THE DOMESTIC MUSEUM:
ART PRINTS AND FASHIONABLE CURATION IN THE VICTORIAN HOME

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NAVSA/BAVS 2013

Given our seminar's concerns with the dissemination of knowledge through objects in Victorian domestic space, this paper attempts to answer the question of whether and which prints of paintings were likely to be on display in middle-class Victorian homes. What images did Victorians live alongside? How were these images made and circulated, and why some over others? This paper begins to answer those questions, and hopefully, our collective knowledge of the period's material history can build upon it.

Information about printmaking and print distribution is surprisingly hard to come by, as art historians tend to focus on original works rather than the commercially, technologically, and socially complex culture of reproductions. Intriguingly, the Victorian era is the golden age of the pre-photographic reproduction. As historian Martha Tedeschi notes, in William Hogarth's time, "twelve printselling shops conducted business in London. By 1839, there were recorded seventy-two printsellers and publishers in operation" and approximately 125 by the 1880's (17). This rising culture of reproduction began to influence the creation of original artwork, rather than the other way around, as increasingly wealthy publishers and printsellers started to commission paintings specifically for reproduction. Painters such as Holman Hunt, Landseer, and Millais were favored for their ability to tailor their creativity to the technology of the engraving and mezzotint. Several London gallerists and artists began to worry about how art culture and the market for original paintings would be affected by the increasing availability of inexpensive prints often made from low-grade engravings of original paintings. In 1847, they founded the Printsellers Association, which began to pressure printsellers to register all engraving plates with the Association, to receive its seal of approval regarding the quality of the reproduction. According to Tedeschi, "Between 1847 and 1894, 4,823 plates had been registered with the Printsellers Association," most of which would have been used to make some 30,000 impressions, meaning the number of prints in circulation was into the millions (17). The reproduction marker eventually became lucrative for painters and engravers as well as publishers, as painters had the right to sell their canvases and the corresponding copyrights as separate entities.[1] One of the first prints to gain a kind of blockbuster popularity was Frederick Stacpoole's engraving of William Holman Hunt's *Shadow of Death* (fig. 1A, 1B). Hunt sold the engraving rights for £10,500, approximately half of the total profits from the sale of the engraving proofs, and certainly a much smaller fraction of total sales of the many prints.

[1] Millais, for example, derived the majority of his impressive annual income of £25,000-40,000 to copyright sales. Even the artistic status of engraving was elevated in 1855, when the Royal Academy reconsidered its ban on engravers and admitted Samuel Cousins, a master of the mezzotint process, in 1855.

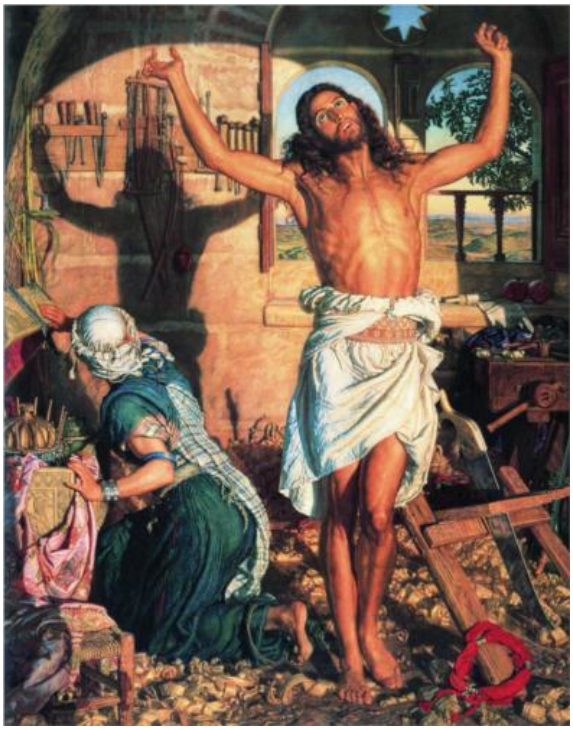

Figure 1A: Holman Hunt's *The Shadow of Death*
http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/william-holman-hunt/the-shadow-of-death

Figure 1B: Stacpoole's *The Shadow of Death*, after Holman Hunt
http://www.grosvenorprints.com/stock.php?ref=7053&search=ref&WADbSearch1=go

As the technology for the large-scale reproduction of paintings evolved, social critics wondered about the moral and economic significance of exposing the working and middle classes to fine art. The Parliamentarian Thomas Wyse was at the forefront of a campaign for the dissemination of affordable reproductions. In the 1830's, a House of Commons Select Committee was formed to investigate strategies for supporting English artists and developing the nation's art culture. The committee heard from Gustave Frederick Waagen, director of the Berlin Royal Academy and a proponent of the "art unions" that had originated in Switzerland around 1800 and caught on in some twenty German principalities by the early 1830's. Roger Smith explains the concept in his essay, "The Rise and Fall of the Art Union Print":

> Essentially, art unions were simple lotteries, though instead of the more usual prizes offered, the lucky winners were awarded contemporary works of art. An annual ballot was held when subscribers' tickets were placed into a drum and the winners' names drawn from it. Prizewinners were either allotted a specific work of art – a bronze or parian statuette or painting – or else the right to select a work of their own choice" from galleries and institutions such as The Royal Academy, the British Institution, the Society of British Artists, the Society of Painters in Water-Colour (96).

The idea caught on among several Parliamentarians and allies interested in promoting art culture. The art historian Joy Sperling notes the justification for art unions extended to economic and imperial motives: "As the 1835 Select Committee suggested, a visually educated workforce could improve British design and enable England to compete more successfully in international manufacturing."

The first art union established in Britain was the Liverpool Art Union, founded in 1854, followed by a similar institution in Edinburgh the same year and the Art Union of London (AUL), eventually the largest art union in Britain, in 1837. Initially, the one-guinea AUL subscription entitled subscribers to a ticket in its yearly lottery for original artworks. Given its immediate popularity, the AUL directed its increased revenue to annually commissioned engravings, which would be circulated among all subscribers. Planned commissions were announced to the public in advance of print circulation, in order to raise the subscription revenue that would fund the upcoming year's prize lottery and commissioned engraving.

Because art unions maintained a goal of popularity in order to survive, the prints they distributed can, to a certain degree, be seen as representative of common taste – or at least of their own estimation of common taste. "If it is possible for anything to be described as 'typically Victorian,' reasons Richard Smith, "then the art unions and their engravings do qualify for that epithet" (106). Even though the prints were selected by the AUL, they are a measure of public interest in certain paintings in two ways: the public could choose whether or not to subscribe to the AUL in a given year, based on the print that would be distributed to subscribers that year. In an attempt to encourage the participation of its subscribers, the AUL selected its annual engraving from paintings chosen by the lottery prizewinners each year. Often, the prizewinners' selections did not rise to artistic or moral standards of the AUL committee members, but they chose from among these selections anyway (at least in the organization's early years), in honor of its subscription base. By fortunate chance, one of the lottery prizes of 1838 went to AUL committee member Benjamin Bond Cabbell, whose chosen painting was selected as the AUL's first commissioned engraving (fig. 2).

Figure 2: William Giller's *A Camaldolese Monk Shewing the Relics In the Sacristy of his Convent at Rome*, after William Simson

William Simson's *A Camaldolese Monk Shewing the Relics In the Sacristy of his Convent at Rome* is a curious choice on several fronts. As the work of a Scottish artist, it represents the AUL's commitment to supporting and promoting contemporary British artists, while suggesting a certain fascination with the foreign exoticism of its Italian setting and Catholic content. The painting's title and subject matter correspond to the mission on the AUL, as stated in its Prospectus:

> To cultivate and extend a love of the Fine Arts and to give encouragement to artists beyond that at present offered by individual amateurs.

Although this Prospectus does not include a pedagogical mission, records of AUL board meetings show the directors were concerned with the didactic power of art as a tool of moral and imaginative formation. The organization's Honorary Secretary, George Goodwin, referred to the

subscription prints as "Silent teachers" that "speedily find their way into the humblest dwellings, to make homes more attractive, raise the character of their occupants and in time perhaps, incite to exercise a latent genius fitted to administer to the improvement of a nation" (Annual Report of the Art Union of London, 1843, p. 4; Smith 104).

The monk at the center of Simson's painting fulfills a mediatory role not unlike that of the AUL: he presents material remainders meant to stand in for something hallowed and inaccessible which, like the AUL's prints, have been distributed widely so the masses might encounter the sanctifying powers of the original. In the picture, a painting of the Virgin Mary crowns the reliquary as part of the hallowed altar on which the saint's bones rest, suggesting the iconographic history of art – the painting as a source of heavenly instruction and wisdom, a portal to the divine. People of all ages and social standing kneel before the altar: a young child beside an elderly woman, a noblewoman in ornamental dress on the same level as a common man in rustic garb. Formally, the composition is organized along a diagonal line that cuts it in half, establishing a formal hierarchy among its figures. After the long, tapered candle illuminating it, the painting within the painting assumes the highest point, then the monk, its interpreter; finally, the laypeople half his size as they kneel at his feet. The titular relics are so marginal to the scene that they are partially cut out of its frame. Art is the highest authority. Rather than a study of relics, this painting portrays their imaginative power as instruments of social cohesion and pious affection. Considering the usual delay between an engraving's commission and its distribution, AUL subscribers probably received prints of William Giller's mezzotint engraving of the work sometime in 1840. Recognizing the disappointment these delays caused among subscribers, the AUL decided it would no longer select the annual engraving from among the paintings chosen by its prizewinners and formed a selection committee from among its board of directors.[2]

The popularity of the Art Union prints is illustrated by printsellers' opposition to their subscription and distribution program. In 1843, publishers and printsellers called into question the legality of all art unions by jointly publishing an open letter in the *Morning Herald* which invoked a generally disregarded 1826 act of Parliament in which all lotteries had been banned. The letter warned the public that art union subscription was liable to a fine of up to twenty pounds (Smith 101-02). The AUL countered with another open letter, reasoning the legality of their operation. The debate attracted enough participants on each side that Parliament formed a Select Committee to address the legal issues raised, which ultimately led to the Art Union Act of 1846, which officially legalized all art unions by removing them from the jurisdiction of the Lottery Acts (Smith 102).

The most popular print issued by the AUL was that of C.W. Sharp's engraving of W.P. Frith's *Ramsgate Sands (Life at the Seaside)* (fig. 3).

[2] In light our of interests in Italian and specifically Venetian influence on English art culture: of the 88 engravings used for AUL prints, at least 9 are set in Italy, one of which (Willmore's 1856 engraving of a Turner painting), is a waterscape of Venice. A complete list of the AUL's annually commissioned engravings is included as an appendix to Richard Smith's article, "The Rise and Fall of the Art Union Print."

Figure 3A: William Frith's *Ramsgate Sands (Life at the Seaside)*
http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/frith/paintings/4.html

Figure 3B: C.W. Sharp's, *Ramsgate Sands (Life at the Seaside),* after W. Frith
http://www.oldprints.com/images/rest-bwlargeengraving2.jpg

Upon its announcement of Frith's painting as its next engraving commission, the AUL brought in £15,210 in subscriptions, an approximately £3,500 increase from subscription revenue of the previous year (for no less a draw than Turner's 1856 "Venice"). The majority of the AUL paintings selected for engraving were of English landscapes or scenes from history or literature. Most human figures were mythic or military heroes, and the commoners who infrequently populate these pictures are few in number and usually set in an idyllic pastoral landscape or a romanticized past. Frith's panoramically wide swath of the Victorian public at mid-century is unprecedented. Twenty years before French Impressionists such as Renoir and Caillebotte indulged in scenes of urban leisure, Frith foregrounds a harmonious collision of all ages,

genders, classes, and even ethnicities at play. The city with its classically civic monuments of obelisk, pantheon, barbican, marketplace, and many crosses is mere background to the carnival of "Life" that becomes the painting's real subject, as "Ramsgate" and "the Seaside" are consigned to the margins. Our seminar might inquire what kinds of thinking and what kinds of teaching this intricately detailed picture enacts.[3] Its use of color (or, in the case of its engraving, of shade) re-emphasizes its compositional attention to the group of mostly middle-class individuals so idiosyncratically rendered they can hardly be called a crowd. The flat pastels of the city's infrastructure give way to the sharp lines and vivid colors of each person spotlit by the sun. If a print of this picture were hung on a parlor wall, it would certainly stand in contrast to less popular AUL prints of collective life: various battle scenes populated by legions of indistinguishable faces, or F. Goodall's *Raising the Maypole*, (fig. 4) distributed three years after *Ramsgate Sands*, whose citizens are less distinct in countenance, activity, and orientation. What does Frith's scene suggest about the life of the individual within the collectives of city and family? Frith's own words, scribbled in a notebook during his first holiday in Ramsgate in 1851, suggest the lesson that there are moments when the aesthetic composition – the unconsciously achieved upshot of pleasure and idleness – is at least as valuable as the civic collective:

> "The variety of character on Ramsgate Sands attracted me - all sorts and conditions of men and women were to be found there. Pretty groups of ladies ... reading, idling, working and unconsciously forming themselves into very paintable compositions."

Just as we might ask what it means about our cultural moment that certain images over others become ubiquitous (how many umbrellas, mouse pads, and coffee mugs shape to their purposes the British war-time propagandistic injunction to "Keep Calm," or a flattened image of Van Gogh's "Starry Night"?). How do these prints in particular fit into the discourse of objects in the Victorian home?

[3] The magnify-able image of the painting on the website of the Royal Collection allows a sense of how its many various parts relate to the whole: http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/eGallery/object.asp?theme=CHILDHOOD&object=405068&row=0&detail=magnify

Figure 4: Frederick Goodall's *Raising the Maypole*
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/90/Frederick_Goodall_Raising_the_Maypole.jpg

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