P.M. for a set piece in fireworks called The Cascade. As many as sixteen thousand people walked under thirty-seven thousand lights. Typically British, Vauxhall was not a royal but a private enterprise, supported by public patronage.

Eighteenth century ladies rode to hounds, electioneered, and managed their affairs much more independently than their Victorian granddaughters.
blitz, and London, as the only rich and unin-
vaded metropolis in Europe, banked and traded
for all the world. Even decades before, the opera
at Covent Garden had drawn musicians from
everywhere. The brilliance of the eighteenth cen-
tury London theater survives in She Stoops to Con-
quer (1773) and The School for Scandal (1777)—
plays which surpass any produced under Queen
Victoria, when the upper classes abandoned the
theater to an uneducated public. The morals of
Rowlandson’s time were also more candid and
humane than those of the next age, for a gentle-
man could frankly keep a mistress with decorous
irregularity, which meant that the harlot’s cry
from street to street rang less hungrily in 1775
than in 1850. This sunny openness of living lulled some of the higher strivings that have en-
nobled unhappier ages. Gibbon said that “the
fat slumbers of the Church” had stupefied the
dons at the universities until “their dull and
deep potations excused the brisk intemperance
of youth.” Intellectual freedom was reserved for
the upper classes, for Walpole took care not to
doubt religion in the hearing of servants, and re-
ligious skepticism, like hair powder, was reserved
for the aristocracy.

Until the French wars suddenly kept English-
men in England, there were some forty thousand
of them living or traveling on the continent,
scrutinizing architecture that they might want
to adapt and buying treasures to bring home in
the first mass migration of works of art since the
Romans raided Greece. The cultivated English-
man, who had looked at more different kinds of
art than anybody in the world, modernized art
history. But the ordinary Londoner could not
see paintings as easily as the Parisian could by
going into the Louvre with only a few restrictions.
Londoners got their first public art show—of
contemporary work—in 1760, which was fol-
lowed by many exhibitions organized by artists.
In 1813 the Royal Academy assembled the
world’s first comprehensive one-man retrospec-
tive exhibition, consisting of 150 paintings by
Sir Joshua Reynolds, who had been dead twenty-
one years. In 1815, the year after Waterloo, a
group of collectors got together at the British
Institution the world’s first important public
loan show of old masters, which included Rem-
brandt’s Aristotle, now in this Museum. In
1819 the government inaugurated modern cor-
porate collecting by purchasing the Elgin mar-
bles. England set the stage for today’s museums,
which are formed by purchase, and not by loot
like Napoleon’s Louvre. The French wars had
diverted the energy of English connoisseurs from
collecting to throwing their collections wide open
to the public.
These educated Englishmen were not only the most enlightened of recent collectors, but they also created an incredible number of drawings and water colors. Every lady learned to draw and paint just as she learned to write, and the army and navy taught their cadets to make recognizable water colors of landfalls and harbor mouths and sites for possible battles. The amateur and professional water-colorist differed not so much in skill as in their working for pleasure or for pay. So many people were painting that after the 1760s color manufacturers found it worth their while to make more than the bare brown, red, and blue that had sufficed for "staining maps." Another encouragement to the landscape painter came in 1776 when Wedgwood exhibited a vast set of his creamware, made for Catherine of Russia and decorated with 1,286 of "the most embellished views, the most beauti-
ful Landskips, with Gothique Ruins, Grecian Temples and the most Elegant Buildings" of the British Isles. Both the ladies and gentlemen and the professional water-colorists turned instinctively to the English landscape, for England was the one country where the aristocracy has preferred the country to the town, and has taken pride in bequeathing better fields than they inherited.

Because educated Englishmen liked to live on their estates instead of staying in town to spend the income from them, they rescued farming from the serf's unthinking treadmill. Englishmen invented modern agriculture when they started to experiment with the rotation of crops, the draining of fens, the use of organic and chemical fertilizers, and the storage of fodder for the winter to avoid slaughtering most of the hungering cattle in the autumn. During the eighteenth century, English cows doubled their weight. Farm produce reached consumers more cheaply and quickly than elsewhere in Europe, because England alone had no internal customs barriers or tolls except for turnpike tolls.

England also had more good highways than the rest of Europe, although the royal roads around Paris may have been of better quality. The good roads encouraged innovations in carriage design which quickly outmoded the old clumsy coaches, swaying on leather straps like the British coronation coach, which is said to bring its royal passengers to the Abbey slightly seasick. The new light, steel-sprung carriages that rode softly and turned easily made it charm-

ing to travel at exactly the right pace for seeing a landscape.

As the horses labored up a hill, the more active passengers got out and walked, and could even sketch a quick notation of a view. The widespread roads and the pace of the coaches account for the enormous number of views that Englishmen sketched and etched as they discovered picturesque spots in England, Scotland, and Wales. It was on the top of a stagecoach that Wordsworth had his vision of London in the limpid forenoon:

This City now doth, like a garment, wear The beauty of the morning; silent, bare, Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky, All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

But the good roads and fast coaches drained
activity from the villages. No longer did each hamlet make its own carts and chairs and tables, its cloth and boots and baskets. Now one sent to town for more modish articles. The new factories superseded all the local craftsmen except the village blacksmith, who continued to shoe horses and repair carriages. Jane Austen put the perfect words to many a Rowlandson water color of an ancient, still active village when she described what Emma saw as she stood in the doorway of a shop at Highbury and looked out into the street in 1816: “When her eyes fell on the butcher-boy with his tray, a tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarreling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children round the baker’s little bow window eyeing the ginger-

bread, she knew that she had no reason to complain, and was amused enough: quite enough still to stand at the door.”

Who was the lively recorder of this complex scene, Thomas Rowlandson? His thousands of pictures are practically the only records of his existence. We know that he was born in 1757 in the heart of old London, and that when he was two, his father, a silk merchant, went bankrupt and handed the baby to an uncle, who died when the boy was seven. The uncle’s widow, a Frenchwoman, seems to have given him a familiarity with France that was rare among artists of his generation, who usually went to Italy. When he was fifteen, he entered the Royal Academy drawing school, and then studied art for a couple of years in Paris. When he was eighteen, he first exhibited a drawing in a Royal Academy show, but ceased to exhibit anywhere after he was thirty. When he was about forty, he began to draw and etch for the enterprising publisher Rudolph Ackermann. His sketches show that he traveled extensively in Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands. He died in London at the age of seventy.

A number of his friends have told us how he loved to ramble and talk and drink and play cards with innumerable acquaintances. He gambled so immoderately that he once “continued at the gaming-table for nearly thirty-six hours,” stopping only for a cold collation. When he lost all his money, he would say “I have played the fool, but”—holding up his pencil—“here is my resource.” His enormous output (“he etched as much copper as would sheathe the British navy”) supplied an enormous demand.

His prints sold penny plain and tuppence colored, to be used for transparencies when painted on both sides, to be pasted as “borders for rooms and screens,” to be “lent out to copy,” or to be “lent out for the evening.” His savage political satires appealed like newspapers to an age when personal invective flourished almost as rankly as in the Athens of Aristophanes. He even used his drawings as though they were copperplates for multiplying pictures. This he did by going to Ackermann’s shop in the Strand, where he would “ask for paper, vermilion, a brush, water, a saucer, and a reed; then, making of the reed such a pen as he liked, he drew the
outline of a subject (generally taking care to reverse the arms of his figures), and handed the paper to Mr. Ackermann to be treated as if it were a copper-plate. This was taken to the press, where some well-damped paper was laid upon the sketch, and the two were subjected to a pressure that turned them out as a right and left outline. The operation would be performed with other pieces of damp paper in succession, until the original would not part with vermilion enough to indicate an outline; then the original became useless, and Rowlandson proceeded to reline the replicas, and to tint them according to the fancy of the moment.” In spite of this flood of genuine drawings, the faking of his water colors became a London industry.

It may be the pressure of production that coarsened Rowlandson’s later work and made it perfunctory. Certainly he was at his best in his twenties and thirties, while he still exhibited his work in professional shows. After that he probably saw little of the art of his time and cared less, for his water colors show absolutely no effect from the innovations of Turner, who astonished England with his first big painting when Rowlandson was forty-three.

He must have learned much in France, for he drew figures with the fluid accuracy of the French, and his line resembles Fragonard’s more than that of any English artist. It may have been this French strain that enabled him to influence French art of the Directoire more than any other Englishman, for Deburcourt and Horace Vernet would certainly have etched very differently without his example. The world appropriated his art, although English-speaking lands think more of his contemporary William Blake. As Rowlandson swam delightedly with the stream of his times, he probably never met Blake, battling against it. Their two temperaments were as mutually exclusive as though they had lived in different centuries, and the fact that they were contemporaries to a matter of months shows—in case it needed showing—that what we call “the spirit of an age” is merely a useful fiction.
English coachmakers invented a light, swift, and dangerous forerunner of our sports car. The small front wheels turned on a dime.

Rowlandson's occasional sporting prints are freer and more vivid than those made by the sporting specialists.

Fashion mingles with the smart underworld outside the boxes in Covent Garden Theatre during a performance of The Way of the World. In England, as in Spain, the aristocracy of the age shared the brisk diversions of the populace.
The famous Georgina, duchess of Devonshire, set the fast pace that London society followed right through the Napoleonic Wars.
Fig. 5. Chealsea Reach, 1789. Etching. 7 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches
Whittelsey Fund, 56.567.7

Queen Elizabeth, Pepys, and George III all escaped the dust of roads and the mire of London streets by boating on the Thames. This is a special high summer picnic with a flute, horns, wine, and pretty girls.

Fig. 6. Dressing for a Masquerade, 1790. Etching. 13 1/2 x 18 inches
Whittelsey Fund, 59.533.346

Real life quickened into masquerade as smoothly as opera recitative flows into aria. The feathers on the chair backs probably show that these girls are playmates of the twenty-eight-year-old Prince of Wales, who had begun to build the Brighton Pavilion six years before.
Robert Adam had rebuilt Drury Lane Theatre fifteen years before with bad sight lines and acoustics. A few months after this etching was published, Adam’s work was pulled down and the house was rebuilt by Henry Holland.

Britain used her ships with political astuteness, although they were smaller, slower, and less well armed than French and Spanish ships.

In July, Napoleon’s army captured Cairo and Alexandria and overwhelmed the Turks. On August 1, Nelson isolated the French in Egypt by destroying their fleet, so that each side lit bonfires for a victory.
Fig. 10. The Reception. Watercolor. 9 1/2 x 15 inches Rogers Fund, 23.219.1

English eighteenth century furniture has a sturdy elegance, a reticent serenity that reflects the strength of a country that had long before gone through the agonies of a revolution, and was ready for modern times.

Fig. 11. A Snug Cabin, or the Port Admiral, 1808. Etching. 10 1/4 x 14 inches Whittelsey Fund, 59.533-568

In spite of humane efforts by naval officers, British sailors ate so badly and bunked so stinkingly below decks that crews had to be filled by kidnapping. Sailors mutinied twice, but when it came to guarding England from a French invasion, they fought with reckless courage.

Fig. 12. A Ghost in the Wine Cellar, 1800. Etching. 10 1/2 x 14 1/2 inches Whittelsey Fund, 59.533-571

The eighteenth century invented the Gothic novel of oubliettes and wicked monks and damsels immured, but it could not take these stage effects quite seriously.
Fig. 13. The Deer Park. Water color. 8 3/4 x 11 1/2 inches
Whittelsey Fund, 59.533.563

Parts of this tree might have been drawn by Van Gogh. Rowlandson was at his best when making water colors of nature.
Fig. 14. The Bank of England, 1808. Aquatint. 9 1/4 x 10 3/8 inches
Whittelsey Fund, 59.533.569

The architecture is drawn by Augustus Pugin, and the figures by Rowlandson. London, as the only uninvaded great city in the West, became the world’s banking center for nearly a century.
These rooms, which once housed Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, were opened in 1806 "to give painters a facility in selling their works, and to form a school of painting for the rising generation by furnishing exemplars by the old masters, from the collections of the nobility and gentry." Here young painters are studying pictures by Rubens, Van Dyck, Salvator Rosa, etc.—not in order to copy them, but to paint companion pieces in the same styles, following a suggestion made long before by Sir Joshua Reynolds.
Fig. 16. A Successful Fortune Hunter, 1802. Etching. 12 x 9 inches
Whittelsey Fund, 56.567.16

This couple on the Royal Crescent at Bath are in the great vacation spot of England, where leisure made quick marriages.

Fig. 17. Modern Antiques, 1811. Etching. 12 3/4 x 9 1/4 inches
Whittelsey Fund, 56.567.5

Napoleon's return from Egypt in 1792 popularized the Egyptian style throughout Europe.

Fig. 18 (opposite). Exhibition Stare Case, 1811. Etching. 18 3/4 x 12 inches
Whittelsey Fund, 59.533.573

People are crowding into the gallery of the Royal Academy, which occupied Somerset House from 1771 to 1837. This mansion, now used for government offices, was rebuilt in 1776-1786 by Sir William Chambers, and is the most imposing classical house in England.