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Patricia Mainardi

exhibition review of

Infinite Jest Caricature from Leonardo to Levine

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Infinite Jest: Caricature from Leonardo to Levine
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
September 13, 2011 – March 4, 2012

Catalogue:

Constance C. McPhee and Nadine M. Orenstein,

Infinite Jest: Caricature from Leonardo to Levine.

New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012.

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An unintended consequence of the current financial problems facing museums is that they are obliged to organize exhibitions based on their own collections instead of giving us a never-ending cycle of blockbuster shows. As a result, museum exhibitions have become more imaginative than in the past, often surprising us with the depth of collections we never knew existed. Who would have thought, for instance, that the august Metropolitan Museum of Art has a world-class collection of caricature? And yet, the exhibition *Infinite Jest: Caricature from Leonardo to Levine* is comprised of works from the Met's own collection, which is stunning in its depth and breadth (fig. 1). Conceived by the Met's two curators of prints and drawings, Constance C. McPhee and Nadine M. Orenstein, the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue survey the entire history of caricature, with everything from a Leonardo drawing to a witty send-up by Enrique Chagoya of Barack Obama as seen by George Cruikshank. While it includes works ranging from the late fifteenth century to the present, its focus, as might be expected, is the great age of caricature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And although caricature is by no means limited to the west, or even to the modern tradition, when we consider the size of the exhibition, over 160 works, we should be happy that the curators did limit it both geographically and chronologically.



Fig. 1, Entrance, *Infinite Jest* exhibition. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. [\[larger image\]](#)

Caricature is familiar to the general public, but it has received relatively little scholarly attention, either in museums or in academic art history. The last survey exhibition was in 1971 at the Rhode Island School of Design Art Museum; subsequent exhibitions have focused on narrower topics, like Roberta Waddell's *James Gillray* show at the New York Public Library in 2004–05.[1] Scholarly studies have also focused on limited areas, for example Robert

Goldstein's *Censorship of Political Caricature in Nineteenth-Century France*, or Diana Donald's *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III*.^[2] There is no general survey, and what publications exist are more picture books than histories. The basic theoretical essay still remains the brief study *Caricature*, published in 1940 by E. H. Gombrich and Ernst Kris.^[3] Orenstein and McPhee, in contrast, have formulated an ambitious project, attempting to present the medium in its entirety and its genealogy, in both exhibition and catalogue.

The curators' main premise is that, although Northern European printmaking developed satire, particularly through moralizing images, political and religious caricature began as exaggerated portrait drawing in sixteenth-century Italy. For them, the purest form of caricature is, at base, exaggeration. This quality can be seen in works by the many Italian artists besides Leonardo who are represented in the exhibition; Carracci, Bernini, Tiepolo, as well as lesser known figures. For these artists, however, caricature was an amusement, rarely moralizing. Pier Leone Ghezzi (1674–1755) is identified as the first self-conscious caricaturist, making a living in late-seventeenth-century Rome with drawings mocking tourists and his fellow Romans alike. This tradition of witty Italian drawings was so popular with British tourists that the publisher Arthur Pond reissued (one might say plagiarized) a collection of such drawings in London in 1736. Thus transplanted to England, the tradition quickly took root and inspired the great age of British caricature, seen here in numerous works by Thomas Rowlandson, James Gillray, and George Cruikshank, all of whom were professional caricaturists, earning their living with pens dipped in acid. Interestingly enough, there was little caricature produced in France until the Revolutionary period when, inspired by English models, it began to thrive. This genealogy is demonstrated in the exhibition by the juxtaposition of Eugène Delacroix's 1822 lithograph *Watch Your Rear!!!!* with Isaac Cruikshank's 1799 hand-colored etching, *General Swallow Destroying the French Army*, on which it is based. The great age of French caricature came later, with such major figures as Grandville and Honoré Daumier, both well represented in the exhibition, and with the establishment of the French caricature journals *La Caricature* (1830–35) and *Le Charivari* (1832–1937), examples of which are on display.

Infinite Jest comprises three large galleries, walls, and display cases filled with prints, drawings, books and periodicals, with works spilling out into the corridor on both sides (fig. 2). The show touches all the bases one might expect, from Leonardo da Vinci, whom many consider the inventor of the medium, through the great English artists William Hogarth, Thomas Rowlandson, George Cruickshank, and James Gillray, touching on Spain with Francisco Goya, France with Grandville and Honoré Daumier, and America with Thomas Nast. Continuing into the twentieth century, there are wonderful works by Al Hirschfeld and David Levine, and there are even a few twenty-first-century examples.



Fig. 2, Gallery view, *Infinite Jest* exhibition. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

[\[larger image\]](#)

One's first thought is how on earth could anyone—curator or audience—make sense of a tradition that extends through several centuries and covers all of Europe and the Americas? Here the curators deserve our applause for charting a path through this material that is visually clear and always interesting. It would be impossible to organize such a show chronologically, as stylistic development and national movements are of limited importance to the medium. Instead, they set it up as a series of categories, grouping together images with similar themes. In the first gallery, “Elements of Caricature,” images are analyzed through their component parts, as a sort of Caricature 101; in the catalogue, a brief essay by Orenstein with the same title performs this function. Thus armed, the viewer can navigate the rest of the exhibition, which is broken down thematically into small groupings. The juxtaposition of somewhat dissimilar works that share a theme succeeds in making the images both homogeneous and individual at the same time. Since the Met owns splendid examples of hand-colored prints—for example, a major collection of the work of Thomas Rowlandson—the galleries have the freshness and verve that one associates with comic strips, with staccato notes of brilliant color enlivening what otherwise might be a monotonous installation of small, framed works (fig. 3). Each work in the show is accompanied by a wall label of explanatory text, necessary since so many of the references have become obscure. This didn't seem to deter the viewers: quite the contrary, on my several visits there were always attentive readers as well as viewers.



Fig. 3, Gallery view, *Infinite Jest* exhibition. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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The introduction to the exhibition, as well as the major catalogue essay “‘Shoot Folly as It Flies’: Humor on Paper,” which McPhee wrote with contributions by Orenstein, gives an historical overview of the development of the medium. The word *caricature* comes from the Italian *carico* and *caricare*, “to load” and “to exaggerate,” and although fifteenth-century examples exist, the medium really began to flourish in the sixteenth century when paper became more widely available. At its origins, caricature referred to a type of portrait drawing, the features exaggerated in some way; these early works are featured in the “Elements of Caricature” gallery, with overhead wall labels identifying subcategories such as “Exaggeration and Distortion,” “Folly of the World,” “Extreme Physiques,” “People as Animals,” and “People as Objects.” Each heading is illustrated by numerous examples; “Exaggeration and Distortion,” for example, features drawings by and prints after Leonardo, including the famous etching by Wenceslaus Hollar of *Five Grotesque Heads* (1646), made long after Leonardo’s death. Hogarth’s famous *Characters and Caricaturas* (1743) is also here, where he counsels—obviously to no avail—against such exaggerations. *Folly of the World* focuses on seventeenth-century Dutch moralizing prints, *Extreme Physiques* on eighteenth-century English grotesques, and *People as Animals* features illustrations of human character based on their animal resemblances. Giovanni Battista della Porta’s 1586 treatise *On Human Physiognomy* is included here, as it influenced centuries of artists and was later codified by Charles LeBrun in the seventeenth century and Johann Kaspar Lavater in the eighteenth. A section on *Processions* is included in the catalogue as one of the basic elements of caricature; these works were placed outside the gallery, in the corridor, where they formed a witty counterpoint to the procession of viewers entering the exhibition, adding a certain note of self-consciousness to our progress: “Do we really look like that?”

The Second Gallery, “Social Satire,” displays images lampooning every variety of human weakness. Here the groupings are, as one might expect: “Eating and Drinking”; “Gambling”; “Fashion” (the largest section in the show and evidently a never-ending source of entertainment); “The Art World”; and “Crowds.” Two gems on exhibit here are the rare hand-colored lithograph by Pierre-Nolasque Bergeret, *Dawdlers of the Rue du Coq* (1805), and Theodore Lane’s 1821 hand-colored etching, *Honi. Soit. Qui. Mal. Y. Pense: The Caricature Shop of G. Humphrey, 27 St. James Street* (1821). Both demonstrate, through the counterpoint of the viewers depicted in the prints gawking at the caricatures on display in print shop windows and we, museum visitors, doing much the same in the galleries, the never-ending delights of this art form. The section on fashion, with its juxtaposition of English and French examples, points up a quality that might otherwise be less apparent, namely the misogyny of so much English caricature. Thomas Rowlandson’s 1792 *Six Stages of Mending a Face*, for example, shows, in sequential imagery, the transformation of a bald toothless crone into a seductive young coquette. Such images abound: an anonymous British artist produced *Top and Tail* in 1777, in which an elaborate coiffure is perched upon naked buttocks with no intervening torso. Though French artists were not immune from misogyny, the degree of nastiness in the British images seems unique and is apparent in the British predilection for truly revolting physiognomies—grossly obese, morbidly thin, drooling, or covered with warts. In contrast, French caricature seems almost classically beautiful: only Louis-Léopold Boilly’s *Grimaces* of 1823 (reproduced as the catalogue cover) comes even close to British extremes.

The last gallery lacks an over-riding theme and is, instead, composed of smaller thematic groupings. In contrast to the previous gallery’s social critiques, most of these are political. The

gallery's categories include "America and Mexico"; "Foreigners"; "Reversals and Revolutions"; "Napoleon"; "Delacroix as Satirist"; "France in the 1830s" (where Daumier receives star billing), and finally "Celebrities," which is continued in the outside corridor with more recent works. While this section of the show is the least coherent thematically, it succeeds in suggesting the enormous variety and richness of caricature through the centuries, for virtually every political event, every celebrity, every fashion has bred a plethora of satiric drawings that could have been included here.

The exhibition catalogue basically follows the same format as the exhibition; in addition to the main essay, "Shoot Folly as It Flies," and the introductory "Elements of Caricature," it contains three brief essays, "Social Satire" by McPhee, "Politics," and "Celebrities," coauthored by both curators (fig. 4). The main body of the catalogue is comprised of entries on individual works, written by the curators, which reproduce and discuss each object in the show and include relevant bibliography. It is unusual in that virtually all the works are reproduced in color; in most publications, alas, reproductions of prints and drawings are relegated to black and white images, and cost-cutting budgets have increasingly turned catalogues into coffee table books with essays but no individual entries. In this case, the curators' respect for the ephemeral art form of caricature is made manifest through an elegant and scholarly catalogue that is not just a handsome publication, but is also a valuable research tool.

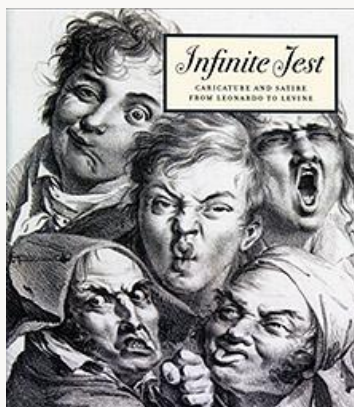


Fig. 4, Catalogue cover for *Infinite Jest*. [\[larger image\]](#)

In both the exhibition and in the catalogue, it is apparent that the curators' intention is to establish the taxonomy of caricature in all its breadth and variety. Their exhibition has opened doors to myriad possibilities for future investigation, and we owe them an enormous debt of gratitude for bringing these works, rarely seen, to our attention, and setting a high standard of scholarship for future research.

Patricia Mainardi
Professor Emerita of Art History
The Graduate Center, City University of New York
Visiting Professor

New York University
Pmainardi[at]gc.cuny.edu

Notes

[1] *Caricature and Its Role in Graphic Satire: An Exhibition by the Department of Art, Brown University*, April 7 – May 9, 1971, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence; catalogue: Juergen Schulz, ed., *Caricature and Its Role in Graphic Satire* (Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1971). *James Gillray*, Print Gallery and Stokes Gallery, New York Public Library, October 29, 2004 – January 30, 2005. There was no printed catalogue, but the online catalogue can be accessed at <http://legacy.www.nypl.org/research/chss/spe/art/print/exhibits/gillray/>.

[2] Robert Justin Goldstein, *Censorship of Political Caricature in Nineteenth-Century France* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1989); Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Another valuable study is Judith Wechsler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in 19th-Century Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

[3] E. H. Gombrich and Ernst Kris, *Caricature* (London: Penguin, 1940).

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Entrance, *Infinite Jest* exhibition. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
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Fig. 2, Gallery view, *Infinite Jest* exhibition. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
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Fig. 3, Gallery view, *Infinite Jest* exhibition. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
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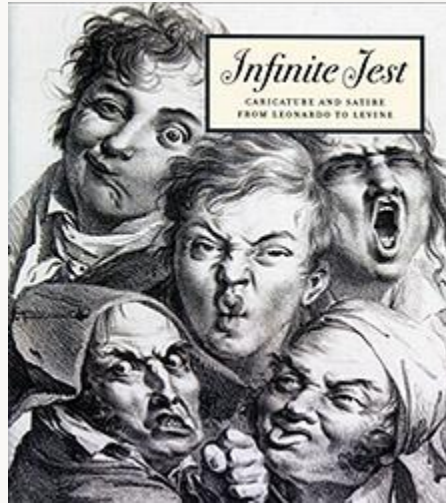


Fig. 4, Catalogue cover for *Infinite Jest*. [\[return to text\]](#)