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PATRIOTIC TRANSPARENCIES IN NORWICH, 1798-1814

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IN October 1801, the *Leeds Intelligencer* reported "a more brilliant illumination than we ever remember to have seen at this place . . . a number of emblematical devises were exhibited, many of them so elegantly executed, that the beholder, while he admired their beauty, could not but regret their short-lived glory. They were many of them highly appropriate, and did great taste and judgement to the different artists". Almost every provincial newspaper in the country was expressing similar sentiments, as town after town celebrated the interlude of peace with France.

It was not the first such national celebration of the war, for the news of Nelson's victory at the Nile in 1798 had also been the occasion for widespread festivities; nor was it the last, for the apparent return of peace in 1814 was eventually fêted on an even larger scale. In all three instances, the celebrations seem to have been characterized by general illuminations, arranged independently by each town, but typically featuring huge bonfires, firework displays, and streets decorated with evergreens, devices and mottoes in great variety, coloured lights and transparencies.¹ In 1814, public feastings were also not infrequent. Contemporary accounts of illuminations in Norwich at this time give something of the flavour:

At nine o'clock, the lighting up of the Guild-hall served as a signal for the Illumination to commence, and by ten nearly the whole city had assumed a most splendid appearance and become almost one blaze of light. There were many large and well executed Transparencies exhibited, which did great credit to the several Artists, Messrs. Dixon, Sillett, Ninham, Jean, Abbs, &c, &c. . . .²

About this time that old English favourite a Bonfire, which on this occasion was a stupendous Pile of Billet and Faggots surrounding a lofty Fir-tree stripped of its branches, from which were suspended five large Pitch-barrels, was lighted up. . . .³

The streets appeared a wilderness of laurel, olive, and evergreen, & almost every house seemed an illuminated grove. The transparencies were neither so various in design, or so consummate in execution as might have been expected; many however have considerable merit, particularly those of our native artists, Crome, Dixon, Copping [i.e. Daniel Coppin], Capon, Ladbrooke, Sillett, and Ninham. . . .⁴

Of particular interest in these eyewitness accounts are the descriptions of individual transparencies, especially when the name of the artist responsible is also given. Indeed, it is on written descriptions of this kind that our information about festive transparencies largely depends. Not one is known with

any certainty to have survived, and considering their fragile, inflammable nature and the hazardous methods use to illuminate them this is not surprising.

What was understood by a transparency at this period was essentially a screen of diaphanous material, or of semi-opaque material partly rendered translucent, lit from behind by candles, rushlights, oil floats and lamps, or Argand lamps. (By 1814, illumination by gas was also just practicable.) At its simplest, a transparency might be no more than a design in coloured papers; at its most elaborate, a finished painting of grand dimensions, created with an eye to subtle lighting effects and presented in a fanciful setting. The basic techniques are set forth in Ackermann's *Instructions for painting transparencies* (1799, 2nd ed. 1800) and Edward Orme's *An essay on transparent prints and transparencies in general* (1807). Although the simple transparency is an ancient (one might say obvious) invention, Orme claimed at least to be the originator of transparent prints. To produce these he had to paint his subject twice over, on both sides of a sheet of medium-weight paper, and then apply several coats of mastic varnish to clear the lights (while the darks remained unvarnished). The transparency could then be strained on to a frame, perhaps with others, and set up at a window. Instead of paper, the ground could be of fine calico or muslin, first primed with isinglass and alcohol, and then painted in distemper, gouache or oils (using printer's oil or burnt linseed oil for preference). Should there be a risk of the transparency suffering from damp, then waxed cloth might be employed as a substitute, though its greasy surface tended to repel colour. Another possible surface was ground glass; this could be painted in colour mixed with varnish and well thinned with turpentine. Ordinary glass might also serve, smeared with putty first or etched with fluoric acid. One of the simplest methods was Ackermann's. A drawing or print was damped, gummed on to a sheet of glass, and then given two applications of isinglass and three of mastic varnish; the resulting transparency was claimed to be quite durable and to have the rich appearance of stained glass. Such techniques must have given satisfactory results, for they were still in use, if somewhat refined, when W. Williams published his *Transparency painting on linen* in 1855.

No mystery therefore attached to the making of transparencies and the correct materials were easy to obtain. Amateurs could produce them along with professional artists, and many a private apartment must have contained examples (like the east room at Mansfield Park with its "three transparencies, made in a rage for transparencies, for the three lower panes of one window, where Tintern Abbey held its station between a cave in Italy and a moonlight lake in Cumberland. . ."). It is certain that a number of the transparencies displayed in Norwich during the illuminations were by amateurs. One instance will suffice. In 1798, a Miss Jacobs exhibited a patriotic transparency in the style of a celestial diagram. Here the unusual choice of subject is doubtless to be explained by the current demonstration in the town of an Eidouranian; that is, a transparent orrery or model of the heavens used to illustrate lectures on astronomy.

But most of the work was done by professionals: drawing masters, heraldic painters, scenic artists, miniaturists, topographers: the majority of them local artists. Only a few of those recorded were artists based on London, and even these frequently had strong Norwich connections—Charles Catton the younger, for example, and William Capon. During the Battle of the Nile celebrations in 1798, a transparency by Orme was displayed. In its mingling of the allegorical and the historical it is typical of many:

The Genius of the Fine Arts immortalizing the Naval Heroes. . . . Over her head blazes the fire of victory and light of Genius; in the clouds, Fame and Honor support the ensigns of royalty, whence descend the rays of patronage and approbation. On the left, in the distance, is a pyramid. . . . On the right, a ship in full sail, and the sea appeased and open to commerce; in the fore ground are the emblems of industry and plenty. . . .⁵

For the same occasion, Catton had painted a scene in which Orus, God of the Nile, was shown with crocodile and other symbols, holding a laurel crown over a medallion of Nelson; a sea fight closed the view.

In spite of the depressed state of the British economy at this period, artists could often command reasonably good prices, even for such ephemeral productions as transparencies. James Sillett, always quick to advertize his services in the newspapers whenever an illumination was announced, was charging from one to twenty guineas in 1801, the price varying according to the subject and size of the transparency. But the cost did not deter leading citizens from commissioning quite large, imposing pieces. In 1798, the printing and publishing firm of Stevenson & Matchett ordered a transparency from John Ninham which depicted "a Plan of the Engagement off the Mouth of the Nile" and measured 14 feet by 8; further devices brought the height of the whole composition to about 17 feet. And in 1814 we find Mr. Browne, near the Cathedral, showing a ten-foot square painting by Abbs which "excited universal admiration, and drew forth reiterated plaudits from the spectators". These are by no means unique examples, although the majority were certainly on a more modest scale. An artist like John Ninham, painting perhaps two or three dozen items, large and small, for each illumination, must have found them a profitable sideline.

Celebrating historical events, many of the transparencies displayed during these war years naturally recall history painting proper; in a small way therefore, they participate in what had come to be known as the *grand style*. Hence the allegorical figures of Victory or History or personifications of the belligerent powers. Hence the emblems and all the paraphernalia of columns, pyramids, scrolls, trophies of war, cornucopias and symbolic foliage. And then, juxtaposed to this fanciful element, real historical persons and suggestions of actual battles. Nelson (with his local connection) figures prominently, but other heroes appear too, and portraits of the king. Napoleon is variously vilified and ridiculed. (It is likely that historical figures were represented in modern dress, for this particular innovation in history painting was by then becoming an established convention.) The kinship of such transparencies with contemporary history painting is plain from a comparative description of an *Apotheosis of Nelson* (1806-7) by Benjamin West:

. . . the admiral's draped figure . . . is being borne out of the sea by Neptune, helped by Victory and Britannia, whilst cupids bear a wreath and a scroll inscribed with the name of the final battle.⁶

Naval engagements occur as a favourite theme for the background of Norwich transparencies. Although they may have recalled to the spectator the "panorama with motion" ("a grand Display of a Memorable Victory obtained by Admiral Duncan over the Dutch fleet") which had been seen in the town in 1798, or even the firework set-pieces of ships in action shown in Norwich's Ranelagh and Vauxhall gardens the same year, nevertheless for the artist they presented an opportunity of depicting vessels exploding and on fire. With fire effects transparencies came into their own.

But there are other influences at work in these transient pieces. A literary or antiquarian component is noticeable in some. The usual straightforward motto swells into a classical quotation, an acrostic, even a complete poem. In 1801, Charles Hodgson devised a scene at his Academy for Young Ladies which included a gothick arch and a grotto; among the latter's fossils, mosses and marine forms, he set a transparency carrying a quotation from Ossian and a sonnet composed by himself. Other transparencies specifically sought to imitate stained glass—as Ackermann had suggested they might. This is a small but revealing symptom of what was a lively interest in medieval art in Norwich at this date. In this connection it is worth noting that in April 1806 a Normandy stained glass window, measuring 20 ft. by 9 ft., was on public exhibition in St. Andrew's Hall.

Immediately before the London celebrations of August 1814 (which centred on St. James's Park, The Mall and Green Park) "the machinists of the theatres were incessantly engaged in preparing innumerable Chinese lanterns, of various shapes, and exhibiting all manner of grotesque and ludicrous devices".⁷ It was in fact usual to call upon stage designers, both scene painters and machinists, to make the decorative arrangements for public rejoicings. Illuminations were a mass theatrical spectacle, and as a result they reflect the stage practices of the day.

Around the turn of the century the management of décor and spectacle in the major theatres was evolving rapidly. Not only were the theatres themselves much bigger (Covent Garden remodelled 1792, Drury Lane rebuilt 1794), but the apron stage was also shrinking and the action retreating behind the proscenium arch. These changes put effects of perspective, distance, lighting and general spectacle at a premium, and together matched the public's romantic taste for the picturesque, the exotic, the sublime. At the same time emerges a demand for greater realism in settings and costume. When therefore William Capon was appointed by Kemble in 1794 to design the scenery for Drury Lane, he was able to perfect the illusionistic skills already available (many of them introduced by De Louthembourg over a decade earlier) and also indulge his own penchant for meticulous, antiquarian realism. The first production in the new theatre, not a play but a performance of sacred oratorios, allowed Capon to re-create a Gothic chapel on the stage, illuminated stained glass and all.

And in the next few years he offered simulations of old English streets, the Tower of London as it was in the fifteenth century, the Palace of Westminster, and a number of other medieval settings.⁸

The Norwich relevance in all this is not merely that Capon was a Norwich man, but that through him other Norwich artists worked on scenery for London theatres at a formative point in their careers. Catton and probably Sillett both worked with Capon in the 1790's, and it seems very likely that Dixon did too, before he returned to Norwich in or about 1800 as scene-painter at the Theatre Royal. For a period then, these artists were trained in the broad manner of the scene-painter and in all the latest tricks of lighting and perspective. They were simultaneously exposed to the melodramatic plots and performances of the London stage at this period.

How his experience of the theatre affected one artist may be seen in the instance of a transparency painted by Sillett in 1814, long after his London years, and significantly for his own house and so, presumably, done at his own pleasure. Sillett, it should be recalled, is normally thought of almost exclusively as a painter of still-life, miniatures and occasional topography; almost all the 342 items he exhibited in London and Norwich portray fruit, flowers, birds, fish and animals. The subject of his transparency could hardly be a more patent contrast:

The Tyrant's Dream. A superb tent, in which Bonaparte is seen sleeping by lamplight: the ghost of the murdered Duc de Enghein [*sic*] appears to him, and seems to threaten him with a drawn dagger.⁹

Shades here, surely, of the Drury Lane *Macbeth* of 1794 for which Capon provided the sets. Even Dixon produced no transparency so melodramatic, although one of three he painted for the Sheriff in the same year, 1814, does not lack for action:

Bonaparte in great trouble; on one side is the Russian Bear disarming him; on the other the British Lion trampling indignantly on the tri-coloured flag; and above, the Imperial Eagle snatching the crown from his head and bearing away the sceptre in its claw. . . .¹⁰

The relationship between transparencies and the theatre is further established by a list of transparent prints on sale at Orme's Bond Street shop in 1807. A number have theatrical subjects, amongst them a scene from *De Montfort*, a Capon success of 1800.

The example of John Crome, however, is enough to show that a background of theatre was by no means essential for success at transparency painting. It is well known that Crome painted inn signs and similar journeyman exercises at a fairly early stage in his career. Therefore to find him turning out the odd transparency in 1801 (and possibly in 1798 also; many transparencies are described without being attributed) is not surprising. But it is of real interest to discover that he painted several for the illumination of 1814, when he was approaching maturity as an artist and on the eve of his departure for France.

In 1801, at the second meeting of the Norwich Anacreontic Society (the first time that ladies had attended), a grand concert with a supper was arranged to commemorate the return of peace. The *Norfolk Chronicle* reported:

At the upper end of the supper room was a large transparency (painted by Mr. Crome) representing Harmony crowning Peace with a wreath of laurel, who is burning the instruments of War—at her altar stands Euphrosyne. In the fore ground, the British Lion lies in the attitude of guarding the Olive. This, with the lustre of 150 pairs of sparkling orbs, the brilliancy of which no art could imitate, rendered any other illumination totally unnecessary.¹¹

A typical transparency of the time, though not the kind of subject that one would readily associate with Crome—it was doubtless prescribed him. Moreover, the three pieces of 1814 which we know to be the work of Crome (assisted by John Berney Crome, then 19?) resemble it quite closely. Of these the most imposing was painted for the Free Grammar School, where Crome was then teaching:

A Capital transparency (by Crome) over the Free School Porch. Victory crowning Britannia seated on a rock, in the background Discord chained, ships in the distance—over the whole—"Jam bella quiescant Atque adamantis Discordia vincta catenis Eternos habeat frenos in carcere clausa".¹² In the dark part of the picture, the Fiend of war hurrying to its dark abyss; broken instruments of war scattered about.¹³

(Dr. Valpy, Master of the Free School, may have provided Crome with the text, if no more.) Crome's other endeavours on this occasion sound rather pedestrian, but the descriptions must be set down as further evidence of his activities in this unsuspected medium. For the Misses Pratt of Colegate he painted:

Britannia standing on a pedestal, with the implements of war at its base; with the colours of the different nations in the act of distributing laurel to the brave.¹⁴

Mrs. Burrough of Catherine Hill had the other over her gateway:

The word Peace, surrounded with real laurel; side compartments, broken instruments of war.¹⁵

Apart from the small class of humorous transparencies (which appear to have been none too successful in their efforts to amuse), those Norwich examples discussed above seem to be entirely representative. In future years transparencies were to become more subtle and elaborate, yet this was their heyday nonetheless. How well they chime in with the age's delight in optical effects, the urge to theatrical experiment: panoramas, ombres chinoises, De Louthembourg's Eidophusikon and Philipsthal's Phantasmagoria, the toy kaleidoscope which became the rage of Europe, the spectacular diorama shows which themselves employed the transparency in a more developed form. (In the 1814 illumination, when the steeple of St. John Maddermarket was hung with

lamps and a crimson transparent ball, the curious effect of illusion thereby produced was described as "a compleat Phantasmagoria".) How well, too, these faerie devices ornamenting the dark streets seem to accord with the romantic expectations of the time. On this also let the newspapers have the last word:

But the most striking and awful effect of the illumination arose to the mind on the contemplation of the churches, whose towers and walls wore an air of solemn stillness and grandeur which it is impossible adequately to describe. The spire of the cathedral was particularly sublime from the reflection of the lights on the one side, and the deep and unchanging darkness of the clouds on the other. . . .¹⁶

ARTISTS RESPONSIBLE FOR NORWICH TRANSPARENCIES,
1798-1814

Since many transparencies are described in contemporary accounts without the artist being named, the following list must inevitably be incomplete. Dates indicate each occasion for which an artist is known with certainty to have painted transparencies.

- ABBS (T.) 1814. Abbs was a sign and ornamental painter, formerly in partnership with John Rudd.
- BEDFORD & SON 1814. Perhaps Charles and Philip Bedford, braziers, of Pottergate.
- CAPON (WILLIAM) 1801.
- CATTON (CHARLES) 1798. This must be the younger Catton. His father died in August 1798.
- CLOVER (JOSEPH) 1798, 1802. The only artist known to have painted transparencies specially for the 1802 illumination, which was otherwise mainly a repeat of that of 1801.
- COPPIN (DANIEL) 1798, 1801, 1814. In 1798 and 1801 may have been assisted by his wife.
- COPPIN (MRS. D.) 1805. Transparencies for the Trafalgar Ball.
- CROME (JOHN) 1801, 1814. Possibly assisted by John Berney Crome in 1814.
- CULYER 1814. Perhaps John Culyer, whitesmith, of Cow Hill.
- DIXON (ROBERT) 1801, 1805, 1814. In 1805 for the Trafalgar Ball.
- EDWARDS (WILLIAM CAMDEN) 1814. Edwards was principally an engraver.
- HARVEY (MISS S.) 1801.
- HODGSON (CHARLES) 1801, 1806, 1814. In January 1806, Hodgson exhibited one of his usual transparency manuscripts, this time in memory of Nelson.
- JACOBS (MISS) 1798.
- JEAN (R.) & RUDD (J.) 1814. Jean, a miniaturist, seems to have been the only one of the partnership to paint transparencies. He advertised them in April 1814 and replied to accusations that he was overcharging in June of the same year.
- LADBROOKE (ROBERT) 1801.

NINHAM (JOHN) 1798, 1801, 1814. Possibly assisted by Henry Ninham in 1814.
 ORME (EDWARD) 1798.
 SAUL (W.) JUN. 1814.
 SILLETT (JAMES) 1798, 1801, 1814.

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¹For earlier records of the use of transparencies in Norwich, see the accounts of the 1746 thanksgiving in *Norwich Mercury*, 11 Oct. 1746, and of the celebrations of 1761 in *Norwich Mercury*, 26 Sept. 1761.

²*Norfolk Chronicle*, 18 June 1814.

³*Norfolk Chronicle*, 24 Oct. 1801.

⁴*Norwich Mercury*, 24 Oct. 1801.

⁵*Norwich Mercury*, 1 Dec. 1798.

⁶Irwin (D.), *English neoclassical art*. London, 1966. p. 150.

⁷Orme (E.), *An historical memento, representing the . . . public rejoicing . . . of 1814*. Introd. by F. W. Blagdon. London, 1814.

⁸See Boaden (J.), *Memoirs of the life of . . . Kemble*, Vol. 2, London, 1825.

⁹*Norwich Mercury*, 18 June 1814.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Norfolk Chronicle*, 14 Nov. 1801.

¹²*Norfolk Chronicle*, 18 June 1814.

¹³*Norwich Mercury*, 18 June 1814.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Norwich Mercury*, 8 May 1802.