

**Digital Review of the British Museum's Online Collection of
Political and Personal Caricatures.**
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection>

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Romanticism on the Net

Digital Review of the British Museum's Online Collection of Political and Personal Caricatures. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection>.

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Biographical Note

Ian Haywood is Professor of English and Director of the Centre for Research in Romanticism at the University of Roehampton in London. A past president of BARS and founding member of the [Romantic Illustration Network](#), he has written on nineteenth-century graphic satire in *Romanticism and Caricature* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), *The Rise of Victorian Caricature* (Palgrave, 2020), and the new essay collection (co-edited with Susan Matthews and Mary L. Shannon) *Romanticism and Illustration* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

1. It is not too long ago (in the late Noughties) that I remember spending a great deal of time in the British Library's Rare Books Reading Room taking innumerable photocopies from a multi-reel microfilm collection of British Museum caricatures. As the rainforest-depleting pile of A4 and A3 paper cascaded over my desk, and as other worthy researchers desperate to get their turn at the hand-operated technology muttered their frustrations, I developed a curious affinity with the historical producers of this remarkable art form. I felt that the laborious mechanical reproduction of grainy black-and-white images – paper copies of photographic copies of original paper copies – was a fitting tribute to the prodigious industry of artists, engravers, printers and publishers who turned out many thousands of visual satires during the 'Golden Age' of caricature. But I also wondered if I was off my rocker devoting so much time to Hanoverian cartoons.
2. In terms of Romantic studies back then, caricature was everywhere and nowhere: Gillray's wonderfully inventive, witty, and outrageous scenes may have adorned many book-covers, but caricature struggled to be regarded as a serious subject of study in its own right. One reason for this was aptly illustrated in my cloistered labours in the British Library: accessibility. There was simply no way to visually browse or search the 17,000+ prints in the British Museum collection. Scholars had to rely on reproductions in books and on the twelve-volume *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires Preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum* compiled by Frederick Stephens and M. Dorothy George between 1870 and 1954. The latter is unquestionably the 'bible' of caricature studies, but it includes very few images. So, the only way to proceed was the slow and dirty route.
3. Having ploughed through all the reels covering the Romantic period, sustained in my graphic travels by a Keatsian faith in culture's 'realms of gold', I eventually had several folders of images that would later become the basis for *Romanticism and Caricature*. More immediately, I had been researching Thomas Rowlandson's remarkable print [*The Two Kings of Terror*](#) (1813) for a conference on 'Romanticism and War' at Oxford in the fall of 2007; but imagine my surprise when, on the day, the other keynote speaker remarked almost in passing that the British Museum caricatures were now becoming available online and (where was the fanfare?) in colour. Never mind the wasted hours of microfilm misery, 'bliss it was in that dawn to be alive'. Once back home, I rushed to my computer and feasted on the technicolour spectacle of rescanned images, revelling in the searchability and versatility of this new online collection.
4. Two innovations stood out: the inclusion of the *Catalogue's* description of the contents of each image made it easy to cross-reference other prints by artist, publisher, political figure, or theme; and the ability to click on the thumbnail and see a larger, higher-resolution image replaced the magnifying glass as the means to identify obscure visual *puncta*. Above all, it felt as if we were now able to see Georgian caricature at its vivid best. Almost overnight, this field of study had been transformed. The bar had been raised, and within a few years other collections followed suit by digitizing many of their prints, though not always with an accompanying commentary.¹ By the time I wrote *Romanticism and Caricature* in the early 2010s, my wallet files of paper

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copies were already gathering dust, and by then I was able to work almost entirely with digital images. The burgeoning number of articles and monographs on caricature which have appeared in the last ten years is testimony to this massive expansion in access.²

The screenshot shows the British Museum's online catalogue entry for the engraving 'The Two Kings of Terror' by Thomas Rowlandson. The page layout includes a navigation bar at the top with 'Previous' and 'Next' buttons, and a 'Menu' icon. The main content area is divided into sections: 'Title' (The Two Kings of Terror), 'Description' (a detailed paragraph about the engraving's symbolism and historical context), and 'November 1813' (the date and medium). To the right, there is a thumbnail image of the engraving itself, which depicts a skeleton and a figure representing Napoleon on a battlefield. Below the thumbnail, there are interactive icons for zooming in and out, and a 'View less' link at the bottom left.

Figure 1: [BM online catalogue description](#) for Rowlandson's *The Two Kings of Terror*

5. Since its 2007 launch, the British Museum Online Collection has expanded massively and has very recently been revamped, adding, for instance, a long-needed zoom feature. The huge task of scanning the original collection has ended, and the database now includes prints not covered by the *Catalogue* and updated contextual information by present-day curators. Each image is accompanied by details on the artist, designer, engraver, publisher, title, dimensions, date of publication, catalogue number, and acquisition history. Many entries also include a 'Description' (Fig. 1 above) from the *Catalogue* and additional 'Curator's Comments' by current staff (Fig. 2 below). There is also a tab which allows users to give feedback, submit any relevant facts, and offer corrections for inaccuracies. This adds up to an invaluable resource for conducting research into caricature and puts the open-access British Museum Collection in a league of its own.

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Curator's comments

(Description and comment from M. Dorothy George, 'Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the British Museum', IX, 1949)

News of Leipzig, 'the battle of the Nations', 16-18 Oct., reached London on 2 Nov. ('Extraordinary Gazette'); the town was illuminated on 5 and 6 Nov. The first print to be published was perhaps Cruikshank's 'The Emperor Boney escaping from Leipsic under Cover', dated 8th Nov.; he hides under the petticoats of an old woman representing the Church of Rome (Reid, No. 269, not in B.M.). For gas-lighting cf. No. 10798, &c.. For the battle see Nos. 12094, 12096, 12097, 12098, 12100, 12103, 12108, &c., 12109, 12110, 12169, 12171, 12177, 12187, 12188, 12192, 12201, 12202, 12203, 12204, 12235 A, 12318, 12319, 13487.

A folded impression, without text, shows that the plate was used also as a book-illustration.

Imitated in 'Conversation Sentimentale', 1830 (against Charles X).

Grego, 'Rowlandson', ii. 255, 257, 272 (under date 1 Jan. 1814). Broadley, i. 338. De Vinck, No. 8825. Van Stolk, No. 6179. Hennin, No. 13777. Often reproduced, e.g., Dayot, 'Napoléon', p. 87; Fuchs, i. 180; Bourguignon, ii. 204; Klingender, p. 43.

(Supplementary information)

Copies vary considerably in size, the text being printed at different distances from the design.

View less 

Bibliographic references

BM Satires / Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum (12093)

Location

Not on display

Exhibition history

Exhibited:

1989/90 Nov-Jan, Glasgow Mus & AG, World of Thomas Rowlandson

1990 Jan-Mar, Leicester City AG, World of Thomas Rowlandson

1990/1 Nov-Jan, Maidstone Museum, World of Thomas Rowlandson

1991 Jan-Mar, Swansea, Glynn Vivian AG, World of Th.Rowlandson

2015 Feb-Aug, BM, Rm 90, Bonaparte and the British

Figure 2: [Recent curator's comments and exhibition history](#) for Rowlandson's *The Two Kings of Terror*

6. It bears noting, however, some remaining limitations and idiosyncrasies. To begin with, the search facility can be frustrating due to the 'one size fits all' nature of the website. The caricatures are part of the general online British Museum Collection, and there is no dedicated portal for finding prints. This is not a problem if you already know the artist and title; but if you are doing a more general search by theme, it is a good idea to add the word 'satire' after your search terms. Otherwise, you will receive many non-satirical images (which can be illuminating but perhaps surplus to requirements). You can only refine the results at the second stage: to limit the search by date range, for example, click on the menu option 'Production date'. The next problem is that a search often produces multiple versions of the same image. While comparisons can yield interesting insights into the caricature production process, as James Baker has shown, only one version has the curators' comments, and it can be frustrating chasing this one down.³
7. It is also worth pointing out that contextual notes are limited to historical information. Valuable as this is, it reflects a rather limited notion of the prints as visual reportage rather than aesthetic artefacts. Historical contexts are obviously important to most analysis, but many scholars are equally, if not more, interested in stylistic, cultural, and ideological questions. So, for example, the recently updated comments on [The Liberty of the Subject](#) (1779) point out the (rather obvious) irony of the title in relation to press-ganging, but do not extend the irony to Gillray's announcement of the caricaturist's unique creative freedom.⁴ Perhaps one day we could have a third set of comments written by art historians and literary scholars.
8. The recently revamped website is still under construction, and a link to 'ongoing improvements' includes an invitation to provide feedback. One immediate suggestion I might offer is to clarify

the museum's pricing policy for reproduction rights. In my experience, the charges for high-resolution images which are suitable for publication in a book can be prohibitive. For my recent book, *The Rise of Victorian Caricature*, the charge was £45.00 per image (excluding new photography). The book has over 90 images, and, needless to say, this meant I only used the British Museum sparingly. It is perhaps understandable that cash-strapped cultural institutions need to maximize income streams, and the British Museum is by no means the only culprit in this respect. But a case needs to be made to the Museum (and the government that funds it) for exempting academic and educational publishing from commercial rates. In fact, it is currently quite hard to obtain relevant information about the charges, perhaps evidence that this is a touchy issue. You have to click on 'Use this Image' at the bottom right corner of the screen, which takes you to second page where you can contact 'BM Images' directly with your request. A different link to ['Copyrights and Permissions'](#) explains that: 'For the avoidance of doubt, the British Museum considers the following to be commercial activities (this list is not exhaustive): "Anything that is in itself charged for, including textbooks and academic books or journals" though the rates are not included.'

9. The wider philosophical issue here is why out-of-copyright images have a different ontological status from out-of-copyright texts. I can quote Wordsworth ad infinitum, but I need permission to show a facsimile of a page of the same text from a book in a research library, and will probably have to pay for it. Oddly, this is where the materialism of culture comes back to bite us. Creative Commons may be one solution, but meanwhile diplomatic negotiations and alternative sourcing is the order of the day.

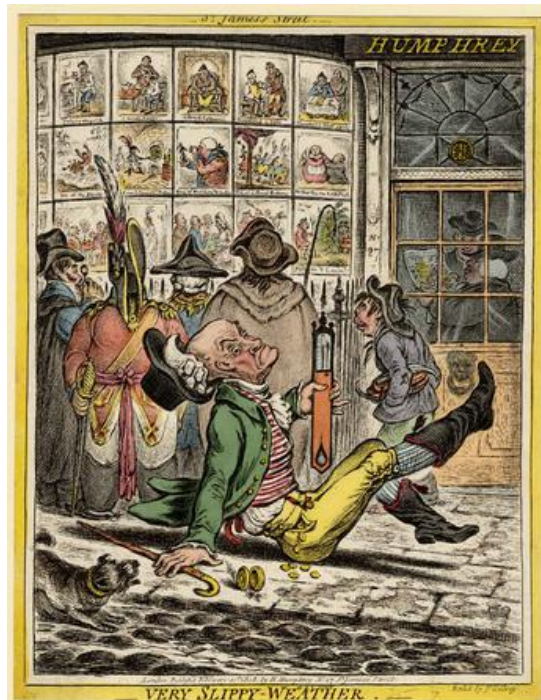


Figure 3: James Gillray, *Very Slippery-Weather* (1808)

10. In any case, it is typical of caricature's canny self-awareness that the conflicted issue of accessibility was hard-wired into its self-image. Gillray's *Very Slippery Weather* (Fig. 3 above) is an ironic commentary on the consumption of his own satirical prints. On the one hand, they are freely available in the street gallery of the print-shop window; on the other hand, the aim is to persuade someone with cash to enter the shop and make a purchase. But, as the upended, de-wigged gentleman has learned at great cost, what is not allowed is to ignore the allure of caricature altogether.

¹ Among the other notable collections to have been digitized since 2007 are those of the Lewis Walpole Library in Connecticut; the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.; the Firestone Library at Princeton; and the Guildhall Art Gallery in London.

² Most recently, see David Francis Taylor's *The Politics of Parody: A Literary History of Caricature, 1760-1830* (Yale University Press, 2018) and my own *The Rise of Victorian Caricature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

³ James Baker, *The Business of Satirical Prints in Late Georgian England* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

⁴ An interpretation I develop in 'The Transformation of Caricature: A Reading of Gillray's *The Liberty of the Subject*', *Eighteenth Century Studies* 43.3 (Winter 2010), 223-42.