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Modification of Market: John Smith and the Mezzotint Print in Eighteenth-Century England

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Modification of the Market: John Smith and the Mezzotint Print in Early Eighteenth-Century Britain

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in

Art History

by

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June 2011

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INTRODUCTION

The starting point for this study was Antony Griffiths’ twelve page article, “Early Mezzotint Publishing in England—I John Smith, 1652-1743” (1989). Mr. Griffiths’ focus in the article is a rather obscure artist of the late-seventeenth-early-eighteenth-century, John Smith (1652-1743). With a decidedly ordinary name, it is not difficult to imagine that such an individual might easily be forgotten to history. However, what Mr. Griffiths rightfully points out in his brief biography, is that Smith was considered the premier artist of the mezzotint printing technique during his time.

Until this moment, the British struggled to establish themselves in the artistic world. The empire typically relied on expatriates of other nations and the imported techniques they brought with them to provide the nation with an artistic identity. Such was the case with mezzotint technique. The technique involves a process by which an artist uses a rocker or specialized tool to roughen the surface of a copper plate and then smoothes certain areas with a burnisher or scraper. This creates an image of intense gradation in the application of ink from rich, heavy tones to slight grays and white highlights. The technique closely emulates the qualities of oil paint, a primary medium of portrait painters of the
period. Originally popularized during the seventeenth-century by Dutch artists, mezzotint was well suited to the replication of portraits. It became so extensively used in England, that internationally it was known as *la manière anglaise*. With John Smith, the English found themselves with a national artist and technique.

As the first internationally-known English printmaker to use the mezzotint process, Smith’s works were highly sought after both within England and on the continent. So admired, Smith’s prints were given as national gifts to foreign heads of state. His prints were both sold individually and collected into mezzotint albums. The few remaining collected albums now serve as oeuvres of his work.

Smith’s earliest prints, often replications of works by well-known artists such as Sir Peter Lely, were completed under the direction of other print publishers. However by 1689, Smith acquired the workshop of one of his publishers, Isaac Beckett, and began a long-standing business relationship with the portraitist Godfrey Kneller.1 With the acquisition of the publishing workshop, Smith was no longer simply an artist. He was now both printmaker and publisher in absolute control of his market.

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England’s eighteenth century portrait print market is widely understood as a multilayered industry dependent on the cooperation of several autonomous key agents closely working together: the portrait painter, printmaker, print publisher, patron and sitter. The complex roles of these individuals were often not clearly defined and would come to complicate the hierarchical configuration of the market’s business structure. The structural make-up of England’s eighteenth-century print market is a topic that has been considered in several articles and books following Griffiths’ work on early mezzotint publishing in England and will be reexamined here to possibly determine how the modification of the capacity of the agents involved in the print market affected the question of authorship. In doing so, we may very well be able to discern why the technique of mezzotint became known as *la manière anglaise* and John Smith the technique’s most premier artist of the eighteenth-century.

In this thesis, I shall examine in contrast the few known print albums of John Smith with the singular album assembled by Vertue so as to explore the complications which arise when the various roles of the print market are analyzed in terms of authorship, originality and replication. The overall research question which I pose is: how did the transference of the roles of the various agents involved in the print market result in the reconfiguration of the question
of authorship and originality in the production of the portrait print? I will do this by drawing on the history of portraiture and printmaking in terms of the artistic exchange which existed between the Netherlands and England. I will also look to the history of the collection of the non-ruler portrait to establish a precedent for the collection of portraits within the albums of Vertue and Smith. This will require a brief discussion of the social impact of the Glorious Revolution and its relationship to the patronage or subscription system involved in the making of such prints and print albums. In conclusion, I will place the print album into a larger history of collecting, including a discussion of the extra-illustrated book as an alternative to the album. Furthermore, I will examine the effects of restoration and the removal or addition of prints has had on the collection within the album.

The first chapter will introduce the works at the center of the thesis. It will provide a brief formal analysis of the existing print albums of both John Smith and George Vertue (1684-1756). The chapter will address the shared characteristics of the engraved and mezzotint albums. The chapter will also evaluate the differences in the production of Vertue’s albums to that of Smith’s.

The second chapter will focus on the history of the print and its contributive role in the larger history of portraiture and printmaking. It will raise the question of how and why has my topic changed through time, as something with its own
history? I shall sketch out the background of the portrait print to answer the following subsidiary questions: How does the printed portrait fit into the larger history of portraiture? How does the mezzotint portrait fit into the larger history of printmaking?

The final chapter of the thesis will deal with the various agents involved in the production of the print and will discuss the relationship between painter, printmaker, publisher, patron and sitter. The broad question addressed within the chapter is: who are the different agents and how did they interact with one another? I will look at John Smith’s business practices in comparison to his contemporary George Vertue. How do Smith and Vertue take on different or even multiple roles in their business relationships? Is one considered more of an artist or less of a craftsman because of their choice position within the production of the print?

The conclusion will concentrate on the print by looking at the function, viewership and narrative of the print album. In this chapter, I want to address the issues or problems which arise due to the inherent nature of the replication process. Why were these particular prints replicated? Why was there a market for these prints? I shall suggest that this needs to be understood in relation to the Glorious Revolution. These particular print albums of Smith, and the subjects he
represented, were closely connected with those involved in the Glorious Revolution. I shall discuss how the market for prints amongst these individuals helped to shape the marketplace which will help determine the purpose of the albums.

A considerable limitation of my research was that I was unable to make arrangements to view all known mezzotint albums constructed by John Smith. Furthermore, the albums that I was able to view often had prints removed or added after its original construction. The very nature of albums as a means to display one’s collections implies that albums, in general, were rarely static. In addition, the two of the three albums in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London have been restored. Therefore, it is impossible to speak with certainty on the precise construction of the albums. However, each album does contain a table of contents so that while prints were removed or replaced, it is still possible to know what prints were intended by the artist to be included and in what order within the album.

Another complication which arises is that there has been very limited research on John Smith and little information survives from the period regarding the artist. While Smith was well known during his lifetime, he has nearly been forgotten in history. Although little on the biography of Smith is known, he did
leave a will with stipulations regarding his work. This document, mentioned by
Antony Griffiths in an article he wrote in 1989, may very well be helpful in
establishing the desire of Smith to control the market for his work. The thesis will
obviously contain information on the biography of the artist, although limited.
The primary focus of the thesis is the artist within the larger context of the print
market. The inclusion of the precedents for Smith as well as his contemporary
George Vertue will assist me in establishing pattern and context.

As mentioned, very little has been written about John Smith and the
mezzotint print in 18th century England. The most comprehensive work on
Smith to date is Antony Griffiths’ essay, “Early Mezzotint Publishing in
historiographical approach to both Smith’s life and, in general, the mezzotint
printmarket in London. According to Griffiths, it is possible to piece together a
history of the beginnings of the mezzotint in England through an examination of
Smith’s life. He does so by evaluating primary sources, such as George Vertue’s
obituary of Smith, in conjunction with an analysis of Smith’s five known print
albums still in existence. Griffiths’ article is principle to my research on Smith
and will serve as a vital reference on the mezzotint print.
Another prominent source in my research on the portrait print is David Alexander’s article, “George Vertue as an Engraver” (2008). Alexander focuses on the life of the English engraver George Vertue. Much like Griffiths, Alexander presents a historiography of Vertue’s life. The purpose of Alexander’s article is to establish a “basis for the compiling a catalogue of his oeuvre.” He does so through the examination of a chronological list Vertue compiled of his works. In addition, Alexander relies heavily on a chronological catalogue of Vertue’s works located in the rare book department of the Doheny Library at the University of Southern California.

In addition to Antony Griffiths and David Alexander’s research, there is an article “Early Mezzotints: Prints Published by Richard Tompson and Alexander Browne” (2008) by Carol Blackett-Ord and Simon Turner. The article is broken into two sections: Blackett-Ord outlines the career of Richard Tompson, while Simon Turner discusses that of Alexander Browne. The purpose of the article is to explore the role of the publisher-dealer in late-seventeenth-early eighteenth-century England. The publishers discussed in the articles are contemporaries of Vertue’s and Smith’s. The article is consequential to my research in that it will...

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provide reference to other individuals navigating the very same print market as John Smith and George Vertue.

The general premise of the research on the portrait print market until this point was that if more was known about the lives of those involved in the print market, a history of the portrait print could be established. The historiography of the mezzotint and of both John Smith and George Vertue are important to the development of my thesis. However, my work will instead explore the mezzotint as an original work of art in its own right and the roles of Smith and Vertue as authors.
CHAPTER I: The Works of John Smith and George Vertue

The middle decades of the century saw not only the beginning of etching in England, but also an increase in the number of engraved portraits sold separately by printsellers or prefixed to the books whose authors they represented. Large and prestigious engravings of Royalty or the aristocracy were thus complemented by countless portraits of divines and savants who had written books of moral or scientific edification.³

At the end of the sixteenth-century England saw a proliferation of prints. The portrait print began as engravings, but later was fully realized through the use of mezzotint. In his book, *Prints and Printmaking: An Introduction to the History and Techniques* (1996), Antony Griffiths states in regards to the success mezzotint found in Britain “…in France this market was firmly in the hands of engravers, but there was no such tradition in England.”⁴ While the two artistic techniques co-existed in England, each served a specific purpose. The engraved portrait was well suited for frontispieces of illustrated books. The engraved plate did not wear nearly as quickly as the mezzotint, thus allowing for the mass production necessary for the book publishing trade. On the other hand, the mezzotint better

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captured the tonal characteristics and closely emulated the painterly qualities of the painted portrait.

Two of the most recognizable artists of the techniques were George Vertue, a well respected early English engraver and his contemporary, John Smith, the most recognized artist of the early mezzotint in England. As the passage indicates, their works varied as greatly as their business practices. Before grounding Vertue’s and Smith’s works in the history of print in England, I would like to spend time introducing the works that are central to this thesis so to better understand their roles and involvement in the print culture of late-seventeenth-early-eighteenth-century England.

The Oeuvre of George Vertue

Both Vertue and Smith produced individual prints, but also composed albums. While a few albums John Smith’s still exist, the only known substantial album of works by George Vertue is located in the rare book collection of the Doheny Library at the University of Southern California. Inside the first album, of a set of four, is a loose print of the Earl of Oxford and the title page which dedicated the collection of prints to the Earl of Oxford. According to David Alexander in his article, Vertue had several very powerful patrons up until and
after the Earl of Oxford which led to the production of some of his most valuable pieces. However, Oxford was his most significant patron. As it appears, with the production of the four volume set of works, Oxford’s collection was the most complete compilation of Vertue prints.

The University of Southern California album was constructed by Vertue specifically to complement the collection of prints Oxford already owned. This is much different than Smith’s albums. Vertue’s albums were constructed by Vertue, himself, for his most important patron. While Vertue had several patrons during his career, the Earl of Oxford was Vertue’s most significant patron. While Vertue’s albums were a collection of his work constructed for the most significant patron, Smith’s albums were not necessarily constructed by the artist himself and certainly not for a specific patron to complement a collection of works. The set of albums are much like the albums of John Smith which will be discussed later. The albums have caramel color leather binding with a spine which reads Vertue’s Works. This titling of albums implies that it is a complete collection of Vertue prints. However as Vertue completed the album expressly for Oxford, this was not the case. According Alexander, due to Vertue being

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tasked with indexing Oxford’s print collection he was aware of prints that the
Earl already owned and made the conscious decision to preserve space by
leaving at least thirty or so prints. Therefore, the albums serve as a substantial
body of Vertue’s prints by which are complemented by the individual prints the
Earl of Oxford already owned.

Vertue’s painstaking attention to detail is evident in the construction of the
four set volume. The albums’ index and the physical prints are arranged by date.
As we will see, many of the techniques Vertue employed with the albums
produced for the Earl of Oxford were techniques Smith also used in his
construction of his New York Public Library collection. This is not surprising. In
a conversation with Antony Griffiths, he suggested that early engraved album
collections served as models for the mezzotint print albums which would later
follow. Since many would be collectors of mezzotint albums already had
engraved albums in their library, there was a natural desire to create
cohesiveness in the collection.

Vertue’s table of contents was confined to the first album which implies that he
never intended these albums to be sold as separate entities. Each album was
incomplete without the other albums in the collection. Vertue’s indexing of his

\footnote{Ibid., 221.}
prints only in the first album of the set provides the viewer with a sense that the
prints were a collection that could not exist independently. Smith also created a
table of contents for his New York Public Library albums. However, the index
was alphabetical, while the actual prints were arranged by date. The table of
contents opens up the possibility for the viewer to see the prints based on a
particular sitter with little concern for progression of date. However, Vertue’s
album functions more so as a book, encouraging the viewer to engage with the
album based upon date of production and providing a sense of progression.

Vertue’s albums are overall more clearly organized than those of Smith’s. The
pages are uniform and the prints very carefully, methodically aligned. In
addition to Vertue’s finalized print, he also included proofs and counterproofs
which followed the plate. Vertue annotated every page with information specific
to that particular plate such who owned the original painting from which the
print was made, who was the sitter of his print and who was the responsible
paying party. Both Smith’s and Vertue’s hands are visible in their albums.

Smith’s New York Public Library albums have handwritten dates on every print
providing an easily visible progression of his work (Figure 1). According to
Griffiths, the “ink annotations are of two kinds: many are written in a bold
confident hand, while the others are in the hand of a trembling old man.” Griffiths surmises that it was Smith’s hand which was present as the albums were eventually fully realized very late in his life.

The Print Albums of John Smith

In his article “Early Mezzotint Publishing,” Antony Griffiths states that there are five albums produced by Smith still in existence today: a set of albums in the collection of Christ Church in Oxford, a second collection of albums which was sold by the Earl of Haddington to a private collector at Sotheby’s in 1988, the third set of albums in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London, another in the collection in the Hunterian Gallery, Glasgow, and the fifth set of

albums discussed by Griffiths at the New York Public Library. According to Griffiths, these albums share several aesthetic qualities. They are all leather bound sets consisting of two to three individual albums with a frontispiece and an index followed by Smith’s works.

While these albums share several aesthetic commonalities, they are also very different. Each album contains a vast number of prints ranging from 224 prints with the Christ Church albums up to 520 in the collection at the National Portrait Gallery in London. However, the quality of the individual prints varies. The albums at Christ Church, the collection sold by the Earl of Haddington and the New York Public Library albums are all of very fine quality with the New York Public Library being of the finest quality. Yet, the collection in the library of the National Portrait Gallery, London and the Hunterian Gallery, Glasgow collection are of rather poor quality.

More interesting is the differing arrangements of albums in each collection. As I was unable to view all the known albums of Smith’s, it was necessary to rely on Griffiths’ article “Early Mezzotints in England—I John Smith, 1652-1743” for the visual descriptions of the albums in the library at Christ Church, the albums sold by the Earl of Haddington and the collection at the Hunterian Gallery, Glasgow. The collection at Christ Church and that sold by the Earl of Haddington at
Sotheby’s in 1988 both were composed of two individual albums. While the
Hunterian Gallery collection is composed of three albums.

Both the first albums of the Christ Church and Earl of Haddington contain
Smith’s portrait prints exclusively. The first album sold by the Earl of
Haddington was comprised of Royal portraits. The second album was a
collection of small portraits and subject prints by Smith. Griffiths indicates that
the other set of albums were collected and assembled by Reverend Dr. Aldrich
who was Dean of Christ Church. Aldrich placed all the portrait prints by Smith
in the first album, while the second album was dedicated solely to subject prints.

Although I did not examine the Hunterian Gallery collection housed at the
University of Glasgow, Griffiths describes the album collection to be similar in
nature to those in the Library of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

While I was unable to view all the known albums of Smith, I was able to
personally view two albums collections mentioned by Griffiths, the New York
Public Library albums (Figure 2) and the album collection at the National
Portrait Gallery, London. The collection at the National Portrait Gallery is
composed of three individual albums. As Griffiths also points out, the albums
are arranged with the first albums consisting of large prints, the second smaller

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prints and the last album a collection of subject plates. The National Portrait Gallery albums are much thinner than the albums in the collection of the New York Public Library. This is due to the National Portrait Gallery collection being made-up of three albums, while the New York Public Library collection consists of two albums. The two album collections are covered in leather, neither album appears to be entirely original. The National Portrait Gallery has restored the first and second albums of their collection, while the New York Public Library collection has had several prints removed.

Beside the separation of portrait from subject plates, the only other order the prints appear to have in the National Portrait Gallery albums is a separation of female sitters from male sitters. The female sitters are featured at the front of the collection and are followed by the male portrait prints. Furthermore, many of these prints do not appear to be works of John Smith. Rather, some of the prints appear to be printed by Smith and others have no clear connection whatsoever.

There is another significant collection of prints that was unknown to Griffiths. These albums of prints were originally at the Medici Grand Ducal Library, but were later transferred to the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, the National Library in Florence, Italy. According to research notes of Malcolm Baker, the album seemed to have existed until the flood of 1966, after which the album(s) were so heavily damaged that the 301 prints may have been removed from the volumes. Baker located the album after finding a reference at the British Library to the 1st Earl of Egmont, John Perceval. The manuscripts of the 1st Earl of Egmont records that collection of John Smith prints in a two volume set were given by Perceval to the Grand Duke of Tuscany as part of a gift exchange.

Baker records that the unfinished autobiography of the Earl of Egmont chronicles a brief exchange of letters and diary entries which show that during a visit to Florence, Perceval was offered the best image in the Duke’s collection. While Perceval declined the gift, as a means of gratitude he sent the Duke two volumes of mezzotints by John Smith. In the writings of Perceval, Smith is acknowledged as “the greatest artist that there has been in that way, and which

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was much esteemed in Italy.”¹⁰ This implies that not only was Smith recognized in England, but also earned an international reputation. Rather than selecting any other works that Earl of Egmont had acquired, he chose Smith for the specific reason of his renowned reputation as a master mezzotinter.

It is interesting to note that out of the 301 prints included in the albums given by Egmont to the Grand Duke of Tuscany one was of Egmont himself (Figure 3). A copy of this print appears in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London and is also pictured on their collections website. However, it is interesting to note that this

image was not listed among the portrait prints in the New York library collection. The print, dated 1704, was mezzotinted and published by John Smith after a painting by Sir Godfrey Kneller.

The print is very much of the period. The manner of dress, pose and background are all similar to most other portrait paintings and prints of this period. Perceval is positioned in the center of the print with his right shoulder and foot slightly before his left so that his body is almost at a three-quarters angle. His face appears to be positioned in a more frontal stance than the rest of his body and still holds the youthful appearance of a man in his early adulthood.

At this time John Perceval had not acquired the title of Earl of Egmont, which would come later in 1733. At this time Perceval was known as the 5th Baronet of Kanturk in the County of Cork in Ireland and a member of the British House of Commons which he only acquired after a series of unfortunate deaths of several of his elder brothers. A standard practice for both engraved and mezzotint prints, Perceval’s name and title are recorded beneath his image. It appears that the print was completed only shortly before Perceval’s visit to Florence as he has noted in his manuscripts he set out on his trip to Europe in August of 1705. Just a few short years later, Perceval records that he received a letter from Cosmo III, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, thanking him for “a Book of Smith’s messotinos
which I [Perceval] presented to him at my Return from my travels” dated 18
December 1708. 11 It also appears that Perceval was very aware of Smith’s work
and may have even been responsible for the commissioning of the portrait print.

It would seem that Smith’s print functioned as a photograph or business card
would in subsequent periods. Not only did the Grand Duke have a token of
appreciation from the 1st Earl of Egmont, but also a constant physical reminder of
Perceval himself so that he might not forget where such a fine album originated.

As it did in the early eighteenth-century, Smith’s print continues to function in a
manner that is impossible for the painted portrait itself. A comparison of the
painting by Sir Godfrey Kneller to that of the printed portrait proved impossible
as Kneller’s painting was impossible to locate. Either the painting no longer
exists or it is held in a collection which is unable or chooses not to publish its
existence. Smith’s printed portrait as well as printed portraits produced by other
artists of the period was very accessible. As Kneller’s painting may no longer be
in existence, the prints now serve as the only known references to the painting
and more importantly to the physical appearance of John Perceval, 1st Earl of
Egmont, himself. Rather than accept the role as a secondary source, the print has
in this instance superseded the painted portrait to become an original image.

11 Baker, Egmont MSS.
Loose Leaf Collections

Before going into detail on the New York Public Library albums, which will serve as the albums of focus in this thesis, it is necessary to mention another substantial collection of Smith works. In addition to the works discussed by Griffiths and the Bibliotheca Nationale Centrale di Firenze collection, there is a large collection of Smith’s works in the Print and Drawings department at the British Museum which Antony Griffiths heads. The discovery of the collection of Smith prints in Florence suggests that it is possible the large collection of loose leaf prints at the British Museum might too be the remnants of an album set. The British Museum collection may have resulted much like that in the Bibliotheca Nationale Centrale di Firenze, an album set disassembled due to irreparable damage.

The New York Public Library Albums

The albums which will be most utilized by this thesis are those in the collection of the New York Public Library. The prints in the New York Public Library albums are quite different from Smith’s other albums. They are of extremely fine quality and each plate displays a handwritten date indicating when it was published as previously discussed. The prints are arranged for the
most part in order by date, with a few exceptions, and as Antony Griffiths puts forth, the albums are a wonderful source which allows the viewer to see the progression of Smith’s career.\textsuperscript{12} This allows the viewer an insight into with which artists, which print publisher, and what sitters Smith may have been working with at any moment in his career. The consistently fine quality of prints also permits the viewers to see a progression in his artistic technique. While the dating allows us to put a fairly accurate time line on Smith’s career, more importantly the dating of Smith’s work might allow the viewer insight into authorship and originality within Smith’s prints.

**History of Collecting**

In the article, “Art and the Theater of Knowledge: The Origins of Print Collecting in Northern Europe” (1994), Peter Parshall questions the attraction to prints as a collector’s item in northern Europe during the Renaissance. For Parshall, the collection of prints was partially attributed to prints as “literary

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talking pieces and objects of critical assessment within learned circles…” The prints were objects that gained value through social discourse. The larger discussion surrounding a specific print or printmaker encouraged the collection of that artist’s work. Parshall provides several examples for his estimation that early print collecting is directly related to social dialog.

This dialog was not unique to northern Europe, in social circles surrounding such artists as Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach the Elder. The discourse surrounded the printed worked extended to Italian social circles as well. Parshall goes as far as to suggest that prints served well in a role of exchange due to their ability to be easily multiplied and widely distributed. He states that these social circles founded in Humanist discourse had “bound themselves together not only by literary means, but also through traffic in printed images.”

Where do the late-seventeenth-early-eighteenth-centuries albums of John Smith and George Vertue fit into the larger history of print collecting? According to Parshall, the precedents for these album collections can be traced back to these prints central to social discourse in Renaissance Europe. The Northern

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14 Ibid.
Renaissance prints were likely acquired from local ateliers and collecting into the first print portfolios or albums. As an example, Parshall cites an album collection of prints by Albrecht Dürer. Very much like Smith’s and Vertue’s albums, the Dürer album is composed of works almost entirely by the artist himself with some images contributed to an assistant of Dürer’s, Hans Döring. Parshall states that Dürer’s album likely served, “both as a working resource and as legacy of the master’s accomplishments.”

Smith’s New York Public Library albums may have been a working resource he maintained throughout his lifetime. The prints were hand dated and arranged by these dates. Griffiths quoted John Smith’s obituary by George Vertue in which Smith bequeathed to his daughter his personal album collection of his own work. While there is no definitive evidence that the New York Public Library albums was Smith’s personal reference collection, out of the albums known to exist the collection is the most viable candidate in its arrangement and fine quality.

The albums of both Smith and Vertue share the desire of legacy with Dürer. Vertue’s albums was the largest undertaking of his career, compiled of his entire life’s work up to this point, for his most important patron. Smith’s legacy developed slightly differently. While two of the albums, the New York Public

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15 Ibid, 10.
Library and the Bibliotheca Nationale Centrale di Firenze collection, appear to have been constructed by Smith, the other albums appear to be collected by his clientele. Accumulation of the legacy of Smith’s accomplishments was the desire of both artist and of the clients. This was much like as the desire of Vertue and his singular patron, Oxford, to capture his own legacy.
CHAPTER II: The Production of the Portrait Print

“We have known the passion for collecting portraits so strong as to lead an amateur to relinquish every other branch for its prosecution, to amass heaps of all kinds and descriptions of likenesses, and apparently to think and dream of nothing else but portraits”\textsuperscript{16}

In his book, \textit{The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century} (1997), John Brewer elaborates on the distinct development of the art market in England. Throughout the book, Brewer discusses the substantial role prints played in English society. In a section titled “Making a National Heritage,” Brewer’s economic approach to the history of art leads him to conclude that, “the spread of print was the bedrock on which British culture was built.”\textsuperscript{17} In continental Europe the print, in its various forms, had circulated since the fifteenth-century. Its early arrival in Europe was partially due to the well-established patronage system which relied heavily on the support of the church as well as the royal court.


The success of the print in England was quite different from that in Europe. In general, whether textual or as an image, the print gained ground primarily through its intrinsic nature of duplication. The English court was not nearly as strong as that on the continent, thus resulting in a weaker royal patronage system. This is not meant to imply that the royal patronage system was nonexistent. Constance Harris in her book, *Portraiture in Prints* (1987) writes that in the 1550s, the production of two engraved prints of Elizabeth I established a Flemish surgeon, Thomas Geminus, as the first printmaker to work in England. The print achieved its origin with traditional royal support, but flourished by way of a well-to-do audience seeking to transcend a cultural divide.

During the 1660s, in response to the French invasion of the Netherlands, Charles II, the reigning monarch of England, Ireland and Scotland, issued a proclamation encouraging the migration of the recently displaced Dutch to England. The Dutch artists who were amongst those that accepted this invitation brought with them artistic techniques and business concepts that would help to establish the portrait print market and a national artistic identity in Britain. Around 1642, the Mezzotint technique, which would later become known as *la manière anglaise*, was invented by Ludwig von Steigen in Amsterdam. It was

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18 Harris, *Portraiture in Prints*, 54.
during the restoration, with the encouragement of trans-migration by the English crown, that the mezzotint technique made its way to Britain by way of Prince Rupert, cousin of Charles II.\textsuperscript{19} While the Dutch played a vital role in the foundation of new portrait printing techniques in England, immigrants from other nations were also significant players in the maturation of the print marketplace into a highly successful economic forum. An exchange which bolstered the move from a patronage-based system to one which promoted the artist to an entrepreneurial role.

In his book, \textit{The Print in Stuart Britain, 1603-1689} (1998), Antony Griffiths writes briefly about the business relationship between the French artist Henri Gascar who arrived in London during the 1670s with his engraver of Dutch origins, Peter Vandrebanc and their role in shaping the portrait print market. Griffiths recounts a rivalry between the pair and Dutch artist Peter Lely and his Dutch engraver Abraham Blooteling. Griffiths proposes that in response to a series of portrait prints by Blooteling after Lely’s paints, Gascar was inspired to produce mezzotints after his own paintings.\textsuperscript{20} To highlight the significance of

\textsuperscript{19} Griffiths, \textit{Prints and Printmaking}, 85.

Gascar’s actions, Griffiths writes “mezzotint had as yet hardly been used in England, and that the idea of reproducing a portrait painting (rather than just engraving a head) was new, and they must have caused a stir.”

Griffiths’ assessment of Gascar’s act of creating mezzotint prints after his own portrait paintings brings about several key points that will be discussed not only in this chapter, but which will be revisited throughout this thesis. One key issue is the use by Gascar to promote his paintings through a relatively new medium, mezzotint. Griffiths touches on the use of print to market the older, well-established medium of painting. According to Griffiths, Gascar’s temporary success in London was primarily attributed to his use of print as a form of publicity. Griffiths’ attribution of the success of Gascar to his use of the mezzotint print indicates that the primary function of the print was to promote the painting.

While this may be true of Gascar’s relationship with the mezzotint, this does not appear to be the case with Smith. Smith’s prints will not serve to simply promote the works of paintings by such artists as Sir Godfrey Kneller. Rather Smith becomes a successful artist in his own right and his mezzotints highly

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22 Ibid.
valued as original works of art. As discussed in the first chapter of the thesis, Smith’s prints and those of other printmakers of the period were collected into print albums. Smith’s prints, like Vertue’s, were collected into albums dedicated solely to their work. Smith worked with a variety of painters and publishers, all of which are collected in the known albums of Smith’s prints. The commonality of the prints is that they were all produced by Smith. Collectors were interested in works produced by Smith not because of with whom he worked. Rather, collectors were interested in Smith for his quality of printmaking. If collectors were interested in Smith’s prints only for whom he work with, the albums would be dedicated with prints after a specific painter and not with Smith as a printmaker. In addition, the collection neither focuses on solely portraits or subject prints. Rather, the albums are composed of both in an attempt to amass a substantial collection of works by Smith.

Smith’s most interesting and complex mezzotint features himself (Figure 4). In 1716, John Smith created a three-quarter length self-portrait mezzotint print after a painting by Sir Godfrey Kneller in 1696. Smith is positioned center facing his audience. His face almost expressionless, he appears to the viewer very much the serious artist. Unlike most other portraits of the period, Smith is not featured in a long wig or “fancy dress” which was made popular by sixteenth-century
portrait painter Anthony Van Dyke. Rather Smith’s hair is worn short and
natural and he wears a cap, dress shirt, and over shirt. In his left hand he holds a
mezzotint print of Sir Godfrey Kneller, a product of his own hand. The index
finger of his left hand is extended as if to further emphasize the presence of the art
work.

The mezzotint print that Smith holds, that he printed himself, was after a self-
portrait by Kneller (Figure 5). Kneller’s portrait is composed much like the
image of Smith. He is featured in a three-quarter length pose, facing the
audience with a very serious expression on his face with no hint of a smile. Kneller’s dress is nearly identical to Smith’s.

However, he wears the long flowing wig, typical to this period. In contrast to
Smith’s self-portrait print, nothing in the image of Kneller indicates his status as
artist.
Smith’s self-portrait not only features his own work, it also serves to illustrate the business relationship between Smith and Kneller. While Smith worked with several portrait painters throughout his career, Kneller was his most significant partnership. The intricacies of the relationship between portrait painter, publisher, and printmaker will be discussed in greater detail in the third chapter of this thesis.

Another key point of Griffiths’ statement is his differing of the mezzotint as a means reproducing a portrait painting, rather than being just an engraved head. What does Griffiths mean by use of the phrases “reproducing a portrait print” versus just being an engraved head? Before the use of mezzotint, engraving was the technique used as a means to mass produce a portrait. In the late seventeenth-early-eighteenth century, the mezzotint and engraving were competing techniques in the portrait print market. What follows in the following chapter is a

Figure 5. Printed by John Smith, after Sir Godfrey Kneller, *Godfridus, Kneller Eques.*, 1694. Mezzotint, 13 3/8 x 10 in. New York Public Library.
comparison of the two techniques through the analysis of works by John Smith and George Vertue. This analysis will address Griffiths’ implication that one was a reproduction, while the other technique produced something entirely different. In addition, the investigation into the works of Smith and Vertue will shed light on their roles in the evolution of the print market and how a medium used to mimic another artist’s work could result in a work of originality.
CHAPTER III: A Necessary Professional Requirement

Thence I to the print-sellers over against the Exchange towards Covent-garden, and there bought a few more prints of Cittys and so home with them...Samuel Pepys

Richard T. Godrey wrote of the Mezzotint print market in his book, Print Making in Britain: A General History From its Beginnings to the Present Day, that from the introduction of the mezzotint technique in England it has been seen as an “accurate imitation of portrait paintings...For the portrait painters it soon became a necessary professional requirement to strike up a partnership with a good mezzotinter.” The necessity for the partnership between painter and printmaker had advantages for both sides as Griffiths acknowledges.

For the portrait painter, the mezzotint printmaker provided a high quality product which was capable of capturing the tonal affects of the oil paint used in the production of a portrait. The ability of the mezzotint to closely copy the original portrait painting was desirable to the portrait painter in that the print could act as an advertisement of sorts for the painter’s skills. Both painter and

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24 Godfrey, Printmaking in Britain, 28.
printmaker financially benefited through the use of the print as a form of advertisement. In her section on Richard Tompson in the article, “Early Mezzotints: Prints Published by Richard Tompson and Alexander Brown (2008),” Carol Blackett-Ord records the astonishment of portrait painter Sir Peter Lely: “It seems that Lely had been struck by the effectiveness of mezzotint as a means of advertising the paintings of a rival, Henri Gascar.”

While mezzotint was impractical in other uses such as for book production due to the tendency to flatten of the mezzotint plate which often limited the number of prints made, the intense gradation produced by the technique was paramount for the successful relationship between printer and painter. The painter could use the print to illustrate his ability as a portrait painter. The mezzotint print allowed for multiple copies of singular painting to be produced quickly, in comparison to the engraved image, which could be given or exchanged as gifts to friends, family and collectors who could in turn be future clientele.

The mezzotint printmaker also benefited from the professional partnership with a portrait painter on numerous levels. The most obvious benefit of the relationship between painter and printmaker was the ability to gain a ready-

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made audience to which he could sell his work. The mezzotint print not only served to advertise the skill of the painter, but served to advertise the skill of the printmaker. Both painter and printmaker financially benefited through the high quality reproductive characteristic of the portrait print.

The use of the mezzotint to advertise the skill of the printmaker can be seen in the business relationship between portraitist Sir Peter Lely and print publisher and seller, Richard Tompson. According to Blackett-Ord new business practices were developed in Bedford Street print shop of Tompson. Either “Lely and/or Tompson decided to treat the prints as works of art by reproducing the whole image in the continental manner…”26 The traditional British technique often cropped the images to resemble busts and failed to recognize the printer as an artist in their own right. Whoever cast the decision to display the printmaker’s name beneath the printed image opened an avenue for subsequent artists such as Smith and Vertue the possibility of artistic recognition. Tompson’s actions as a print seller and publisher in addition to these new practices recognizing the printmaker would have a tremendous effect on the career of John Smith.

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Various Agents Involved in the Production of the Portrait Print

In addition, the professional relationship went beyond that of painter and printmaker. Rather, the relationship encompassed an overlapping of the fundamental personalities involved in the production of both painting and printmaking. The key figures in the production of the portrait painting involved, of course, the painter, the sitter, and the patron. On the other hand, the individuals involved in the mezzotint portrait print market included the printmaker, the portrait painter, the sitter, the print publisher, his patron and quite possibly the patron of the portrait painter. While the printmaker himself might never directly deal with the sitter of the original portrait, it is likely that the desires of the sitter were carried forth either under the direction of the portrait painter or more likely the patron, who could fill the role of both sitter and patron.

The capacity to simultaneously fulfill two key roles in the print production does not belong to the sitter alone. Rather, when the production modes of John Smith and George Vertue are closely evaluated the ability of the printmaker to serve solely as printer versus the decision of the printmaker to be printer, publisher and even creator become evident. While Smith relied on the creation of portrait painters like Sir Godfrey Kneller for subject matter, other artists like George Vertue produced works of their own creation. Whereas Vertue was not
responsible for the publication of his own works and worked directly for a
singular patron. In the case of the set of albums in the Doheny Library at the
University of Southern California, this patron is the Earl of Oxford. Smith took
on the roles of publisher of his own works as well as agent often seeking clients
to purchase his work rather than working with a specific patron.

The Multiple Roles of the Printmaker

Through the New York Public Library albums produced by John Smith’s, one
can trace a history of his business relationships. During his career Smith worked
with five different publishers: Richard Palmer, Richard Tompson, Alexander
Browne, Edward Cooper and Isaac Beckett. Due to the low pay for printmakers
of the period, “the importance of becoming one’s own publisher was clear…you
had to control your own plates and become your own publisher.” If Smith
wanted to earn a living as an artist, he needed to gain control of the publishing
and distribution of his prints. This is exactly what Smith does. The possession of
control of his own prints and by extension plates, allowed Smith to limit the
number of prints produced as well as control quality. Smith no longer had to
worry about subpar prints sold under his name.

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In addition to establishing himself as printmaker through the acquisition of Sir Isaac Beckett’s print shop upon his death, Smith also makes the fundamental decision to strengthen his relationship with portrait painter Sir Godfrey Kneller. Smith published prints after Kneller’s paintings while working under the direction of Beckett. Griffiths writes of Kneller and Beckett: “Beckett had worked with Kneller for a number of years, and his widow tried to maintain the relationship” after the death of Isaac Beckett.\(^{28}\) As Smith purchased Beckett’s shop from his widow, it appears that he also inherited a very profitable relationship with Godfrey Kneller, who was at the most famous of portraitists. Antony Griffiths formulates that the relationship between printmaker and painter was the centralized relationship in the portrait print making process.\(^{29}\) Smith has not only gained control of his prints, but he also acquired a monopoly on the work of the most popular portraitist of the period.

In opposition to Smith, Vertue had no such relationships. Although he produced the album for Oxford, Vertue relied on outside publishers as well as artists. Vertue like Smith reproduced works by a variety of well known artists


like Kneller. However, unlike Smith, Vertue also produced images of his own
design. This act allotted Vertue recognition as author of his own work.
Conclusion

In speaking with Antony Griffiths at the British Museum in September of 2009, he suggested that many of Smith’s clients were likely involved in one way or another in the Glorious Revolution. As Carol Blackett-Ord indicates of the collecting market: “collecting became more affordable and… more specialized; British collectors—of portraits, anyway—were gradually directed towards classifying their collections on socio-historical lines.”\(^{30}\) Blackett-Ord’s position implies that with the death of the patronage system so too arrived the death of the artist.

Collectors were less interested based on the production of the print such as artist or technique and the market place focused instead on class and types. This would substantiate Griffiths’ assertion that social class and affiliation become a highly important factor in print collecting during the late-seventeenth-early-eighteenth century. Many of Smith’s portrait prints were important royal and aristocratic figures involved in the revolution. However does this devalue Smith as artist?

The existence of the five albums as well as the two print collections at the British Museum and in the National Gallery of Florence suggest not. The only

commonality of all of the prints, both in albums and loose, is Smith. The mezzotints are reproductions of paintings by a wide variety of artists. Furthermore, while the albums do contain portrait prints of key figures of the Glorious Revolution, they also contain unrelated subject plates. Perhaps Smith was one of the last artist’s of the period whose works were collected solely for being his own. What is certain, Smith built on a changing business model laid down by the cooperation of Peter Lely and Richard Tompson to help create a new free market of exchange. The artist evolved from simply printmaker to encompass multiple roles as printer-publisher-seller-businessman.

As was demonstrated with the album collection in the Dohney Library at the University of Southern California, George Vertue worked in a long-standing tradition of patronage. His print album was commissioned and constructed for his most significant patron. Smith, on the other hand, worked with a variety of individuals who were interested in his work. Smith’s marketing of his albums to various cliental, indicated a shift from the traditional patronage model to an open-market model which would be built upon by subsequent artists in the mid-to-late-eighteenth-century.
Bibliography


