

James Gillray

James Gillray (1756 – 1815) was and still is England's greatest caricaturist. Such was his fame that his work was avidly collected by the very politicians that he mercilessly lampooned. Even the Prince of Wales – portrayed as a bloated victim of his own enormous appetites – bought them.

It is hard for us to imagine today the stir created by new Gillray works displayed in the window of Mrs Hannah Humphrey's print shop in the heart of London's fashionable West End. Gillray himself lived "above the shop". He was thus in a prime position to observe the preening, lecherous and outrageously dressed collision of high society and low-life around St James's and Bond Street – his portrayal of the Earl of Sandwich sexually propositioning an attractive barrow girl was probably drawn from life.

Like modern day cartoonists, Gillray had to respond very quickly to the rising tide of political scandals. He kept a stock of small cards in the palm of his hand to secretly sketch a likeness with a pencil. He also made frequent trips to Parliament to capture any new character on the political stage – rising stars of both parties knew they had arrived when Gillray viciously paraded their foibles.



James Gillray, He Steers his Flight, 1810
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Gillray belongs to the golden age of British caricature, which also included Isaac Cruikshank and Thomas Rowlandson, but is peerless. They were all known for bawdy and savage mockery of their targets. Gillray, though, raised popular caricature to the level of art. As in the literary satires of Alexander Pope and John Dryden, he imaginatively and ironically re-staged the base and frivolous deeds of the past week as great set-pieces from Shakespeare, Milton, the Old Testament and the Classics. His visual wit has the surreal modernity of the best comedy of our own time – Fox's 'broad-bottomed' opposition appear as a swarm of bees in one etching, while a rotund Bishop rises above the populace as a hot air balloon in another. Gillray combined brilliant draftsmanship with a devastating way with words. A languid and overstuffed Prince of Wales is hyperbolically identified as A Voluptuary Under the Horrors of Digestion.



James Gillray, (1757 – 1815) A Voluptuary Under The Horrors of Digestion, 1792.
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Politics

For a caricaturist this was a rich period to work in. The two most prominent politicians, arch-rivals William Pitt the Younger (1759 – 1806) and Charles James Fox (1749 – 1806) gave Gillray two physically comic contrasts.

The Whig, or radical, leader Fox was short, fat and hairy, known as a drinker and gambler. Tory Pitt was tall and thin, a conviction politician.

John Bull, the archetypal and long suffering Englishman, is a bumbling country bumpkin, taxed to the hilt. Taxation rose dramatically in this period, mainly to fill the war chest, but also to pay off the debts of the profligate Prince of Wales.

A Great Stream from a Petty Fountain depicts all the new taxes coming in at the 1806 budget – a literal fountain of tax including ‘New Coffee Tax’, ‘New Tea Tax’, ‘New Hop-Tax’, ‘New Malt-Tax’, ‘New Assessed Taxes’, ‘New Tax on Sugar’, ‘New Spirit Tax’, ‘New Tobacco Tax’, ‘New Candle Tax’. The torrent of tax is surrounded by greedy politicians and business-men, like cormorants feeding off fish, while poor John Bull struggles to keep his head above water.

Political parties were not slow to see the propaganda value of Gillray’s prints. Controversially between 1797 and 1801, he received a pension from the Tory party, and produced a number of anti-Whig works. There was a rumour that he was pressured into this by being threatened with legal action over a ‘blasphemous’ work.

Gallery 4



James Gillray, The Plumb Pudding in Danger, 1805
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France

The momentous events of the French Revolution and the long war with the French that followed it dominated much of Gillray's career. Many Britons were at first sympathetic to the Revolutionaries, but during the Reign of Terror in the early 1790s, Gillray's peasant "sans culottes" – shown literally without trousers – become sharp-toothed cannibals, capable of any atrocity. The Whigs (and Fox in particular) were portrayed as keen supporters of the Republican cause. Napoleon was depicted as a petite and petulant dictator, becoming ever smaller as his empire grew.



James Gillray, Maniac ravings or Little Boney in a strong fit, 1803
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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Royalty / Society / Fashion

The richly eccentric royal family, and their circle of dukes, wives and mistresses, were targets which would have gladdened the heart of any caricaturist. The household of King George III and his wife Queen Charlotte was famously dull and deeply mean. In contrast, their eldest son, the Prince of Wales, indulged in every pleasure and acquired huge debts. The King was a Tory supporter and loathed his son, while the Whigs supported the whims of the Prince in an effort to gain future influence. King George himself suffered from bouts of "madness" and was subject to outlandish treatments.

The Georgian public had a keen appetite for gossip, plentifully supplied by flagrant affairs, unsuitable aristocratic marriages and shamelessly conspicuous spending. As in today's gossip mags, Gillray's prints have a strong sense of celebrities "found out" – to the satisfaction of the salacious viewer.

The West End around his home and print shop would have been a fashion parade of high society, and those desperate to join it. Women wore low cut flimsy muslin, accessorised with extravagant hats and towering feathers perched on powdered wigs. Fashionable young men strode out in tight breeches, cutaway coats and extravagantly piled cravats.

Gillray ultimately suffered the same fate as the King he satirised. He lost his sanity in 1810 and was cared for by the devoted Mrs Humphrey until he died in 1815.

Gallery 4



James Gillray, Parasols, for 1795
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Events

4 July 1776: America declares independence

1783: William Pitt the Younger becomes Britain's youngest Prime Minister, ushering in 23 years of unbroken Tory rule

1789: The French Revolution

1792 – 1802: French Revolutionary Wars

1793: execution of French King Louis XVI

1799: first introduction of income tax in England

1803 – 1815: Napoleonic Wars

1804: Bonaparte declared Emperor

1805: Battle of Trafalgar (Death of Nelson)

1806: Pitt and Fox die

1807: Slave trade in the British Empire – but not slavery itself – is abolished

1811: Prince of Wales declared Regent

1815: Battle of Waterloo 1815. Gillray dies 17 days earlier