

# A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: Understanding the Past through 18<sup>th</sup> Century Prints

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**A**s a print curator, I naturally use period graphics to help me to better understand the past.<sup>1</sup> Prints offer the visual detail to record color and pattern, context, and use of objects—information that can't be found in other documents from the period. In the eighteenth century, prints were more than decorative hangings; they offered insight into fashion, consumer trends, social customs, and taste. In a time before photography, television, and the internet, engravings were the primary source for reproducing and distributing visual information, giving viewers access to people, places, and things from near and far as well as to contemporary and historical events only read about or imagined.

Today, engravings complement written records such as probate inventories. Inventories provide insight into a property owner's taste and document what household goods (such as furniture, textiles, paintings, ceramics and metals) were owned. But while they contain useful and detailed information about the size, type, and material of an object, they fail to include descriptions that tell us how and where to use these personal possessions. In the instance of this late eighteenth-century print (fig. 1), the inventory excluded the wallpaper and carpet, arguably the most elaborate furnishings in the room.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1 *The Lover's Disguise*, published by Carington Bowles, London, 1792, black-and-white mezzotint engraving with period hand color.

Because of this, we rely on prints to provide us with a visual link to our material past. What did a package look like in the eighteenth century? A 1775 engraving by John Collier (fig. 2) shows how parcels were wrapped and prepared for mailing. Although the intent of the print was to characterize human passion, it serves a dual purpose of illustrating a common task not likely to be described in written materials from the period.

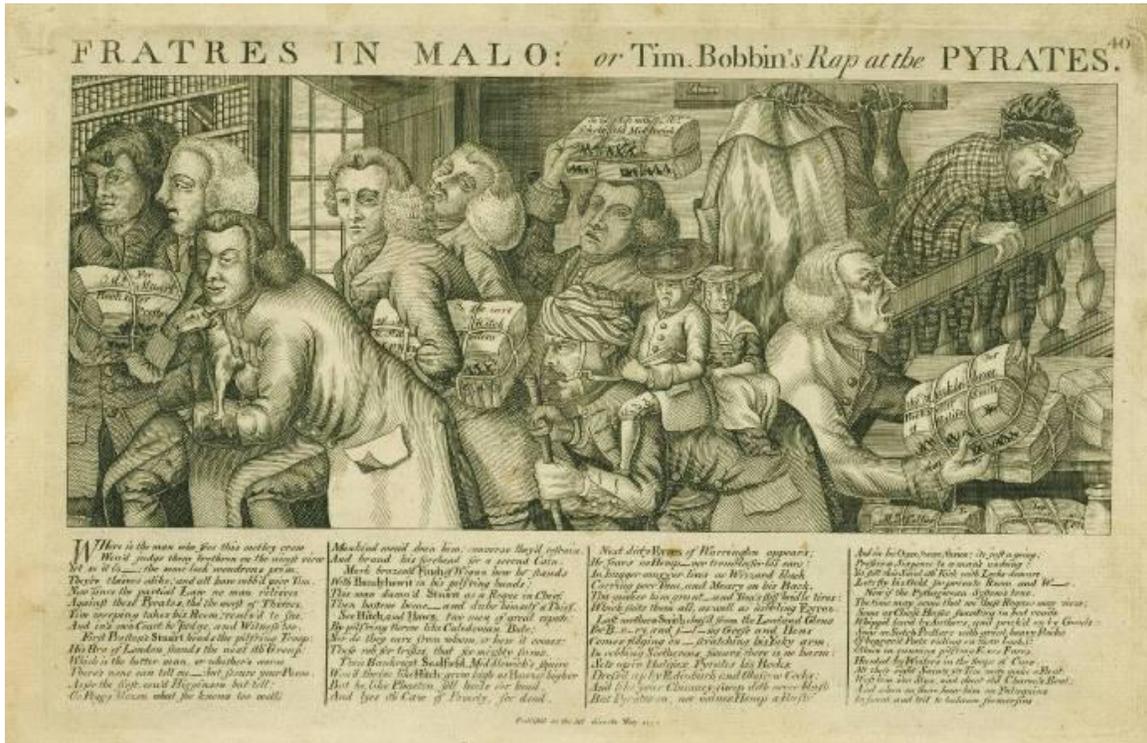


Fig. 2 *FRATRES IN MALO: or, Tim. Bobbin's Rap at the PYRATES.*, engraved by an unidentified artist after a print by John Collier (Tim Bobbins), London, May 1775, black-and-white line engraving.

Where were books stored when not in use? Certainly desks, bookcases, and book shelves served as storage units for books. But, who would have thought that a bookshelf could have been made by attaching wooden boards and a base to the skeleton of a building? In *A Journeyman Parson with a Bare Existence* (fig. 3), dated ca. 1760, books are kept on shelves constructed between the posts of the clergyman's house. The exposed brick batting, sparse diet, and tattered table linens reinforce the poverty of the parson and at the same time provide us with a visual description of how a more modest home would have looked.



Fig. 3 *A JOURNEYMAN PARSON with a BARE EXISTENCE*, published by Carington Bowles, London, ca. 1760, black-and-white mezzotint engraving with period hand color.

Is there a period precedent for covering tables? The use of textiles as a protective layer over wood is well documented in the eighteenth century. In addition to using white linens for dining or tea, period engravings show green wool broadcloth serving this purpose. Its sturdy construction was found to be useful for public events where wear and tear was a concern. Period graphics are indispensable for questions such as these. Their capability to visually capture a subject at any given moment makes prints a useful tool when studying the past.

Most middle, upper middle, and gentry class colonists owned prints. They were less expensive alternatives to paintings and, naturally, more widely available. During the eighteenth century, however, very few images were printed in the colonies. Instead, the majority of graphics were engraved in England and France and exported here. A consumer could purchase a print through various avenues, whether it was through a local merchant, an English factor, or a London printseller.

As the eighteenth century progressed, the standard of living improved for most households and rooms and furnishings became more specialized. One of the most elegantly furnished spaces was the

parlor, an area used for entertainments such as tea drinking and card playing. Just as certain furniture and ceramic forms became standard objects for parlors, certain prints and paintings decorated these spaces, too.

A comparison of print references shows that portraits predominately hung in parlors.<sup>3</sup> Portrait prints ranged from family pictures to printed heads and featured subjects such as the royal family, statesmen, patriots, and scholars. According to eighteenth-century print catalogs, portraits also portrayed “the most celebrated beauties of the time,” a subject of fascination for mezzotint engraver Thomas Frye. Frye executed over a dozen life-size portraits between the years 1760 and 1762 depicting heads of royalty and leading women of British society (fig. 4). An advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette* documents their availability in colonial America.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 4 A Lady Fashionably Dressed, engraved by Thomas Frye, London, February 28, 1762, black-and-white mezzotint engraving.

Another popular location for portraits was the library. Today, “brass nailed” to the library walls of the reconstructed Governor’s Palace in Williamsburg, are two maps and twenty formally-arranged engraved portrait heads stemming from a period reference by eighteenth-century furniture maker Thomas Sheraton. He writes, “Such prints as are hung in the walls [of the library] ought to be memorials of learning and portraits of men of science and erudition.”<sup>5</sup>

Virginia planter William Byrd, II, favored painted likenesses to adorn the walls of his well-known library. Research indicates that over thirty portraits, many of which were commissioned in London between the years 1714 and 1726, were displayed at his James River plantation home, Westover.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Byrd's collection was so highly regarded that Williamsburg resident Nathaniel Walthoe (fig. 5) offered Byrd a diamond ring if he would hang Walthoe's portrait among the wealthy and politically elite.



Fig. 5 Portrait of Nathaniel Walthoe, painted by William Dering, Williamsburg, Virginia, 1745-1750, oil on canvas.

For the fortunate few, like Byrd, paintings were the prevailing choice of decorative wall hangings. The majority of colonists, however, had access to and acquired prints. Next to portraits, sporting prints and historical scenes were popular subjects, especially in spaces for dining. A 1766 inventory for York County, Virginia, resident Joseph Royle includes “6 prints of the Ruins of Rome/ 6 prints of the arts and sciences/ [and] 2 prints of Rome in its original splendor.”<sup>7</sup> Prints of antiquity were fashionable among colonial Americans, including Williamsburg tavern keeper Jane Vobe who purchased a similar set from the Printing Office in 1765 for the King's Arms Tavern.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to eating and drinking, dining rooms served multiple purposes as spaces for entertainment, sleeping, and/or conducting business. Printed views of landscapes and seascapes appeared in these rooms, offering a glimpse of buildings, towns, and monuments from around the world. Especially popular were perspective prints, landscapes created with sharp linear perspective (fig. 6). London printsellers Robert Sayer and John Bennett advertise the availability of over 200 of these specialized views, stating in 1775 that the prints “make Genteel Furniture when Framed and Glazed; [and] likewise are admirably adapted” for use with optical instruments.<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 6 *A View of the Mall in St. James's Park, &c.*, engraved by Thomas Bowles after a drawing by John Maurer, London, 1753, black-and-white line engraving with period color.

The placement and use of engravings in specific interior locations tells us that there were predetermined spaces for objects that were considered to be acceptable by society. At first glance, *Morning* (fig. 7), published by Robert Sayer in 1758, shows a woman drinking tea. Close study, however, reveals that the portrayal does more than document a social custom; it also advertises the proper accoutrements used with tea drinking.



Fig. 7 *Morning*, engraved by Richard Houston after a painting by Philip Mercier, London, January 7, 1758, black-and-white mezzotint engraving with period hand color.

In addition to social customs and etiquette, period graphics helped to reinforce gender roles and social hierarchy. The text beneath the 1745 engraving, *The Good House-wife* (fig. 8), offers instruction to those who view it: “Woman, when virtuous, free from sloth & Vice,/Greater by far, than Rubies is her price/Heaven crowns her Labour with a plenteous Store,/To feed her Household, and relieve the Poor.” Likewise, *Keep within Compass* (fig.9) reinforces the moralistic teachings of the day. In this instance, keeping oneself within the prescribed boundaries—industriousness for men and prudence for women—is equated with wealth and happiness.

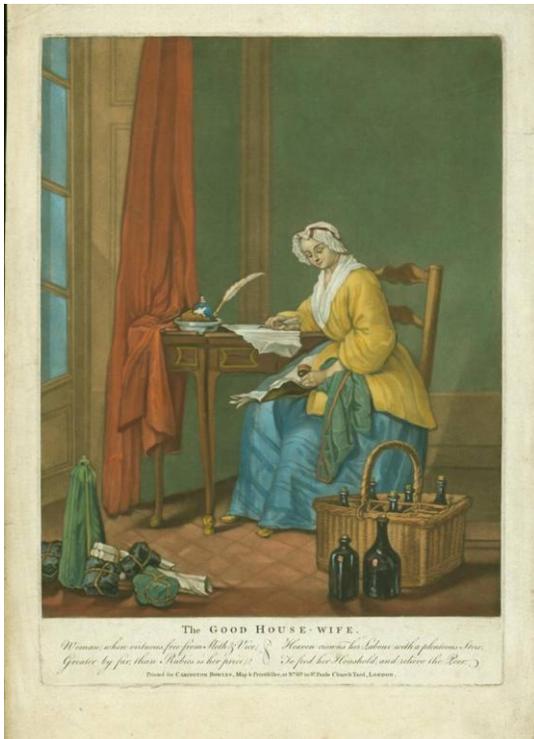


Fig. 8 *The GOOD HOUSE-WIFE*, published by Carington Bowles, London, ca. 1745, black-and-white mezzotint engraving with period hand color.



Fig. 9 *KEEP WITHIN COMPASS*, engraved by Robert Dighton, published by Carington Bowles, London, August 16, 1785, black-and-white line engraving with period hand color.

During the eighteenth century, as prints became available to a wider market, the upper class sought new status symbols that would differentiate themselves and their furnishings from the rest of society. One way the gentry set themselves apart was by cultivating social skills and engaging in activities that working people had no time to participate in. Printsellers quickly adapted to the demand for new prints and created illustrations that promoted leisure-time entertainments such as music, dance, and the art of needlework, pastimes that played a large part in the education of eighteenth-century females and, as adults, occupied much of their free time.<sup>10</sup> Illustrations of women reading or playing cards flooded the print market along with pictures of men engaged in hunting, horse breeding, and racing. This image of a

gathering at the local coffee house, dated 1781, (fig. 10) illustrates a place where males conducted business, discussed literary and political matters, and exchanged news of the day.



Fig. 10 *THE COFFEE-HOUSE*, engraved by William Dickinson after a drawing by Henry Bunbury, London, October 15, 1781, black-and-white stipple engraving with aquatint and period hand color.

Prints also help us to better understand the popular taste for furnishings in the past. Engravings like *A Hint to Married Men* (fig. 11) of 1787 reveal a period aesthetic based on bold colors and patterns, a decorating scheme quite different from that of today. The brown, blue, and orange stripe wallpaper, chintz bed curtains and coverlet, and a Wilton carpet are eighteenth-century choices supported by physical evidence. Since the late 1950s, conservators have been using science to examine works of art. Technology has aided that process and as a result, we've been able to gain a more accurate look at period paint finishes. The findings are staggering—the subtle gray, army green, and yellow ocher once thought to define colonial America are now known to have been much brighter and/ or used in combination with patterned wallpapers. At Colonial Williamsburg, we continue to re-examine and refurnish buildings in the historic area in order to reflect new research discoveries.



Fig. 11 *Hint to Married Men*, published by Robert Sayer, London, August 1, 1787, black-and-white mezzotint engraving with period hand color.

In many instances, engravings alone provide the answers to how objects were used. *The Dinner: Symptoms of Eating and Drinking* (fig. 12) from 1794 illustrates the contemporary social practice of dining in addition to providing visual instruction in how to use a stirrup cup, a specialized ceramic form that was made in Staffordshire, England, after 1765. Stirrup cups were traditionally used for toasts to the hunt and were intended to be drunk from the saddle as mounted riders were about to depart. They were made without a handle or foot and thus could not be put down when full. This print source illustrates that they were held inverted while in use.



Fig. 12 *THE DINNER. Symptoms of Eating & Drinking*, engraved by William Dickinson after a drawing by Henry Bunbury, London, March 5, 1794, black-and-white stipple engraving with period hand color.

The use of candles in period graphics depicting night scenes refutes the popular belief that candles were used during the day and complement documentation from eighteenth-century servants' directories which indicate that, in the morning, candles would have been put away until evening.<sup>11</sup> Robert Dighton's engraving *December* portrays a female subject about to retire for the day and includes subtle reminders—like the moon and the young woman's attire—that reinforce the use of candles at night.<sup>12</sup>

Understanding the proper placement of objects is an important component to accurately furnishing a period home. For years, scholars have thought that the use of jamb hooks for holding fire utensils was a late-eighteenth century colonial American convention, but period engravings like this English print entitled *A Female Philosopher in Extasy* (fig. 13) proves the trend was evident in England, too. Similarly, plate 2 of William Hogarth's *Before and After* series (fig. 14) documents important details about the way textiles were made and used during the eighteenth century. The print supports physical evidence that that bed hangings were constructed with metal rings, not tape.



Fig. 13 *A Female Philosopher in Extasy at solving a Problem*, engraver unidentified, London, ca. 1770, black-and-white mezzotint engraving with period hand color.



Fig. 14 *AFTER*, invented, engraved, and published by William Hogarth, London, December 15, 1736, black-and-white line engraving.

In many instances, prints challenge our standard associations with objects and how they were used. For example, by illustrating a roaring fire in *Loo in the Kitchen or High Life Below Stairs* (fig. 15), engraver Isaac Cruikshank suggests that a common location for storing fire tongs while in use was inside the fireplace. Additional prints support this notion by illustrating fireplace equipment in the same position. Other engravings, like the 1773 engraving *Art of Dressing Fish* (fig. 16) show that, during the eighteenth century, a mantel served as a resting place for objects such as a coffee pot, coffee mill, cup, and saucer, items we today, consider more appropriate for the kitchen or dining room. In both instances, visual repetition reveals useful information about the placement of objects, whether it is a location for storage or for use.



Fig. 15 *LOO in the KITCHEN or HIGH LIFE below STAIRS*, engraved by Isaac Cruikshank after a drawing by George M. Woodward, London, June 25, 1799, black-and-white etching with period hand color.



Fig. 16 *THE ART OF DRESSING FISH*, engraved by Johann Elias Haid after a painting by Johann Caspar Heilmann, Augsburg, Germany, 1773, black-and-white mezzotint engraving.

Clearly, prints help us to form a clearer picture of the past. Not only do graphics provide us with rich visual detail, but they complement written descriptions and physical evidence. During the eighteenth century, ownership and display of a print sent a clear message that you were aware of the latest trends and that you could afford to follow them.

Today, engravings serve as symbols of eighteenth-century popular taste, social status, and contemporary values. They teach us about the context and use of objects while at the same time offer insight into past events and period fashion. What does the future hold? It remains unclear, but as our knowledge continues to grow through web-enabled search engines and the advance of scientific instruments, I will keep using prints along with primary source documents and physical evidence with the hope of gleaning even more information about the past.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been adapted from a campus-wide lecture given at Juniata College on April 7, 2010. All graphics are courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> During the eighteenth-century, wallpaper and wall-to-wall carpet were considered part of the architecture of a building and were therefore rarely accounted for in household inventories.

<sup>3</sup> A survey of eighteenth-century inventories, newspaper advertisements, and print catalogues reveals that engraved portraits were one of the most common subjects displayed in colonial American parlors.

<sup>4</sup> *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), Sept. 17, 1771.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Sheraton, *Cabinet Dictionary II* (London, 1803; reprint ed., New York, 1970), pp. 215-219, s.v., "Furnish."

<sup>6</sup> For more information on Byrd's library, see David Meschutt, "William Byrd and His Portrait Collection," *Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts*, 14 (May 1988): 18-47.

<sup>7</sup> *York County (Va.) Wills, Inventories, & Accounts, 1760-1783*, vol. 21 (1760-1771), "Inventory and appraisement of the estate of Joseph Royle," 26 May 1766, pp. 217-275.

<sup>8</sup> See entry for "Jane Vobe" dated February 5, 1765 in *Virginia Gazette Daybooks, 1750-1766*, Tracy W. McGregor Library Accession #467, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Virginia.

<sup>9</sup> *Sayer and Bennetts Catalogue of Prints for 1775*, reprinted by The Holland Press, London, 1970, p. 58.

<sup>10</sup> Printsellers not only reacted to this demand by offering new subjects, but they created a hierarchy of engravings that ranged in price and workmanship. Graphics referred to as "fine prints" and described as "proper for the collections in the cabinets of the curious" were produced for a more elite market, while others were created to be "very saleable and cheap." See *Sayer and Bennetts Catalogue* for more information.

<sup>11</sup> This is supported by period graphics which also fail to show lighting devices being used during the day.

<sup>12</sup> *DECEMBER*, engraved by Robert Dighton, published by Carington Bowles, London, ca. 1780, black-and-white mezzotint engraving.