

Criticism and the Illustrated Periodical

Sometimes described, in the words of Eric de Maré, as ‘the Boxwood Age,’¹ but more usually classified as ‘The Sixties’, the period from 1855 to the middle of the 1870s is one of the most productive epochs in the history of British illustration. Enshrined in a series of important archives – notably the de Beaumont Collection in the British Museum – the images produced during this period have always been popular and widely collected. Scholarship has been similarly attentive and wide reaching, offering several ways in which to interpret this ‘golden age.’ Most attention has been directed at the artists’ individual contributions, although Julia Thomas has recently re-read sixties’ designs as visual texts in which it is possible to detect a mid-Victorian ‘inscription of value.’² The illustrations can also be read as embellishments for literature, or, in the terms of Geoffrey Wakeman, as the products of a ‘technical revolution’ in the art of printing.³ All of these perspectives are important, and explain key aspects of what is undoubtedly a complex phenomenon. However, a broader view is obtained if we consider the period historically, as part of the wider traditions of graphic art.

Located in a nexus of styles, the ‘golden age’ was unquestionably a break with the past, and revolutionised the aesthetics of the printed page. In one sense, the ‘new’ design was a complete change from the style of Germanic artists such as Selous, Franklin and Tenniel, whose dramatic compositions dominated the forties; but the greatest contrast was between the sixties and the ‘knockabout’ humour of Cruikshank, Doyle, Leech and Phiz. The comic modes employed by these designers were comprehensively replaced by the art of the mid-Victorians. Of special significance were Rossetti, Millais, Holman Hunt, Sandys, Pinwell, du Maurier, Houghton and Walker, although we should also remember the impressive talents of Burne-Jones, Simeon Solomon, J.D. Watson, Small, Hughes, Lawless, Barnes and Pettie. Dividing their time between painting and graphic design, these masters of black and white offered a distinct body of images and themes which transformed the ‘look’ of British illustration.

There was a radical change, as one might predict, in the quality of drawing and composition. Trained as painters, the artists of the sixties greatly

¹ *The Victorian Woodblock Illustrators*. London: Gordon Fraser, 1980, p.7.

² *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription of Values in Word and Image*. Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2004.

³ *Victorian Book Illustration: The Technical Revolution*. Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973.



The TRIUMPH of CUPID.

Young Grikshank

REVEREND

"Ex Fumo dare Lucem"

improved the formal standards of illustration by applying the ‘academic’ draughtsmanship of fine art to the smaller domain of the book or periodical. Painting became the standard by which excellence was judged, not the satirical print. The intricate, scratchy style of caricaturists such as Doyle (fig. 1) was replaced by ‘correct’ drawing and perspective, and this formality produced an effect in which the illustration is figured as a miniature oil in black and white.



3. Rossetti, ‘The Weeping Queens.’ Tennyson, *Poems*.
London: Moxon, 1857, p. 119.
Engraved by the Dalziels.

The illustrations’ expressive range, so often confined to the comic grotesque or the satiric hit, was similarly enlarged. Cruikshank’s febrile imagery had dominated the long period from the twenties to the forties (fig. 2); artists of the mid-nineteenth century, on the other hand, were far broader in scope. Difficult to pin down to a single formulation, the sixties style can be traced from the medievalism of Rossetti (fig. 3) and Sandys (fig. 4), with its yearning figures and extravagant costumes, to the idealised domesticity of Millais (fig. 5) and the barbed lyricism of Houghton (fig. 6). It also includes the social observation of du Maurier (fig. 7) and Keene (fig. 8); the picturesque landscapes of Birket Foster (fig. 9); and the poetic ruralism of the Idyllicists, Pinwell (fig. 10) and Walker (fig. 11). By turns sentimental and realistic, medievalist and mid-Victorian, the designers of the sixties offered a rich imagery which is both escapist and satirical, highly moral and overwhelmed with a sense of archaic dreaminess.

Opposite: 2. Cruikshank, ‘A Reverie.’ *George Cruikshank’s Table Book*.
London: The Punch Office, 1845, facing p.1. Steel engraving.



4. Sandys, 'The Death of King Warwolf'.
Once a Week, 30 August 1862, p.266.
Engraved by Swain.

Image taken from *Reproductions of Woodcuts by F. Sandys*. London: Hentschel, n.d.