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The American Dressing Academy: a venue for early American caricature prints

ABSTRACT

In America at the turn of the nineteenth century, separately published engraved caricature prints were made with surprisingly little regularity. With so few caricature prints made at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a natural assumption might be that this imagery was unimportant, that these prints were less commonly seen, or that there was a limited audience; however, a number of primary documents have suggested otherwise. Because of the numerous announcements located in newspapers it is known that caricature prints in America were sold primarily in book and print shops; advertisements announced new caricatures on offer and where such prints can be purchased. However, another venue served as a sale point and discussion forum with a

captive audience: barbers took to newspapers to announce the many services offered and mentioned the arrival of new forms of entertainment for the waiting gentleman customer. While adverts provide evidence that caricature prints could be seen in barbershops, it is not known to what extent these prints were sold or for how much they were sold for. This was a male-dominated space, but there were female equivalents: an advertisement by the barber John Richard Desborous Huggins refers to two sections, one addressed to the “ladies” for the “School of Fashion” followed by a section meant for male clients at the “Dressing Academy”. The article would like to contribute to the understanding of how caricature prints in America were seen and how barbershops were one of the most important spaces for their circulation.

The American caricature print *All in my eye!* (fig. 1) provides previously unknown information on how an early nineteenth century audience might have seen and purchased caricature prints. In 1806, the caricaturist James Akin (1773-1846) depicted the basic interior of a New England barbershop. He included a back wall consisting of

caricature prints, which would have been available to a male clientele either waiting for a service or being served by the barber.¹ Two of the caricatures appear to have been framed while the remaining prints have been tacked to the wall with large pins (see detail of fig. 1 in fig. 2).² The scene represented by James Akin visually supports contem-



Fig. 1: James Akin (1773-1846) *All in my eye!*, hand-colored engraving, 1806
The Charles Peirce Collection of Social and Political Caricatures and Ballads,
American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts

porary evidence found in newspapers that allude to caricature prints being available for purchase and on view in barbershops. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century barbers, much like book or print shops, frequently advertised the arrival of new

- 1 James Akin was born in South Carolina in 1773 and was active in the cities of Newburyport, Massachusetts between 1804 and 1807 before settling in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania until his death in 1846. For the most thorough biography on James Akin, please consult Maureen O'Brien Quimby, "The Political Art of James Akin" in *Winterthur Portfolio*, January 1972.
- 2 For further clarification on this caricature print and the examples of caricatures included by James Akin, please consult Allison Stagg, "All in my eye!" James Akin and his Newburyport social caricatures" in *Common-Place*, vol. 10, no. 2, January 2010.

caricature prints on offer. Examples can be found in newspapers along the east coast of North America, by one popular barber and a subject of this paper, John Richard Desborough Huggins, advertising, “Just received and for sale, a large collection of European and American Caricatures.”³ The discovery of the Akin caricature is recent, found in 1991 in a bound album that contained other previously unknown caricatures attributed to James Akin. For the first time, however, this article takes Akin’s print as starting point for a more detailed discussion of how early American satirical engravings were viewed and by whom in the early Republic.⁴



Fig. 2: James Akin (1773-1846) *All in my eye!*, hand-colored engraving, 1806 (detail)

- 3 *New York Evening Post* (New York) 1 July 1805; Murrell only reprinted the section of the advertisement relevant to caricatures. William Murrell, *A History of American Graphic Humour*, Volume 1, 1747-1865 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1933), 56.
- 4 The Charles Peirce Collection of Social and Political Ballads located at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts has been digitized and the collection can be viewed online: <http://www.americanantiquarian.org/Inventories/Peirce/>. This is the earliest volume of bound caricatures to have been discovered intact. It was created by the Portsmouth, New Hampshire bookseller Charles Peirce and in addition to the caricatures by James Akin included caricatures made in London before 1807.

Rare Finds – Popular Consumption

In America at the turn of the nineteenth century, separately published engraved caricature prints were made with surprisingly little regularity. Between 1789 and 1809, a tumultuous twenty-year period in the early American Republic that spanned the first three presidents of the United States, George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, few native artists engaged with visual satire. Not until the beginning of the 1820s and with an increased interest in the European mode of lithography, a form of printmaking that enabled prints to be cheaply produced, did American artists begin to publish caricature in any large numbers. With so few caricature prints made at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a natural assumption might be that this imagery was unimportant, that these prints were less commonly seen, or that there was a limited audience; however, a number of primary documents have suggested otherwise.

Early nineteenth century caricature prints that survive today offer distinctive clues as to how they were handled and seen by citizens. For example, many of the caricature prints that can be examined from this period have creases and indentations where the paper was folded to be mailed in letters or to be passed to friends. As illustrated by Akin's work mentioned above, some prints contain small holes in the corners of the paper from when they were tacked with pins to a wall or to a door; others have evidence that perhaps at some time they were placed in bound albums, collected with other ephemeral visual material. Occasionally a former owner or viewer will have helpfully added in ink the names of those figures represented on a caricature print or clarifications of the subject matter. The majority of caricature prints during this period was published anonymously and left unsigned. This has led to a lack of information regarding how and why these prints were made; indeed even the knowledge as to where many of these artists accessed printing presses to print the caricatures are unclear. Information on this imagery is instead gleaned from contemporary newspapers, which provide published notices in which the arrival of caricature prints was announced, and in primary documents, such as letters written by politicians which described caricatures to friends and family – particularly those where they found themselves the unwanted subject of such imagery. As evidenced in these archival documents, caricature prints, while published infrequently in small numbers, were part of the fabric of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century American society.

The Cultures of Caricatures in the U.S. and in Britain by Comparison

Because of the numerous announcements located in newspapers it is known that caricature prints in America were sold primarily in book and print shops; advertisements announced new caricatures on offer and where such prints can be purchased. Markedly different were the processes of marketing/consuming caricatures in London, which was the center of production of caricature prints during this period. Subject matter found in British caricatures provide visual evidence as to how these prints were seen by a various

London audience. An example can be found in James Gillray's popular print, *Very Slippy-Weather* (fig. 3) of 1808. Every pane of the large shop window for the print publisher Hannah Humphrey contains a caricature print. The largely male audience look over the latest colorful prints while inside the shop two further gentleman examine another print, perhaps with the intention of purchase. All the figures are so engaged in looking at the caricature prints on display that they are oblivious to the falling gentleman in the foreground.



Fig. 3: James Gillray (1756-1815) *Very Slippy-Weather*, hand-colored etching, 10 February 1808, Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

Although Gillray depicted an all-male audience in his print, men were not the only viewers of such imagery. As print shops owners placed caricature prints in windows facing towards the street, women too would pass and see the colorful arrangements. Another early nineteenth century British example published in 1801 and entitled, *Caricature Shop* (fig. 4) provides further indications to this depicting a more diverse crowd with a variety of figures that included men, women, and even children, clamoring to see the prints on view, while the shopkeeper looks on in the doorway.

Alongside contemporary archival documentation, these British satirical prints account for a greater understanding as to the prevalence of caricature prints in everyday life in



Fig. 4: Published by P. Roberts, *Caricature Shop*, etching, September 1801. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

London during this period, what has been largely regarded as the “Golden Age of Caricature”.⁵ In contrast evidence of how caricature prints were publically seen in early American cities has been far less forthcoming. Some information has been gleaned from newspapers but this is rather limited and vague. For example, one rare notice was printed in 1797 as an anecdote about the streets of Philadelphia and reads, “A Mechanic in this city in passing by the British Printer’s door on Monday, observed a number of people gazing at a print in the window – It appeared to be a caricature...”.⁶ In the late eighteenth century, the majority of American commercial establishments could be found inside private residences and the location of these shops were only distinguishable by signs hanging outside, although at the start of the nineteenth century shop owners began

5 There are number of important studies on British caricature during this period. For more on this topic, please refer to Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

6 *Aurora General Advertiser* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) 9 August 1798. It is likely that the British printer referenced here was the British patriot William Cobbett, who arrived in Philadelphia from London in 1796 and set up a print shop in that year.

to introduce large windows opening onto the street.⁷ While the British caricature prints by Gillray and others show the modern viewer how caricatures may have been seen in such windows, it is unclear if such a practice was relatively common in America. Newspapers in this period frequently included advertisements that announced the arrival of new American caricatures in addition to imported British caricatures. Rather unfortunately, without more detailed descriptions or visual evidence, little else can be discerned as to how caricature prints were displayed within these shops. For example, questions remain unanswered as to whether caricature prints were proudly exhibited in the windows of print shops, as seen in the Gillray caricature of 1808, or if they were kept inside, away from a passing consumer audience. Did print shop owners in American cities focus their attention on such imagery or were caricature prints relegated to the back of the shops?

The New York Barbershop as Venue for the Display of American Caricatures

In 1933, William Murrell published the first monograph to provide social, historical, and political context for American caricature prints. Published in two volumes, *A History of American Graphic Humor*, Murrell asserted in volume one, covering caricature prints made in America between 1747 and 1865, that, “Within a few years after the opening of the 19th century graphic humor in America, though still of irregular production, began to receive more attention, both from designers and engravers and the general public.”⁸ Despite being published nearly a century ago, this publication is still the standard reference for scholars, curators, and historians interested in American caricature prints. It was Murrell who first made the connection between early American caricature and the barbershop when he referenced the nineteenth century New York City barber, John Richard Desborous Huggins. Little is known about Huggins, who was active as a barber in New York between 1801 and 1808. During this period, Huggins regularly published satirical and witty advertisements in local New York newspapers. In 1808, he collected his advertisements, publishing the most popular in what became a rather unsuccessful venture, a bound volume titled, *Hugginiana; or Huggins’ Fantasy, being a Collection of the most esteemed modern Literary Productions*.⁹

7 Philip Stevick, *Imaging Philadelphia: Travelers’ Views of the City from 1800 to the Present* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

8 Murrell, Volume 1, 1747-1865, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1933), 51. Murrell’s primary inclusion of Huggins within his narrative on early American caricatures was due to the fact that the “emperor of barbers” chose to include in his book of advertisements eight engraved satirical plates. This is why Murrell raised the importance of Huggins within the field of early American caricature, by asserting that Huggins was the first early patron of graphic humor in America, employing New York area artists to work in caricature. This may be true, although limited information survives such as account books or letters that would provide factual evidence as to how these prints were commissioned; indeed, one of the prints was not original to Huggins but was first published in another journal

9 Few studies have focused on the career of John Richard Desborous Huggins. The most recent study can be found in John Strachan’s *Advertising and Satirical Culture in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) especially chapter 6, “The Poetry of hair-cutting”: J.R.D. Huggins, the emperor

Huggins's advertisements, some of which were reprinted in his *Hugginiana*, include detailed descriptions of the decoration and display found in his New York barbershop. Indeed he elaborated on at least one caricature print that could be found on his walls, interestingly, another print by the James Akin, the artist responsible for *All in my eye!*. The print Huggins referred to in his newspaper advertisement was of Thomas Jefferson and titled, *The Prairie Dog Sickened at the Sting of the Hornet or a Diplomatic Puppet exhibiting his Deceptions!* (fig. 5).



Fig. 5: James Akin (1773-1846), *The Prairie Dog sickened at the Sting of the Hornet or a Diplomatic Puppet exhibiting his Deceptions.*, hand-colored engraving, 1806; The Charles Peirce Collection of Social and Political Caricatures and Ballads, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts

John Richard Desborous Huggins was but one barber in a city of many that took to newspapers to advertise their shops to customers. Huggins appears to have not been isolated in decorating his shop, located by 1802 at the fashionable address of 92 Broadway in New York City, with the latest caricature prints. So common were caricature prints in barbershops, that one newspaper notice remarked, "It is a general custom, and has existed almost since the memory of man, for barbers to adorn their shops with pictures and charicatures [sic]."¹⁰ Even still, barbers took to newspapers to announce the many services offered and mentioned the arrival of new forms of entertainment for the waiting gentleman customer. A direct competitor to Huggins, the barber H.J. Hassey, commented in a advertisement published in New York in 1806 that his shop was now complete with new caricature prints, stating, "The eye may be gratified with a new collection of caricatures,

of barbers", 226-252; Strachan primarily discusses the literary and satirical tone of the advertisements, although he does reproduce the engravings from *Hugginiana*.

10 *Philadelphia Repository, and Weekly Register* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) 21 February 1801.

by the latest and ablest masters, exhibiting the moral character rendered ridiculous by the adoption of fugitive folly.”¹¹

Unfortunately, the majority of such advertisements are rather ambiguous in their information on caricature prints. Similarly to Hassey’s advert, Huggins published advertisements that included vague information about the political caricatures he received. For example, in July of 1805, Huggins announced in a New York newspaper, “Just received and for sale, a large collection of European and American Caricatures.”¹² While these adverts provide evidence that caricature prints could be seen in barbershops, it is not known to what extent these prints were sold or for how much they were sold for.

In 1798, a hairdresser by the name of Gardner who had a barbershop that was located across the Hudson River in Newark, New Jersey announced that his shop had caricatures on offer for customers to consider while services were being employed, “His shop is embellished with a variety of caricatures, and the daily papers, to beguile the tedious moments of operation.”¹³ This is a rather subtle hint at what the barbershop often transformed into when a group of men were waiting for services: temporary committee rooms and spaces of political debate and discussion. British caricatures showing the interior of barbershops frequently included male customers engaged in reading newspapers. For example, in a late eighteenth century British caricature by Henry William Bunbury (fig. 6) in which a group of male customers can be seen; the character on the left reads a newspaper, his face in shock by the news on the pages. Caricature prints, particularly those that were political, would not have been out of place in such an environment.

For Male Eyes Only?

Adding to this was the common belief, albeit not a widespread acceptance, that caricature prints were not for a female audience but instead were intended for men only. This was initially perpetuated by a number of essays and letters published in newspapers, including one lengthy notice located in the New York newspaper, *The Daily Advertiser*. The reprinted letter, supposedly written by a mother to her daughter and titled, “on the manner of passing Sunday rationally and agreeably” contained a long list of acceptable Sunday activities, as well as a passing reference to what a fine young lady should not do on a Sunday. A passage from the letter concerns the growing interest in caricature prints by noting their availability in local shops,

“...looking over prints and drawings [which] is an innocent and rational amusement. I do not however recommend the caricatures, and political prints, with which our shops are at present crowded; they may *amuse* but cannot *instruct*; but histori-

11 *The People’s Friend & Daily Advertiser* (New York, New York) 11 November 1806.

12 *New York Evening Post* (New York) 1 July 1805; Murrell only reprinted the section of the advertisement relevant to caricatures. Murrell, Volume 1, 56.

13 *The Centinel of Freedom* (Newark, New Jersey) 3 July 1798.

cal prints, prints of illustrious persons, views of places, figures, of plants and animals, are at once instructive and entertaining.”¹⁴

Other newspaper notices continued the notion that caricature prints were of a low art form not worthy to be considered, and this letter appears to agree with this, as it recommends that while caricature prints may be amusing, they were not useful as an educational source. Politicians, particularly those that found themselves the subject matter of such imagery, appear to have thought otherwise, often sending caricature prints in letters to their most trusted confidants: female members of their households, such as their wives and daughters.



Fig. 6: Henry William Bunbury (1750-1811), A barbers shop: from an original drawing by H. Bunbury Esqr. in the possession of Sr. Joshua Reynolds, to whom this plate is inscribed by his much obliged & most humble servant, John Jones. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

While women appeared to have had the opportunity to view caricatures in a variety of spaces, the barbershop did provide a division between the genders. Advertisements placed by barbers in newspapers appealed to both sexes, but also exacerbated this notion that caricatures were for male audiences, particularly when one considers the specific notices placed by Huggins for his shop (fig. 7). In 1803, Huggins placed a lengthy advertisement for what he referred to as his “Dressing Academy and School of Fashions”

14 *The Daily Advertiser* (New York, New York) 20 December 1792.

in the *Evening Post*. The advertisement is the first of many by Huggins to be divided into two sections, one addressed to the “ladies” for the “School of Fashion” followed by a section meant for male clients at the “Dressing Academy”. Huggins assured his female customers that “...the *School of Fashions* is fitted up in a style of superior elegance, and



Fig. 7: *New York Evening Post* (New York) 14 June 1803. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts

well adapted for their reception and accommodation...” as well as confirming that the School of Fashion is entirely separate and distinct from the male section of the barbershop, which Huggins termed “the Dressing Academy”. The division in the advertisement signifies that the physical space has also been separated; in his advertisement, Huggins further addresses his male clientele, stating that he “...has spared neither trouble or expense to adorn his Dressing Academy with elegant engravings, caricatures, and fanciful decorations... Gentlemen will find in the Dressing Academy, for their amusement...”

The Barbershop as Political Sales Space

It was likely that Huggins displayed the caricature designed by James Akin, *The Prairie Dog Sicken'd at the Sting of the Hornet or a Diplomatic Puppet exhibiting his Deceptions!*, in the designated male section of his barbershop. This caricature was not known by Murrell in his *A History of American Graphic Humor* or by Frank Weitenkamp, the first curator of prints at the New York Public Library, who published the only known catalogue of caricatures held in collections.¹⁵ Only two copies of this caricature are known in public collections today and can be found at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and the Ladies American Antiquarian Society, in Worcester, Massachusetts. Despite the rarity of the print, the artist, James Akin appears to have been rather proud of the subject matter, mentioning it in a variety of advertisements and notices in the fall of 1806. For example, when Akin announced his removal from the city of Newburyport in November of 1806, he included

15 Weitenkamp published his “checklist” in 1953, titled, *Political Caricature in the United States in Separately Published Cartoons* (New York: New York Public Library, 1953). He is also the co-author with Columbia University Professor Allan Nevins of *A Century of Political Cartoons: Caricature in the United States from 1800 to 1900* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1944); in neither book does Weitenkamp spend considerable time on Akin nor was he aware of this caricature.

his full name and the following signature, “James Akin, Author of the “Prairie Dog” “Infuriated Despondency” “Bug a boo,” &c. &c.” (fig. 9)¹⁶ Akin’s caricature was likely published sometime in early spring of 1806 because in May 1806 Huggins noted the arrival of the caricature and the placement of it on his walls at his barbershop at that time located on Broadway,

“Tired with the fatigues of the camp and disgusted with the din of arms, his whole attention will hereafter be undeviatingly directed towards the patronage and protection of the fine arts. He therefore invites artists of every description, (the mechanical excepted) to bring their works to his Repository, whose classic walls have lately been graced with the Prairie Dog; this historical piece is from the hands of a master, and may be seen every day. It may not be amiss to give a short description of this inimitable performance, which by some ill-natured folks, has been called a caricature... This piece is interesting to the amateur and connoisseur of fine paintings, but more particularly to the politician – being a faithful portrait of some strange occurrences which have taken place within a few months, derogatory, in the highest degree, to the honour and interests of the United States.”¹⁷

The subject of Akin’s caricature would have fit in well with Huggins’ federalist, anti-Jefferson beliefs, and likely with the clients that frequented Huggins’s shop. According to Murrell, Huggins attracted a wealthy clientele in New York for his professional skills as a hairdresser, however, many clients were further drawn to Huggins due to his consistent attacks on the Jefferson administration.¹⁸ If that is the case, then Akin’s striking visual attack on Jefferson would have been well received by his loyal customers. In the print, Akin has depicted Jefferson in the guise of dog, stung on his backside by a hornet with the head on Napoleon Bonaparte. The topic of the print was President Jefferson’s negotiations for the purchase from Spain of West Florida, which occurred in 1804. Huggins’ initial notice provided a lengthy description of the print,

“The animal is of the canine species, representing a certain *great* personage, of whom, the head of the Dog reserves an exact likeness. Bonaparte is in the act of stinging him with the sting of the HORNET, which severe discipline, acting as a violent emetic on the terror- struck Spaniel, the reluctantly disgorges *Two Millions of Dollars* at the feet of a certain little Marquis, with Talleyrand’s instructions in his pocket...”¹⁹

16 *The Repertory* (Boston, Massachusetts) 21 November 1806. The other two caricatures noted here in this advertisement were both designed and printed by James Akin while he was active in Newburyport, Massachusetts: *Infuriated Despondency* on 1 May 1805 and *A Bug-a-boo to frighten John Bull, or the Wright Mode for kicking up* in 1806. Copies of *Infuriated Despondency* can be found at a number of American institutions, including the American Antiquarian Society, while only two copies are known to have survived of *A bug-a-boo* and can be found in The British Museum and the American Antiquarian Society.

17 *New-York Gazette & General Advertiser* (New York) 12 May 1806.

18 Murrell, Volume 1, 58.

19 *New-York Gazette & General Advertiser* (New York) 12 May 1806.

Surprising little else has been discovered regarding public reaction to this caricature print. If customers or clients responded to it, those documents have not yet been located, nor is it known how much Huggins might have sold this caricature for or how he came to have this caricature print. It was not uncommon for caricaturists later in the nineteenth century to send impressions of their visual satires to newspaper editors and booksellers in large cities, requesting that these individuals write favorably in their papers of the designs; however, James Akin is known to have done this in the 1820s and not earlier. No other advertisements or newspaper notices have been located that reference this caricature or contains a description of it. There are thus many possibilities as to how Huggins came to acquire this caricature print for his barbershop.

nov 21. HUNT & BULL,

HENRY SHEAFE,
No 22, Long Wharf, Has for sale,
THREE hundred bbls superfine Alexandria Flour, now afloat, and can be delivered at any part of Boston. nov 21.

“Secret History” a la mode “St Cloud.”

AS public curiosity has been greatly excited relative to the very peculiar situation in which I have been placed, by a controversy of three years standing, and as rumour has caused much speculation in inquiries respecting my character, which from various causes has alternately become the theme of conversation at the fire-side, in the stage, and upon the ocean, perhaps with few or none of the connecting circumstances to give truth its proper colouring—I am actuated from a sense of duty which I owe to the reputation of my family and to my honour to lay before the publick, with a rigid adherence to truth, minute details of the abuse of power that has been practised towards me by imprisonment and unconstitutional demands for excessive bail, the effect of a shameful collusion oppressively intended and wickedly exercised, for pretended offences presumed to have been committed by me, against the peace and dignity of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, after all which, the Grand Jury was discharged without finding a bill of indictment against me.

“Vivat respublica” “vivent la liberté et L’Egalité.”

As soon as I can conveniently remove to Philadelphia, it will be put to press, and shall contain the full value of One Dollar, at which price subscribers are solicited.

Many Plates from entire new and original designs, made expressly for the occasion, shall accompany the work; and the politician, the moralist and the critic shall find a record of events as strange as they are true.

JAMES AKIN,
Author of the “Prairie Dog,”
“Infuriated Despondency,”
“Bug a boo,” &c. &c.

Newburyport, Nov. 21, 1806.

SALES AT AUCTION.

THIS DAY at 10 o’clock,
At No 4, Hancock-street,
A Variety of goods, BURLINGAME

This advertisement and the surviving two caricature prints by Akin contribute to a greater awareness as to the prevalence of caricatures in everyday life in the early American Republic. While much about the history and culture surrounding early American caricature prints is still unclear, however, the above-mentioned three documents can contribute to improve the understanding of how caricature prints in America were seen and how barbershops were one of the most important spaces for their circulation. It is to be hoped that this article will encourage further research about the details and the context of this unusual showcase and sale venue for a popular art form.

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Fig. 8: *The Repository* (Boston, Massachusetts) 21 November 1806. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts