Still life, British graphic art, and the engraved series: c.1680-1735

By Peter Moore

While the *Dead Standing Things* display at Tate Britain showcases the diverse practice of still life painting in Britain during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, there is also a rich history of graphic culture associated with the genre. As this short essay shall demonstrate, the broadening uses of still life as an engraved art form throughout this period can be productively aligned with a process of commercial and pictorial development which is more commonly told through other forms of graphic art produced at the time.

In the decades immediately following the Restoration, the relatively newly discovered process of mezzotint became the preferred *modus operandi* for producing still life imagery in printed form. Like the desirable commodities routinely used to construct still life assemblages, the mezzotint had considerable contemporary fashionable appeal. The medium's tonal qualities allowed artists to emulate the visual effects of paint, and its reputation as being "easily learned...neat…[and] convenient" meant that it was the most cost effective way for engravers to execute numerous designs in quick succession.[i] Among the most prolific producers of still life mezzotints were John Smith, who was regarded by many as "the best mezzotinter" of his generation, and Robert Robinson, an extremely versatile engraver who also painted easel pictures, decorative interiors and stage designs.[ii] Smith's floral mezzotints after Monnoyer exemplify the type of fashionable prints that made still life imagery accessible to wider audiences. Similarly, Robinson's prints – often of his own design but clearly inspired by painted flowers pieces and banquet scenes – demonstrate the way in which the velvety luminescence of mezzotint was exploited to imitate brushwork on canvas. In common with paintings by artists such as Roestraten and Verelst, these kinds of still life prints were deeply rooted in the Dutch tradition of the genre.

While engravings by Smith and Robinson showcase the products of a thriving trade in luxury goods, brought about in large part by Britain's increasingly prosperous global empire, they also signify a growing market for decorative prints at the end of the seventeenth century. Like the paintings they were inspired by, these kinds of images were habitually sold by auction: a commercial system that had been used for the distribution of artworks in the Dutch Republic for much of the seventeenth century, which became common in Britain by the end of the 1680s.[iii] Many of London's auctions took place in taverns or coffee houses, where potential buyers could peruse works amid the hustle and bustle while enjoying a beverage. As John Brewer has noted, such outlets were not places where one could learn about the erudite pleasures of art: "the early auctioneers had little knowledge of what they were selling [and] sales catalogues were perfunctory".[iv] This lively commercial environment seems to have been a particularly important outlet for Robinson's works, which were sold in large quantities and often in quick succession. In January of 1691 for example, at least a dozen pieces of still life by Robinson of fish and banquet scenes were sold in London salerooms.[v] The fact that Robinson's name is scarcely mentioned by contemporary writers on art, yet he appears with such regularity in these more ephemeral "recesses of the London art world", seems to indicate the relatively low status of the kind of still life prints he produced.[vi]

Although picture auctions remained a popular avenue for the sale of prints well into the eighteenth century, new ways of distributing engravings developed too. Individual engraver entrepreneurs began to utilise the subscription model for selling their works, placing advertisements in the London press to publicise ambitious projects and drum up business in advance of their production. In contrast to the highly popular outlet of the auction house, this manner of selling promoted prints as more exclusive, elegant aesthetic objects: still produced in multiples, yet somehow distanced from the increasingly vulgarised mechanisms of mass consumption. As Mark Hallett has noted, this period saw the subscription series become "the conventional modern vehicle for high engraving in the capital", showcasing subjects drawn from history, religion and literature.[vii] For these subjects, line engraving – a much more established form of engraving with a greater artistic heritage – was the medium of choice. The employment of this format and medium for a set of still life prints of marine subjects, published by Arnold van Haecken in 1734, highlights the way in which the conventions of the engraved series was used to elevate the status of the genre.

Titled *The Wonders of the Deep*, van Haecken's eight images were originally produced in oil on canvas, but were later replicated in print by the engravers Giles King and Antonio Jongelinckx for an ambitious commercial venture. In an advertisement placed in London's *Daily Journal* on Thursday 20th December 1733, the artist announced that both "Paintings and Prints" could be seen at his house in Belton Street near

Long Acre – just a stone's throw from the area surrounding Covent Garden, where Britain's first academies of art were to be found.[viii] As the advertisement continued, the engravings were to be had uncoloured, or "neatly washed in their natural Colours as almost to equal the Original Paintings"[ix]. A further note explained that in addition to the various fish and sea creatures depicted in each print, a labelled key would be included, allowing "curious" viewers to identify the "surprising variety" of species on display. Further emphasising a sense of natural variety, van Haecken's finished prints employed picturesque seascapes as backgrounds, depicting fishing boats at sea in an assortment of weather conditions.

By engaging with his subjects with such sensitivity to ecological and naturalistic concerns, van Haecken clearly hoped to distance his imagery from the context of the aristocratic dining table, more commonly used as a setting in ostentatious banquet scenes. Indeed, it seems certain that a key target for his series was Britain's growing corpus of virtuosi, who were interested in the virtues of art and science, as well as other academic disciplines such as history and literature.[x] Appropriately therefore, the images drew upon the visual language of illustrations used in earlier scholarly texts such as *Piscium Vivae Icones*, published in Antwerp throughout the late sixteenth century. In this publication, seascape scenes are juxtaposed with intricately figured specimens of fish and sea creatures, contributing to the engravings' appeal as aesthetic objects, while offering appropriate contexts for the scientific specimens delineated. A comparison between these illustrations and van Haecken's *Wonders of the Deep* demonstrates the significance of the former works as pictorial precedents.

Although clearly responsive to the scientific genre of natural historical illustration, van Haecken evidently sought to promote his engravings as high class, luxury aesthetic objects. Not only were the images printed on a monumental scale of 45 by 58 centimetres, but their price tag of two guineas per set was certainly not a modest one. The invitation for potential subscribers to visit the artist's residence to view the prints and the paintings would certainly have discouraged less affluent customers who may not have felt comfortable in such refined surroundings. In promoting his work in this way, van Haecken employed a method of selling which was customary among the capital's leading engraver-entrepreneurs. Indeed, his marketing strategy closely mirrored the way in which Hogarth had advertised his printed series, *A Rake's Progress*, in the very same week. Yet, unlike Hogarth, who lured subscribers by including "a new etched Print, describing a pleased Audience at a Theatre" and another engraving depicting the "Humours of a Fair" within the price of his series, van Haecken's subscribers simply received the eight still life prints, with no incentivising extras.[xi] Perhaps as a result of poor sales during the series' first two years of production, and witnessing Hogarth's commercial success and meteoric rise to fame during the same period, van Haecken issued a new advertisement for *The Wonders of the Deep* in the *London Evening Post* on February 24th 1736, explaining that new subscribers would thereafter receive an additional print "representing the Humours of a Fish-Market…deliver'd gratis".[xii]

Like Hogarth's satirical 'Humours of a Fair', which subsequently became known as *Southwark Fair*, van Haecken's 'Humours of a Fish-Market' was given greater topographic relevance upon its release by being renamed *The View and Humours of Billingsgate*. During the early eighteenth century, Billingsgate was not only known as the location of London's principal fish market, but was renowned for the seediness of its environs. In Ned Ward's satirical *London Spy*, the market was described as a place "which Stunk of stale Sprats, Piss, and Sirreverence [faeces]".[xiii] Other contemporary commentators remarked upon the notorious whores, or "Oyster-Wenches".[xiv] The market's smutty dialect was colloquially referred to as the "filthy Billingsgate stile", and in the years prior to the production of van Haecken's print, theatrical productions titled "The Humours of Billingsgate" and "The Amours of Billingsgate" cemented the market's place in the popular imagination.[xv] Accordingly, van Haecken's image presents a scene of utter disorderliness, in which fish-sellers and prostitutes jostle with shoppers and voyeurs in the chaotic hubbub of the market. The parallel between the consumption of flesh as edible produce, and the consumption of flesh as a wanton bodily pleasure, would certainly have been recognised by contemporary viewers as being indebted to Hogarth's distinctive brand of graphic satire. Yet, van Haecken's pairing of the image with a series of sedate still life engravings was unprecedented. In juxtaposing these contrasting modes of representation, he evidently sought to modernise the genre of still life by carefully establishing a connection with one of the most popular emerging forms of graphic art of the day.

This short essay is currently being developed into an extended journal article which the author hopes to publish in 2013.

Figure 1. Monnoyer, *Still life of mixed flowers in a vase on a ledge*. c.1690. The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.
Figure 2. Smith (after Monnoyer), *Table-top still-life with roses and other flowers*. 1691. The British Museum.

Figure 3. Roestraten, *Porringer, German cup and oysters*. c.1680, Victoria and Albert Museum.
Figure 4. Robinson, *Still Life with tankard, wine flask and fruit.* c.1674-1706, The British Museum.

Figure 5. Verelst, *Vase of flowers*, c.1680-1710, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
Figure 6. Robinson, *A glass vase of flowers*, c.1680-1688, The British Museum.

Figure 7. A view of four, from a set of eight, of the original paintings by Arnold van Haecken at Fishmongers' Hall

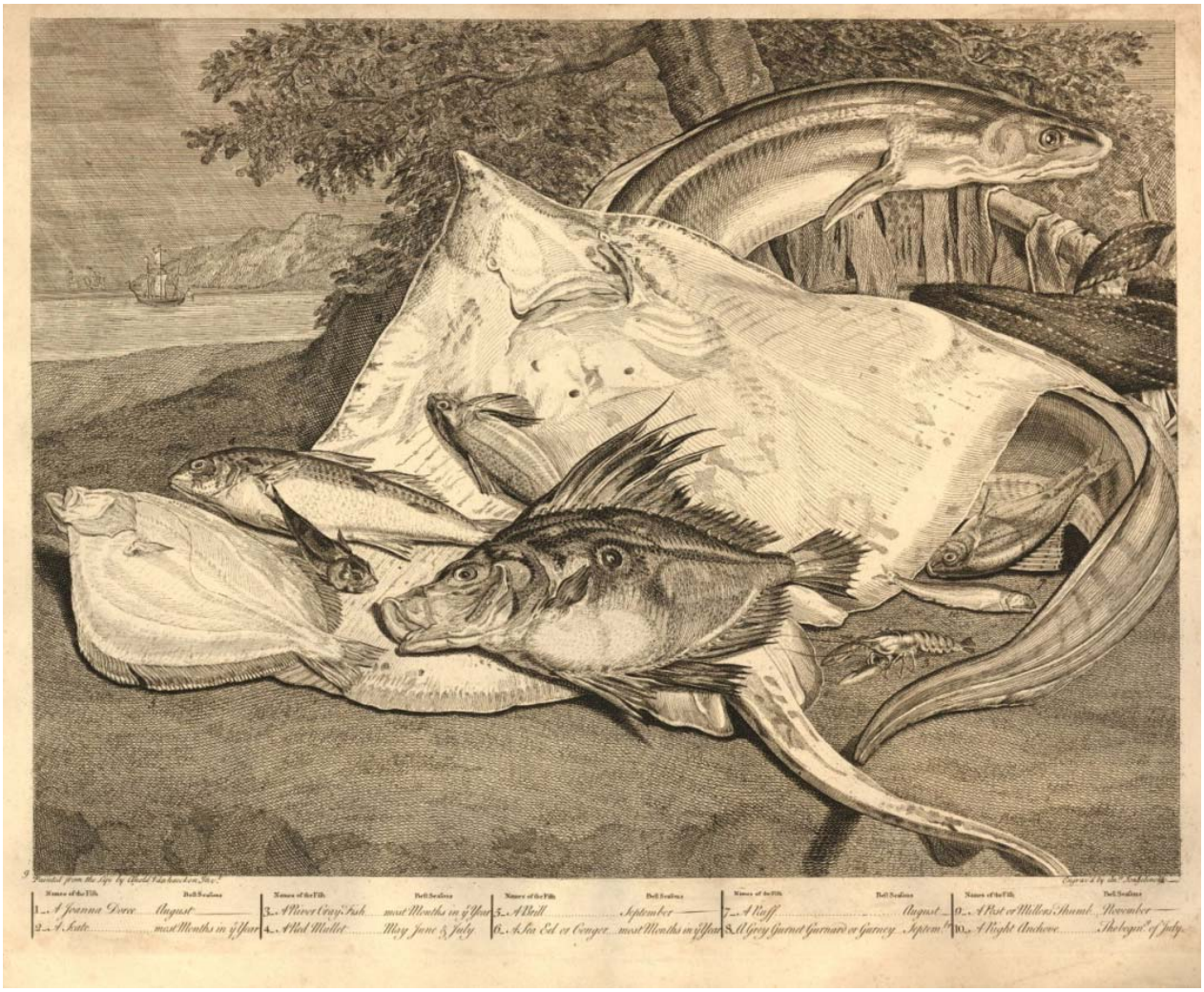

Figure 8. Jongelinckx (after van Haecken), The Wonders of the Deep (Plate 9), 1734, The British Museum.

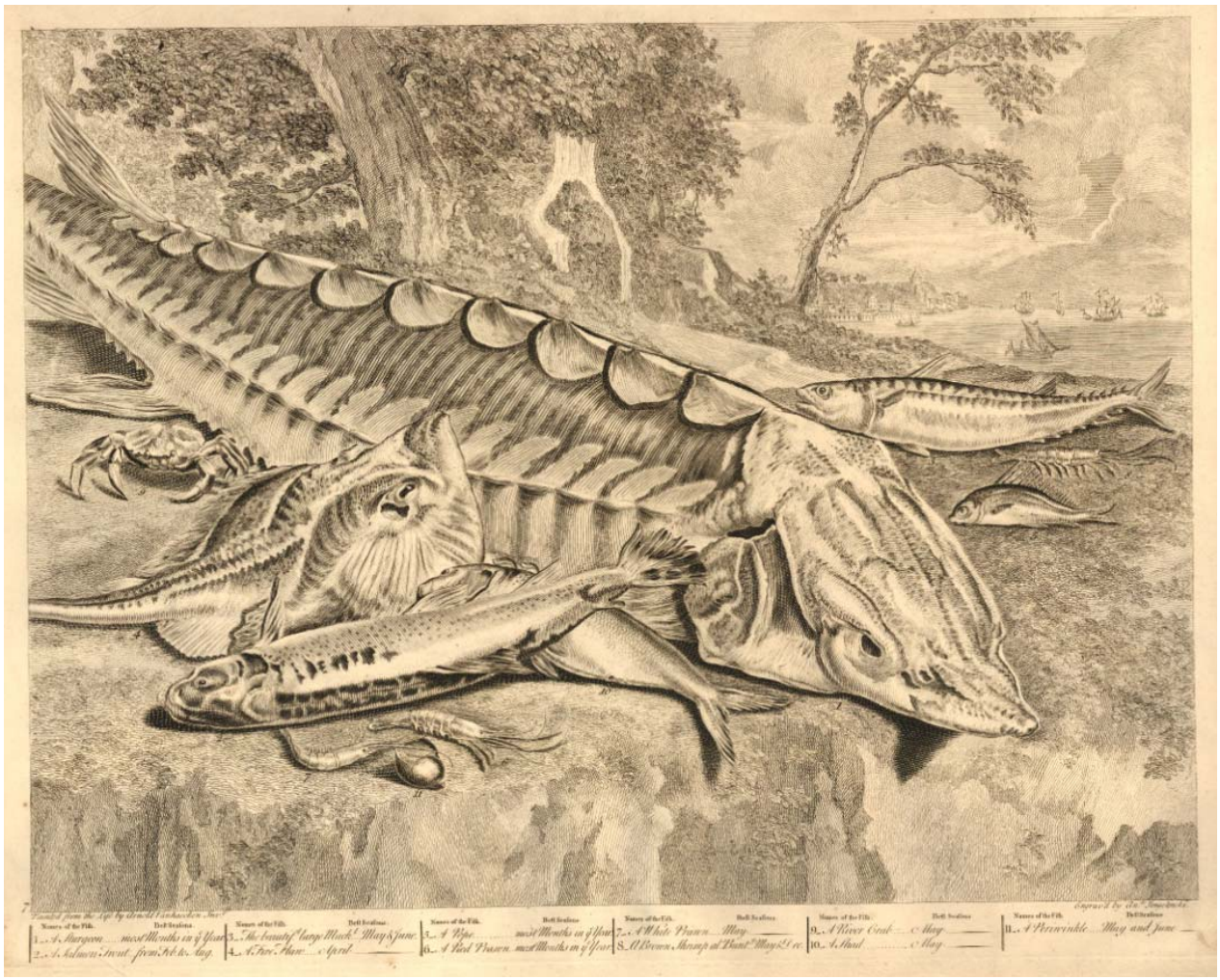

Figure 9. Jongelinckx (after van Haecken), ***The Wonders of the Deep*** **(Plates 7), 1734, The British Museum.**

Figure 10. Collaert, Illustrations from ***Piscium Vivae Icones*****, c.1610, The British Museum.**

Figure 11. Hogarth, *Southwark Fair*, 1734., The British Museum.

Figure 12. van Haecken, *The View and Humours of Billingsgate*, 1736, The British Museum.

[i] De Lairesse, trans. Fritsch, 1738 (vol. 2):397.
[ii] Walpole, 1762:105.
[iii] Unpublished catalogue entry by Sander Karst.
[iv] Brewer, 1997:223.
[v] http://artworld.york.ac.uk; accessed 25 April 2012. Throughout this period the term ‘picture’ or ‘piece’ was used to describe both prints and paintings. Therefore, it is difficult to be certain of the medium of many works sold by Robinson at auction.
[vi] Ganz, 1998:93.
[vii] Hallett, 1999:116.
[viii] Daily Journal, Thursday, December 20, 1733.
[ix] Daily Journal, Thursday, December 20, 1733.
[x] Daily Journal, Thursday, December 20, 1733.
[xi] London Journal, Saturday, December 22, 1733.
[xii] London Evening Post , February 24, 1736.
[xiii] Ward, 1703:38.
[xiv] Observator, September 15, 1708.
[xv] Patriot, May 28, 1714; Daily Post, Tuesday, April 20, 1731; Daily Post, Thursday, June 10, 1731.