

Introduction

I must begin with an apology to the subject matter discussed within this book. In the fall of 2004, I began a one-year master's degree in art history at University College London, enrolled in the subject course "British Caricature and Visual Satire." Truth be told, I was not the most enthusiastic student. I had come to London to study nineteenth-century British paintings, not British caricature, but that course had been canceled at the last minute. Having had a relatively traditional undergraduate art history experience at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia, the subject of caricature was a mystery to me. So, I was quick to judge when I briefly flipped through a book on the subject. To leave the program meant delaying my studies and moving back home to New York. It is only a year, I thought at the time. I grudgingly stuck with it. However, within a few class sessions the subject of caricature had me hooked. Taught by David Bindman, the course focused on the output of satirical imagery in London by caricaturists of the long nineteenth century. The greats of British caricature were discussed in class: James Gillray, Thomas Rowlandson, Richard Newton, and Isaac Cruikshank, among others. The course often met at the print study room in the British Museum, where our small student group huddled around colorful caricatures propped up on wooden stands. Designed and published with immediacy to lampoon sensational events and people, exaggerating and embellishing physical attributes and situations, the caricature told varied stories of the time, the people, the market for art, gender, and politics. I soon found the prints and their layered histories intoxicating.

As the course continued, an important question loomed for me: Was there an American equivalent? Living an ocean away from my home in the United States, I looked initially at the culture and politics of America's founding in the 1780s and 1790s. Reading David McCullough's biography of John Adams, America's second president, I was struck by the derogatory way in which Adams's enemies referred to him in newspapers and pamphlets.¹ "Rotund" and "balding" are descriptors that should have been perfect bait for a caricaturist. Surely, there must be an abundance of caricature prints devoted to the rotund and bald Adams. Initially my searches did not find any caricatures of Adams, nor of Washington; but as my research continued, I found that caricatures were made during this period of the two leaders (including *The Times; a Political Portrait* [fig. 14]). However, the prints published in the United States at this time were nowhere near the numbers of caricatures made in London. Where were the hundreds of caricatures depicting American politicians and commenting on the problems of the day in the 1790s?

One challenge was the lack of existing scholarship on American caricature. There was not an American companion to the foundational text on late Georgian satirical prints by Diana Donald. When published in 1998, Donald's *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* was the first major study to analyze British caricature and connect the historical, social, and political context in which caricatures were made. Donald's important scholarship has since inspired a great number of studies, including this book, but also, for example, Mark Hallett's *The Spectacle of Difference: Graphic Satire in the Age of Hogarth*, Amelia Rauser's *Caricature Unmasked: Irony, Authenticity, and Individualism in Eighteenth-Century Prints*, and Vic Gatrell's *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century England*.² Additionally, the many caricatures published in London between 1780 and 1830 were treated differently from those also published at the same time in America. British caricatures were published in higher numbers but an incredible number were also saved, allowing many of these prints to be available today. Searches for specific prints by an artist such as Gillray can usually be found in British and European museum collections online. So thorough is the research that often lengthy descriptions can be found alongside beautifully digitized high-resolution images. The interest in British caricature from this period has prompted special exhibitions, such as *The Art of Satire: London in Caricature* (2006) held at the Museum of London, *High Spirits: The Comic Art of Thomas Rowlandson* (2013) organized by the Royal Collection Trust, and *Bonaparte and the British: Prints and Propaganda in the Age of Napoleon* (2015) at the British Museum. In British museums, historical caricatures can be found alongside paintings and sculpture in permanent collection displays. Consciously or not, this has built awareness in the British public to the satirical prints made two centuries ago. One has only to look at modern British newspapers to see how influential these historical images are for cartoonists of today. Examples of this are plentiful and can be found regularly in British newspapers, with many cartoonists referring

directly back to the historical caricature or artist that inspired the modern image. James Gillray is of particular interest to many contemporary cartoonists, with his name often referred to somewhere within the modern print. One sees this, for example, in the cartoon *Britannia Rules the Second Waves* (fig. 1) by the British artist Ben Jennings and published in the December 22, 2020, edition of *The Guardian* newspaper. Jennings's visual commentary on contemporary events, here Brexit and the coronavirus, was directly inspired by Gillray's April 1793 caricature *Britannia between Scylla & Charybdis* (fig. 2). If the audience for Jennings's cartoon was not immediately reminded of Gillray and the tradition of caricature in England, Jennings provided in the upper right-hand corner the following prompt: "Ben Jennings After Gillray." There is great asymmetry when comparing modern cartoons made in the United States, which rarely draw on historical imagery.

In the twentieth century, there were several significant champions for American caricature prints, on which research for this book has relied. In 1933, William Murrell was the first to write on caricature known at that time, in his two-volume *A History of American Graphic Humor*, the first volume of which covers caricature prints between 1746 and 1865.³ Of particular importance, even more than the book's commentary, are the reproductions of caricatures discussed between its covers. At a time before museums began to routinely digitize a great number of their collections, Murrell provided visual examples of the prints discussed. Despite this, Murrell's index is incomplete, with instances of omitted citations and incorrect location information. His scholarship, though vital for the images, did not provide critical analysis or an engagement with American history or art of the period. Frank Weitenkampf addressed some of these oversights. Weitenkampf's interest in caricature dates to at least 1887, when he published an essay titled "Some American Caricaturists," followed by a chapter on the subject in his *American Graphic Art*.⁴ He was appointed the New York Public Library's first curator of prints in 1921. He served in that position until his retirement in 1942, when he focused almost exclusively on researching eighteenth- and nineteenth-century caricature prints published in the United States, resulting in two important publications: *A Century of Political Cartoons: Caricature in the United States from 1800 to 1900* (1944) and *Political Caricature in the United States in Separately Published Cartoons* (1952). Weitenkampf also completed an unpublished manuscript, "The Social History of the United States in Caricature," all the while writing frequently to curators and museum directors regarding caricatures in their collections.⁵ His correspondence with Clarence Brigham, director of the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts between 1930 and 1959, and Robert W. G. Vail, director of the New-York Historical Society between 1940 and 1960, reveals their mutual knowledge and shared enthusiasm for early American caricature.

In preparing *A Century of Political Cartoons*, Weitenkampf recognized that the subject required an authoritative and well-respected figure in American history. He sought

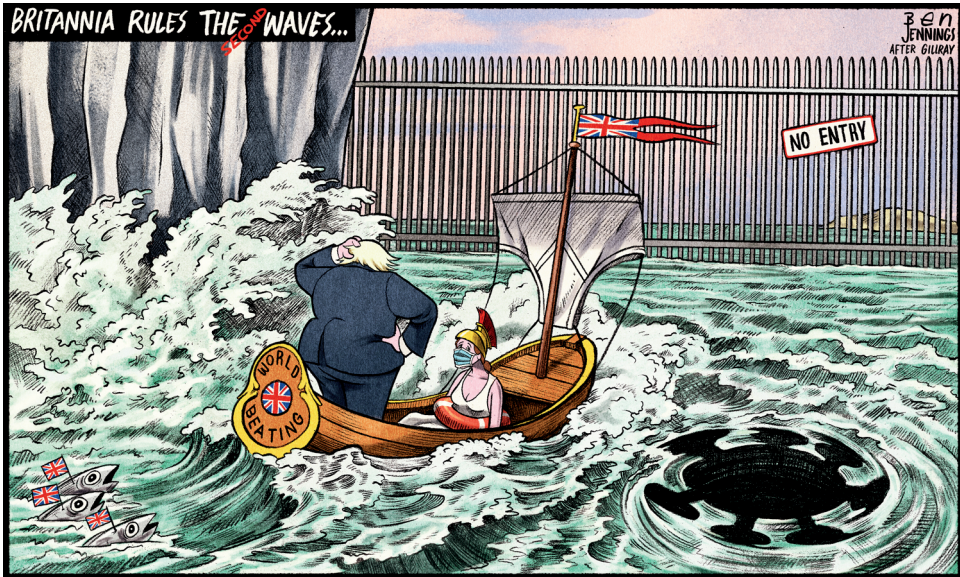


Figure 1 | Ben Jennings, *Britannia Rules the Second Waves*, cartoon published in *The Guardian*, December 23, 2020. Courtesy of Ben Jennings.

out Allan Nevins, the renowned scholar of American history, to be his coauthor, but this was very much Weitenkamp's project: he had chosen the one hundred prints to be included in the book and written much of accompanying text. The work earned praise, with one contemporary review noting that "this is one of the most useful books to the student of American history that has been published in a long time."⁶ Weitenkamp's museum colleagues were equally positive. Brigham wrote his congratulations to Weitenkamp with the hope that he would complete a catalogue on American caricature: "I was much delighted with your *Century of Political Cartoons*. It is a fine book, evidencing much research and a thorough knowledge of political history of the century, and containing an interesting selection of illustrations. It shows what can be done on a larger scale if one made the volume more comprehensive. . . . I hope that some day . . . you and I can combine on a bibliography of political cartoons—or perhaps better, I can turn my material over to you."⁷ In the ensuing years, Weitenkamp visited museums and collections along the East Coast, amassing files on caricature made in the United States between 1778 and 1898 for his catalogue, which was first published in 1952 in the *New York Public Library Bulletin*; in 1953 it was published as a separate volume. This is a critical body of primary research and was greatly influenced by the catalogues of the collection of caricature in the British Museum collection. Modern scholarship on British



Figure 2 | James Gillray, *Britannia Between Scylla & Charybdis*, April 8, 1793. Etching in dark brown, with hand-coloring, on cream wove paper, plate 303 × 364 mm, sheet 311 × 393 mm. Gift of Thomas F. Furness in memory of William McCallin McKee, 1928.1529, Art Institute of Chicago.

caricature is greatly indebted to the *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the British Museum*, compiled between 1870 and 1954, firstly by Frederic George Stephens in the late nineteenth century and from the 1930s through the 1950s by M. Dorothy George. George's six volumes (5–10) catalogued caricature prints held in the British Museum collection that were made between 1771 and 1827 and, crucially, provided indexes of names and subjects for quick searches. Like M. Dorothy George's catalogue, Weitenkampf also included an index for searches related to subjects. Brigham hypothesized that the catalogue would be "consulted frequently,"⁸ and he was correct: since its publication in the 1950s, Weitenkampf's catalogue has remained the only such publication on caricature prints published in the United States up to 1898 in American museum collections. Visiting archives, libraries, and print rooms on the East Coast of the United States to work with the caricature prints, I found I wasn't alone in marking up my copy of Weitenkampf.

Despite its utility, his list has not been amended or corrected until now; the appendix of this book contains an updated catalogue with newly discovered caricatures, contemporary references to caricatures not yet known to have survived, and corrections to the Weitenkampf catalogue, including factual attributions of dates, titles, and artists.

From their correspondence, it is evident that Vail and Weitenkampf believed the most complete collection of caricature prints was not at either of their institutions in New York City but in Worcester, Massachusetts. Brigham was also aware of this, writing, “The Antiquarian Society collection for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is one of the most comprehensive to be found in any library. It has been gathered from many sources during the last thirty years.”⁹ In the second half of the twentieth century, his successors would continue to foster that reputation. Marcus McCorison (director, 1967–92) supported collecting in this area and encouraged Georgia B. Barnhill, whom he appointed curator of graphic arts, to develop contacts with fellow curators, collectors, and scholars and to become active in the American Historical Print Collectors Society founded in 1975. Barnhill followed Weitenkampf’s model of championing further research into American caricature.¹⁰ The list of scholars in the twentieth century who worked to promote scholarship on caricature includes Wendy Shadwell, print curator at the New-York Historical Society from the 1970s until 2002, and an eminent scholar in American prints. The initials “W.S.” are frequently found in the departmental archives alongside additions of caricature to the collection and in the print department’s copy of Weitenkampf. She had a particular interest in ephemera, especially nineteenth-century trade cards and catalogues, and as an author she was instrumental in bringing early American printmaking to the view of a wide audience with *American Printmaking: The First 150 Years* (1969) and the two-volume *Catalogue of American Portraits in the New-York Historical Society* (1974), both valuable references for historians and collectors.

It is difficult to ignore that caricature prints have been reproduced as illustrations in histories of the early national period, but with little integration or awareness as to how these prints were made, seen, and circulated. In the 1999 introduction to “The Catalogue of American Engravings: A Manual for Users,” Georgia Barnhill observed that “when images are read as text, they provide a different perspective, but an important one, as scholars seek to understand the past. Publishers of textbooks have been steady users of reproductions of American prints and illustrations, but even in the past twenty-five years, few have recognized the importance of relating the images reproduced to this historical discussion.”¹¹ Barnhill was echoing the words of Louis Masur, who addressed the need for historians to be more vigilant in using images within texts, particularly as many do not choose the images themselves: “Authors do not situate the images in their historical context or locate those images within the history of visual production and reproduction;

they do not discuss the images within the narrative. . . . Nor do the authors interpret these images or suggest how to read them as texts within multiple meanings that speak not only to the past but to the present."¹² When Barnhill and Masur wrote their essays, locating caricature was more difficult and time intensive than it is now, as institutions are digitizing their impressions. Because caricatures are becoming accessible online, it is more important than ever to correct the erroneous artist attributions and dates of publication and to uncover a better understanding of why these prints were made and who saw them. That is the intention of this book, although it is important to note here that this history of American caricatures published between 1789 and 1828 is not complete: as more newspapers are digitized, as more caricatures are discovered hidden away in books or in uncatalogued collections, further information can be applied to the ambiguities that do still remain.

The overall focus of this book is on the separately published caricatures engraved on copper plates, ending with a brief discussion of the lithographed caricatures that became popular at the end of the 1820s. This book's main objective is to study caricature engravings made in America between 1789 and 1828 as a collective body of images and to explore, for the first time, the myriad ways domestic caricature evolved during this thirty-nine-year period. Caricatures made after 1830 were more frequently lithographed, and their number overwhelms the small number made between the late 1780s and late 1820s. These later lithographed caricatures have been better preserved, with surviving impressions more readily available in institutional archives. The following chapters explore who made caricature prints in the new republic through 1828 and why and to what degree such prints are to be considered alongside other forms of art of the period. Some of the caricatures explored in this book were naively and hastily conceived, while others reveal a learned skill. This book argues, as has been demonstrated in recent studies on British caricature, that concentrated and focused study of these objects and the artists who created them offers new insights into crucial historical developments. The absence of a comprehensive study on the history and artistic merits of early American political caricatures contrasts sharply with the recent publications on late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English caricature and culture.

Through an examination of contemporary documents, the first chapter will consider the market in the United States for political caricatures in the 1790s and first two decades of the 1800s, with a focus on the myriad of ways caricatures were received in cities along the East Coast. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are centered on the lives of two caricaturists crucial to the early years of the republic: James Akin and William Charles. Chapter 5 considers the 1820s, a decade of transition in printing methods as well as a passing from the first generation of caricaturists to the next generation working in lithography.

A Note on the Terms “Cartoon” and “Caricature”

- 8 Within the text, I have used the term “caricature.” In recent scholarship, these prints are often referred to as “cartoons”; however, contemporary viewers of these satirical prints and indeed the artists themselves referred to these prints as “caricatures.” Contemporary newspaper advertisements and opinion pieces, descriptions found in diaries, and letters refer to these images as “caricature.” I have followed this example.