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AN ELECTION, A SET OF FOUR COPPER ENGRAVED PRINTS.

After William Hogarth, printed 1805 by Thomas Cook

Bribery and corruption during an election campaign.

DIMENSIONS: 57cm (22^½") High, 69cm (27^¾") Wide

STOCK CODE: P00547



HISTORY

Hogarth's Election series was inspired by the notorious Oxfordshire contest in the General Election of 1754. The seats had been held, uncontested, by the Tories, since 1710. Then in 1752 the Whigs, who already held a large majority in Parliament, decided to contest the Oxfordshire seats and this heralded a two-year campaign characterised by unprecedented levels of bribery and corruption. These prints are based on the four paintings Hogarth started not long after the General Election. By this time the events in Oxfordshire had been widely

publicised through journals and pamphlets. The paintings were bought from Hogarth by the actor David Garrick and later acquired by John Soane at an auction of the effects of Mrs Garrick in 1823. The Gentleman's Magazine had been critical of Hogarth's work calling it, 'the very many disgusting, if not depraved exhibitions of human nature' in the paintings. Fortunately Soane instead recognised them as the finest of Hogarth's satirical works.

1. An Election Entertainment The scene is an election 'treat' given by the Whigs to gain voters' support. The guests are arranged around two tables with the two candidates seated at the far end to the left of the picture. One candidate is suffering the attentions of an old hag and the other has been collared by a pair of drunks. At the opposite end of the table the Mayor has collapsed after consuming a surfeit of oysters and the election agent has just been struck by a brick thrown by the Tory mob outside. In the foreground (from left to right) a Quaker is carefully examining an I.O.U. (clearly a bribe); a boy adds more alcohol to the punch, and a butcher pours wine or gin over the head of a bruiser who has been fighting with the crowd outside.

2. Canvassing for Votes The second scene takes place in a village street in front of three Inns, the Royal Oak, the Crown and the Portobello. The landlady of the Royal Oak is counting her 'treat' money. Behind her the figurehead of a lion is about to consume the French fleur-de-lys, a reference to the continuing war between Britain and France. In the middle of the picture an innkeeper is being solicited by representatives from the two parties and is happily taking bribes from both. Images of bribery abound, even on the new Inn sign in the foreground where a shower of gold flows from the Treasury into the wheelbarrow of 'PUNCH' the candidate for 'GUZZLEDOWN'. Here Hogarth is suggesting that the Whigs, the party of power, have been using taxpayer's money to fund election treats and other bribes. A close look at the sign reveals a coachman in the distance having his head knocked off as he drives under the arch of the Horse Guards in Whitehall. To the right of the picture two drinkers discuss the decline of Britain's naval fortunes; the man with the pipe is a blind cobbler who obviously cannot see his companion's complicated demonstration. In the distance it appears that a Whig treat is being attacked by an angry mob of taxpayers.

3. The Polling The polling stand is adorned with the flags of the two parties and the candidates sit at back. The Tory candidate is scratching his head, seeming anxious, and the Whig

candidate is looking smugly satisfied. The excitement has proved too much for the election agent who has fallen asleep between the two candidates. The stand is being swamped by a motley collection of individuals. On the right a dispute is arising involving a soldier who has lost his hands – the Tory representative appears unhappy, taking issue with the man's attempts to take an oath with his metal hook. At the front of the stand a Tory supporter is trying to extract a vote from a man who is clearly not in full command of his faculties; the pox-marked representative is fully attentive. Another man in a white shroud is being carried up the steps; he appears to be dying or dead. To the left of the picture Britannia's coach is shown toppling over as the two coachmen cheat each other at cards.

4. Chairing the Member The successful Tory candidates are being chaired through the streets in triumph. One member is part of the central group and the other is only seen in shadow as he approaches the side of the church in the background. Looking out from the window of the building on the left are the supporters of the defeated Whig candidates, some are clearly amused by the scene unfolding below. Even in defeat the feasting continues, as the procession of cooks towards the front door reveals. A soldier, bleeding from a recent fight and stripped to the waist, takes solace in tobacco, unconcerned about the pandemonium breaking out behind him. The chaired Member in the centre of the composition is about to topple, one of his bearers having been struck by the end of a flail wielded by one of his own supporters. The sense of collapse is heightened by the movement of the sow and her litter as they make a dash for safety. On the side of the church wall is a sundial inscribed with the words 'PULVIS ET UMBRA SUMUS' – we are but dust and shadows.