

“ITALIAN BOYS”: THE *FIGURINAI* OF ITALY AND LONDON

ALAN RAUCH
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
UNC CHARLOTTE
CHARLOTTE, NC 28205
T: 704.687.0391 F: 704.687.3961
arauch@unc.edu
<http://webpages.unc.edu/~arauch>



Among the many confusing sights in the streets in the nineteenth century London was a small army of “Italian Boys” who balanced—on their heads--dozens of figurines on slender boards. These were the “Italian Boys,” sometime called “Image Boys” or “Figurinai,” from whom passers-by would buy figurines generally made of Plaster of Paris. Although they are almost now entirely forgotten, they were clearly an important—even conspicuous--part of London’s street life. Wordsworth notes their prominence in the Prelude:

The Italian, as he thrids his way with care,
Steadying, far-seen, a frame of images
Upon his head; with basket at his breast.¹

And the Penny Magazine (1833) makes it clear that these vendors were not only a daily sight but they had diverse wares as well.

From Charing Cross to Ludgate-street,
That haunt of noise and wrangle,
Has seen, on journeying through the Strand,
A foreign image-vender stand
Near Somerset's quadrangle.

No; far more classic is his stock;
With ducal Arthur, Milton, Locke,
He bears, unconscious roamer,
Alemena's Jove-begotten Son,
Cold Abelard's too tepid Nun,

¹ The Prelude, Book VII, ll. 214-216

And pass-supported Homer.

Italian image vendors have a long tradition in their native land, selling their figurines predominantly in larger cities such as Florence, Rome, Milan, and Venice. But for reasons that aren't entirely clear, they began to emigrate in the early 19th century and found England a particularly hospitable market for their merchandise. To be sure, Staffordshire pottery was on the rise in the 19th century, and so consumer interest in earthenware *objets d'art*—especially at an affordable price—was widespread. And interest lasted throughout the Victorian era. In Jude the Obscure, Sue Bridewell purchases images of Venus and Apollo, only to render them into Mary Magadalen and St. Peter, to satisfy the intrusive questions of her landlady. Later, Conan Doyle's story "The Six Napoleons" (1905) relies on the enduring presence of parian figures of Napoleon which, having only recently been manufactured, are a convenient place to hide the mysterious "black pearl of the Borgias."

In this paper I want to explore the role of "Italian Boys" on the streets of London, not merely as vendors of images, but as vectors of European culture. The very idea of icons for sale, though commonplace in Italy and France, where Catholicism endorsed the idea of iconic representation, was new to England's protestant, to say nothing of its Puritan, sensibility.

What was it about "Italian boys," that facilitated the sale of iconic figurines? Sent out into the streets by the actual "artists," who were adults, the children combined a sense of innocence and exoticism, while avoiding any of the threatening connotations of the Gothic Italian, so deeply embedded in English consciousness. The images themselves were typically secular, and though often iconic as with the images of Wellington and Napoleon, they ostensibly skirted religious value for political or even intellectual appeal. The vending process, as described in the Penny Magazine, was simple... although it does evoke a sense of Fagin's operation in Oliver Twist:

the artist, or the principal of this company, having received his moulds, would set to work, dispatching the boys who were with him through the city and the little towns and villages in the neighborhood, to sell the figures which he could rapidly make. When the distance permitted, these boys would return at night with the fruits of the day's sale to their master, who lodged and fed them.²

The Italian Boys, always represented as nicely dressed and very capable (showing off their balancing skills while also selling images), brought an acceptable "dose" of Italian culture into the heart of London, which clearly struck the English as endearing rather than threatening. We have little knowledge of what happened to these boys as they matured, but they surely found their way into the broad mix of London life. Street vendors in general began to disappear toward the end of the Victorian era, and with them, the "Italian Boys." Still, in their very tempered way, they left a legacy and a lasting bond with Italian culture.

The question, what does this have to do with late 18th and early 19th century earthenware, which included an array of figurines depicting giraffes, circus displays, and racehorses. As I began to consider these items it occurred to me that these items might well be consistent with the "knowledge-texts" (of the late Romantic and early Victorian periods) that I examined in Useful Knowledge. Most scholars, including myself, have focused primarily on print materials as emblems and vehicle of disseminated knowledge. Yet pottery, unlike the relatively expensive items of the presses, could often be had for as little as sixpence or a shilling and their meaning and significance was surely powerful and significant even to the barely literate.

The role of pottery—a subject now dominated posh collectors but previously in the realm of the lowest street vendors—has never been fully or even adequately explored, but it was nevertheless pervasive. Who, we must ask, kept images of giraffes and why? What meaning, what social or intellectual caché, was derived from having these inexpensive and rough-hewn objects in one's home?

Interestingly enough, we celebrate the discovery of clay icons, or toys, or fertility symbols in the context of archaeology, but we seldom bring the same ethnographic interest to the mass-produced items of the Staffordshire industry. The encoding of knowledge, to say nothing of the performing of Knowledge, can be much more subtle and much more engaging than it already is, if we're willing to reconsider modes of mediation that include the material objects of everyday life. These materials, offered the possibility of a sustained engagement (in contrast with ephemeral print) with emblems that signaled a strong commitment to the material and scientific world.

When I started giving serious thought to the world of figurines, it became clear to me how much our sense of the Georgian and Victorian era is dominated by print culture. Whether in the written texts of Shelley, Byron, Dickens, or George Eliot, or in the wonderful illustrations of Gillray, Rowlandson, Heath, Cruikshank, or Doyle, the texts and materials we most often discuss are not paper based, expensive until mid-century, but often word based. What is so striking about earthenware figures is that because they are fully representational, in other words, they are strict analogues of what they purport to represent, they are highly accessible to a wide variety of people. Literacy, at whatever level of accomplishment, is not a prerequisite for making sense of or for telling stories about figurines.

The re-mediation of knowledge --to use a term from Richard Grusin's and Jay Bolter's book of that name-- existed in a variety of objects, but I want to focus on the very inexpensive form of earthenware. To be sure, certain collectors recognized that porcelain "bric-à-brac" reflected British history in its entirety. This was the philosophy of Henry Willett, whose remarkable collection of pottery forms the core of the Brighton and Hove Museum. Willett claimed that British History, in its entirety, could be documented in pottery and he devoted his life to proving just that. Herbert Byng Hall's *The Adventures of a Bric-à-brac Hunter* (1875) makes similar claims for English pottery, though Hall's (1868) taste runs toward a higher end of "bric-a-brac" than does Willett."

By way of analogy, in terms of bric-à-brac and material culture, I think it's worth considering bobbleheads dolls which became a phenomenon as early as the 1920s but have, more recently, undergone something of a revival. Bobbleheads, by the way, are known as "figural noddors" to the initiated collectors and have, in one form or another, been around for at least two centuries. The Schwarzenegger bobble-head (depicted above) elicited controversy recently when the now-Governor of California threatened to sue the manufacturer if they continued to produce an image of him holding an automatic weapon. After an out-of-court settlement, the manufacturer, Bosley Bobbers, agreed to depict an unarmed Schwarzenegger, a settlement that, no doubt, undermined the sales of the dolls. What is clear, I hope from the analogy, is that even these examples of so-called "ephemera" have powerful and significant cultural meaning, so much of which is derived from their visual impact. If our interest is to understand how knowledge is both represented and emblemized, our attention must encompass the full range of material culture generated by a culture.

If bobble heads weren't on sale in the Regency/Victorian era, plaster of Paris images were in abundance. "Image boys" or "figurina" (because they were often Italian) roamed London's streets with images balanced precariously on their heads.

The image boys or "figurina" as they were called, were predominantly Italian and often young, although adults sold images as well. The most celebrated "Italian Boy" is the young man

murdered in London by “resurrectionists” as described in Sarah Wise’s recent Book “The Italian Boy.” (Though it isn’t clear if the victim was, in fact, an image vendor.)

Their wares, which were made of plaster, would not have lasted very long and it’s not surprising that none of those images have, to my knowledge, survived. There are a few representations, however, aside from J. T. Smith’s that, if they don’t actually depict the images that were sold, give us sense of how common image boys were. At the formation of university College, London, a caricature depicts Lord Brougham, the relentless force behind the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge AND the indefatigable advocate for what he hoped would be a working man’s college, as an image vendor... selling the idea as an amalgam of subject areas incorporated into a building. In tow, reflecting Brougham’s lengthy pursuit of this project... is a toy hobbyhorse. Later, in the 1840s, Brougham reappears as an image Boy in Punch. By this time, he is a relative outcast from the Whigs and a bit of an anachronism –a discarded toy, if you will-- but he was still interested in sustaining his reputation as a relatively new Peer of the realm, as is clear by his attempts (in this illustration) to recycle past images of himself. Another cartoon in Punch, interpolates Mr. Punch himself (and thus the magazine he represents) as the “new” source of “fine images.”

I’ll return to the image boys later in this paper, but I do want to spend a little more time discussing earthenware pottery, which though more expensive, was well within the reach of merchants aspiring to the middling classes. Although little information exists about the commercial process that put figurines into the hands of these people, the evidence from collectors is that this mode of manufacture was very successful, and that potters were ingenious about creating wares that would find consumers. Charles Shaw, a young laborer in the Staffordshire potteries, had a very clear view of the production end of the process. The term Shaw uses is a Toy Manufactory and he describes the making figurines of Napoleon as follows:

I remember the figure of Napoleon Bonaparte was the leading article of our industry at this to factory. When Napoleon was finished he stood with his arms folded across his breast, his right leg a little forward, looking defiance at his English makers. He had a dark blue coat on, tightly buttoned, a buff waistcoat, and white breeches. There were touches of gold on his coat and his large black hat, with flat sides and point, with a high peak. These Napoleons must have been in large demand somewhere, for shoals of them were made at the time.

It is curious how a man who thirty years before had been veritable ogre and demon to the English people should now have become so popular. If all of the Napoleons made at this Toy factory could have had life given them, then England, if not invaded, would have been crowded by military Frenchmen and of the dreaded Napoleonic type. *P. 125*

Shaw’s astonishment at the popularity of Napoleon at this time is interesting. Was his appeal nostalgic? For a time, however bad at the moment, when England was neither complacent nor comfortable in its bourgeois context? Other objects covered everything from crime, such as the notorious Red Barn murders, to industry, circuses, and so on. The Death of Munroe, for example, famously known for the object called “Tippoo’s Tiger” (now at the Victoria and Albert), was reproduced in enormous numbers.

Most of the objects that remain are, of course, “collectibles” and what that means is that they are both aesthetically pleasing and in relatively good shape. But there is enough evidence of less than beautiful objects using a single green glaze or figurines that were simply never quite right. And it may well be, if the few objects that still exist in museums are any measure, that these too were bought as decorative items.

The cultural significance of figurines certainly deserves more attention. And it’s certainly not clear how much we’ll ever learn about the role of ceramics in the 19th century

household. Some writers, like Anna Laetitia Barbauld, who in poems such as “Washing Day” embraces the domestic has given us a record of a tankard in “The Groans of a Tankard” and a record of the gift of candlesticks in “Lines to Anne Wakefield on her Wedding to Charles Rochement Aikin.” The impressions left by these images must have been strong. Even Thomas Hardy recalls not merely the existence of the image boys, but the power and protean quality of the images he sold. Thus Sue Bridewell cannot resist the objects sold by an image boy which include “reduced copies of ancient marbles, and comprised divinities of a very different character from those the girl was accustomed to see portrayed, among them being a Venus of standard pattern, a Diana, and, of the other sex, Apollo, Bacchus, and Mars.” She finally purchases the naked images of Venus and Apollo, the largest figures on the tray, but when she arrives home, she recognizes that they will not pass muster with her landlady and transforms them, quite effortlessly into St. Peter and Mary Magdalen, updating the symbolic images that hold so well for her and Jude.

Image objects were clearly a significant part of Regency and Victorian culture, where they were produced for all socio-economic levels of consumers, from Wedgwood aficionados to “impulse” buyers on the street. So little attention has been paid to this area that the purpose of this paper will, in part, serve to open the dialogue about image-objects even further and to begin to suggest the potential emblematic meaning(s) of such objects. Bourdieu, in creating important models of cultural consumption (focusing on, among other things, chamber-pots), has broken important ground in this area, but there is much work left to be done, particularly given the rich history of the pottery industry in the U.K., as part of an effort to situate these objects in the context of how knowledge was, is, and can be represented.