

## PRESS RELEASE

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25 March 2015, for immediate release:

## LOVE BITES: CARICATURES BY JAMES GILLRAY

26 March–21 June 2015



James Gillray (1756–1815)  
*Cupid*, 1799  
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**LOVE BITES** marks the 200th anniversary of the death of the great caricaturist James Gillray (1756–1815). His political and social satires were the *Private Eye* of his day – unflinchingly cruel at times, but keenly anticipated and collected. The exhibition takes a fresh look at Gillray's work, focusing on the unusual angle of his portrayal of marriages and alliances, be they sexual, political or bizarrely anatomical. It also explores Gillray's devotion to high art and his classical training and shows how Rubens, in particular, was a key influence. The exhibition features sixty works taken from the outstanding collection of New College, Oxford, one of the greatest and best-preserved groups of Gillray's work. On the occasion of the exhibition, New College has commissioned a new cartoon from the Guardian's Martin Rowson which will be displayed for the first time in **LOVE BITES**.

James Gillray trained as a professional copyist at the Royal Academy and then staked his professional life on caricature, amongst the first generation of artists to do so. He produced more than a thousand prints, some the fruit of months of reflection, others banged out at lightning speed, responding to, and also creating, instant controversies on the very day of the event. His prints were divisive and partisan: in 1798 a Tory Lord would congratulate him for having "been of infinite service in lowering them [the Whigs] and making them look ridiculous"; while the exiled Napoleon, well aware of Gillray's anti-French propaganda, was reported to have said that the British engraver did more than all the armies of Europe to bring him down.

Although known for his derisive satires of political life, this exhibition shows the artist in another light, exploring themes of love and harmony, friendships and alliances, through a variety of amorous encounters set against the backdrop of the tumultuous Georgian era. While Gillray made his remarkable contribution to the early tradition of visual satire he also avidly collected Rubens prints, surrounding himself with the Baroque master's images of love and harmony. Gillray was an artist with the most divergent and biting views on the subject of love. He shows how varied and tricky a kiss can be in sealing political deals and selling votes; he reveals that then, as now, royal and aristocratic figures were judged according to the beds they shared; and he depicts sometimes painful, frightening and elegant embraces that have gone further than the usual kiss.

This surprising aspect of Gillray's work uncovers a new vitality in his pictures, demonstrating that the acerbic and robust Gillray was not only the leading caricaturist of his time, but also a hallmark figure of modernity. Beyond his own lifetime, LOVE BITES considers Gillray amongst a canon of artists of love that includes Rubens, Boucher, Renoir, Brancusi and Schiele. The exhibition will contain both well-known and little-known prints by the artist, juxtaposed in such a way as to throw new light on their subjects. Unusually for Gillray's prints, many of the works in the New College collection have never been exhibited and therefore retain their original vivid and intense hand-colouring.

**Professor Todd Porterfield, exhibition curator, says:** 'We are accustomed to seeing caricatures that divide the world along political and personal lines. In this exhibition I hope to emphasise a previously under-explored theme in James Gillray's work: love, friendship and alliances; and by doing so to provoke fresh insights into his work and to show that Gillray was a substantial figure of his time and an enduringly great artist.'

**Martin Rowson, Guardian cartoonist and award-winning author, says:** 'David Low, one of the greatest political cartoonists of the 20th Century, described James Gillray as the Father of the Political Cartoon. 200 years after Gillray's death, cartoonists today are still in his debt on a daily basis.'

**Exhibition:** LOVE BITES: CARICATURES BY JAMES GILLRAY  
**Dates:** 26 March–21 June 2015  
**Venue:** Sainsbury Exhibition Gallery 59  
**Tickets:** £6/£5 concessions available at [www.ashmolean.org/exhibitions/tickets](http://www.ashmolean.org/exhibitions/tickets)

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▪ **NOTES TO EDITORS**

LOVE BITES: CARICATURES BY JAMES GILLRAY is curated by Professor Todd Porterfield, University of Montreal.

**The exhibition is supported by:**

- The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art
- Friends of the Ashmolean
- New College, University of Oxford
- Bridgeman Images

▪ **GREAT BRITISH DRAWINGS**

26 March–31 August 2015

Following the overwhelming popularity of the Ashmolean's Master Drawings exhibition in 2013, the Museum is celebrating its position as one of the world's leading collections of drawings and works on paper. GREAT BRITISH DRAWINGS features more than a hundred of the Ashmolean's best drawings by British artists, charting the history of drawing and artistic development in Britain. Among the artists represented are: JMW Turner; Rossetti, Millais, Holman Hunt; Paul Nash; Ben Nicholson; Graham Sutherland; Eric Ravilious; Peter de Francia; and more.