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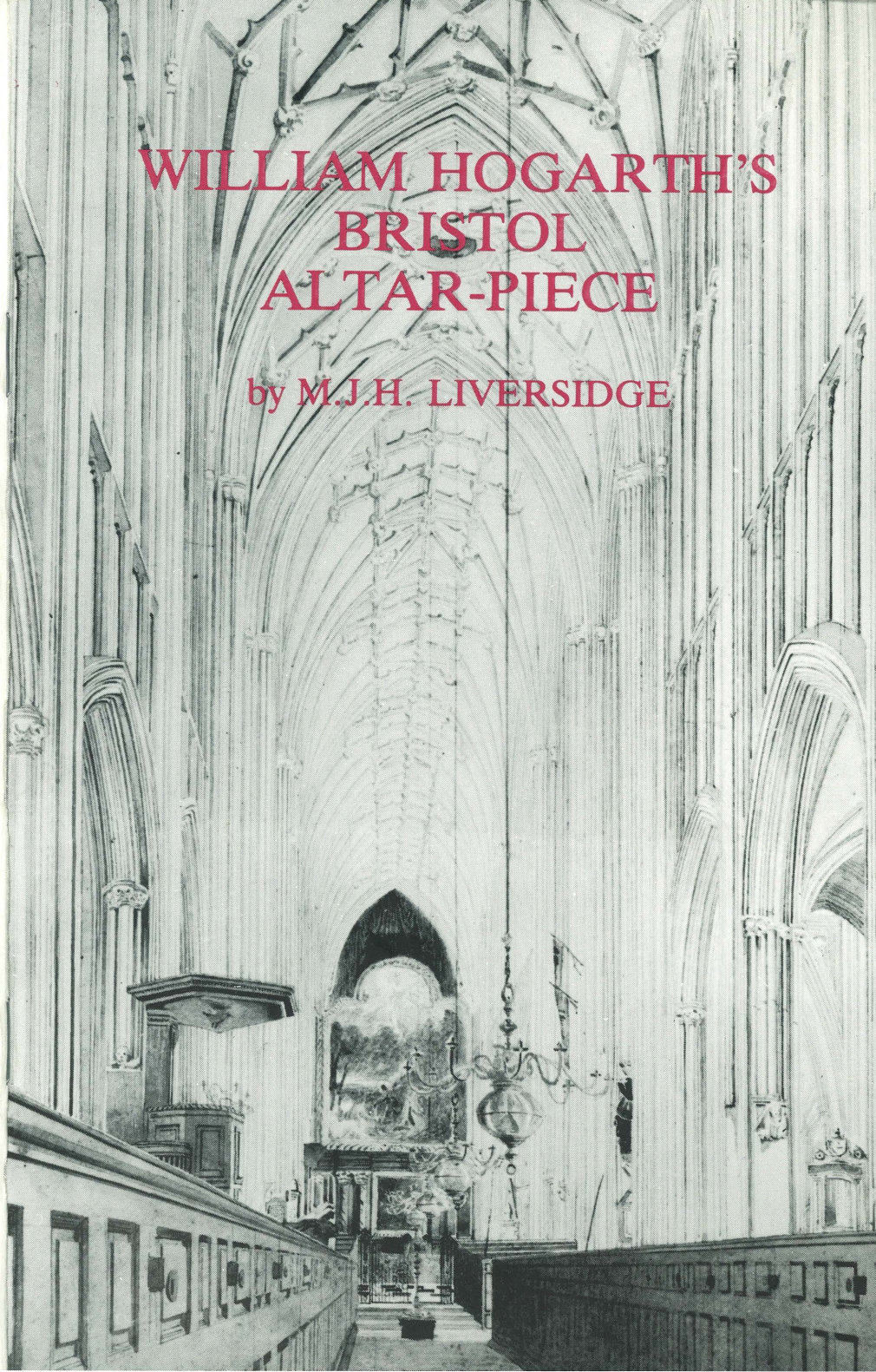
WILLIAM HOGARTH'S BRISTOL ALTAR-PIECE

by M.J.H. LIVERSIDGE



BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

LOCAL HISTORY PAMPHLETS

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William Hogarth's Bristol Altar-piece is the forty-sixth pamphlet to be published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association. It is based on the Frederick Creech Jones Memorial Lecture which Mr. Liversidge delivered in the University of Bristol in May 1979.

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The Branch also gratefully acknowledges a grant from The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, London, towards the cost of printing the lecture. Assistance was also received from the Publications Committee of the University of Bristol.

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The next pamphlet in the series will be Basil Cottle's *Robert Southey and Bristol* which was the first of a new series of lectures organised by the Old Bristol Parish Church (Christ Church with St. Ewen and All Saints, City).

A list of pamphlets in print is given on the inside back cover. Pamphlets can be obtained from most Bristol booksellers, from the Porters' Lodge in the Wills Memorial Building and from Mr. Peter Harris, 74 Bell Barn Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol 9.

Cover illustration: James Johnson, *Interior of St. Mary Redcliffe*, 1828. City Art Gallery, Bristol.

WILLIAM HOGARTH'S BRISTOL ALTAR-PIECE

William Hogarth died at the house in Leicester Square in London where he had his painting studio during the night of October 25th., 1764. He was buried at Chiswick — in 1749 he had bought a modest country house there — and in 1771 a monument to his memory was erected in the churchyard. It bore an inscription composed by the actor David Garrick which begins,

> Farewell, great Painter of mankind,
> Who reach'd the noblest point of art;
> Whose pictur'd morals charm the mind,
> And through the eye correct the heart.[1]

Another epitaph was penned by Dr. Johnson:

> The hand of him here torpid lies,
> That drew the essential Form of Grace;
> Here closed in Death the attentive eyes
> That saw the manners in the face![2]

The qualities for which Hogarth was appreciated as a man and as an artist were more fully expressed in an obituary published by the *London Evening Post:*

> In him were happily united the utmost force of human genius, and an incomparable understanding, an inflexible integrity, and a most benevolent heart. No man was better acquainted with the human passions, nor endeavoured to make them more subservient to the reformation of the world, than this inimitable artist. His works will continue to be held in the highest estimation, so long as sense, genius and virtue, shall remain amongst us; and whilst the tender feelings of humanity can be affected by the vices and follies of mankind.[3]

1. J.B. Nichols, 1833, 146. For a comprehensive summary of obituary notices and posthumous eulogies to Hogarth's memory see R. Paulson, 1971, II, Appendix K, pp. 508-11.
2. J.B. Nichols, 1833, 147.
3. *London Evening Post,* 28-30 October, 1764.

An old friend of Hogarth's, the Reverend James Townley, added his own appreciation of the painter in the form of an extended epitaph which was printed in the *Public Ledger* on November 19th., 1764, in which he asserted that the artist had been

> . . . such an accurate observer of mankind, that no character escaped him; and so happy in expressing his conceptions by the strength of his pencil, that, as his own times never produced a rival, posterity will scarce ever see an equal to him. His thoughts were so constantly employed in the cause of truth and virtue, that he may be justly ranked amongst the best moral authors. Whilst he faithfully followed nature through all her varieties, and exposed, with inimitable skill, the infinite follies and vices of the world, he was himself an example of many virtues . . .[4]

In his own day Hogarth's reputation rested, as it still does, on the popular appeal of the 'modern moral subjects' and 'comic histories' in which he observed with penetrating wit and acerbic satire, and always with a keen understanding of human nature, the follies and vices of contemporary society at every level.

His prints and paintings introduced an entirely novel sort of narrative art to the English public: they were intended not merely to amuse, but by means of humour to instruct as well. As Hogarth himself recorded in the *Autobiographical Notes* he wrote towards the end of his life,

> Subjects of most consequence are those that most entertain and Improve the mind and are of public utility . . . If this be true, comedy in painting stands first as it is most capable of all these perfections.[5]

Behind series like the *Harlot's Progress* (1732) and the *Marriage à la Mode* (painted c1743, issued as a set of engravings in 1745) there lay a profoundly serious intention, and in the same way Hogarth exploited the comic characters and situations he created in single paintings such as the early *Christening* (c1729) or the much later *Lady's Last Stake* (1758-9) to expose concupiscence and moral corruption.[6] When he contrasts the benefits of beer drinking with the degradation of an addiction to gin (*Beer Street*

4. R. Paulson, 1971, II, 510-11, reproduces the epitaph in its entirety.
5. J. Burke, 1955, 214-5.
6. The original paintings for *A Harlot's Progress* were destroyed by fire at Fonthill in 1755; for the set of prints, see Beckett, 1949, *45-50. Marriage a la Mode* (London, National Gallery), *ibid. 142-7; The Christening* (private collection), *ibid. 16; The Lady's Last Stake* (Buffalo, New York State, Albright-Knox Gallery), *ibid. 195.* All these works were included in the Tate Gallery *William Hogarth* exhibition (1971) and are reproduced in the catalogue.

and *Gin Lane*, 1750-51) his motives were explicitly those of a social reformer whose passionate commitment to humanitarian causes was expressed with a deeply personal sense of involvement.[7] Horace Walpole remarked of Hogarth's work that "Mirth coloured his pictures, but benevolence designed them",[8] and if practical demonstration were needed of his compassionate nature it may be found in his active support of Thomas Coram's Foundling Hospital, with which he was associated as a governor from its foundation in 1739.

Hogarth's narrative pictures depend for their effect on his vivid observation of circumstantial detail and the characterisation of types combined with an intuitive facility for fluent design and handling the brush. Similar properties distinguish his portraits, which are usually invested with an intimacy and candid realism that sometimes disconcerted his sitters. As Lawrence Gowing has observed, "He showed the aspect that a man presented to his fellows and the place that he occupied in the world with a completeness that invented what was virtually a new kind of image",[9] and it was his singular ability to capture on canvas personality and human nature in a likeness as much as in a character that Jonathan Swift recognised in the lines he addressed to Hogarth in 1736, where he urges the artist always to present his subjects with uncompromising truth:

> Draw them so that we may trace
> All the soul in every face.[10]

Invariably the visual immediacy and the perception of character in portraits such as those of *George Arnold* (c1740) and *Mrs Salter* (1744) are the most striking features of a likeness painted by

7. The engravings after Hogarth are reproduced in R. Paulson, 1971, II, *226-7;* for Hogarth's original drawings (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library) see P. Oppe, 1948, *73-4.*
   Hogarth makes his intentions in creating the two prints perfectly clear in his *Autobiographical Notes:* "Bear Street and Gin Lane were done when the dredfull consequences of gin drinking was at its height. In gin lane every circumstance of its horrid effects are brought into view, in terorem nothing but (Itleness) Povert misery and ruin are to be seen. . . . Bear street its companion was given as a contrast, were the invigorating liquor is recommended to drive the other out of vogue. here all is joyous and thriveing/ Industry and Jollity go hand in hand. . . ." (J. Burke, 1955, 226).
8. Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England,* 1765-71; reprinted 1876 (3 vols, ed. R.N. Wornum), III, 6.
9. Tate Gallery, 1971, 42.
10. Jonathan Swift, 'The Legion Club', 1736; H. Williams (ed.), *The Poems of Jonathan Swift,* Oxford, 1937, III, 839.

Hogarth, and by the standards of their time they represent a radically new departure in English painting that profoundly influenced the work of artists that followed.[11]

Hogarth's contribution to the progress of painting in England was much greater than his originality as an artist alone could have achieved. His work reached a far wider public than any English artist before him had succeeded in addressing, and this in itself served to stimulate interest, influence taste and create new demands from which his fellow painters materially benefited. His naturally assertive temperament found expression not only in the style and content of his work, and in the campaign he constantly carried on to publicise himself and his art, but it was also energetically directed into projects devised to promote the professional status of the artist in England. Various enterprises with which he was involved during his career reveal how strenuously he was committed to improving the training, opportunities and recognition which he felt British artists were entitled to receive from their countrymen. He was instrumental in securing the passage of the Engravers' Copyright Act in 1735 to protect artists from the loss of income occasioned by unscrupulous printsellers who pirated their work, an abuse from which he had suffered personally following the publication of his *Harlot's Progress*. In the same year he revived the St. Martin's Lane Academy, previously managed by his father-in-law, the decorative painter Sir James Thornhill, from whom he had inherited the furnishings and apparatus in 1735. It survived until it was absorbed into the Royal Academy when it was founded in 1768, providing artists in London with a place where they could practise life drawing from the model and receive some instruction. During the 1740's he presented some of his own paintings to the Foundling Hospital and persuaded his fellow artists to follow his example, creating what was in effect the first permanent exhibition of English pictures accessible to public view. Within ten years the collection included works by virtually all the leading London painters of the period — portraits by Ramsay, Hudson, Highmore and Reynolds, views by Wilson and Gainsborough, subject pictures by Hayman, Highmore and others.[12] The scheme allowed artists to exhibit "the kind of work they would *like* to be

11. *George Arnold* (Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum), R. Beckett, 1949, *101; Mrs Salter* (London, Tate Gallery), *ibid. 152.*
12. B. Nicolson, *Treasures of the Foundling Hospital,* Oxford, 1972, 20-38; R. Paulson, 1971, II, 35-50.

commissioned to paint rather than turning out the usual run of what was expected of them",[13] and as one contemporary observer commented it "afforded the public an opportunity of judging whether the English are such indifferent artists, as foreigners, and even the English themselves pretend".[14] It was largely due to initiatives such as these that a sense of corporate identity and community of interest was propagated among the members of the profession and set in motion the events that led in due course to the formation of the Society of Artists in 1760 and the Royal Academy in 1768.

Above all Hogarth campaigned against the prejudice which prevailed among the fashionable *beau-monde* of the mid-eighteenth century who preferred the work of foreigners or even the most mediocre of old masters to the products of the native English school. In satirical prints such as *The Battle of the Pictures* etching (1745), in which Hogarth's paintings are assaulted by a group of delinquent old master pictures assembled outside an auctioneer's premises, and in *Time Smoking a Picture* (1761), as well as in the essays and advertisements that he published from time to time, Hogarth consistently returned to the same theme, the spurious value attached to venerable antiquity at the expense of the living.[15] In particular he attacked the iniquitous neglect of British artists by British connoisseurs and patrons, critics (whom he described contemptuously as quacks), and the dealers, for whom he reserved his severest invective:

> . . . noxious . . . *Picture-Jobbers* . . . who are always ready to raise a great Cry in the Prints whenever they think their Craft is in Danger; and indeed it is their Interest to depreciate every *English* Work, as hurtful to their Trade, of continually importing ship loads of dead *Christs, Holy Families, Madona's,* and other dismal Dark Subjects, neither entertaining nor Ornamental; on which they scrawl the terrible cramp Names of some *Italian* Masters, and fix on us poor *Englishmen,* the Character of *Universal Dupes.*[16]

The same point was made by the Swiss miniaturist André Rouquet in his book, *L'Etat des Arts en Angleterre,* published in Paris in 1755:

13. E.K. Waterhouse, 1965, 18.
14. A. Rouquet, 1755, 27.
15. *The Battle of the Pictures,* R. Paulson, 1971, I, *189; Time Smoking a Picture, ibid.,* II, *287.*
16. W. Hogarth ("Britophil"), *St. James's Evening Post,* 7-9 June, 1737; reprinted, *London Magazine,* July 1737. The essay is reproduced in its entirety in R. Paulson, 1971, II, Appendix F, 491-3.

> The English painters have one obstacle to surmount, which equally retards the progress of their abilities, as of their fortune. They have a set of men to contend with, whose profession is to sell pictures; and as it would be impossible for this sort of people to trade with the pictures of living artists, and especially of their own country, they take it into their heads to decry them, and to amuse those whom they have access to, with the absurd notion, that a picture becomes more valuable in proportion to its antiquity.[17]

Most of Hogarth's contemporaries were confined by the limitations of the patronage available to them and by the prevailing climate of critical opinion to earning their living as portrait painters, a profession for which he had little regard and less enthusiasm despite his own success in the business. Portrait painting he regarded essentially as a kind of drudgery, and the painters who specialised in manufacturing likenesses according to the dictates of fashion he dismissed as a "nest of Phizmongers".[18] Hogarth's ambitions lay in a very different direction, and it was because he was, in his own words, "desirous of appearing in the more eligible light of an History painter or engraver"[19] that he turned to more serious subjects which included several excursions into religious and decorative painting in the tradition of the European grand manner. These were intended to demonstrate that English painters were capable of achieving the same qualities of intellectual dignity and greatness of style that were automatically ascribed to the old masters and contemporary continental artists, and also to encourage by example the formation of a native school of history painting.

The eighteenth century had inherited from the Renaissance the notion that history painting represented the highest endeavour to which an artist could aspire. It was an idea that had become enshrined in academic doctrine and was accepted equally by artists and connoisseurs. Hogarth rightly perceived that until the English school had at least laid the foundations of its own tradition in this particular *genre* it could not hope to earn the respect that was due to it. The problem was to obtain the commissions, and in this he was frustrated by the lack of opportunities that existed in England for producing such pictures. The situation was conveniently summarised by Rouquet in 1755:

17. A. Rouquet, 1755, 23.
18. *Autobiographical Notes,* J. Burke, 1955, 218.
19. *Ibid.*

> History Painters have so seldom an opportunity of displaying their abilities in England, that it is surprising that there are any at all who apply themselves to this branch: whosoever happens to fall into this business, very rarely meets with a rival. . . .
>
> In England, religion does not avail itself of the assistance of painting to inspire devotion; their churches at the most are adorned with an altar-piece, which nobody takes notice of; their apartments have no other ornaments than that of portraits or prints; and the cabinets of the virtuosi contain nothing but foreign pictures, which are generally more considerable for their number than their excellence.[20]

To overcome the problem Hogarth had to create his own opportunities for history painting in the 1730's and 1740's. He did so by adopting the expedient of presenting examples of his work to public institutions in order to advertise his talent. In 1735-36 he painted *Christ healing the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda* and *The Good Samaritan* for the staircase of St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London after offering his services free to the Governors to prevent the commission going to a Venetian painter, Jacopo Amiconi — an example of Hogarth's xenophobic resentment of the foreign painters who prospered in England at the expense of the native artists.[21] In 1746 Hogarth organised a gift to the Foundling Hospital of four history paintings, one of which he contributed himself. It shows *Moses brought before Pharoah's Daughter* and, like its three companions (*The Finding of Moses* by Francis Hayman, *Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert* by Joseph Highmore, and a nastily sentimental *Suffer the Little Children* by the now forgotten James Wills) the subject was chosen for its relevance to a charity for abandoned children.[22] The group were certainly intended to serve more than simply a straightforward decoratve purpose: as Ellis Waterhouse has pointed out, "Hogarth also saw the chance of using the Foundling gallery as a place for advertising the possibilities of a native school of history painting".[23]

20. A. Rouquet, 1755, 62.
21. R. Beckett, 1949, *85, 88;* R. Paulson, 1971, I, 378-88: "he painted a great stair case at Bartholomews Hospital with two scripture-stories, the Pool of Bethesday and the good Samaritan figures 7 foot high. this present to the charity he by the pother made about the grand stile thought might serve as a specimen to shew that were there any inclination in England for Historical painting such a first essay would Proove it more easily attainable than is imagined" (*Autobiograhical Notes,* J. Burke, 1955, 202).
22. B. Nicolson, *The Treasures of the Foundling Hospital,* Oxford, 1972, 25-7; 70, *53* (Hogarth); 67-8, *50* (Highmore); 66, *51* (Hayman); 80, *52* (Wills).
23. E.K. Waterhouse, 1965, 18.

The limited success that these presentation pieces met with may be measured from the fact that Hogarth received only two public commissions for large history pictures. One was for a huge canvas measuring ten feet by fourteen of *St. Paul before Felix* which he painted for the Chapel of Lincoln's Inn in 1748 (in fact it proved too large and so was hung in the Hall instead);[24] the other was for the great tripartite altar-piece ordered for St. Mary Redcliffe, Bristol, in 1755. Both are gigantic works of considerable significance as specimens of a class of painting, sublime history, that was then only just beginning to establish itself within the canon of English art. Hogarth mentions both these works in his *Autobiographical Notes:*

> To shew how little it may be expected that history painting will ever be required in the way it has been on account of religion abroad there have been but two Public demands in within the forty years, one for Lincoln Inn hall, the other for St. Mary Church at Bristol for both which I was applied to, and did them as well as I could recollected some of these ideas that I had pickt up when I vainly Imagind history painting might be brought into fasheon.[25]

The decision to invite Hogarth to paint an altar-piece for St. Mary Redcliffe to replace an earlier triptych done by someone called Holmes in 1709 is recorded in the minutes of a Vestry meeting held on May 28th., 1755, when

> it was agreed That the Altar-Piece of the Parish Church of St Mary Redcliff be new painted and that an Application be made to Mr. Hogarth to know whether he will undertake to paint this same and to desire him to come from London to survey and make an estimate thereof. And it was also ordered that the present Churchwarden Mr Nathaniel Webb shall pay him the Expences of his Journey provided He shall not think proper to undertake the said Painting.[26]

The commission was accepted, and the following year the three large paintings which form a triptych depicting *The Ascension* flanked by *The Sealing of the Sepulchre* and *The Three Marys at the Tomb* were completed. They were delivered to Bristol in July 1756, and on August 14th Hogarth signed a receipt for £525. The total cost to the Vestry, including carriage from London, the

24. R.B. Beckett, 1949, *160;* for the related engravings, see R. Paulson, 1971, II, 51-5, 116-21. For a discussion of the painting since it was cleaned, see R. Paulson, 'Paul before Felix Reconsidered', *Burlington Magazine,* CXIV, 1972, 233-7.

25. *Autobiographical Notes,* J. Burke, 1955, 219.

26. St. Mary Redcliffe, Bristol, *Vestry Minutes,* 1709-66, 54.

making, carving and gilding of the frames by local craftsmen, and the installation of the completed ensemble, amounted to £761-6s-4d.[27]

The surviving documents are quite specific on one important point. In his monumental study of *Hogarth: His Life, Art and Times* Professor Ronald Paulson of Yale University asserts that, after an initial visit to Bristol, Hogarth "must have worked out the composition in detail back in London, making pencil studies and oil sketches, and painted the panels *in situ* inside the church".[28] This cannot have been so because among the churchwardens' vouchers there is a receipt signed by the waggoner "for the carriage of a case containing the Altar-piece for St. Mary Redcliffe", indicating that the pictures must have been painted in London. Furthermore, an article describing the pictures appeared in the June 1756 issue of a London journal, *The Critical Review:* the author presumably saw the canvases before they left for Bristol. Hogarth himself supervised their installation in the church, and there are payments on July 8th to John MacCree for "attendance in St. Mary Redcliffe when Mr Hogarth was putting up the Altar-piece", and on July 17th to William Carter who spent "6 days helping Mr. Hogarth and the upholsterer". The upholsterer referred to was James Howell, who received £6-18s-6d for supplying and fitting the crimson draperies which were hung above the principal panel of the altar-piece. The original arrangement is shown in two watercolour drawings made by James Johnson in 1828.[29] Only the *Acension* was visible from the nave; the other two panels were placed at right-angles to it facing each other across the last bay of the choir.

Clearly Hogarth did not spend more than a few days in Bristol, and this fact disposes of another doubtful detail in Professor Paulson's account of the altar-piece. One of the payments made in connection with the work was for £45 to John Simmons for "Painting, gilding, gold sizing and varnishing three new frames". This John Simmons was a local jobbing painter, and a good deal of confusion and colourful nonsense grew up around his brief and

27. St. Mary Redcliffe, Bristol, *Churchwardens' Accounts,* 1756-7.

28. R. Paulson, 1971, II, 229.

29. Bristol, City Art Gallery, M1949, M1967 (Braikenridge Collection). An engraved *View of the Interior of the Church of St. Mary Redcliff, Bristol,* by W. Angus after E. Bird, first published by John Aggle, Broadmead, Bristol, in August 1808, showing the altarpiece in position was used as an illustration opposite page 276 in J. Corry and J. Evans, *The History of Bristol, Civil and Ecclesiastical,* Bristol, 1816.

purely incidental association with Hogarth's altar-piece. He was born in Nailsea in 1715. According to a biographical sketch which appeared in *The Bristol Memorialist* in 1816 he seems to have earned his living principally as a sign painter, but occasionally he was commissioned to do something a little more consequential and a few of his portraits were exhibited at the Royal Academy between 1772 and 1780, the year in which he died. *The Bristol Memorialist* is the source for an anecdote, probably apocryphal, which tells how,

> as soon as Hogarth arrived at Bristol, in passing through Redcliff-Street, the sign of the Angel attracted his attention; and on being informed that it was painted by Simmons of Bristol, he said, 'then they need not have sent for me'.

On another occasion he is supposed to have remarked, when asked by Simmons why he had stopped to inspect another sign-board, "I am sure you painted it, for there is no one else here that could". On this rather slender evidence of artistic aptitude, and on the mistaken assertion that Hogarth painted the triptych in Bristol, Professor Paulson concludes that a local tradition current in the early nineteenth century which claimed that Simmons had a hand in the altar-piece might be taken seriously, and that he may have been the author of the "large open spaces which somebody other than Hogarth must have mechanically filled in".[30] It has to be admitted that parts of the St. Mary Redcliffe altar-piece are very badly painted, but at least Simmons can be acquitted of responsibility. If Hogarth did employ an assistant, it must have been a Londoner equally as feeble.

It may be mentioned in passing that Simmons seems to have been something of an eclectic. His portrait of *John Watkins* (1757; City Art Gallery, Bristol, K474), a member of the Vestry that commissioned Hogarth's altar-piece, is crudely painted but interesting for its imitation of Rembrandt and Ribera, and a rather anaemic *Annunciation* (City Art Gallery, Bristol, K1099) done for All Saints in Bristol suggests that he had looked with profit at the work of the Reverend Mathew William Peters. Legend has it that Hogarth is supposed to have helped Simmons paint his *Annunciation,* but this is obviously no more than wishful thinking.

In fact it does seem likely, though, that another hand did participate in the execution of Hogarth's altar-piece. This would account for the apparent discrepancies in quality between the handling of the figures and their setting which rather tend to

30. R. Paulson, 1971, II, 230.

reinforce its deficiencies as a work of art. It is not one of Hogarth's most distinguished performances. Compositionally it lacks cohesion, both as a triptych and in its individual parts, and technically (even allowing for the extensive damage it has suffered to the original surface and for the participation of a less able assistant) there are large areas of flaccid and lifeless execution; but there are also a few passages in which the full vigour of Hogarth's brush is apparent. The High Priest in *The Sealing of the Sepulchre* is perhaps the most effective and accomplished figure in the entire work, and that panel as a whole is visually more successful than the other two.

Hogarth's occasional excursions into serious history painting, interesting as they are to the art historian, were not very enthusiastically received by contemporary opinion. Even the favourably disposed author of the notice which appeared in *The Critical Review* in 1756 was slightly equivocal in his judgment and concluded with the observation that

> we think it would be a just subject of public regret, if Mr. *Hogarth* should abandon a branch of painting in which he stands alone unrivalled and inimitable, to pursue another in which so many have already excelled.

Some years later, in his *Fourteenth Discourse* delivered before the Royal Academy in 1788, Sir Joshua Reynolds made it clear that he regarded Hogarth's efforts as an history painter as misconceived:

> After this admirable artist had spent the greater part of his life in an active, busy, and we may add, successful attention to the ridicule of life; after he had invented a new species of dramatick painting, in which probably he will never be equalled, and had stored his mind with infinite materials to explain and illustrate the domestick and familiar scenes of common life, which were generally, and ought to have been always, the subject of his pencil; he very imprudently, or rather presumptuously, attempted the great historical style, for which his previous habits had by no means prepared him: he was indeed so entirely unacquainted with the principles of this style, that he was not even aware, that any artificial preparation was at all necessary. It is to be regretted, that any part of the life of such a genius should be fruitlessly employed. Let his failure teach us not to indulge ourselves in the vain imagination, that by a momentary resolution we can give either dexterity to the hand, or a new habit to the mind.[31]

As President of the Royal Academy Reynolds embodied the traditional doctrine which taught that history painting, the most

31. Robert Wark (ed.), *Sir Joshua Reynolds: Discourses on Art,* New Haven (Yale University Press), 1975, 254-5.

elevated category in the hierarchy of *genres,* should improve the mind and inspire noble sentiments, and that to do so it should exhibit a suitably dignified style in keeping with the nobility of the subject. It was in this last ingredient that Hogarth was found wanting. James Northcote, one of Reynolds' *protégés,* is particularly succinct on this point:

> Hogarth has never been admitted to rank high as a painter, but certainly so as a moralist; yet it has, of late, been discovered that his small pictures possess considerable dexterity of execution: as to his large pieces, they appear to be the efforts of imbecility; he was totally without the practice required of such works.[32]

In fact Hogarth went to very considerable lengths in his large history paintings to adjust his style so that it conformed to the requirements of the grand manner or "what the puffers in books call the great style" as he once put it.[33] His version of *The Ascension* combines baroque rhetoric with academic classicism assimilated, though not altogether digested, from assorted old masters. The wildly gesturing figure of St. Peter in the foreground at the extreme left is reminiscent of ecstatic high baroque saints; for his features Hogarth had used a familiar patriarchal type. His immediate source may have been the head of Francois Duquesnoy's statue of St. Andrew made for St. Peter's, Rome, between 1629 and 1640. Hogarth certainly knew of the work, and included a sketch taken from a cast of the head in a manuscript draft of his book *The Analysis of Beauty* in 1753.[34] The most obvious source from which he has quoted, however, is Raphael's *Transfiguration* of 1520.[35] It supplied various motifs and also

32. James Northcote, *Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds,* London, 1819, I, 138. Horace Walpole was equally critical of Hogarth's attempts at painting sublime history: "Not content with shining in a path untrodden before, he was ambitious of distinguishing himself as a painter of history. But not only his colouring and drawing rendered him unequal to the task; the genius that had entered so feelingly into the calamities and crimes of familiar life deserted him in a walk that called for dignity and grace" (H. Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England,* ed. R.N. Wornum, London, 1888, III, 9).

33. *Anecdotes of William Hogarth, written by Himself,* in J.B. Nichols, 1833, 9.

34. For Duquesnoy's statue, see J. Pope-Hennessy, *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture,* London, 1963, II, *160;* III, 138-9. Hogarth's drawing, made from a cast of the St. Andrew head, or possibly from a clay or terracotta modello for it, is bound into one of the draft manuscripts for *The Analysis of Beauty* (British Library, Egerton Mss., 3013, f29): see J. Burke, 1955, and A.P. Oppé, 1948, 52, *81.*

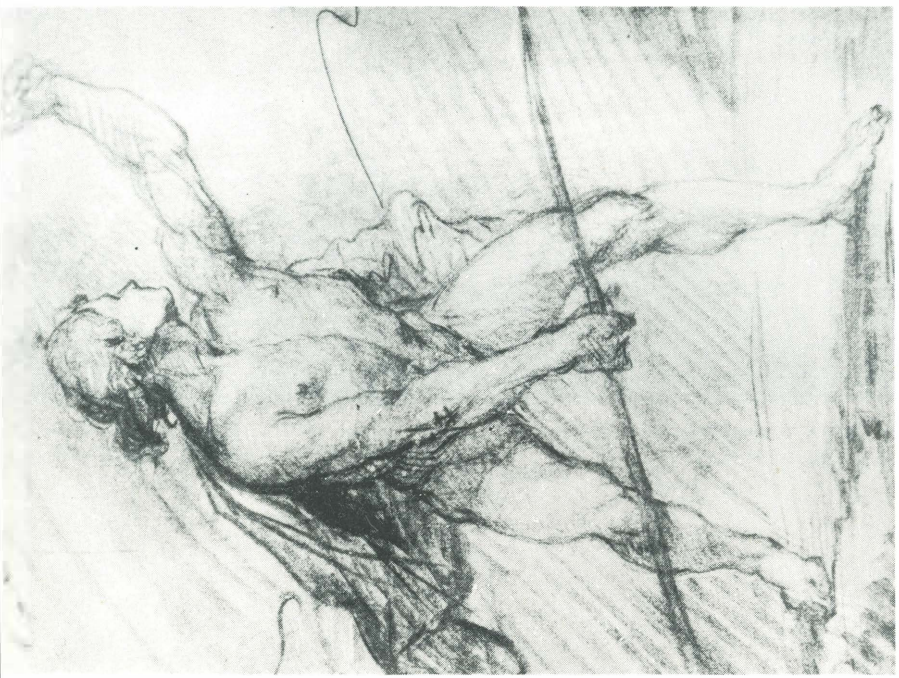
35. For Raphael's painting, see L. Dussler, *Raphael: A Critical Catalogue,* London, 1971, 52-4. Hogarth would have known the composition from an engraved reproduction.

1. *The Ascension.*
City Art Gallery, Bristol.

2. *The Three Marys at the Tomb.*
City Art Gallery, Bristol.

3. *The Sealing of the Sepulchre.*
City Art Gallery, Bristol.

4b. *A man levering a rock.* The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.



4a. *A man carrying a javelin.* Royal Library, Windsor. Reproduced by Gracious Permission of Her Majesty the Queen.

influenced the composition in a general way, but in Hogarth's picture the figures are dispersed across the canvas too incidentally to form any really coherent narrative or sense of unified dramatic tension. For *The Sealing of the Sepulchre* and *The Three Marys at the Tomb* Hogarth also drew upon European precedents: the rather operatic looking High Priest in the first wing recalls an earlier eighteenth century Venetian painter who had worked for a time in England, Sebastiano Ricci, and the prototypes for the three Marys may be found in Bolognese academic painting of the seventeenth century. Again he seems to have turned to Raphael, for it has been pointed out that the Roman soldiers in the *Sealing* and the angel in the *Three Marys* are comparable to equivalent types in the Renaissance painter's *Liberation of St. Peter* fresco in the Vatican which, like *The Transfiguration,* he would have known from an engraving. Yet another general influence may be present in the *Three Marys* from Andrea Sacchi's 1640 *Vision of St. Romuald* (Vatican Gallery) which Hogarth refers to in *The Analysis of Beauty* as having "the reputation of being one of the best pictures in the world", an indication of the esteem enjoyed by the classical grand manner in eighteenth century England.[36]

Above all it was Raphael, closely followed by Nicolas Poussin, who epitomised to the eighteenth century 'the great style' in painting. Hogarth's interest in Raphael went back to the beginning of his career and his early association with his future father-in-law, Sir James Thornhill. His preoccupation with the idea of serious painting and his ambition to raise in England a grand historical tradition were directly inspired by his admiration for Thornhill's achievements as the decorator of the Painted Hall at Greenwich and the dome of St. Paul's. These were by far the most important public decorations executed in England during the first quarter of the eighteenth century, and Thornhill scored a notable triumph over his foreign rivals when he secured the commissions to carry them out. Hogarth records in his *Autobiographical Notes* that it was Thornhill's example that first fired in him the determination to become a painter in preference to remaining an engraver, the profession for which he had originally been trained.[37] The scenes

36. W. Hogarth, *Analysis of Beauty,* 1754. For Sacchi's painting, see A. Sutherland Harris, *Andrea Sacchi,* Oxford (Phaidon), 1977, 61-2, *41*. Hogarth in fact associated the Duquesnoy head with the painting by Sacchi in the *Analysis of Beauty:* ". . . the old man's head was model'd in clay . . . for the use of Andrea Sacchi, after which model he painted all the heads in his famous picture of St. Romoaldo's dream".

37. "The paintings of St. Paul's Cathedral and Greenwich hospital . . . ran in my head; and I determined that silver-plate engraving should be followed no

from the life of St. Paul which Thornhill painted inside the cupola of London's cathedral between 1715 and 1720 are restrained by a controlling order and figurative classicism that clearly exhibit the moderating influence of Raphael's Tapestry Cartoons on his normally rather more exuberantly baroque conception. At the time the Cartoons, brought to England in the previous century by Charles I, were displayed at Hampton Court, where they could be examined by artists and connoisseurs and were admired as specimens of the most elevated grand manner and sublime invention. In 1729, just a few days before Hogarth ran off with his daughter Jane, Thornhill was granted permission to make copies of the Cartoons — one set full-size (now belonging to the Royal Academy in London), one set half-size, the third set quarter-size.[38] One of these small versions is shown on an easel in a sketch Thornhill made about 1730, after he had been reconciled with the couple: it is an inscribed study for a conversation piece of the artist with his family and friends which includes at the left of the group his son-in-law and daughter identified respectively as "Mr. Hogarth" and "&c".[39] The particular Raphael composition on the easel is of *St. Paul preaching at Athens,* from which Hogarth later adapted the principal figure to his own *Paul before Felix* painted for Lincoln's Inn in 1748. Another of the Raphael Cartoons which he used as a source for the Lincoln's Inn composition was *The Blinding of Elymas.* What may be a preparatory study for Hogarth's St. Paul, but which could equally be a rejected idea for one of the apostles in the St. Mary Redcliffe *Ascension*, belongs to the Marquess of Exeter: the gesture and attitude would be at least as appropriate to a participant in the Bristol painting as it is to the principal protagonist in the Lincoln's Inn picture.[40] In any case it illustrates particularly well the way in which Hogarth could assimilate the style of the old masters in the course of working out ideas for his own sublime histories.

The grand manner was not exclusively cultivated from the old masters, however, although they furnished the principal source for

longer than necessity obliged me to it": *Anecdotes of William Hogarth, written by Himself,* J.B. Nichols, 1833, 2.

38. R. Paulson, 1971, I, 209-12. The two smaller sets of copies by Thornhill are untraced, but two paintings which recently appeared on the London art market (Sotheby's, 21 March 1979, Lot 65a) probably originally belonged to the quarter-size series.

39. For Raphael's originals, see J. Shearman, *Raphael's Cartoons in the Collection of H.M. the Queen,* London, 1972.

40. A.P. Oppé, 1948, 45.

its syntax and vocabulary. The academic practice which lay behind the style also included life drawing from the model, and one of Hogarth's few drawings of this type relates specifically to a figure in *The Sealing of the Sepulchre.* The study, preserved in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, is for the Roman soldier in the right hand foreground corner of the Bristol painting.[41] It is a carefully finished design which may have been developed from a life drawing done in the St. Martin's Lane Academy. It can be compared to another academy figure by Hogarth of *A man holding a javelin* in the Royal Collection at Windsor which raises an interesting speculative point concerning the Bristol altar-piece.[42] Iconographically the combination of an *Ascension* with *The Sealing of the Sepulchre* and *The Three Marys at the Tomb* is unusual, if not unprecedented. It is not known who was responsible for selecting the subjects of the St. Mary Redcliffe paintings, and it might be argued that the Resurrection would be more logical for the central panel. Possibly Hogarth may have had this originally in mind, in which case the Windsor drawing could conceivably be connected with an early idea for the altar-piece before the subject was finally settled: it might have been intended to serve for one of the soldiers in a Resurrection. Apart from the Pierpont Morgan drawing, however, no other preliminary work specifically for the commission has come to light, and there are very few records of any having been made. In *A Catalogue of the Pictures and Prints: the property of the late Mrs Hogarth* sold by auction in 1790 there are two relevant entries: Lot 28 included " . . . 2 drawings of the altar of Bristol", and Lot 50 was "A (first sketch) of the altar of Bristol Church".[43] This last was probably an oil sketch, but it has never been traced. It may have been only a preliminary study,as summarily sketched as the spirited draft for

41. *Ibid.*, 54. Very few such drawings from Hogarth's hand survive. He seldom drew from the model, at least in the sense of following the traditional discipline of academic study in the life-class, preferring to work from memory or the imagination: "Sometimes, but too seldom, I took the life, for correcting the parts I had not perfectly enough remembered, and then I transferred them to my compositions" (*Anecdotes,* J.B. Nichols, 1833, 5). On the whole the figures in the Bristol altarpiece do not suggest that Hogarth undertook any special preparatory studies from life for the work, but the fact that the Pierpont Morgan drawing portrays a helmeted figure levering a great boulder clearly indicates that it was made specifically for *The Sealing of the Tomb.*

42. *Ibid.*, 28.

43. R. Paulson, 1971, II, Appendix L, 511-3, reprints the catalogue of the sale in its entirety.

The Pool of Bethesda (c1735; City Art Gallery, Manchester).[44] Hogarth, like Thornhill before him, seems to have made use of the oil sketch quite frequently in the formulation of an idea, and for a public commission such as the Bristol altar-piece he would probably have executed a more careful *modello* as well to show his patrons what he proposed. It may have been the "skitch" referred to in a payment made by the Churchwarden to the same waggoner who transported the finished altar-piece:

> Paid carriage of the skitch and postage 4s-7d.

That, too, has disappeared.

So, very nearly, did the altar-piece itself, at least from Bristol. After its installation in the summer of 1756 it remained in St. Mary Redcliffe until 1858. A few years before it was removed an appeal had been launched for the restoration of the church and the replacement of various distracting furnishings which were not in keeping with its Gothic character. Mid-nineteenth century Gothic Revival taste despised the Georgian 'improvements' which disfigured the interiors of so many mediaeval churches, and Hogarth's paintings inevitably fell victim to the zealous restorers of the period. As one writer put it in 1843,

> The disposition now envinced to remove the paintings, and restore this portion of the Church to its original beauty, marks a return to that purity of taste which so distinguished ecclesiastical architecture in the era when this building was completed.[45]

In 1853 the pictures were offered unsuccessfully to the National Gallery, and were then advertised in the local and national press without a buyer coming forward. Finally, in 1858, they were bought for £20 by Alderman Thomas Proctor on behalf of the Bristol Academy for the Promotion of the Fine Arts, later to become the Royal West of England Academy. A condition was attached: if the Academy ever disposed of them, the Vestry would receive half of any proceeds. In 1910 their sale was again proposed, this time to raise funds for a new Academy building. The threat prompted the *Bristol Times and Mirror* to comment that if they were sold,

> Bristol will be looked upon as one of those places which prefer hard cash to art treasures.[46]

44. R. Beckett, 1949, *84.*
45. Anonymous, *Cursory Observations on the Churches of Bristol,* Bristol, 1843, 38.
46. *Bristol Times and Mirror,* 22 February 1910.

In the event local opinion saved them for Bristol, but without the space to display them the Royal West of England Academy stored them away rolled up in a box. Eventually, in 1955, they were made over to the City for the Art Gallery and restored. More recently they have been transferred to St. Nicholas Church Museum, and further restoration work has revealed once again the qualities of colour and brushwork that Hogarth had originally imparted to them.

Hogarth's Bristol altar-piece may not be a great masterpiece, but it is an important work that sheds an interesting light on the history of English art and taste in the mid-eighteenth century. Although it has been harshly criticised and cannot be claimed as one of his successes, it is nevertheless a remarkable achievement, not least because it demonstrates the degree to which Hogarth anticipated in his great histories the doctrine laid down by Reynolds in his *Discourses* to the Royal Academy which are generally regarded as the definitive statement of the principles on which the grand manner was founded. Hogarth certainly performed a valuable service to the progress of painting in Britain by preserving and promoting in his own work those principles, and although his invention was not always equal to his ambition, the St. Mary Redcliffe altar-piece serves as a reminder that he did much to confer an intellectual dignity upon the status of the artist in England.

Appendix I

Documents relating to Hogarth's altar-piece.

The earliest reference to the St. Mary Redcliffe commission occurs in the *Vestry Minutes* for May 28, 1755, recording the meeting at which it was agreed to replace the existing altar-piece with a new one and to invite Hogarth to visit Bristol to survey the site and, if he agreed to undertake the work, to discuss arrangements. The audited account of the expenses incurred appears in the *Churchwardens' Accounts* for the year 1756-7 under entries for the chancel:

"William Hogarth for Paintings	£525
Brice Seed for the Frame &c	50
Thomas Patty for Carving &c	63
John Symons, Gilding, Painting, &c	100
James Howell, Upholsterer	6-18-6
Joseph Thomas, Tyler	3-15-6
Joseph Whitton, Mason	6-7
Wiltshire, Waggoner	2- 3-1
John MacCree	1- 1
gave the Workmen to Drink at Sundy times	4-9
	£761-6-4"

Further details of the payments entered in the ledger may be found among the vouchers and receipts kept by the churchwardens. The payments were made by Nathaniel Webb, who was the Churchwarden at the time; those relating to the installation of the altar-piece run from June, 1756, until the following October. Since the vouchers and receipts sometimes also include payments made for other work about the church undertaken by the recipients, the amounts they record do not in every case correspond exactly to those entered in the ledger, where the expenses relating to the altar-piece are set out separately from the other items shown in the supplementary documents. The records show that on June 19, 1756, John Thomas was engaged in taking down the old altar-piece in readiness for the installation of Hogarth's three paintings which were set up in July. Payments for this work are recorded as follows:

July 8, 1756: "Mr. Nathaniel Webb to John MacCree, to attendance in St. Mary Redcliffe Church when Mr. Hogarth was putting up the Altar-piece. £1- 1-0"

July 17, July 24 and August: payments made to Brice Seede,

"For a large frame in front of the Altar	£20
A large straining from *(sic.)* for the Altar	£ 7
Two frames each side the Front	£12
Two straining frames	£ 3-12-0
	£42-12-0
Putting up the pictures and other work about the windows William Carter 6 days helping Mr. Hogarth and the upholsterer	£53-19-6"

August 3: work undertaken by John Simmons, the painter,

"Painting, gilding, gold sizing and varnishing three new frames	£45
Other carved ornaments	£30
Blacking, polishing and writing tables &c	£21
For painting wainscot at the Altar twice over Pillars Jasper or Icano marble, niches and all inlaid work in the Chancel	£20
Painting white marble work twice over — last with white flake	£10
Painting and gilding three gates in the Chancel Painting the dyed window behind the Altar	
	£126"

July 23, October 8: costs incurred by James Howell, upholsterer,

"36¼ yds. green Harrateen lace and rings	£ 2-14-1½
Making and putting up two curtains over the paintings in Redcliffe church	15-0
Carriage and porterage and Letters to and from London for crimson velvet	
Making up the crimson velvet pannell with gilt leather border for the Altar-piece in the Church	
Total	£ 6-18-7"

August 14: receipt signed by Hogarth,

"Rec^{d} Augst: 14 1756

Of M^{r}. Nath Webb the sum of five Hundred and Twenty five Pounds for three Pictures Painted for the Altar-piece of St. Mary Redcliffe^{s}: Church at Bristol in full of all Demands

p W^{m}: Hogarth"

Undated vouchers include details of the payments made to Thomas Paty, a member of the Bristol family of contracting and speculative builders, and to the waggoner who brought Hogarth's completed altar-piece from London. Paty was paid for

"Carving large frame and ornaments to the same for the front picture to the Altar	£23
Two side frames	£12
Marble Communion Table, pedestal and fixing &c	£28
	£63"

The cost of transporting the paintings is recorded in a receipt signed on behalf of the waggoner:

> "Received of Mr. Nathaniel Webb £1-16-0
> in full for the carriage of a case containing the
> Altar-piece for St. Mary Redcliffe.
> For Mr. Wiltshire — A. Drewett
>
> For halling and porteage of the above 2-6
> £1-18-6
>
> Paid carriage for the skitch and postage 4-7
> £2- 3-1"

The altar-piece is not mentioned again the records of St. Mary Redcliffe again until 1827 when it was cleaned and revarnished by John Thorold who also undertook some restoration to *The Sealing of the Sepulchre* which had suffered some damage due to sunlight falling on the canvas. On January 28, 1853, the question of further restoration or sale of the pictures was discussed by the Vestry, and it was decided to place a curtain over *The Ascension* to protect it from the sun; on May 18, 1853, the Vestry agreed to sell the altar-piece and apply the proceeds to the funds for restoring the church *(Vestry Minutes)*. Following correspondence with the National Gallery and Christie, Manson and Company, the London auctioneers, negotiations with the Bristol Fine Arts Academy proved equally abortive. On August 11, 1853, the Vestry declined the Academy's offer to accept the pictures as a gift, and on August 20 advertisements offering the pictures for sale were placed in the local papers, *The Times,* and in the Liverpool and Manchester press, but no offers were received. In 1855 Alderman Thomas Proctor offered to purchase the altar-piece for a nominal £20 and present it to the Academy, but his proposal was not accepted until 1858. On July 9, 1859, the paintings were transferred to the Academy on condition that they would be displayed and that ownership should revert to the Vicar, Churchwardens and Vestry of St. Mary Redcliffe if for any reason the Academy could no longer care for them. By the end of the century, however, the Academy no longer had the space to show the pictures, and they were concealed behind screens so that other paintings could be hung in its exhibition galleries. In 1910 the possibility of selling the altar-piece was once again explored, the intention being to divide the proceeds between the Academy and the Vestry of St. Mary Redcliffe as joint owners, but public opinion led by the local Bristol press prevailed against the proposal. The likelihood that the altar-piece would be sold abroad, probably to America, prompted one Bristol newspaper to comment that "It is iniquitous to think that a Hogarth of this historical association with the most beautiful church in our city and our land can be lightly sacrificed to satisfy the whim of some American magnate who hopes by its acquisition to climb into social distinction in his particular sphere". Eventually, despite the rebuilding of the Academy's premises following its reconstitution as the Royal West of England Academy in 1910, the paintings were taken from their frames and rolled up. They were briefly brought out of storage in 1938 for a

Church Congress, and in December 1954 a committee consisting of representatives of the St. Mary Redcliffe Vestry, the Academy Council, the National Art-Collections Fund and the City Art Gallery was formed to examine the paintings and consider their future. A grant from the Dulverton Trust supplemented by the National Art-Collections Fund made restoration possible, and in 1955, two hundred years after Hogarth received the commission, the altar-piece was presented by its joint owners to the City Art Gallery in Bristol where it was displayed until in 1973 it was transferred to the St. Nicholas Church Museum where it is currently exhibited.

Appendix II

The Critical Review, June 1756, 478-9:

"Mr *Hogarth* has just finished three large pictures for the altar piece of *Redcliff* Church at *Bristol.* The middle piece, which is by much the largest, represents the ascension of our Saviour, who is seen high in the air. The emanation of rays from the ascending Deity beaming through the interstices of the surrounding clouds is managed with tenderness and delicacy. The point of time which the painter has chosen is immediately after He has disappeared from the spectators below. In the fore-ground, on the right-side at the bottom, St. *Thomas* is represented on one knee, and his hands lifted up and clasped together, is still eagerly looking upwards with an expression of wonder and adoration. On the other side is St. *Peter* in a reclining posture. Towards the middle is St. *John,* who with a group of figures, supposed to be the other disciples, more remote from the eye, is listening attentively to the *two men in white,* who appeared upon that great occasion. The back ground is shut up with rocks, and the bottom of the cloudy mass, except on one side, where, under the skirts of the low-hung clouds, part of a magnificent city (supposed to be *Jerusalem*) appears to great advantage at a distance, illuminated by a flash of lightening under a darkened sky, which casts a livid gloom over it.

The side piece on the right-hand of this large picture represents the rolling of the stone, and the sealing of the sepulchre in the presence of the high priest. The labour and exertion which is naturally express'd in this scene is very happily contrasted by the tenderness and elegant softness which prevails in the other side-piece, where the three *Maries* are come to visit the empty sepulchre. The angel who is speaking to them, and pointing up to heaven with an expression which explains itself, is a figure of singular beauty, and with an aspect of great sweetness and benevolence, still retains in his look the native dignity of a superior being.

This opulent city does honour to its own taste in this instance of its love of the fine Arts; and if this noble ornament should make its way into our churches, it will be the likeliest means to raise a *British* school of painters. In the mean time we think it would be a just subject of public regret, if Mr *Hogarth* should abandon a branch of painting in which he stands alone unrivalled and inimitable, to pursue another in which so many have already excelled."

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