ART AND OCCUPATION

William Hogarth

The fellow ’prentices at their looms, a drawing for Plate 1 of Industry and Idleness, 1747

The interior of a silk-weaving shop provides the setting for one of William Hogarth’s 18th century morality tales [1]. Two apprentice weavers Francis Goodchild and Thomas Idle are applying themselves to their labours. The neatly dressed, well-groomed Francis, bathed in sunlight from the window, diligently concentrates on his work as he carefully and with obvious satisfaction passes the shuttle between the threads of the warp on his loom. A pristine copy of The Prentice’s Guide lies at his feet and behind him pinned to the wall are various items of uplifting literature, including The London Prentice and Whittington Lord Mayor to ‘improve his mind and enlighten his understanding’ [2]. Meanwhile, on the dark side of the room, the unkempt Tom is asleep on the job, his shuttle like his future hanging idly by its threads—a ready toy for the playful cat (another reference to Whittington?). His Prentice Guide lies tattered, soiled and discarded on the floor and behind him nailed to the post is a copy of the bawdy tale Moll Flanders [3]. A clay pipe is wedged into the handle of his loom and a tankard labelled ‘Spittle Fields’ [4] rests above it—all...
signs of Tom’s wayward lifestyle. The decorations on the frame of the picture confirm the boys’ futures: to the left of Tom, a whip, fetters and a rope; to the right, by Francis, a ceremonial mace, sword of state and an alderman’s golden chain and below each apprentice are quotations from the Book of Proverbs.

*The Drunkard shall come to Poverty, & drowsiness shall cloth a Man with Rags;* [5]

*The hand of the diligent maketh rich* [6]

A third character, the apprentices’ master, Mr West has just entered the room to oversee their progress. He stares angrily at Tom and carries his cane threateningly over his left shoulder. (Masters taught discipline as well as skills in 18th century England.) Disobedience and punishment are established as the dominant themes of Tom’s life, whereas diligence and reward will be Francis’s.

*Industry and Idleness* is the title of a series of 12 plot-linked pictures, which were created solely as engravings. The prints were aimed at a mass market and sold for 1 shilling each [7]. The remaining prints in the series show the progress of the two apprentices [8] as they speed to-towards their fates: Francis to the Guild House as Lord Mayor of London and Tom to Tyburn and a public execution. At the end of the drama, the hard-working apprentice has obviously done well and his idle counterpart has obviously done poorly and he idle counterpart miserably. The message to working children is clear—hard work and diligent application bring rewards but idleness courts disaster.

Hogarth was born in the City of London in 1697 the fifth child of a Latin teacher. He was apprenticed to a silversmith and by 1720 had established his own engraving business [9]. He studied painting in his spare time at the St Martin’s Lane Academy and later under Sir James Thornhill, whose daughter he married in 1729 [10]. By the early 1730s, he had introduced his morality tales con-fronting the city, sexuality, integration, crime and political corruption. *A Harlot’s Progress* was followed by *A Rake’s Progress and Marriage à la Mode*. Later came *Industry and Idleness*, *Beer Street* and perhaps most famously * Gin Lane*. These images proved very popular and provided Hogarth with a degree of financial security although his ambition was to become a great history painter. Two murals in the Great Hall, St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, London, are stunning examples of this classical style. *The Pool of Bethesda* and *The Good Samaritan* are said to be based on patients at the hospital [11]. In 1757, Hogarth was ap-pointed ‘Serjeant Painter’ to King George II and in 1762, he published an anti-war satire *The Times*. The follow-ing year, he had a paralytic seizure but started work again. He died 6 months later aged 66.

Perhaps, therefore, it is no surprise that the first factory Act in the UK (1802) was as much about the morals as the health of apprentices [12]. Apprenticeship remains an im-portant and alternative career pathway for UK young people with almost 250 000 starts in 2008/09 [13] but to-day’s workplace regulators are less concerned with ap-

prentices’ moral welfare than their health and safety. A report from the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work identifies that there are >20 million European Union young workers (~10% of the workforce), who ac-count for 8.9% of all fatal occupational accidents. How-ever, in line with the results in the rest of world, this same group has a higher non-fatal occupational accident rate than older workers.

Surprisingly, the report’s recommendations regarding education, training and inspection have familiar echoes from the pages of the 1802 Act [14]. And as for young people’s morals plus ça change . . . .

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References

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