

# THOMAS ROWLANDSON

(London 1756 - London 1827)

**T**HOMAS ROWLANDSON, 'ONE OF THE FOUNDERS and supreme characters of the English caricature tradition',<sup>1</sup> excelled in depicting his subjects with gentle satire and exuberance. His comedic characters, although quintessentially English, are portrayed with an elegance and fluidity of line that is reminiscent of the French Rococo style. The five drawings and watercolours presented here, varying in subject matter and their degree of satire, are all excellent examples of Rowlandson's distinctive style of draughtsmanship.

Rowlandson, whose portrait painted by George Henry Harlow (1797-1819) can be seen in figure 1, was the son of William Rowlandson, a wool and silk merchant. Early in Thomas' childhood, his father went bankrupt and he was sent away to live with relatives. He attended the reputable school of Dr Barwis in Soho Square. At the age of sixteen, he entered the Royal Academy Schools, first exhibiting there three years later. During this period he also visited Paris where it is thought he may have been introduced to the Rococo manner, although he no doubt would already have been familiar with French works of art through prints. In 1777, he received a silver medal from the academy and in the following year, set up independently in Wardour Street, London.



George Henry Harlow, *Thomas Rowlandson*, 1814, National Portrait Gallery, London (Figure 1)



William Hogarth, *A Rake's Progress* (plate 3), 1735, The Tate Gallery, London (Figure 2)

Early in his career, Rowlandson painted attractive portraits in the manner of Francis Wheatley, R.A. (1747-1801) (see catalogue no. 75) and John Raphael Smith (1752-1812). He was also inspired by Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), whose works were among those he engraved in *Imitations of Modern Drawings* (1788). Rowlandson's humorous drawings are indebted to the works of John Hamilton Mortimer (1740-1779), many of which he owned. Rowlandson also collected engravings after the artists he most admired, ranging from Rubens (1577-1640) to William Hogarth (1697-1764), who not only played a crucial role in establishing an English school of painting but became famed for his satirical works depicting low-life scenes of the period, such as *A Rake's Progress* (fig. 2).

Rowlandson undertook the first of several sketching tours in 1784, travelling from Salisbury to Portsmouth accompanied by his friend, the amateur caricaturist Henry Wigstead. Throughout his career, Rowlandson toured many parts of England and Wales, recording the landscapes and people he encountered. As all the drawings presented here are rural in subject matter, it is likely that they were created on one or more of these study trips. His landscapes drawn from life are often devoid of human activity and are therefore not illustrative of Rowlandson's most humorous commentary. They are, however, imbued with character and expressiveness, as the landscape elements of the works here attest to.

In 1784, Rowlandson, who was not politically inclined, also produced a

<sup>1</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*, 3rd edition, ed. Ian Chilvers, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003.



James Gillray, *A Voluptuary under the horrors of Digestion*, 1792, The British Museum, London (Figure 3)

rare series of political prints ridiculing Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, in her canvassing of votes for Charles James Fox. His cartoons are not as abrasive as those of his contemporary James Gillray (1756-1815), who specialised in political satire, exemplified by his attack on the notoriously dissolute Prince of Wales, later Prince Regent and George IV (reigned 1820-1830) in *A Voluptuary under the horrors of Digestion* (fig. 3). Neither are they morally conclusive, like those of Hogarth. In general, Rowlandson favoured a mild form of caricature as evident from the present works, and his most cutting satirical prints are modelled on ideas originally conceived by Wigstead, Henry William Bunbury (1750-1811) and Job Nixon (1784-1815).

Rowlandson achieved considerable prestige and popularity in the 1780s and his patrons included the Prince of Wales (later George IV). In 1787, however, he abruptly stopped exhibiting at the Royal Academy, perhaps because of the substantial legacy left to him on the death of his aunt. Instead, he spent the following years travelling through Europe and gambling excessively, quickly depleting his fortune. By 1793, he was back in London and poverty-stricken, and was forced to survive on the proceeds of his drawings and prints. Fortunately, in 1797 he was employed by Rudolph Ackermann (1764-1834) who owned a print shop in the Strand, and his works for the next twenty years were mostly produced for Ackermann, featuring some of his most celebrated characters, such as Dr. Syntax.

In 1798, Rowlandson visited Bath with the amateur caricaturist Nixon

<sup>2</sup> Fiona Haslam, *From Hogarth to Rowlandson: Medicine in Art in Eighteenth-century Britain*, Liverpool University Press, 1996, p.180.



Thomas Rowlandson, 'The Pump Room' from *The Comforts of Bath*, 1798, Victoria Art Gallery, Bath (Figure 4)

and published his series *The Comforts of Bath*, satirising all the essential elements of a fashionable person's stay in the city, such as attending balls, gambling and taking the waters. In each print there is always present the figure of the bewigged invalid gentleman, overweight and suffering from gout, which Rowlandson considered the typical visitor to Bath. The scene depicted in *The Pump Room*, see fig. 4, bears many similarities to that of *Taking the Water* (no. 144), the most obviously scornful of the five drawings presented here. In both works, Rowlandson treats his subjects with undisguised mockery, depicting a cross section of fashionable society afflicted with all manner of ailments.



Thomas Rowlandson, *The Parson and the Maid*, Private Collection (Figure 5)

The composition of *Taking the Water* is crowded with men, women and children, of different shapes and sizes, some debauched and careless in appearance and others more image conscious. They have assembled in this countryside location to benefit from the healing properties of the water, which was thought to ease disorders such as melancholia, consumption and gout, and of which the physician George Cheyne wrote: 'I have often observ'd, with admiration, the Wisdom and Goodness of Providence, in furnishing so wonderful an Antidote to almost all the Chronical Distempers of an English Constitution and Climate'.<sup>2</sup> A young woman carries around a tray with glasses, from which the visitors guzzle voraciously. A number of elderly gentlemen with canes in hand and sour expressions on their faces have come to the spa to sooth their afflictions. The exceedingly rotund gentleman sitting on the bench at the right wears slippers to relieve his gout. The women appear generally jovial and enjoy the opportunity to socialise while benefiting from the medicinal effects of the water. Rowlandson revels in the opportunity to depict their light clinging Regency dresses, which although fashionable, are inappropriately revealing and look unbecoming on the older and stockier women.

A recurrent theme in Rowlandson's work is that of physical, economic and sociological contrasts. His drawings often place side by side the elderly and young, rich and poor, ugly and attractive, virile and impotent, drawing attention to the inequalities inherent in human nature and society. These differences are particularly noticeable in *Taking the Water* although they are also alluded to in some of the other works presented here. *Travellers on the Road* (no. 145), which appears to be primarily an impartial narrative image, is overtly class conscious in its depiction of a poor family overtaken on a country path by a gentleman and lady riding their horses. The female rider is noticeably plump, indicating her comfortable lifestyle, in contrast to the mother with her children who labours up the hill. The human pathos is evident in Rowlandson's interpretation of the scene and gives the image a greater significance.

*A Passing Flirtation* (no. 142) is a charming small-scale depiction of a gentleman and a lady trotting by each other on horseback. The lady glances downwards with blushing cheeks as the gentleman turns in his saddle towards her. As is common in Rowlandson's drawings, even those that are not obviously satirical, there is an element of gentle caricature in the modelling of the figures and evident mischief in the indelicate way in which the horse's rear is turned towards the viewer. The drawing provides a refreshing contrast



Thomas Rowlandson, *The Horse Dealer*, Private Collection (Figure 6)



Thomas Rowlandson, *Market Cart*, c.1805, The Courtauld Gallery, London (Figure 7)

to many of the artist's works featuring lascivious elderly men leering at pretty young women, such as *The Parson and the Maid* (fig. 5).

Naturally, horses and wagons frequently feature in Rowlandson's country scenes. With a few dashes and squiggles of the pen and brush, Rowlandson expertly conveys the anatomy and movement of the animals. In drawings such as *The Horse Dealer*, see fig. 6, which is the same size as *A Passing Flirtation*, there is a corresponding immediacy, vitality and naturalness to his depiction of the steeds. His treatment of trees is similar, always quick and economical in his use of line to convey foliage. The extensive landscape in *A Wagon and Horses Passing a Family on a Wayside* (no. 143), clearly sketchy and not intended as a highly finished drawing, exemplifies Rowlandson's vigorous and emphatic draughtsmanship. A more fully worked up watercolour in The Courtauld Gallery, London, *Market Cart*, reveals not only the same basic elements within the composition but also a corresponding hasty and dynamic handling of the trees, animals and figures (fig. 7).

*A Landscape with Monks* (no. 141) also portrays an expansive landscape enlivened by the grouping of figures to the right of the composition. A portly monk, with a distended belly showing beneath his robes, looks unwieldy as he stands at the bottom of the steps leading to the chapel, revealing that not even men of God can escape Rowlandson's sharp wit. In his landscapes, (such as the present one,) Rowlandson owes something to the works of Francis Towne (1739-1816), who similarly outlined landscape elements before filling them in with broad pale washes of colour. The delicate colouring and curvilinear rhythms of Rowlandson's watercolours are evidence of the Rococo influence on his work.

The accessibility of Rowlandson's images and the ease of interpretation that they invite have no doubt contributed to the artist's popularity throughout generations. Ronald Paulson writes, 'for the most part Rowlandson is content with the surface appearance of things, he is easy to live with, calling for no special preparation of mood, his meaning plain and instantaneously conveyed to the observer'.<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt that the facility and devotion with which Rowlandson communicates and caricatures the peculiarities of English scenery and society, and the gusto and vitality with which he records them on paper, have affirmed his significance within the English artistic tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Paulson, *Rowlandson: A New Interpretation*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 13.

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## *Travellers on the Road*

pen and ink with wash over pencil  
15 x 23.5 cm (6 x 9¼ in)

