



HIGH SPIRITS

THE COMIC ART OF

THOMAS ROWLANDSON

Rowlandson

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THOMAS

Published 2013 by Royal Collection Trust
York House
St James's Palace
London SW1A 1BQ

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Palaces at www.royalcollection.org.uk
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ISBN 9781905686766

014623

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data:
A catalogue record of this book is available from
the British Library.

DESIGNED BY Philip Lewis
PROJECT MANAGER Elizabeth Simpson
PRODUCTION MANAGER Debbie Wayment
EDITED BY Andrea Belloli and Bev Zimmern

Typeset in DTL Fleischmann
Printed on matt coated Condat 150 gsm
Colour reproduction by Altimage, London
Printed and bound in the UK by
Butler Tanner & Dennis Ltd.

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ROWLAND O.A.

ROYAL COLLECTION TRUST

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BUCKINGHAM PALACE.

Caricatures are a cross between art and humour. Not all artists have the appropriate sense of humour, while not many humorists have any artistic talents. Caricaturists are in a class of their own, and, as this exhibition makes clear, Thomas Rowlandson is one of the leaders of that class.

There are, of course, two sides to the art of caricatures – the caricaturist and the subjects of his work. The latter, of which I am one, certainly need a sense of humour in order to enjoy a caricature of themselves. They need to be masochists to collect cartoons about themselves.

I suspect that the subjects of Rowlandson's cartoons needed a pretty robust sense of humour – especially if they collected them. Like his modern counterparts, Rowlandson employed the full vocabulary of the stand-up comic – puns, double meanings, insinuations, exaggerations, and the plain ridiculous to comment on the events and characters in the world around him. I think it says something about the Prince Regent that he appreciated Rowlandson's genius to the extent that he collected so much of his work.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

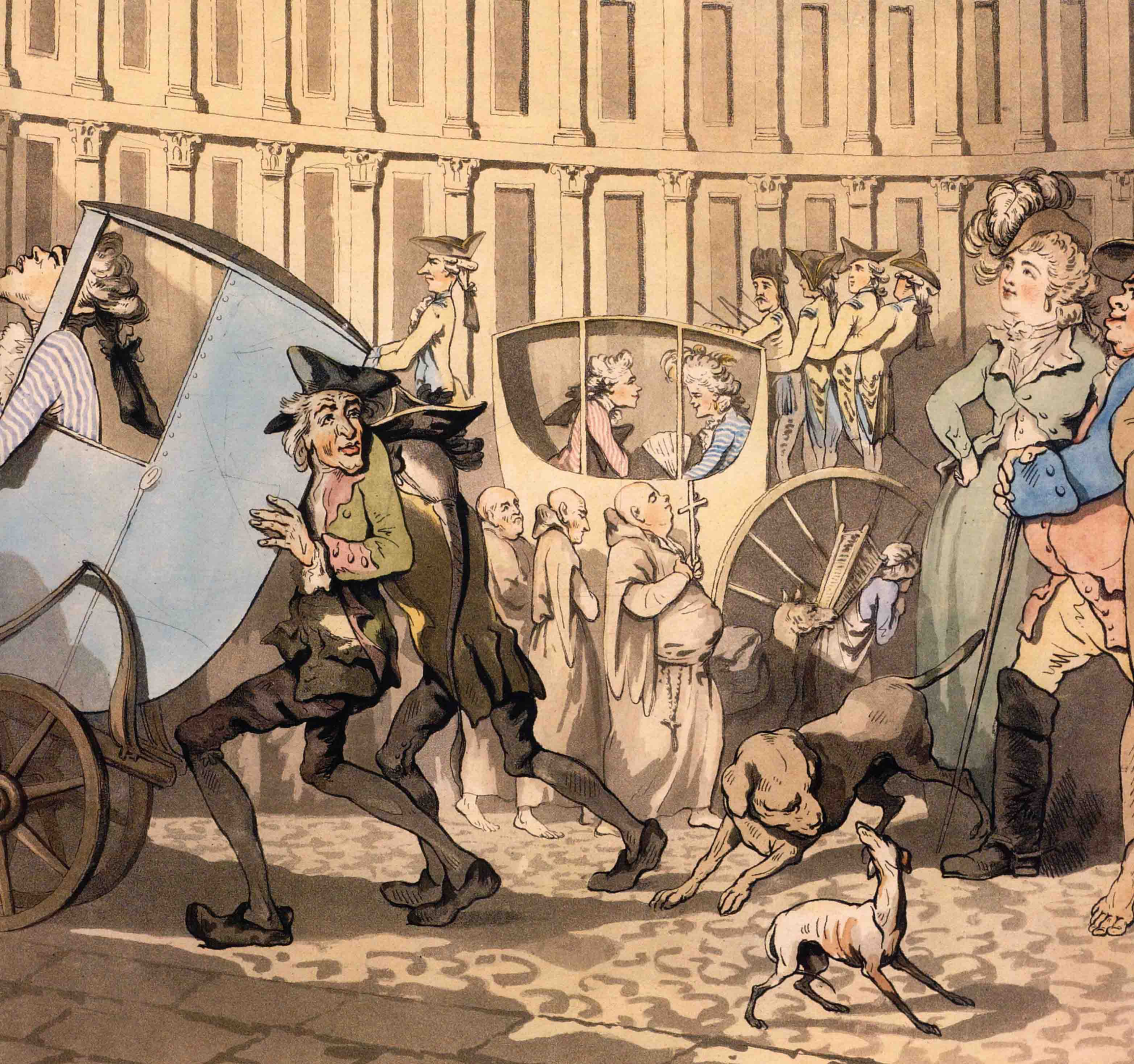
I am grateful for the permission of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to quote from material in the Royal Archives. For help with enquiries, access to collections and hospitality, I am grateful to Angela Roche and her colleagues in the Prints and Drawings Study Room at the British Museum, Stephanie Clarke in the Central Archive of the British Museum, Simon Blundell at the Reform Club, Sue Palmer and her colleagues at the Sir John Soane Museum, the staff in the Collections Care Department at the National Archives, John Monahan and his colleagues at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Sue Hurley at the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, Susan Halpert at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, Pat Hardy at the Museum of London, Angelamaria Aceto and Caroline Palmer at the Ashmolean Museum, Amy Marquis at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Laura Turner at the York Art Gallery and Margaret K. Powell and her colleagues at the Lewis Walpole Library.

A number of people have generously shared time, knowledge and expertise during the preparation of this catalogue. I am particularly grateful to Piers Baker-Bates, Andrea Belloli, Jonathan Conlin, Antony Griffiths, Philip Lewis, David Oakey, Sheila O'Connell, Matthew Payne, Maria Pretzler, Amelia Rauser, Alan Renwick, Sir Hugh Roberts, Laurent Turcot and Debbie Wayment. I am grateful to all the Royal Collection staff who have worked on the exhibition and catalogue or provided help with particular queries, especially the Hon. Lady Roberts and Martin Clayton for their invaluable comments on the individual works and the text, and Sandra Adler, Rufus Bird, Wolf Burchard, Irene Campden, Elizabeth Clark, Deborah Clarke, Jacky Colliss Harvey, Suresh Darghalkar, Alan Donnithorne, Roderick Lane, Karen Lawson, Theresa-Mary Morton, Daniel Partridge, Shruti Patel, Lauren Porter, Rosie Razzall, Anna Reynolds, Susan Shaw, Kirsten Sierag, Elizabeth Simpson, Charlotte Slark, Rachael Smith, Kate Stone, Paul Stonell, Emma Stuart, David Westwood, Rhian Wong, Bridget Wright and Eva Zielinska-Millar. Pamela Clark, Jill Kelsey, Allison Derrett and their colleagues in the Royal Archives have been unfailingly helpful.

Special thanks are due to Sara Duke and all her colleagues in the Prints and Photographs Division at the Library of Congress, Washington DC, who provided a warm welcome and much research assistance, to Claire Gaskell, who has carried out detailed conservation work on the scrap screen and provided helpful information on the prints and the making of such screens, and to Nicholas Knowles who has generously shared his own extensive research on Rowlandson, some of which appears as an appendix to this catalogue.









High Spirits

The Comic Art of Thomas Rowlandson



FIG. 1
John Raphael Smith (1751–1812)
Thomas Rowlandson, c.1785
Black chalk with pencil and grey ink,
27.8 × 20.6 cm
British Museum

THOMAS ROWLANDSON (fig. 1) was born in London in 1757, the son of a textile merchant. After his father was declared bankrupt in 1759, he was placed in the care of his aunt and his uncle, a silk weaver who died a few years later.¹ Thereafter, Rowlandson was brought up by his aunt Jane, the daughter of French immigrants to London.² He was an accomplished artist from an early age and, after a period at the well-regarded Soho Academy (which aimed to prepare students for careers in business), was sent to the recently formed Royal Academy Schools in 1772, at the age of 15.³ His six years at the Academy Schools, where he won a silver medal for sculpture, were probably sponsored by his aunt.⁴

At the Academy Schools, the theory of teaching was dominated by Sir Joshua Reynolds (President 1769–92), who encouraged the study of plaster casts, life models and the Old Masters, and the prioritising of Classical and historical subject matter.⁵ Some of Rowlandson's lifelong interests can be found taking root here, and he made studies of Classical sculpture and of works by the Old Masters throughout his career.⁶ Evidence of his time at the Academy Schools includes one of his earliest surviving drawings, in which he captured the concentration of a row of his fellow students (fig. 2), and an anecdote of his mischievousness in a life-drawing class when he used a well-aimed peashooter to startle a female model out of her pose.⁷

While at the Royal Academy, Rowlandson was given permission to draw from the cast collection in the Duke of Richmond's sculpture gallery at Whitehall.⁸ The gallery, filled with casts of famous sculptures and intended as a resource for those who wished to study from the Antique, had opened in 1758.⁹ It may have been there that Rowlandson met John Hamilton Mortimer (1740–79), who produced deft, sharp drawings and prints of figures from Shakespeare, soldiers and satires (fig. 3).¹⁰ Mortimer was a leading figure in the Society of Artists, which had been founded in 1759 to provide encouragement for artists through regular exhibitions, and which was closely connected to the Duke's gallery.¹¹ Rowlandson's early work was deeply influenced by