

A VIEW OF LONDON

Tim Saunders looks at William Hogarth and his pictures of the capital

LONDON of the 18th century was a contrast of great wealth and abject poverty – the rich oblivious to the struggles endured by the masses. Theft, murder and gin drinking, the scourge of the underclass, were rife, and until 1829 there was no police force to prevent crime. Children roamed the heavily polluted, rat-infested streets while prostitutes plied their trade and chamber pots were emptied overhead.

Enter William Hogarth. These were ripe scenes for the artist, who was born in the capital in 1697. He lived in London throughout his life and died there in 1764. The story of everyday life was his to tell; this immoral society needed a moral compass and Hogarth was it.

Often referred to as the Shakespeare of painting, Hogarth's work drew the viewer in and told a story, much in the same way as the great playwright did. He took contemporary everyday life, added a touch of high art and mixed it with humour and satire and in so doing, he taught the viewer valuable moral lessons.

His first 12 years were spent in a debtors' prison with his family because his father's business had



A self portrait of William Hogarth

failed. These straitened circumstances would provide an unforgettable experience of deprivation. But his fortunes changed in 1714, when for seven years he was apprenticed to Ellis Gamble, a silver plate engraver. Hogarth's father died and, with a year still to run, he left his apprenticeship, setting himself up in business as an engraver, no doubt to bring money in to bolster his mother's finances. Rather than simply being a craftsman, though, he wanted to become an artist at a time when foreign painters were hugely popular in Britain.

Finding that engraving on copper was fraught with complication, Hogarth taught himself etching as well and, when combined with engraving, he discovered that there was greater depth to an image because of the variety of hatching and shading. He also learned to paint in St Martin's Lane, paying two foreign artists, John Vanderbank and Louis Cheron, two guineas to teach him.

In the early 1720s, Hogarth produced some engraved illustrations but one of his first independent engravings was a satire, *The Bad Taste of the Town*, also known as *Masquerades and Operas*. This was an important time for Hogarth because he had also started to paint in oils. By 1728 he was sufficiently competent to paint a scene from John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. The theatre fascinated him and he wrote:

"Subjects I considered as Writers do . . . my picture was my stage and men and women my actors who were by means of certain actions and expressions to exhibit a dumb show."

It was the 1730s when Hogarth really cemented his reputation. In 1731 he moved in with Jane, the daughter of the history painter Sir John Thornhill, his teacher, who ran a free academy from his home. Hogarth was a great admirer of Sir John's who was the first English-born painter to receive a knighthood. As is often the way, behind every successful man there is a strong, dependable woman and his marriage was a happy, if childless one. Content with his lot, he set to work on painting *A Harlot's Progress*, which became the first set of Hogarth's contemporary history paintings of modern moral subjects. It shows how the City of London ultimately ruins a naïve country girl with her ending up destroyed. "*A Harlot's Progress* burst on to the London scene just after an official crackdown on prostitution had begun,



Images from *A Harlot's Progress* which tell the tragic story of a naïve country girl "M" destroyed by the City of London. Clockwise from top left: Plate 1 shows her arriving; Plate 3 is the Tavern Scene; Plate 5 "M" is dying of syphilis; and Plate 6, she is in her coffin at the end of her short life

focused specifically on Covent Garden," according to a recent exhibition at the Tate.

Realising that selling paintings would not generate enough income he produced an engraving of this painting and sold it by subscription. This generated a substantial £1,200. To put this in perspective, Hogarth's friend, the writer Henry Fielding, received just £700 for his comic novel, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*. Fielding's 1732 play, *The Covent Garden Tragedy*, was in part inspired by Hogarth's *Harlot*. The story behind *A Harlot's Progress* was published in a pamphlet of verse and four editions of these sold out in only 17 days, which was testament to its popularity. But unscrupulous publishers had resulted in Hogarth earning less from the prints of the Harlot than he had forecast, which is why he delayed the release of engravings of *A Rake's Progress* until his Engravers'

Copyright Act, for which he had campaigned, was passed in 1735. He fought for his rights and the older he got, the more obstinate he became.

His 1747 series of engravings *Industry and Idleness* show a city of aspiration and opportunity beyond the wildest dreams of villagers. But there is an undertone of danger. While wages were greater in London, life expectancy was lower than elsewhere, not helped by alcohol consumption. In his two works of 1751, *Beer Street* and *Gin Lane*, he contrasts two much-loved beverages. Beer was perceived as healthy and part of the English character, while gin was a major problem for the working classes. So much so that in 1751 an act was passed curbing its production.

To Hogarth, London was the gift that kept on giving. In *The March to Finchley* (1746) there is a crowded scene of drunkenness and promiscuity in north London, set at a time of

Jacobite success where a soldier is flanked by two pregnant women.

The general election campaign provided Hogarth with yet more material for his series of four paintings in 1754. In one, a member of parliament is carried through the streets. This political painting, full of humour, illustrates the corruption that was rife at the time – some things never change, you might think.

Former Tate Britain curator and Hogarth champion, Elizabeth Einberg reveals how in 1755 the paintings of *A Harlot's Progress* were destroyed in a fire at William Beckford's Elizabethan mansion at Fonthill, Wiltshire. In her book *William Hogarth: A Complete Catalogue of Paintings*, the senior research fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art shows the relaxed, humorous side of Hogarth, even in the most distressing of times. From his writings she quotes that he was "more taken with reports



Marriage-A-La-Mode was not appreciated by his clientele



The relative civility of Beer Street . . .



. . . versus the debauchery of Gin Lane

> that [Fonthill's] magnificent clockwork organ, set off by the heat, played pleasing airs throughout the conflagration". A smile is raised at this humorous scene rather than dwelling on the depressing loss of his precious paintings. At least the ones forming *A Rake's Progress* were rescued from the same fire.

Eight paintings formed *A Rake's Progress* (1734) with lead character Tom Rakewell frittering away his inheritance while surrounded by loose women. While painting these, Hogarth produced murals for the staircase of St Bartholomew's Hospital, in an area of London that he knew well, the *Pool of Bethesda* and *The Good Samaritan*.

Wishing to succeed at religious decorative painting, he did not charge for these commissions, which helped him secure them over Italian painter, Jacopo Amigoni (1682-1752) whose sumptuous portraits were much in demand. Although Hogarth produced more of this type of work, he did not feel at ease doing so.

Rather than painting a single picture, Hogarth produced a whole series around a theme, allowing him to thoroughly explore a subject while at the same time maximising the opportunity for sales.

With an eye on his accounts he dabbled in portraiture, which before too long he referred to as "face

painting" and decided that he was not well suited to the routine and neither was he "sufficiently paid".

Nevertheless, he was very good at it. Miss Mary Edwards, believed to be the wealthiest woman in Georgian Britain, commissioned Hogarth to produce several works. His 1742 painting of his patron shows her patting her spaniel, her jewellery and her rich, ruffled red dress, all expertly handled and reproduced with extraordinary detail. The same is true of his portrait of the impressive figure of Benjamin Hoadly, Bishop of Winchester, who loved luxury and is shown enrobed in finery as Chancellor of the Garter.

But Hogarth's subject matter sometimes let him down. *Marriage-A-La-Mode* (1743), a satire on the marriage of convenience, was less successful, perhaps because it attacked the very people who could afford to buy his work. That same year, he decided to sell some work at auction as a way of proving that his pictures were in as much demand as the Old Masters but this attempt left him disappointed.

Still, it was a rare disappointment in a rich life. Hogarth died of a ruptured artery in October 1764 and is buried near his home in Chiswick, with his close friend David Garrick's inscription, "Farewell, great painter of mankind who reached the noblest point of art", on his grave.



Hogarth's House in Chiswick, which is now a museum