

Queen's Gallery Exhibition opens today – High Spirits



A new exhibition of work by one of the wittiest and most popular caricaturists of Georgian Britain opens at The Queen's Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse today.

High Spirits: The Comic Art of Thomas Rowlandson presents over 90 prints by Rowlandson (1757–1827), many of which have not been shown in Scotland before. The artist's work satirises life at the turn of the 19th century – the absurdities of fashion, the perils of love, political scandal and royal intrigue – and offers a new perspective on an era perhaps best known through the novels of Jane Austen.

Rowlandson made his name poking fun at politicians, foreign enemies and even members of the royal family, who both feared and admired his incisive wit. George III (1738–1820) and his family were favourite targets of the many caricaturists of the day. The apparent miserliness of the King and his consort, Queen Charlotte, and the supposed corruption of their son, Frederick, Duke of York, were popular subject-matter. Above all, it was the extravagance and immoral lifestyle of George, Prince of Wales (1762–1830) that came in for the harshest treatment. Yet, despite often finding himself the butt of the joke, it was the Prince of Wales, the future George IV, who began the collection of around 1,000 Rowlandson prints in the Royal Collection today.

Satirical prints, the precursor of the newspaper cartoon, were a key part of life in Georgian Britain. Collected by fashionable society, they were also enjoyed by the crowds that gathered in front of the latest productions in print shop windows to gossip about and laugh at the scandals of the day.

Favourite themes were drunken gatherings, runaway coaches, rowdy theatregoers, impoverished artists and 'loose' women.

Caricatures were passed around at dinner parties and in coffee houses, pasted into albums and used to decorate walls in homes and coffee houses. They were even applied to decorative screens, which could easily be folded away so not to offend female guests with the often bawdy imagery. A folding screen dating from 1806-7, decorated with hundreds of figures and scenes painstakingly cut from Rowlandson's satirical prints, has been conserved for the exhibition and goes on public display for the first time.

Few of the leading political and society figures of the day escaped Rowlandson's attention. Among the works on display are depictions of the glamorous Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, who was claimed to have traded kisses for votes in elections, and the politicians William Pitt and Charles James Fox, alternately championed and satirised. In 1784 Rowlandson produced both the pro-Fox print, *The Champion of the People*, and the anti-Fox print, *The Covent Garden Night Mare*, and was quite happy to work for whichever side would pay him more.

Kate Heard, Senior Curator of Prints and Drawings at Royal Collection Trust said:- 'Satirical prints were powerful tools for influencing public opinion, and it is understandable they were both disliked and admired by their targets. The superlative collection of works by Rowlandson in the Royal Collection shows that the Georgian royal family was just as able to laugh at caricatures as be offended by them.'

The exhibition includes a video animation of Rowlandson's caricatures, narrated by the actor Brian Blessed. The prints by Rowlandson in the Royal Collection can be enjoyed on the Royal Collection Trust [website](#).

High Spirits: The Comic Art of Thomas Rowlandson is at The Queen's Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse, 22 November 2013 – 2

March 2014.

Tickets and visitor information, T +44 (0)131 556 5100.