William Hogarth’s Moral Tales

Target Audience
AS Art students interested in finding out more about the ideas embedded within William Hogarth’s work, as a means of exploring iconography.

Key Concepts
Painting, engraving, moral subjects, iconography, London, class, identity, society, values and ideals

The Activity
Explore William Hogarth’s use of iconography (visual signs) in his ‘modern moral subjects’ in order to create your own metaphors for modern life.

William Hogarth, Scene 2, from Marriage a la Mode, 1735. Engraving. British Museum.

Background Knowledge
In this activity you will need to spend some time finding out about William Hogarth’s art and its meaning. The resources listed below will enable you to do this. In particular I would like you to focus on images from his ‘modern moral subjects’ such as Gin Lane, Beer Street, The Rake’s Progress, The Harlot’s Progress and Marriage a la Mode. These images are particularly rich with iconography for you to explore.

Remember: the word iconography is used here to describe people, objects, signs or gestures that have been incorporated by Hogarth to inform our ‘reading’ of the image.

If you can, you should also visit the website of specific collections which contain Hogarth’s work. They will also provide further background information.

Once you have a sense of William Hogarth’s approaches and techniques, then you can develop a presentation, using the following process:
• Chose one image/scene from his moral subjects. Find out as much as you can about it: is it part of a series? If so, at what stage in the story are we at? Who are the characters represented? What kind of iconography has Hogarth used? What might these things tell us about 18th century life?

• From this image highlight between 1 and 3 examples of iconography (e.g. the syphilitic black spot on the face of a prostitute, or a particular book open on the floor)

• Describe/explain what these visual signs mean in the context of the whole image or series.

• Lastly (if you can) create your own iconography for the modern day. Come up with modern-day replacements for the examples you have chosen and explain why you would use these elements to tell a similar, but contemporary, story.

**Resources**

William Hogarth’s works are very well documented on the Internet, and you will find it quite easy to explore his art in detail. Use the very rich and helpful list of online resources below, to help you to explore and understand Hogarth’s art and world:


http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/hogarth/default.shtm - Online resource linked to the 2007 Hogarth exhibition at Tate Britain

http://www.library.northwestern.edu/spec/hogarth/main.html - William Hogarth and 18th Century Print Culture (Online exhibition by Northwestern University Library, USA)

http://www.gresham.ac.uk/event.asp?PageId=45&EventId=659 - Hogarth’s London, a lecture given by Robin Simon FSA (Video and transcript)

http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/18th/art.html - 18th century art resources from Rutgers University, USA

http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=l0CGrLV2SNs - Short snippet from Andrew Graham-Dixon documentary Hogarth’s Progress


http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database.aspx - Search the British Museum’s extensive print collection (Great images!!+ Image zooming too)

http://www.british-history.ac.uk/Default.aspx - British History Online (excellent source material)

**Online E-Books, which can be searched and downloaded:**


Outcomes
This activity can be used either for individual or group study. It is a great opportunity to work together investigating the detail in Hogarth’s images. A lot has been written about the potential meaning of Hogarth’s works, but there are still many hidden messages that are difficult to decode. When you are exploring your iconography, think about the history of a particular image or idea? Also contemporary language – from literary sources or even slang – are important to consider.

Ideally your final response should be in the form of a presentation or short essay. You may even want to create a montage or ‘mood board’ which explores your findings and ideas. You can decide what approach is best.

Helpful hints
Here are some useful questions that you may want to think about in relation to William Hogarth’s art and times:

- What kind of art was Hogarth influenced by?
- How does Hogarth utilise and reference other works of art in his own images?
- Why do you think Hogarth chose to engrave subjects that he had already painted?
- What connections can be made between Hogarth's work and contemporary literature of the period?
- What role did humour play in Hogarth’s critique of modern life?
- Are there aspects of Hogarth’s personal life and upbringing that influenced the tone and subject matter of his art?

Going further
Hogarth is often considered to be the ‘Grandfather’ of satirical prints – an art form that grew in immense popularity from the late 18\textsuperscript{th} century to the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century, under the reign of George III and George IV. Artists such as James Gillray, George Cruikshank and Thomas Rowlandson were some of the genres most famous and popular artists.

Satirical prints were produced in response to political and social issues or events, and they contained humour that was biting and crude. They were the equivalent of today’s tabloid press. Often raunchy and sometimes reflecting prejudices about women or foreigners, Georgian satirical prints used imagery to convey ideas that people would not speak – especially in public.

The satirical tradition has continued to thrive. Even today many of our local and national newspapers employ cartoonists to make comment on contemporary life.

So, do you think that visual humour is a negative or positive way of commenting on societal issues?