

Hogarth's *Marriage à la Mode* and Henry James's "A London Life": Versions of the English Rococo

It was only in 1984 that a large-scale exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum could bring Hogarth and his basic relation to the Rococo into the open. Art historians had been avoiding an attachment of such an outstanding artist to a genre which has always had in England a pejorative meaning. Although Frederick Antal's book on the sources of Hogarth¹ could not miss seeing such connections, the combination of Rococo forms with moralistic ends accomplished first in the art of Hogarth seemed to argue against his creating in a genre usually associated either with the aristocratic frivolity of Fragonard and Watteau or the verbose mythology of Tiepolo. The art histories of the nineteen sixties and seventies rarely got Hogarth and his historical genre together. But Richard Rosenblum, following Antal, has seen that the English Rococo, which was personified in Hogarth, influenced French painting in the middle of the century; witness painters like Greuze, who made the same moralistic interpretation as Hogarth within the Rococo framework of design—the unstable composition, the delicate brushwork, the heritage of Watteau from the early part of the century.² In Watteau there was pleasure-seeking accompanied by a melancholia which Greuze, as a didactic painter, naturally foreswore. This combination of moralism and Rococo design, the kind of design we associate with Fragonard and Boucher, was really the invention of Hogarth. In British painting, there had been a development of the tradition of seventeenth century portraiture. But the gay insouciance of Rococo subject matter and technique had been missing from English art. When the Rococo hit it, it found itself in the moralizing and yet, to a certain extent, fun-loving, bawdy and literary narrative quality of the Hogarth Progress series.

Even the catalogue of the Victoria and Albert show, while recognizing Hogarth as the dominating influence in the rococo arts of engraving, textiles, design and furniture,³ hesitates to mention the great Hogarthian

monuments to the English Rococo. In its concentration on the minor arts, the silver of Paul De Lamerie and the Huguenot influence on engravings of the period, the catalogue illustrates the dominant force of Hogarth as the leader of St. Martin's Academy, his center for the education of artists and artisans. In the three engraved Progress series, *A Harlot's Progress* (1732), *The Rake's Progress* (1735) and finally the chef d'oeuvre of the movement, *Marriage à la Mode* (1743-5), Hogarth managed to wrest from the Rococo an interpretation all his own. Using the props of William Kent and the forms of the emerging conversation piece, he infused their static forms with the energies of the Rococo aesthetic of the unstable. In almost every plate chairs are thrown off their legs and become the chief icon *par excellence* of this new "imagination of disaster." As each Progress ends in the death, or the moment before death, of the heroine or hero towards which the preceding scenes of violence lead, the overturned chairs function as the concrete symbol of the eventual destruction of the self. In Plate 5 of *A Harlot's Progress* Moll Hackabout's moment of dying is iconically presented by the overturned small table or chair in the picture foreground, while in the background one of the arguing doctors is in the act of overturning his chair, symbolic of the reversal of a medical opinion. In Plate 3, the brothel scene of *The Rake's Progress*, the Rake has broken his chair in the center foreground and replaced it by another, but in Plate 6 where he troubles deaf heaven with his gambling losses he is assimilated in the center foreground once more with an overturned chair which acts as an iconic *alter ego*. In the plate devoted to the Rake in the debtor's prison, two chairs are assigned both to Sarah Young and to the fast deteriorating Rake in the foreground. In the last plate, Bedlam (Fig. IX), no chairs are allowed as they are not allowed on the maximum security wards today. Chairs can become the weapons of the insane. The only chair is the chariot on which Britannia rides scratched