Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Printed Images in Early Modern Britain: Essays in Interpretation

Review Number:
978
Publish date:
Friday, 1 October, 2010
Editor:
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ISBN:
9780754666547
Date of Publication:
2010
Price:
£65.00
Pages:
372pp.
Publisher:
Ashgate
Place of Publication:
Farnham
Reviewer:
Joseph Monteyne

In recent years Ashgate Publishing has become one of the most dominant forces in the field of early modern studies, and the recent appearance of the impressive volume edited by Michael Hunter of Birkbeck College entitled *Printed Images in Early Modern Britain: Essays in Interpretation* (2010) is a case in point. This is a lengthy volume of 16 essays and an introduction, all lavishly illustrated with high quality reproductions, with contributors drawn primarily from the disciplines of art history, English literature, and history. The volume should be well received across these, and other, disciplinary boundaries. The collection?s genesis occurred as a result of two conferences in 2007 and 2008 at Birkbeck and the Victoria and Albert Museum respectively, conferences brought to fruition with the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project *British Printed Images to 1700*, the latter itself an indispensable resource for the study of early modern print culture. Despite its length and breadth, spanning the 16th?17th centuries and nudging into the early 1700s, *Printed Images in Early Modern Britain* is a cohesive and stimulating collection, and it makes a significant intervention into the burgeoning field of published studies of the print culture of early modern Britain. Until quite recently the printed objects originating in England during the 16th and especially the 17th centuries were neglected in comparison with texts from the same era and, as Hunter is right to point out in his introduction ?the object of this book is to help rectify this state of affairs by offering a conspectus of the kind of interpretive work that such images invite? (p. 1). Furthermore Hunter has been careful to acknowledge that, regardless of the fact that many producers of printed visual objects working in England

were foreigners, they were producing for a local market and so he has shaped the volume to reveal ?a distinctiveness to the British tradition? that ?helps justify its terms of reference, notwithstanding the broader European context to which these artists also responded? (p. 7).

The essays themselves represent a diverse range of approaches to printed images both high and low, ranging from book frontispieces and illustrations to portrait engravings, mezzotints, political broadsides and ballads. All the essays are meticulously researched and crafted, and they read exceptionally well. The structure of the contents seems logical, and Hunter has clearly given much thought to the organization of the book into a series of theme related sections, from printed images related to religion and the Reformation, followed by the visual culture of science, the printed image?s engagement with political issues, and, lastly, a section including essays dealing with aspects of market practice and consumerism.

I feel it is worth addressing the essays in these sections briefly, since they represent a great diversity in both methodological approach and subject matter. Margaret Aston?s, ?Symbols of conversion: proprieties of the page in Reformation England? is an intriguing essay that tracks the appearance of the tetragrammaton into the Reformation print culture of 16th?17th-century Britain, and raises debates about the representation of God in human form. Her discussion ranges across a number of intriguing visual examples from the reign of Henry VIII and concludes with an analysis of the 1641 frontispiece of John Foxe?s *Actes and Monuments*, incorporating as well a comparison to another more problematic textual symbol appearing in printed images at this time, the ?IHS? adopted by the Roman Catholic Society of Jesus. Although print culture seems primarily book culture in this essay, Aston concludes that in the Reformation debate about symbols and figures ?it is plain that printed images made their own contribution to contemporary controversy? (p. 38). In ?Censorship and self-censorship in late sixteenth-century book illustration? Richard Williams provides a valuable study of restriction and editing. He smartly moves away from high profile and obvious cases of suppression to suggest ways in which authors, printers, and publishers may have internalized the fear of censorship to the point that they self consciously sought out inventive ways of avoiding official sanction. What is particularly strong about this selection is that it demonstrates how Protestant identities were emerging and changing in 16th-century England as a result of politics and anti-Catholicism, as well as broader forces of religious and social change, and how one can track this through a careful analysis of the era?s print culture. Tara Hamling, in the next selection entitled ?Guides to godliness: from print to plaster?, focuses on the fascinating link between printed images in Protestant devotional literature and early modern domestic decorative art. This study delineates suggestively how a desire to purify religious practice and ward off the evils of idolatry actually led English Protestants to create a new type of religious imagery instead of abolishing it entirely. While it is common, as the author herself states, to search for and locate borrowings in decorative art from printed sources, what is different about this essay is the way it moves beyond questions of working practice and method in order to embed this borrowing ?in relation to the ideology of the patron and the belief systems of the intended audience? (p. 71). This is done, for example, by focusing on how the fashion for large plasterwork overmantels containing religious scenes, derived from printed images, dovetailed with the function of religious practice within the home. Closing out the section on religion and the Reformation is Alexandra Walsham?s ??Like fragments of a shipwreck?: printed images and religious antiquarianism in early modern England?. Through a close reading of text and context Walsham does an excellent job of reappraising the meaning of Dugdale?s use of images of religious structures and ruins. The essay shows how the difficult balance between a desire to suppress the popery of the pre-Reformation church in England and a growing interest in antiquarian research propelled the emergence of a specific type of pictorial imagery in printed form. The author rightly argues that images are active agents, working to erase the memory of defilement at the same time as they contribute to a process of rehabilitation desired by Anglicans. Images attempt to pictorially repossess spaces at one time desecrated, and under perceived threat again at the hands of Puritan iconoclasts. I particularly appreciate Walsham?s attempts to demonstrate that Protestant efforts to eradicate idolatry ironically led to new forms of pictorial representation.

Opening the subsequent section on printed images in science and cartography is Lori Anne Ferrell?s ?Page *techne*: interpreting diagrams in early modern English ?how-to? books?. This is also a strong essay that explores the increasing presence of diagrams in printed books of the 16th?17th centuries, and how such

graphics gave a certain look to printed forms ? as the author states, ?orderly, verifiable, demonstrable? (p. 114). This material has been much overlooked by historians of the visual culture of this period. The essay?s strengths are that it reveals how practitioners of early modern science in Britain were as suspicious of images as religious reformers were, and how printed images could be culled from books and take on an independent life of their own. As Ferrell implies, knowledge production began, but did not end, with book learning. The latter is particularly suggestive since the author smartly connects prints to social practice, for example, Ferrell argues that diagrams in how-to books generated ?the palpable pleasures of kinetic manipulation?, remaking ?pages of books into agents of instrumentation? (p. 116). The importance of Katherine Acheson?s contribution to this volume ?Gesner, Topsell and the purposes of pictures in early modern natural histories?, is that through her focus on zoological images she works across the boundaries of popular and scientific works, thereby questioning the veracity of animal illustrations and their use as components of new scientific knowledge. She tracks the migration of images from Conrad Gesner?s natural history *Historiae animalium* (1551?8) to Edward Topsell?s moralizing work based in the medieval bestiary tradition, *The Historie of Foure-footed Beastes* (1607), and draws out the important point that ?illustration itself has a use-value, separate from the use-value of the thing that is illustrated? (p. 135). One such use, as she shows, is the copying of images in other works of natural history and source books for the decorative arts. Even though the images are not scientifically accurate they are ?evocative and iconic? (p. 136), that is, they provide a template for reproduction more than they complement or supplement the information in the books they are paired with. This reviewer especially appreciates how Acheson grapples with the differences between verbal and visual representations.

A welcome shift occurs in the text at this moment away from primarily printed images drawn from books toward single sheet etchings and maps. Well crafted and carefully researched, Simon Turner?s ?Hollar?s prospects and maps of London? delineates how the Bohemian artist in 17th-century London produced a variety of images making clear the size and complexity of the city, providing ?a visual chronicle of the capital in the mid century? (p. 146). Turner reveals both the ambition and the magnitude of the projects Hollar chose to bring to fruition, and even some he aspired to produce but never could for lack of patronage. It is important to note, as the author does, that Hollar worked for ?virtually every significant publisher? (p. 157) in the city who issued prints and maps, and that his records of different aspects of the old St. Paul?s Cathedral are critically important historical documents, ?constituting the main record for the appearance of the now vanished building? (p. 150). Turner provides many fascinating details and facts, especially about Hollar?s interaction with John Ogilby and Robert Hooke, and ultimately situates the etcher and draughtsman?s post-Great Fire production in the context of a transformation that witnessed traditional pictorial maps becoming ?functional diagrams owing to increasingly accurate surveying techniques? (p. 162). Closing out the second section of the book is quite likely the most adventurous and theoretically challenging selection of this volume. Matthew Hunter?s ?The theory of the impression according to Robert Hooke? ranges across the characters of Vincent Laurensz van der Linne, Robert Hooke, Alexander Browne, and John Evelyn. He shows that theoretical and practical concerns about visual representation were central to the debates occurring in the Royal Society, and employs the suggestive analytical tools of the ?syntactical? and ?semantic? problems of the impression. The former refers to the desire by experimentalists that a printed image would contain the ?relevant, intended markings? whereas the latter relates to the wish of having an image bear a strong relation to its ?real-world targets? (p. 170). Hunter?s discussion of Robert Hooke is particularly invigorating in this essay, and he shows how the ?agency of print? was central to Hooke?s ?theory of the impression?, and how it shaped ?experimental vision and imagination? (p. 177). Hooke thematized ?the liabilities of the impression as a condition inherent to print-making itself? (p. 178).

The third section of *Printed images in early modern Britain: essays in interpretation* is framed by the printed image?s engagement with political affairs and personages. The essay by Malcolm Jones, ?*The Common-weales canker wormes, or the locuts bth of church, and states:* emblematic identities in a late Jacobean print? is a fantastic read ? engagingly written, rigidly historical, and laced with a sense of humor. The piece shows just how complex these early modern English prints can be, and how worthwhile it is to do the painstaking work of taking them apart piece by piece. Jones reveals the multitudinous meanings that viewers could encounter in a single sheet print replete with figures and banderoles, visual emblems and

mottos, and social types that upon closer examination reveal themselves to be particular individuals, such as the popish plotter Henry Garnet and the Count of Gondomar. Shifting tack slightly, Alastair Bellany in ?Buckingham engraved: politics, print images, and the royal favorite in the 1620s? follows Jones?s selection. Bellany?s aim is to explore the intense politicization of representations of the Duke of Buckingham during the twelve years he was court favorite and after his murder in 1628 by John Felton. Bellany asks excellent questions of his material, and deploys sophisticated methodology in order to approach his printed images ?from multiple interlinked perspectives?, as ?forms of political media?, places of the Duke?s own ?self-fashioning and self-presentation?, and finally ?as mechanisms for the constantly contested representation and construction of political, social and moral authority? (p. 217). The author spends much time in analysis of Willem de Passe?s equestrian portrait of the Duke from around 1625 as ?a representation and defence of Buckingham?s authority?, but then nicely reads this against ?a skeptical current of libelous critique?, including a lost image showing a figure meant to be the Duke riding on the back of grotesque elderly woman (p. 228).

Bellany cites the work of Helen Peirce in his aspiration to situate himself in the new political-cultural history of early modern Britain, and so it is a logical segue to the work of this very scholar with the next essay in the volume, her ?The devil?s bloodhound: Roger L?Estrange caricatured?. Pierce?s essay is a skilled analysis of the meeting of ribald ritual and imagery with high politics and crisis. Taking as her subject the transformation of Charles II?s licenser of the press Sir Roger L?Estrange into the dog Towzer, the author then weaves this into a larger history of grotesque, carnivalesque, meldings of human and animal form in the graphic satires emerging from the presses of 17th-century London. Pierce works to invert traditional hierarchies of text and image, in which the latter is usually seen as inferior to the former, by showing how a printed image provided the impetus for a multitude of texts. Here, as in other works by this author, she masterfully reveals the influence of the pictorial upon forms of polemic during a vibrant moment of political discourse and publication. While Pierce is concerned with keeping practices of print closely aligned with political rituals Justin Champion, in the volume?s next selection entitled ?Decoding the *Leviathan*: doing the history of ideas through images 1651?1700? seeks to re-appraise the politics of religion in 17th-18th-century England though an analysis of persistent symbols in the visual culture of the time. Champion views the illustrated title-page to Thomas Hobbes?s *Leviathan* (1651) as ?the most powerful fusillade? in an attack on the structure of the Anglican Church (p. 256). The image both drew on and altered common symbols (swords, crosiers, mitres, etc) in order ?to suggest a unambiguous resolution to the destructive conflict between church and state? (p. 256). While reading the title-page is, as Champion acknowledges, ?a minor scholarly industry? (p. 259), he is able to make an intervention into this crowded field by presenting a convincing argument about how visual sources and their repetitions suggest that the realm of images was important in generating significant and persistent public debate about the ?jurisdictional and spiritual power of the church?, its role in civil war, and the intolerance or persecution enacted by its clerics (p. 259). Particularly enjoyable is Champion?s shift in attention away from the Leviathan figure to his accompanying attributes.

With the fourth and final section of this volume of collected essays both Ben Thomas?s ?Noble or commercial? The early history of mezzotint in Britain? and David Alexander?s ?Faithorne, Loggan, Vandrebank and White: the engraved portrait in late seventeenth-century Britain? present some of the more traditional art historical research in comparison with the other essays. Thomas? essay, dealing with the early history of the mezzotint in Britain, is supported by outstanding historical and archival research linking graphic culture to scholarly discussions about the mechanical arts and the inductive or experimental methods of early natural history. The discussion of the concerns of *virtuosi*, especially John Evelyn, over mezzotint?s commercial exploitation and ?vulgarization? is particularly strong ? the author reveals that Evelyn viewed the techniques of creating printed images as being closer to the liberal arts than the mechanical, and this in fact would be in opposition to the more analytical and scientific approach to print media based on technique. For example, Evelyn desired to place the new tonal method of printmaking ?into an intellectual paradigm with its own established concerns and categories?. Mezzotint?s status as foreign, secret, even exotic, contributed to ?the difficulty of categorizing it within the scheme of more established arts and trades? (p. 282). Evelyn?s fear of the corruption of this art by market forces is also germane to Alexander?s essay, in

which he demonstrates that, after 1660, ?the production of prints, as much as books, was increasingly market-led? (p. 297). Alexander deftly employs the tools of an art historian in confirming attribution of prints, providing convincing production dates, and compiling the *catalogue raisonée*. The essay shows how mezzotint production propelled an expansion in the print market, contributing to the overall success of printed portraits and generating an interest in the beauty of the relatively novel technique. Alexander makes a puzzling distinction, however, between ?fine prints? and ?images? (p. 300) that demands more explanation. It seems to be based on the dichotomy of contemplation versus use, but in a book with ?images? in the very title this becomes somewhat unworkable because many of the other essays argue that contemplation of an image and its use in social practice or ritual are not mutually exclusive facets.

The penultimate selection by Gill Saunders, entitled ??Paper Tapistry? and ?Wooden Pictures?: printed decoration in the domestic interior before 1700? represents an excellent discussion of a little studied aspect of the print culture of early modern Britain. Saunders employs in depth discussion of sources and examination of surviving objects to assemble a skillful critique of the argument that surviving patterns of wallpaper designs should be seen solely in the context of designs for embroidery patterns. The author shows in fact that wallpapers were produced that mimicked a number of different materials from woven tapestry to marble and even moulded plasterwork. Consumer interest in these prints was based on their imitative powers, not as sources of patterns for embroiderers, they were ?a means of achieving the effect of walls hung with tapestry or lined with marble but doing so much more cheaply? (p. 324). Lastly, Angela McShane and Clare Backhouse?s ?Top knots and lower sorts: print and promiscuous consumption in the 1690s? represents a cooperative effort between an historian of popular print and an expert in dress history. This is a fruitful collaboration that has produced an excellent essay structured around a series of broadside ballads addressing the ?top-knot?, a style of headdress used by women at the time. The essay discusses cheaper forms of print and includes a welcome reappraisal of the popular and its hierarchical association with the low. It includes a suggestive discussion of audience and gender, including the incorporation of divergent readership/viewership within the printed sheets themselves. The authors clearly want to open up the possibility that popular broadsides were in fact intended for the lower or middling classes. Unlike genre paintings that present either a negative or positive stereotype of the lower orders for an elite audience, these illustrated ballads actually spoke directly to a consuming class that was also the subject of the representations. Through their focus on ballad images the authors conclude by pointing to the ubiquitous and rich visual vocabularies enveloping the people of early modern Britain. This they characterize as ?a visual archive that will amply repay careful enquiry? (p. 352). This is the last sentence in the book, and it is also a fitting summary of the collection as a whole.

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