

The consultation in art

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William Hogarth (1697–1764) commenting on his paintings and engravings of moral subjects wrote ‘... I have endeavoured to treat my subjects as a dramatic writer; my picture is my stage, and men and women my players, who by means of certain actions and gestures are to exhibit a dumb show.’ The first of these moral subjects was the series *The Harlot’s Progress* (1731–2), followed by *The Rake’s Progress* (1735), *Marriage à La Mode* (1743) and finally *The Election* (1754). Each is a detailed and critical commentary on behaviour and customs of eighteenth century England.

This particular painting, *The Inspection*, belongs to the series *Marriage à La Mode*, which traces the disastrous marriage between an idle, supercilious and dissipated earl’s son to a spoilt daughter of a rich merchant. First, there is *The Marriage Contract* when the marriage is arranged, second the *Tête à Tête* (*Breakfast Scene*) where the newly-weds are exhausted after an all-night card-party. That scene clearly indicates their lifestyle has resulted in serious debt and the young nobleman’s life of debauchery has resulted in his acquiring a venereal disease. In *The Inspection*, the nobleman visits a French quack doctor for treatment. The remaining scenes (*The Toilette*, *Death of the Earl*, and *Death of the Countess*) chart the subsequent downfall of the couple.

As in all of Hogarth’s moral series, there is much detail, and research has revealed a great deal of its significance. The scene and surroundings represent a criticism of quackery in general: the grotesque appearance of the quack himself, the many objects and images referring to useless remedies. The model head with a pill in its mouth was often displayed outside an apothecary’s shop in order to advertise his wares. The urinal represents the practice of urinoscopy.

The unicorn’s horn was a highly prized and expensive medieval remedy, and was supposedly an aphrodisiac. There is much more. The nobleman holds out a box of pills, the lid remaining on his seat, indicating the area for treatment. He is portrayed with a black spot on his neck, indicating venereal infection, which appears in his subsequent images in the series, including later his child by the countess.

Hogarth was very critical of the quack doctors of his time and the gullibility of many patients. His sympathy for the sick themselves however is beautifully illustrated in *The Pool of Bethesda*, painted on the staircase at St Bartholomew’s Hospital (where it can still be viewed).

Though he painted and engraved many other subjects, it was his moral series which brought him most fame. He was proud of his Englishness and once signed a painting ‘W Hogarth Anglus Pinxit’.

Marriage à La Mode: The Inspection (1743) William Hogarth
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