‘Flower Sellers of London’ by Gustave Doré

Who was Gustave Doré?

Gustave Doré (1832-1883) is a figure now largely known for his extensive illustrations for works of literature – in his lifetime he produced 220 illustrated books with over 10,000 individual graphics. Along with his paintings and sculpture, that averages as one artwork every single day in the span of his mature career! Most of Doré’s monumental canvases that were exhibited to great popular acclaim in 19th-century London, and many other paintings in genres as varied as landscape, portraiture and religion, have either made their way into private collections or to the United States. Compared to his book illustrations, his paintings are not well-known to the modern British gallery-going public.

Born in Strasbourg, France, he was a child prodigy and produced his first illustrated book, *The Labours of Hercules*, at the age of 15 having had no formal schooling in art. The images he created for works of classic literature such as *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Coleridge, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* remain to this day some of the most common choices for illustrated editions. They have arguably become the definitive images of the texts. The quality of his engraved output varied, however, and it was said that he passed sketches to his engraving assistants with “etc.” marked on architectural features that he had no time to fill in himself.

Doré hoped, after his initial popular success in illustration, to find similar adulation in the arena of high art with oil paintings and sculpture. However, his submissions to the Salon in Paris, the most highly esteemed venue for the arts in France, were never received with the same amount of success that his illustrations achieved.

So it was not in his native France that he found success with his paintings, but across the channel in England. In 1865, the English publisher Cassell invited Doré to produce an illustrated edition of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. By 1868 a ‘Doré Gallery’ opened in central London and displayed canvases of enormous scale depicting subjects such as *The Triumph of Christianity over Paganism* (now in Hamilton, Ontario) and *Christ Leaving the Praetorium* (Strasbourg - http://www.musees-strasbourg.org/index.php?page=accrochage-historique-en). The appeal of such huge paintings was very much like that of a blockbuster movie today. Although establishment critics such as John Ruskin were not impressed by his sensationalism, the general English public were drawn to his works. Despite this he never settled in England or learnt to speak English, but its capital city provided Doré with the inspiration for one of his most highly regarded works in illustration: *London: A Pilgrimage* in 1872.

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**London: A Pilgrimage**

Doré was approached in 1869 by Blanchard Jerrold, a journalist, who was interested in writing an illustrated guide to London. London was the largest city on the planet in the late 19th century and was a source of fascination for writers and artists in its extremes of both poverty and riches. As Jerrold says in the introduction, he set out to depict “the most striking types, the most completely representative scenes, and the most picturesque features of the greatest city on the face of the globe – given to us to be reduced to a single volume”. The work was a great success. Doré is referred to in Jerrold’s text as his fellow pilgrim and “the foreigner”. Doré was said to have employed his photographic memory in recording what he saw rather than taking sketches on the spot, and it is these observations that ensured the work is remembered today. Jerrold’s writing, however, gives us an insight into Doré’s reaction to the poverty he witnessed:

“The Cockney gamin was the constant wonder of my fellow pilgrim. It appeared terrible, indeed, to him, that in all the poverty-stricken districts of our London, children should most abound; that some of the hardest outdoor work should be in their feeble little hands”.

Jerrold also mentions the effect the massed poor at London Bridge had on Doré, and how the Frenchman insists that they revisit at night.

“The wayfarers grouped and massed under the moon’s light, with the ebon midnight stillness, there was a most impressive solemnity upon the whole, which penetrated the nature of the artist. “And they say London is an ugly place!” was the exclamation. “We shall see,” I answered.”

**Flower sellers in London**

Jerrold tells of some flower sellers in *London: A Pilgrimage*.

“Irish girls mostly [who] hasten out of the horrors of the common lodging house to market, where they buy their flowers, for the day’s huckstering in the City. … There is an affecting expression in the faces of some of these rough bouquetieres, that speaks of honourable effort to make headway out of the lodging-house and the rents…”

Doré produced an engraving of a flower girl for Jerrold. She is standing on a kerb. In common with the painting is the voluminous basket of flowers and the child held close to her, but the sense of extreme poverty is not as pronounced as in the Walker’s painting. It has more of the character of a snapshot than the carefully considered composition of his oil painting.

One of the precedents for Jerrold’s *London: A Pilgrimage* was the vast study by his brother-in-law Henry Mayhew: *London Labour and the London Poor* published in 1851. This work of social history attempted to record and classify the massed poor of the capital in a study of types. Mayhew interviewed many...
of the people to be found on the streets, including two young orphan girls who work as flower sellers. The lodging houses in which they live are said to be in "remarkable contrast to the beauty and fragrance of the flowers they sometimes have to carry thither with them unsold", a similar contrast that Doré is no doubt trying to represent between the figures and their basket of wares in the painting.

The younger of the girls was said to be barefoot, much as the young girl in the painting, “the soles of her little feet were impervious, like horn, to the roughness of the road”. She is said to have a “chubby, and even rosy face” which is reminiscent of the little girl by Doré. In the elder girl’s own words:

“I sell flowers, sir; we live almost on flowers when they are to be got. I sell and so does my sister …I buy my flowers at Covent Garden; sometimes, but very seldom, at Farringdon. I pay 1s. for a dozen bunches, whatever flowers are in. Out of every two bunches I can make three, at 1d. a piece. …The two of us doesn’t make less than 6d. a day, unless it’s very ill luck. But religion teaches us that God will support us, and if we make less we say nothing.”

**The Walker At Gallery’s ‘Flower Sellers of London’**

Depictions of the poor have a long precedent in art history. Amongst the most famous examples are paintings by the Spanish artist Murillo, who in the 17th century, as well as altarpieces such as the grand *Virgin and Child* displayed in room 3 of the Walker (http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/collections/17c/murillo.aspx ), produced images of beggar boys, some of which are now in Dulwich Picture Gallery (http://www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk/collection/search_the_collection/artwork_detail.aspx?cid=146 ). These images were probably designed to evoke feelings of Christian charity in the viewer by combining the extremes of poverty with the humanity bestowed upon the subject.

In the 19th century, the French Realism movement of the 1850s recognised ordinary, everyday people as appropriate subjects for high art, such as in Gustave Courbet’s revolutionary canvas *The Stonebreakers* (1850, formerly Dresden, destroyed). More conservative artists such as Bouguereau also portrayed the poor in very formal academic paintings such as his *Charity* (1865, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery - http://www.bmagic.org.uk/objects/1897P11 ). The Walker has a collection of paintings from the English Social Realist movement of the 1870s. This movement emphasised an approach to the poor that has much in common with the journalistic reportage of *London: A Pilgrimage*. Herkomer’s *Eventide* (http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/picture-of-month/displaypicture.asp?venue=2&id=146 ) and Kennington’s *Daily Bread* illustrate, like the *Flower Sellers*, a shared concern held by much of Victorian high society for the terrible situation that the underclass of its cities endured.

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In part, the Walker’s *Flower Sellers* reproduces the journalistic approach of *London: A Pilgrimage*. The central figure of the composition is perhaps the baby held by the woman in the centre. Far from a beaming Christ-child, his appearance borders on the grotesque. A close bond to his mother is shown by their touching faces and the wrapping of the child in her shawl. The woman to the right is bleary eyed, and the child’s head is buried in her breast in a shadowy slump. No figure within the painting makes eye contact with another, giving an overbearing sense of alienation. The little girl and the baby, however, look out to the viewer, making it difficult not to engage with the image. The flowers provide a colourful contrast to the sombre atmosphere; contrasts between beauty and squalor play an important part of Doré’s *London* illustrations.

However, the Walker’s painting is far from just a *London* illustration conceived in a larger scale in oil on canvas. Doré has conditioned the subject to conform to the customs of high art. The central woman supports her no doubt heavy child with a columnar strength, her pose and the treatment of the draperies of her dress recalling an ancient Greek statue known as a *caryatid*, which stood in for a column in architecture. This aspect is not evident in the later engraving after the painting. The figures are organised into a neat pyramid and have none of the character of a candid photograph. Yet Doré attempts to strike a balance: the painting does not have the academic, spotless sheen of Bouguereau’s *Charity* nor the unconvincingly healthy child, very likely a well-off model, of Kennington’s *Daily Bread*.

Much Victorian art was prized for its moral value. Although the women here are far from helpless and the sense is that they will struggle on supporting their offspring, the children appeal to the viewer’s sense of charity. Since there is no male figure in the image, and the typical viewer of art in the Victorian period would be a man, Doré invites his viewer to ‘step into’ the picture and provide support to these women. Perhaps this is why the wealthy Henry Thompson purchased the painting and donated it to the Walker Art Gallery in 1880, thinking it would instil in the citizens of Liverpool who visited the gallery a sense of charity towards the poor and strengthen the moral character of the city.

**Some drawings after the Walker Art Gallery’s painting**

A number of small drawings including the figures from the Walker painting appear to have been produced by Doré afterwards, as well as other images of flower girls relating to his work with Jerrold. However, they give out very different messages in the imagery they use.

A sketch titled ‘Flower Sellers, Drury Lane, London, 1880’ with a personalised inscription to his friend Samuel P. Avery and now in the Avery collection at New York Public Library, includes the Walker figures with three old men to the right and another child in front offering bunches of flowers. The mood here differs from the painting; it is less a mood of melancholy and contemplation, the figures seem to huddle together for warmth and the girl in front transmits a sense of desperation that the girls are anxious to sell off their flowers and get

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off the cold street. The extra figures give the image a sense of a narrative scene rather than having the timeless quality of the Walker’s painting.

An etching Doré produced after the Walker painting presents another very different mood. Here a young standing woman replaces the seated woman and child on the right. Flower selling was a well-known guise for prostitution, and the figure’s ostentatious offering, flowers in her hair and pouty, sensual lips may have been understood by a 19th-century viewer as referring to this practice. The young girl is also shielded by the central figure and there is a very pronounced sense of danger. Another illustration by Doré ‘A Beggar of London’ from 1873 shows a different image of a flower seller with overtones of prostitution – a young vulnerable girl, her hat worn at a coquettish angle. These views of flower selling show Doré approaching another aspect of poverty that he perhaps felt was too explicit to include in his canvas.

Doré’s illustrative work frequently contained violent, grotesque and sensational imagery that would appeal to a popular audience, and which would not have been appropriate in high art. ‘Flower Sellers in London’ includes elements of this dilemma for Doré, who had been trying to reconcile his ‘popular’ side with the aspirations he held in his forays into the sphere of ‘serious’ art. Victorian Britain was perhaps more receptive to these contrasts than his native France as depicted in London: A Pilgrimage and to a lesser degree in ‘Flower Sellers of London’.

**Conservation of the painting**

Before ‘Flower Sellers of London’ could be returned to display in the Walker in 2010 its condition required serious attention. Areas of the paint surface, particularly the flowers, were loose and fragile and the canvas showed horizontal creases, thought perhaps to be a consequence of it being rolled for storage during World War II.

The painting was treated by conservators at National Museums Liverpool. The first task was to make sure that the problem areas were consolidated so no further paint loss could occur. This had been attempted in the 1950s by applying wax to the reverse of the canvas in the hope it would secure the paint. However, this is a treatment we now know can do more harm than good to the painting: it means that the canvas cannot respond in the usual way to its environment. The wax-free areas will expand and contract according to moisture in the air more than those imbued with wax. This could lead to a great deal of stress on the borders between these areas. Areas of severe flaking were treated with isinglass, a substance commonly used in modern painting conservation and obtained from the swim bladders of fish (and occasionally more wax where there was no other option).

The next task was to remove the excess wax from the reverse of the painting. Analysis of the paint layer found that Doré himself originally mixed some wax into the paint for this work. This made it impossible to remove the modern wax chemically without risking damage to the original work. It was decided that the
only way to reduce the effect of the misguided 20th-century restoration was to remove it with a scalpel.

After this the canvas was removed from its wooden stretcher (the support frame over which the canvas is stretched) to repair torn edges which was done by applying a strip-lining all around the inner edges of the canvas. Following this the surface grime was removed and the painting retouched where unsightly paint loss had occurred. It was finally re-varnished with a modern varnish that should not yellow over time.

This conservation project demonstrates how much of the work of the modern conservator is removing the effects of previous conservation attempts while retaining as much of the original artist's work as possible. Although earlier conservators' efforts can be damaging, we must remember that without the attempts they made at the time with the knowledge they had, there might have been nothing left to conserve today!

The painting's 19th-century frame, very likely the original, also needed extensive repair to restore it to an exhibitable condition.

The painting was x-rayed during conservation. It was found that the horizontal 'crease' marks noted above were not due to any rolling but were actually evidence of the artist originally including a brick wall behind the figures; this can be just be seen by the naked eye in front of the painting. Why did Doré make this change? We can only speculate. One reason is perhaps he thought the sight of a plain brick wall made his painting too bleak. By opening it up with what is perhaps intended to be open sky, he made it a brighter and more striking picture. The low wall and oil lamp may also relocate the scene from a street side to the London Bridge that Jerrold recorded as making such an effect upon Doré in his pilgrimage.

This feature was researched and written by James Cameron during a volunteer work placement at the Walker Art Gallery in 2010.

Selected further Reading
- Nigel Gosling – Gustave Doré (1973)
- Gustave Doré Loan Exhibition (Published by Hazlitt, Gooden and Fox, 1987)