The Microcosm of London

Special Collections featured item for May 2009 by Lucy Atkinson, MERL Assistant Librarian.


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The *Microcosm of London* (‘London in miniature’) is attributed to the celebrated nineteenth century publisher, Rudolph Ackermann (1764-1834). He was born in Stollberg, Saxony, and originally studied saddlery and coach-building before moving to London where he took over a drawing school at 96, The Strand in 1795. This had been established by William Shipley, the founder of the Society of Arts, and it was here that he set up a print shop. The following year he moved to larger premises at 101, The Strand, which was known as the Repository of Arts from 1798. It became one of the chief social institutions in London.

The *Microcosm* [see title-page shown above] was the first major colour plate book Ackermann published. It originally appeared in monthly parts, usually by subscription, between 1808 and 1810. Each issue cost seven shillings and included four coloured plates. It later appeared in its final bound folio format of three volumes, each containing over thirty full-page hand-coloured aquatints depicting London’s principal buildings in the nineteenth century.
Ackermann was responsible for a series of books with coloured aquatints, including the History of the Abbey church of St. Peter’s, Westminster (1812), the History of the University of Oxford (1814), the History of the University of Cambridge (1815), and finally the History of the colleges of Winchester, Eton, and Westminster … (1816). These publications also originally appeared in monthly parts. After the first volume had been launched, he began a monthly periodical, The Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashion and Politics of which the first issue appeared in January 1809 and the final in 1828.

Plate 88: Vauxhall Garden

The Microcosm was a new undertaking in that it treated Regency London pictorially, and ranged over new and ancient buildings and meeting places, capturing the mood of London at the time. Life in London during the Regency era was distinctive for its architecture, literature, fashions, and politics. Socially, it was a combination of two extremes, with extravagance and opulence for the aristocracy with their affluent buildings to the
overcrowded slums and poverty endured by the poor. It was an era of economic uncertainty caused by the Napoleonic Wars, and social unrest due to the Industrial Revolution and its introduction of machine-based labour over manual labour.

Plate 21: House of Commons

The three volumes are laid out in the form of a dictionary, with the buildings listed alphabetically for ease of reference. Each entry includes a colour plate and is accompanied by descriptive text ranging in length from very brief to very detailed: the description for the King’s Bench Prison is only a paragraph, whereas that for the House of Commons covers thirty-nine pages.

From the introduction, Ackermann puts forward his intentions in producing such a work. It is aimed at those inhabitants of London who are either too busy to appreciate the architecture surrounding them, or those who are largely familiar with it, but not in great detail. It would also appeal to visitors to the city for the first time as a source of reference. Two-thirds of the buildings included no longer exist, which adds to its appeal today. These include The Pillory, The Old Bailey, King’s Bench Prison, Royal Cockpit in Birdcage Walk,
Brooks’ Subscription House, India House of Charles Lamb, King’s Mews (now the National Gallery) and Christie’s Auction Room [see plate 6 below].

Plate 6: Christie’s Auction Room

With its elaborate coloured aquatints, the *Microcosm* was a masterpiece. The nineteenth century was the most formative period in the history of book illustration, with one of the most important events during this time being the opening of Ackermann’s Repository where he produced hand-coloured aquatints. Between 1790 and 1830, the principle process in book illustration was aquatint engraving, a method notably used for publications devoted to topography. Although this form flourished for no more than half a century, these books remain the most attractive in the history of illustration.

Aquatint is an intaglio printmaking technique from a copper plate where whole areas are evenly hollowed out to give a uniform tint and by this method a variety of tones are achieved throughout the print, some imitating the highlights of watercolour. The appeal of this process can be “due to its being only partly mechanical. Though two and occasionally even three colours were printed from one plate, the remaining tints were added by hand, with the result that there is a certain spontaneity and natural effect not seen in other forms of engraving.” 1
Ackermann was largely responsible for the introduction of lithography to Britain and the promotion of the coloured aquatint, and in 1816 he established the first significant lithographic press in England. He illustrated almost always using the aquatint method, with his publications intended for the libraries of country gentlemen. He would have employed colourists and engravers, but also pieceworkers who would often have worked in their own homes. These may have been children, or whole families working together by candlelight.
The *Microcosm* portrays, for the first time in a topographical book, the introduction of figures drawn separately by a caricaturist. Social caricature at this time was at least as possible as political caricature, thus representing the fashions and features of nineteenth century society. On this occasion, the illustrations were the joint work of Augustus Pugin and Thomas Rowlandson, the text of the first two volumes was by William Henry Pyne, that of the third by William Combe. In the introduction, Ackermann remarked that the usual practice in such topographical books was to leave all the illustrations (figures and architecture) solely to the architectural artist meaning that the figures often lacked interest and became neglected. This was a major criticism by readers of similar books.

However, as he states, “a strict attention has been paid, not only to the country of the figures introduced in the different buildings, but to the general air and peculiar carriage, habits, &c. of such characters as are likely to make up the majority in particular places.” The details shown above from Plates 88 and 68 are examples of the many lively and characterful scenes of figures featured in the plates, which are crammed with detail.

Augustus Charles Pugin (1767/8-1832) originally became a draughtsman to the architect John Nash in Wales. Pugin was a great pioneer in the introduction of Gothic architecture
into England, and acknowledged his debt to Nash in the dedication of his first volume of *Specimens of Gothic Architecture* (1828). He arrived in London by 1792 where he enrolled in the Royal Academy Schools. The lectures he attended on architecture were led by Thomas Sandby, a watercolour artist. He encouraged his students to produce not merely architectural plans, but ‘an imaginary portrait of a building as it would look in its setting’. 2
This idea of perspective became a feature of architectural drawing, combining a skill both in drawing and watercolour painting that seemed to suit Pugin.

The turning point in his career was the forming of a connection with Rudolph Ackermann. Pugin’s wife, Catherine, seems to have come up with the idea of producing a variation on the common books of topographical views that had already been published. According to the draft prospectus attributed to Pugin (although it may have been his wife’s writings), the scenes would feature “equally the ‘animate’ scenery, ‘the modes and customs of streets thronged by men and women … hurrying to and fro in the pursuit of pleasure, the concerns of business or toiling in the meaner occupations of life.’” Whilst Pugin contributed the illustrations, it appears that Ackermann (who played the major part in the *Microcosm’s* production) did not think that Pugin’s wife Catherine was capable of writing the text, so gave this task to William Pyne, and subsequently William Combe. Pugin evidently spent a great deal of time perfecting the illustrations, this being his biggest commission so far, providing outlines for approval, sketches and then finished drawings before Rowlandson added the figures. 3

*Detail from Plate 21: House of Commons*
Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) had been a student of the Royal Academy, and was known predominantly as a caricaturist. He lived and studied in Paris at the age of sixteen, and later made frequent tours to the Continent making numerous jottings of the life and characters he witnessed; his inspiration for his art was said to be taken from his views of the public. He and James Gillray are alleged to have been two of the greatest practitioners of the art of caricature in the eighteenth century, and he was employed by Ackermann from 1799 when he illustrated the eighty-seven plates to the publication *Loyal volunteers of London and environs*.

William Henry Pyne (1770-1843) was a writer and artist, one of the original members of the Old Water Colour Society founded in 1804 and also an exhibitor at the Royal Academy. He was also a caricaturist, representing the social characters of the time and produced two books: *Etchings of rustic figures for the embellishment of landscape* and *Microcosm, or, A picturesque delineation of the arts, agriculture, manufactures, &c. of Great Britain* … 4 However, he became connected with Ackermann in 1803 by providing text for many of Ackermann’s publications, and this collaboration included his contribution of the text for the first two volumes of the *Microcosm*. 
As a skilful etcher, Pyne often made prints of his drawings; he was also among the first artists to draw on stone for lithographic reproduction. He began a long collaboration with Rudolph Ackermann to publish several books, the first in 1798 entitled *Book with Groups of Figures by Pyne for Decorating Landscapes*, and also supplied the figures for some of the plates in Ackermann's other publications.
The writer S.T. Prideaux has highlighted the influence Ackermann had on the history of book illustration, and has paid tribute to his achievement: “Throughout three centuries of book production there is no more attractive figure than that of Rudolph Ackermann, through whose extraordinary enterprise and spirit of adventure aquatint was for many years successfully applied to the illustration of books. The versatility of his achievement has rarely been equalled.”

Detail from Plate 58: Old Bailey

References

3. Ibid.
4. Copies held in the MERL Library (see the list of related works below).

Additional reading

- *Motif* 13 (1967)
Detail of market sellers from Plate 9: Billingsgate Market

Related works in the University of Reading rare book collections and the MERL Library

- *The history of the colleges of Winchester, Eton, and Westminster: with the Charter-House, the school of St. Paul’s, Merchant Taylors, Harrow and Rugby and the Free-School of Christ’s Hospital*. London: Printed for and published by R. Ackermann, 1816. OVERSTONE FOLIO 14J/10