

AHS London Lecture Thursday 12 January 2023

Patricia Fara, William Hogarth. Time's Artist

'Time is Money', wrote Benjamin Franklin, the political publisher who came to epitomize the self-made man. During the eighteenth century, advances in horological technology went hand in hand with booming commercialization and expanding industrialization to encourage a new emphasis on the value of telling time accurately. William Hogarth (1697-1764), Britain's most famous artist of the period, commented on these deep shifts by including an exceptionally high number of references in his paintings both to the passage of time and to devices for measuring it.

As though telling stories with his paintbrush, Hogarth created London scenes that could be read to reveal the fault lines in Enlightenment culture. Whether presented as a chronological sequence or a single image, they depict an imagined present but also implicitly refer to the past and the future. Every canvas and print

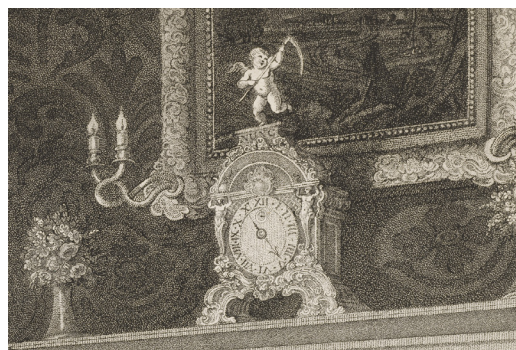


William Hogarth (1697-1764), *The Lady's Last Stake*, c. 1759, engraving, Royal Collection Trust / © His Majesty King Charles III 2022.

is packed with symbols – a guttering candle, a cracked wall, a fallen wine glass, a missing wedding ring – that form a visual language to convey coded messages about moral decline.

Initially apprenticed as an engraver, Hogarth had an insider's knowledge of London's craft world that enabled him to depict timekeepers faithfully. His clocks and watches are realistically portrayed, but they do far more than simply indicate the time of day: they also monitor their owners' personal dilemmas and emotions. Many of Hogarth's paintings were designed to condemn greed and corruption, so clocks and watches feature as decorative items representing wealth, ruthless ambition and the demand for luxury possessions. Ranging from the watch at a harlot's waist to the elaborate ornament on an aristocrat's mantelpiece, they indicate the transience of human life and deplore the aspirations of social climbers.

By focusing on a few key pictures, this lecture explores various time-telling techniques that Hogarth devised. By the time of his death, his youthful cynicism had jaded into disillusioned despair



Dr Patricia Fara is an historian of science and has been President of the AHS since 2016. In the ongoing series of short articles published under the heading 'Unfreezing Time', started in the March 2020 journal, she discusses a number of images, each illustrating a different way of incorporating time and its passing within a picture without showing a clock.

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