THE NECESSARY CLOWN : AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE SYMBOLIC ROLE OF THE CLOWN IN VISUAL IMAGERY

by

TERRENCE OLIVER PATRICK

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in the
Department of Fine Arts & History of Art,
University of Natal
Pietermaritzburg

January 1985

I, Terrence Oliver Patrick, hereby declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Arts in the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, and has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University.

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ABSTRACT

The research opens with an introduction which develops and presents the argument that the clown is a necessary and suitable image of modern man.

A general history is presented in which the evolution of the clown is traced within the society and culture. The symbol of the clown in art is traced from the etchings of Callot in the 17th century to the work of Rouault and Picasso in the 20th century. The research concludes with a look at the candidate's own work on the clown theme.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Murray Schoonraad for his guidance and encouragement, and to Coral and Ethel Carte for their support and assistance.

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"Light, mad in dark lair,
Animal dual and rare,
A monkey's ass,
A primitive fool,
A clown."

"The Clown" by T. Patrick 1982

Chapter 1 **INTRODUCTION**

The Oxford dictionary[1] defines the clown as "a rustic, ignorant or ill-bred man; a jester, especially in pantomime or the circus". The actual word did not enter the English language until the sixteenth century. It is of low German origin and indicates a countryman or peasant. Its original meaning is allied in sense to the word for a Dutch or German farmer "Boor", from which we get the adjective boorish. So, strictly speaking, it means someone who is doltish or ill-bred.

This literal definition is in fact consistent with the nature of clowning which has its roots essentially in the lives of ordinary people. The clown is to some extent the voice of the people; an expression of our human feeling. Our conception of the clown comes from a visit to the circus or possibly a film - on another level we might see a comic mime perform or perhaps even see a painting of a clown. However, we rarely stop to question the symbolic nature of the clown, so deeply ingrained in our psyche has the image become.

What does become immediately apparent on reflection is that the clown is man apart: his dress and his actions are different and appear incongruous. Perhaps his most important and persistent characteristic is the emphasis on exaggeration either of physical or mental attitudes. He can be said to embody the irrational in man. S.T. Nicolls defines the clown as "...the stereotyped role of

a marginal man, who by his vulnerability and his ironic freedom in dress, action and being, challenges the generally accepted order of society and/or the world in such a manner as to create the response called the comic perspective."[2] Sigmund Freud attempted to explain the comic perspective as follows: "Thus a uniform explanation is provided of the fact that a person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, he makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones; and it cannot be denied that in both these cases our laughter expresses a pleasurable sense of the superiority which we feel in relation to him."[3] He explains the cathartic nature of laughter by postulating that: "...humour is one of the highest physical achievements of man, its fending off of the possibility of suffering places it among the great series of methods which the human mind has constructed to evade the compulsion to suffer."[4]

Suzanne Langer sees both tragedy and the comic perspective as a means of dramatic construction which, because of their nature: "...are, of course, not indispensable, however widespread their use. But they are to European drama what the representation of objects is to painting: sources of the great tradition."[5] She sees comedy as filling the role in the great tradition as that of: "...an art form that arises naturally wherever people are gathered to celebrate life, in spring festivals, triumphs, birthdays, weddings or initiations. For it expresses the elementary strains and resolutions of animate nature, the delight man takes in his special mental gifts that makes him the lord of creation; it is an image of human vitality holding its own in the world amid the surprises of unplanned coincidence."[6] This image of human vitality manifests itself as a type of

personality within the complex group personality. C.G. Jung describes this human type as the trickster. He sees the trickster as an archetypal character that has evolved from within the hero myths and describes the hero myths as:"...the development of the character's ego-consciousness - his awareness of his own strengths and weaknesses - in a manner that will equip him for the arduous tasks with which life confronts him."[7] And he sees the trickster cycle as corresponding to the earliest and least developed period of life. "Trickster is a figure whose physical appetites dominate his behaviour; he has the mentality of an infant, lacking any purpose beyond the gratification of his primary needs."[8]

In fact, in keeping with the view of the trickster as lacking any purpose beyond the gratification of his primary needs lies the fact that easily the favourite topic of comedy is sex. The image of man vulnerable to woman and vice versa, within the society and in front of his peer group, is at the kernel of the comic rythm. And because the comic rythm is, in the words of Suzanne Langer: "...that of vital continuity, the protagonists do not change in the course of the action as they normally do in tragedy."[9]

The fact that the comic personality does not develop within the drama is at the very heart of the visual artist's choice of the clown as a symbol. It is because of this impermeability that the clown can be used to denote a specific dramatic aspect of the narrative. This is also because the symbol of the clown is clearly and, in fact, universally understandable. What is more, the clown, representing as he does the irrational, stands almost diametrically opposed to the empiricism of logic. It is the link between the poetic and metaphysical

elements in the theatre and literature together with our popular conception of the fool in society that shape the visual clown. This together with the potential that the clown has for disguise and his maverick position as both actor and man, creates for the artist a potent symbol of his own relations with society and his art. The clown's freedom of movement in play may be seen as analogous with the artist's freedom to create a new world in the shape of his art work.

There is another reason why the artist may find the clown image significant as a statement of his own experience: he may find his own life as meaningless to the society as the clown's. Because the artist is constantly upsetting received patterns, accepted values and the traditional order of society, he must often, therefore, stand outside the very society with which he intends to communicate.

It is the duality of the clown which the artist finds is significant for him to express his own double vision. The duality of being caught between the potentiality of his conception and the limitation of his creation. His ultimate theme is the possibility of human imagination, but the production of the art object represents the impossibility of perfection. Thus in Samuel Beckett's words: "Art says nothing beyond the sheer demand that it must be done even though it cannot be done adequately."[10]

In our present cultural climate we have witnessed the demotion of the hero to the status of the fool. And what is more, the clown has become an image with which we sympathetically identify, because society, with its oppressive inhibitions, is seen as opposing our ideal view of ourselves. The modern hero is at once everyman

and nobody. In the words of Nehama Aschkenasy: "The nothingness of the self as well as of the world, has become the chief theme in modern art and literature."[11] And subsequently the theme of hopelessness and the resultant loss of dignity, is powerfully exploited through the use of the clown as image.

Hand in hand with the decline of the hero lies the fact that western man has lost most of the basic premises on which his culture is based. Premises such as the rational and providential order of reality, the logic and coherence of the world and, as a consequence, the meaningful and important place of man within this system. Man had previously seen himself as at the centre of a created world; a world made for him specifically, in which he was to carry out his pre-ordained destiny. For this task he was invested with immense potential, amongst which was the potential for language. This language included the visual arts whose function was to uncover truths through the representation of reality.

However, with the promotion of science over religion, man began to see himself as merely a biological accident within an alien universe which itself was accidental. Therefore art, if it had any relevance at all, could only be justified within its own context. In Wittgenstien's words: "Each field of existence of each form of life exists and can be understood only in relation to a specific system of reference."[12] In other words, the concept of art for art's sake. Reality now, in the words of Roland Barthes: "...cannot be the copying of things but must be the knowledge of language; the most "realistic" work will not be that which "paints" reality but that which explores as profoundly as possible the unreal reality of language."[13]

To this end a new subject matter has evolved which Andre Malreaux calls: "The presence of the artist upon his own canvas."[14] And the clown is ideally suited as an image to convey this new meaning. In fact, true to his nature, the clown, as image, challenges that system of art which tries to abstract the object from any reference beyond itself in obedience to the motto of art for art's sake. Because, like a many faceted crystal, the clown presents a new face every time he is turned, and out of the raw material of his infinitely variable nature, artists fashion a symbol which reveals their profound meditations on life. For, to the imaginative artist, the clown is an abstract of humanity, as psychologically comprehensive as the thoughts, dreams, fantasies and emotions which compose the intricate web of man's inner life.

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"When walking just walk
When sitting just sit
Above all, don't wobble."

Zen - on how to act in accordance with reality :
Ummon Says

Chapter 2 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Almost everything and anything is suitable subject matter for comedy. That is if one looks at it purely from a philosophical viewpoint. However, comedy is a tradition as well as an idea. This tradition can be visually traced in the relics of our historical past. The first appearance of this enigmatic image in western art dates back to the Egypt of around 5000 B.C. In the aristocratic and royal families, a Danga, as he was called, was kept as much for amusement as a shore against ill fortune, and was regarded with a kind of primitive wonder. He was a member of a pygmy tribe, the Egyptians being fascinated by dwarfs and deformities, and would entertain, dressed in a leopard skin, by dancing and imitating the gods.[1]

The ancient Greek clown (Fig. 1) was one of the stock figures in the Greek popular farces which were based on mythological themes. In these plays, called Phylakes, the clown would appear wearing tights, a short tunic and grotesque padding front and back, together with a large artificial penis which was strapped to his loins. The clowns wore masks with yawning open mouths which amplified their voices. Some of the clowns wore animal heads, the most popular of which was the cock's head. The cock was considered a vain and stupid creature and the actor wearing such a mask would adopt the same characterestic. It is most probable that the cockscomb of the medieaval fool descended from this disguise.

The wealthy Greeks, like the Egyptians, employed clowns for domestic entertainment. They were called parasites and enjoyed much favour and patronage. They parodied the social order by poking fun at the heroes and the political and intellectual life around them.[2]

Fig. 1 Greek Comedy Actor
From circa 2nd Century AD

Both Plato and Aristotle associated the comic with the trivial. The comic character was quite simply and by his very nature, inferior. To Aristotle laughter is seen as a sort of catharsis purging the spectator of those vices exposed to ridicule on the comic stage. He sees the roots of comedy in invective and its function as ridicule. Plato, however, thought that by encouraging the clowns' impudence at the theatre one may be unconciously carried away into playing the fool in ones own private life. The great author of Greek comedy, Aristophanes, implied in his creations that comedy is the safety valve for the outlet of disorderly or erotic passions; that by treating them in an unserious spirit it rendered them less dangerous socially.[3]

Historically it was only natural that the Greek influence would spread to ancient Rome. The Romans were also fascinated by the aberrations of nature and employed freaks and dwarfs for their amusement. They even went so far as to carry around with them bronze models of their dwarfs as good luck charms.

The Roman clown emerges in the farces called "Fabula Atellana". The essential feature of these farces was a high spirited portrayal of traditional characters in ridiculous situations. These traditional stock characters would improvise humour on a given theme as the inspiration took them. The stock characters were Maccus, a stupid, clumsy, blundering, greedy rustic, who wore a square hood which was either drawn back or used as a disguise as the plot demanded. He also wore a patchwork jacket and tights together with the exaggerated phallus common to the Greek performers.

The second clown Bucco (Fig. 2) was known for his wit. His puns, riddles and topical allusions were loved by the Roman audiences. Over-literal interpretations of serious actors' remarks was an area that he exploited to get his laughs. Maccus and Bucco were the clowns proper in the "Fabula Atellana" and it can only be speculated that they were played off against each other rather like the August and Pierrot clowns of the modern circus.

Pappus (Fig. 3) was a senile old man used as a butt for the two clowns' antics. He had a wandering mind and was often tricked by his younger companions. He was also lecherous, for along with adultery, the Romans found the passions of old men very funny.

Two other clown type characters of the "Fabula Atellana" were Dosenius and Mandacus. They were the wise and cunning characters on which the modern clown character Punch is based. They were depicted as humpbacked with grinning mouths, large teeth, hooked noses and exaggerated jaws.

The Roman clowns entertained in the circus, in private homes and on the stage which was sometimes portable. Because the portable stage interfered with the fluidity of the scene changes, comic mimes were employed to keep the suspense dynamic. These short mimes most often took the form of the parody of animals, a form of parody also favoured by the Greeks. Occupying as they did the intervals between the main dramatic action they are not unlike the function fulfilled by the modern circus clown. In the Sannios, as these mimes were called, the actors did not wear masks, arousing laughter with hilarious grimaces, indecent gestures and outrageous dress. One of

Fig. 2 *Bucco* *Fig. 3* *Pappus*

Roman masked actors

the mimic fools was called Stupidus, his speciality being to mimic what the serious actors had just performed. He would appear bald-headed or wear a long, pointed hat and a multi-coloured outfit, from which the later Harlequin costume probably evolved. Innuendo and burlesque fights in true slapstick style were his fashion. A clown of lower importance, with more pronounced physical oddities who indulged in jesting, was called Scurra.

In the middle ages the custom of keeping either natural fools or professional fools was widespread (Fig. 4). These fools, or jesters as they were called, were ruled by the dictum "speak what you think". In this they represented the principle of freedom of speech in an age in which such freedom hardly existed for anyone else. In some cases, these jesters, owing to their closeness to the Crown, gained considerable political power and personal wealth. Some were even able to acquire something of the notoriety of the modern music-hall artist or film star. Moreover, since he enjoyed impunity, the fool also became a social critic. He represented an expression of all the mischievous and rebellious desires in men which society attempted to control or frustrate.[5]

The common people in the middle ages were exposed to the fool through street entertainment, fairs and feast day revels. Here they forgot the harshness of their humdrum lives in the enjoyment of tumblers, contortionists, jugglers, conjurors, bull and bear baiters and travelling minstrels. The performers also dexterously engaged in witty repartee with their eager audiences.

The mountebank and his companion fool or Zanni was also a common entertainment for the wayfarer (Fig. 5). While the mountebank was extolling the so-called marvels of his

Fig. 4 A Court Fool and Buffoon

From the mid 13th Century

Fig. 5 *A Mountebank and his Zanni*

wares, using the latest jokes and witty language, the Zanni would prance around pretending to all kinds of aches and pains. After receiving medication he would affect to be cured, bound upright with a somersault and thank the mountebank for his aid with many an hilarious gesture and innuendo.[6]

To the medieaval thinker, man was essentially vain, and it was only when he knew himself for the fool that he was that he could become the lowly recipient of divine wisdom. In Christian Europe of the middle ages the term "wise fool" was used metaphysically to denote the pious believer who was considered foolish in the eyes of men but wise in the eyes of God. So important to the religious life of the middle ages did the fool become that a special feast day was set aside at Christmas time called the Feast of Fools. In fact it was from the dramatic parts of the churches' rites that the mystery and miracle plays developed. These plays contained a large element of buffonery, with the devil occupying the role of chief comic.[7]

In medieaval France, fool societies were created. These societies, made up largely of intellectuals, produced short, topical farces called soties in which they assumed the character of the fool to criticise the abuses of the Church and the State. Later, in Tudor England and Scotland, a popular entertainer emerged in the houses of the great and wealthy. He was active during the Yuletide celebrations and was called the Lord of Misrule[8] (Fig. 6).

In the Italy of the Renaissance there developed a comic theatre tradition which was called the "Commedia dell'Arte". The exact antecedents of the comic theatre

Fig. 6 The Lord of Misrule

are unknown, however the ancient Greek comedy and the Roman "Fabulla Atellanae" seem to share common stock characters and costumes with the Commedia dell'Arte. What is known is that companies of actors achieved fame throughout Italy and Europe for their skill in improvisation, their store of amazing stage tricks and their creation of characters which have become stock comic types, most of which were caricatures of certain classes or nationalities. The Commedia dell'Arte was in fact the comic theatre in which clowns as we know them first appeared. They differed, however, from the modern individual idea of the clown in that there was no main protagonist. It can be said that their most fundamental virtue was that of bringing to light the whole nature of man on stage.

In the plays each comic actor was given a brief scenario on which he would improvise and expand the stock character he played. There were standard interactions between the players which were called lazzis; these served the purpose of keeping the action moving and also defining the characters. Although the plot of the play would vary, the main protagonists remained constant and were clearly identifiable by their costumes.[9]

Pantaloon (Fig. 7) was always portrayed as the head of the clan. He was a rich Venetian gentleman who was self-made largely through his meanness and avariciousness. To Pantaloon everything could be bought or sold. He was always depicted carrying his keys and his purse and attended by his valet Harlequin. His roles were those of the dogmatic, over-possessive father, or the elderly lecher who was either impotent or being cuckolded.[10]

Fig. 7 Pantalone

The Doctor (Fig. 8) was from the university town of Bologna; he was a self-deceiver, incapable of honesty although he knew what it meant. There is never any record of him having cured anybody and there are many deaths. He was sometimes depicted as a lawyer dressed in black with his nose in a book and always quoting extensively from someone else. He prided himself on his ability to write love letters although his real forte was destructive criticism. The doctor owed his position, his livelihood, his whole existence to Pantaloon. He was also a frustrated creative artist with a tendency to drink too much.[11]

The Captain (Fig. 9) was also from Venice and served Pantaloon alone. He was an unromantic bully and a stupendous liar. He wore a bristling moustache twirled at the ends, a plumed hat, sword, spurs and a cavalier's cloak in true military style. He also had a tremendous appetite for food, a good singing voice and was irresistible to women.[12]

Pulcinello (Fig. 10) was from Benavento. He had a dual temperament and a chip on his shoulder because of his hooked nose, humped back and protruberant stomach. He always wore a belt to keep his belly up and to carry his big stick. He was excessively cruel and practised evil for the pleasure of causing pain. He feared neither God nor the devil and was an extremely clever raconteur.[13]

Harlequin (Fig. 11a and 11b) was a native of Bergamo and was represented as a man with negro or Moorish blood, in the service of Pantaloon. Physically he was always graceful and attractive, a talented dancer and

Fig. 8 The Doctor

Fig. 9 *The Captain*

Fig. 10 *Pulcinello*

Fig. 11a *Arlecchino*

Fig. 11b *Harlequin*

entertainer. He wore bows on his shoes, a ruff at his neck and carried a stick with which he delighted the dirty minded in the audience by handling with indecent and obscene gestures. His costume was made up of brilliantly coloured diamond shaped lozenges. To his detriment he could be malicious, superficial and at times a thief and liar. He was seen as the chief seducer, a great intriguer and lover whose deity was Bacchus, the Roman god of wine. In later Commedia dell' Arte farces he was portrayed as a dandy given to transvesticism and homosexuality.[14]

Brighella (Fig. 12) was also from Bergamo and, like Harlequin, a valet. He was a natural scoundrel, amoral, an active ponce and procurer lacking all refinement and always had his price. Stripes were an important part of his clothing, his weapon being a short knife. He was also an excellent musician. He was portrayed as the alter ego of Harlequin with whom he had a love-hate relationship.[15]

Colombine (Fig. 13) normally wore no mask. It was as a woman that Colombine suffered most in the farces. She was subjected to the masculine indoctrination and interpretation which limited her to her sexual role, that is, as an extension of man's sexual activities. She was outspoken as well as tactful and spoke up passionately for her rights as a woman. Paradoxically she often expressed a wish to be a man.

Her dress showed her to be careful, prudent and unextravagant. She danced, sang and played music beautifully. She was also an enthusiastic letter writer and an avid reader, often late into the night owing to

Fig. 12 Brighella

Fig. 13 Colombine

her insomniac condition. She was sometimes the daughter of Pantaloon, sometimes a maid and always the centre, if not the object, of the intrigue.[16]

The clown thus far is essentially the manifestation of the folly of all men, although the Commedia dell' Arte had vested their characters with individuality as befitted the centrally placed Renaissance man. However, they were still part of the comic vice tradition which laughed at man's failure to achieve the ideal. It was the genious of Shakespeare who elevated the fools in his plays to speak with the voice of reason (Fig. 14). Shakespeare gave us our first wise fool whose voice was the reasonable one of common sense. To the medieaval man the fool was the truth-teller whose insight was disguised by insanity. To Shakespeare the fool represented the uncovering of wisdom in an insane world. He also pointed to a moral truism that power and wisdom are not synonymous.[17]

With the success of the theatre in Europe, the professional as well as stage clowns were encouraged to develop by the increased creative freedom within society. In France there emerged the tradition of the simpleton 'Badin' who was not altogether a fool and was not distinguished by a special costume. In Spain there was 'Bobo', a common servant type influenced by the Harlequin of the Italian theatre.[18]

In the 1830's in France the mime actor Jean Gaspard-Deburau developed the lovelorn, pathetic, silent clown Pierrot (Fig. 15). Pierrot was a minor character in the Harlequinades, a ramification of the Commedia dell' Arte featuring Harlequin. During this period this form of

Fig. 14 King Lear and the Fool

Fig. 15 *Pierrot*

theatrical entertainment was very popular in Paris. Pierrot's ancestry can be traced back to Gros-Guillaume, the medieaval pastry chef and fool, who appeared with face and clothes covered in flour which he blew about to the consternation of the other actors and the delight of the audience.[19] Deburau as Pierrot dominated the Harlequinade; he utterly captivated his audience taking them from tears to laughter in the space of a few moments and back again. Whereas Pierrot had formerly been a country bumpkin type and a mere foil to Harlequin, Deburau invested him with a measure of cunning and, most important, the ability to convey the pathos of the human condition. As a costume, Deburau adopted the loose, white garments of the clown Gilles, with the large buttons. But as Pierrot he discarded the normally worn ruff around the neck and donned the black scull cap of the scholar. In this character we see the genesis of our modern white-faced clown.[20]

In England the Harlequinade produced another character: that of the 'Joey' created by Joseph Grimaldi (Fig. 16). He was a clown who did not rely simply on the slow wit of the rustic yokel outsmarted by a smarter partner. He was a smart urban satirist, poking fun at the vices of the age, getting his laughs out of transforming everyday objects and gilding every situation with his inimitable and immortal comic gifts.[21]

By the late 1800's the circus had come into being and offered the clown a further fertile area for his antics. In the circus the white-faced clown (Fig. 17) was joined by the August clown (Fig. 18) and, traditionally, they worked in partnership as a foil to each other. The August clown developed out of Joseph Grimaldi's act -

Fig. 16 Grimaldi

Fig. 17 White Faced Clown

Fig. 18 The Auguste Clown

small hats, oversized boots, baggy checked clothing, shock-headed wigs and red noses were their trademarks. Both clowns painted their faces. The white-faced clown, white with elegant black character lines; the August clown with a false red nose and grotesque make-up emphasizing the fool.[22]

In the later American circus the melancholic hobo clown, popularised by Emmett Kelly (Fig. 19), was developed from the pathos of the white-faced clown and the make-up and clothing of the August clown. The modern circus clown is identified more and more with the zany appearance and character of the Auguste clown.[23]

With the advent of the cinema in the 1890's, the clown's scope became almost limitless, and gave rise to the likes of Buster Keaton, the Keystone Cops, Laurel and Hardy, Harold Lloyd and the great clown of the silent and early talking movies, Charlie Chaplin (Fig. 20), whose genius was the identification of the clown with the common man and his knowledge that few of us lack in self pity. He became the modern everyman, the miserable average man caught up in the modern machine and lost in the big city.[24] Similarly the great French mime Marcel Marceau created his white-faced clown 'Bib' (Fig. 21). Bib is his response to the struggles experienced by the common man in his everyday modern life. However, he is always ready to face a world too complex for him; his human inadequacy revealing itself as he plays out the average man's contribution as soldier, tight rope walker, lion tamer, weight lifter, salesman, sculptor, etc.[25]

Fig. 19 The Hobo Clown

Fig. 20 Charles Chaplin

Fig. 21 Marcel Marceau

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For everything in nature is
lyrical in its ideal essence
tragic in its fate, and
comic in its existence

George Santayana - 'Carnival'
in Comedy, Meaning & Form
edited by Robert Corrington

Chapter 3 JACQUES CALLOT TO WATTEAU

In piecing together the complex threads which make up a full picture of the image of the clown, historians have turned to Greek vases, Roman sculpture and woodcuts and engravings from the medieaval period. However, it is with the etchings of Jacques Callot (1592-1635) that the clown begins to reveal his true potential in the visual arts.

Callot was one of the first great artists who dealt with man within the perspective of his social consciousness. The clown, being essentially a social animal, was the ideal medium to convey this social awarenes in his art. Callot was born in Nancy, the capital of the independent Duchy of Lorraine. His family had strong catholic ties and were prosperous ennobled bourgeoise. He was apprenticed early to an engraver attached to the court where his father was in charge of the court functions. His early years were spent in an ambience of pomp and ceremony. The fêtes, ceremonies and pageants which he witnessed in the court influenced the content of his work throughout his career.

In 1608 he left Nancy for Rome where he studied his craft. In 1611 he found his way to Florence under the patronage of the Medici family. It was in Florence that the Commedia dell' Arte caught the fancy of the young artist. We know from the Medici archives that many Commedia dell' Arte companies played in Florence during Callot's years in that city. The actors' performances stimulated him to etch dozens of plates which afford us the most complete pictorial record of the visual appearance of the Commedia dell'Arte at that time.

Callot was particularly fascinated by the potential of the dance aspects of the performances, evidenced in his "Two Pantaloons" (Fig. 22) of 1616 and his great series of 24 plates entitled the "Balli de Sfessania" (Fig. 23) of 1621. He also etched 20 plates based on the companies of performing dwarfs popular at the Medici court, dating from 1622. In his three plates of 1618/19 called "Three Italian Comedy Performers" (Fig. 24) he recorded the key Commedia dell' Arte characters - Pantaloon, the Lover and the Captain. They are, in the opinion of Howard Daniel: "Three of the greatest theatrical prints ever made"[1].

The "Balli di Sfessanio" etchings show two lead actors either courting, dancing, fighting or ridiculing each other. Their activities verge on the farcical and strongly stress their sexual interaction. Three items of personal decoration are always apparent: the sword, the feathers in the headdress and the inevitable phallus. The actors are generally shown in an urban setting with the other members of the troupe duelling, playing music or performing acrobatics. The whole conception superbly evokes the light-hearted, humourous, sexual nature of the Commedia dell' Arte.

Callot left Florence in 1622 and returned to Nancy where he remained for the rest of his short life. He took many of the Commedia dell' Arte etchings back with him to France to complete and thereby introduced the image to the French artists.

In Italy the image of the clown is reflected in the paintings of Alessandro Magnasco (1667-1749) of Genoa. His work reflects the baroque interest in the grandiloquent and dramatic, illustrating the sombre colouring and agitated movement of the baroque style

Fig. 22 The Two Pantaloons
J. Callot, etching, 1616

Fig. 23 Title page to the Balli di Sfessania
J. Callot, etching, 1621/22

Fig. 24 <u>Scapin</u>
J. Callot, etching, 1618/19

(Fig. 25). He also has the typical 18th century fondness for the stage, his paintings being full of the attitudes and mimicry of the theatre. As well as portraying Commedia dell' Arte and other characters from the theatre, he had a predilection for depicting the misfits of society. His characters look back to the theatrical etchings of Callot in their dramatic agitation and forward to the Watteau of the "Fêtes Galantes" in paintings such as "Gathering in a Garden at Albaro". However, he fails, like Callot but unlike Watteau, to transcend the merely picturesque. His paintings delight for their painterly qualities rather than for their psychological insights into the true potential of the comic theatre.[2]

In 18th century Venice the townspeople dressed up in fancy costumes and masks on feastdays and carnivals. The comic dress and masks popularised by the actors of the Commedia dell' Arte were the most popular type of fancy dress. Artists such as Giovanni Tiepolo (1696-1770) and in particular his son Domenico Tiepolo (1727-1804) and Pietro Longhi (1702-1785), painted the everyday genre scenes which included the feasts, carnivals and italian theatre. In fact it can be said that Domenico Tiepolo's most original contribution to Venetian painting of the period is the introduction of these genre works.

Probably the last major project undertaken by Domenico Tiepolo was a series of 103 highly finished drawings on the life of Pulcinello called "An entertainment for Children" (Fig. 26) which were probably carried out solely for his own and his family's enjoyment. These drawings, which trace Pulcinello's life from birth to death, depict him as a multiple personality. Many of the drawings portray a large crowd of identical skinny,

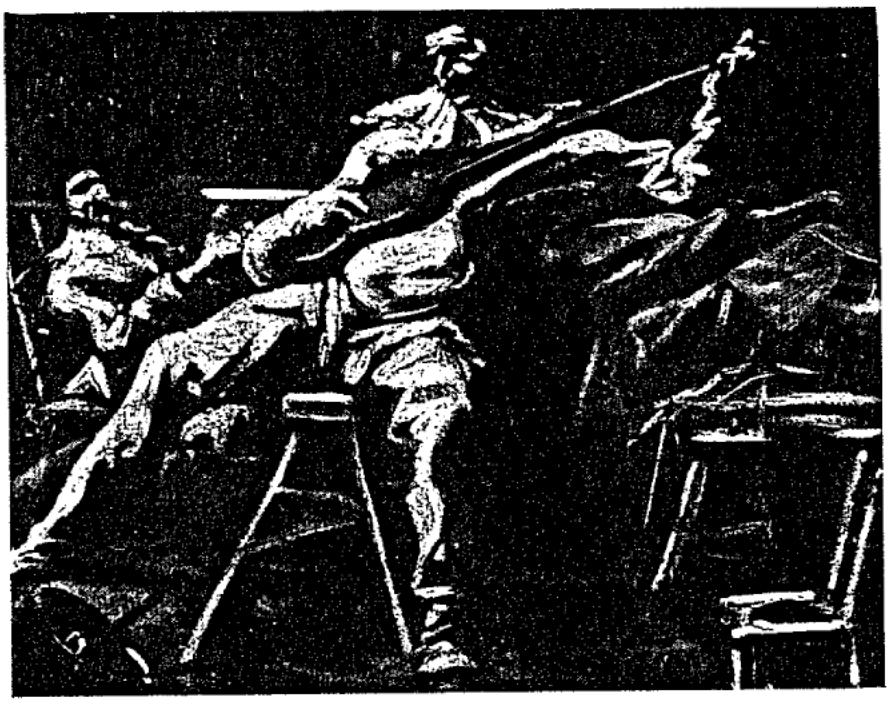

Fig. 25 Pulcinello playing the Guitar
A. Magnasco, oil, c. 1730

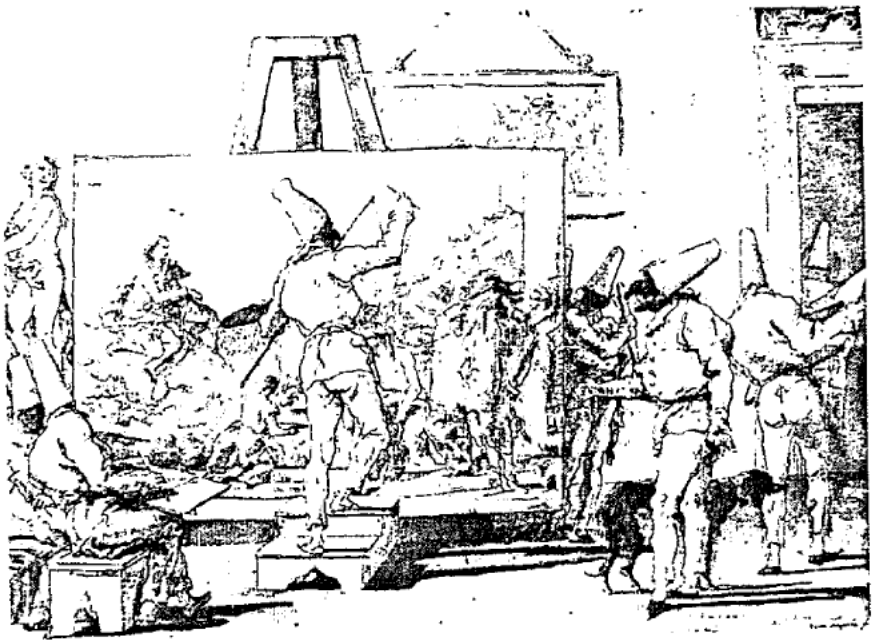

Fig. 26 Pulcinello as a painter of Histories

D. Tiepolo, wash drawing c.1803

hunchback clowns making it impossible to single out the main character.[3]

The drawings afford little insight into the already complex theatrical figure but serve to illustrate the pervasiveness of the clown image in the society of that time.

It is with the work of Claude Gillot (1673-1732) that the portrayal of comic theatre scenes in painting became popularised in France. As we have seen, the portrayal of the theatre was not uncommon at this time, but it was mainly confined to illustrations for the print market. In 1697 the Commedia dell' Arte performing company was expelled from Paris by Louis XIV of France for staging a play insulting a court favourite, Mme de Maintenon. It is not certain what stimulated the public to become interested in the theatrical genre but it is ironic that the removal of the Italians may have stimulated the demand for pictures reminiscent of the Italian theatre. Certainly the comic genre became the dominant art form at this time. The characters, masks and scenarios acquired an important place in art as well as in private and amateur theatricals.

Claude Gillot is known to have designed costumes, fashion plates and book illustrations for the theatre. It is also speculated that he may even have written plays himself. His paintings and graphic works, of which few survive, show the stock characters of the comic theatre faithfully reproduced even to the painted backdrop (Fig. 27).

In fact, it is impossible to correctly assess Gillot's theatrical genre creations without first having seen the

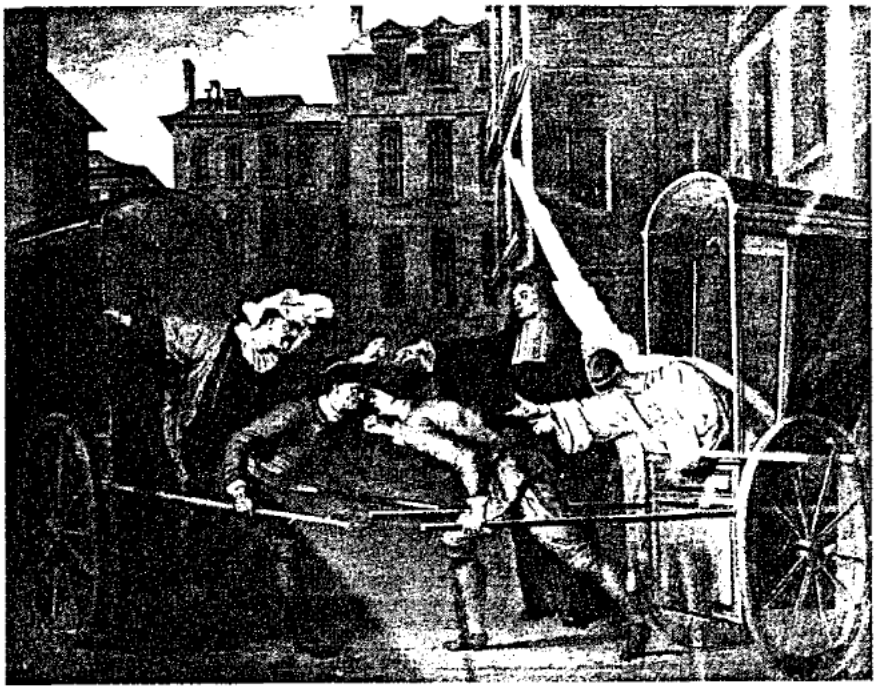

Fig. 27 Scene from the play
The two Coaches
Gillot, oil, 1707

Fig. 28 Harlequin, Emperor on the Moon
Gillot & Watteau, oil, c.1706

plays. Therefore the dramatic impact that the works must have had is largely lost on the modern viewer.[4]

However, Gillot was responsible for making the young Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) aware of the thematic possibilities of the Italian theatre. During the 1706/7 years Watteau worked as an assistant in Gillot's studio and many works of this period are ascribed to both artists, so closely were they working together at that time (Fig. 28). Contemporary biographers unanimously affirm that Watteau's mature style and subject matter were based on those of Gillot. However, it was not long before Watteau drew away from the descriptive precision characteristic of Gillot's work and other theatrical illustrators. He was not interested in the details of the stage action but rather in the atmosphere of the theatre, the theatrics, the settings and costumes.

Watteau's great achievement was the creation of the genre called the Fête Galante (Fig. 29). This was a form of social entertainment prevalent in seventeenth and eighteenth century France, taking place mostly out of doors, revolving around flirtatious conversation, graceful and witty interchanges conducted according to the polite norms of aristocratic behaviour. Watteau drew his inspiration from these Fête Galantes and his formal structure from the earlier genre painters from The Netherlands, as illustrated by Peter Paul Rubens' "Garden of Love"[5] (Fig. 30).

The result Watteau achieved was a vision that touched, but did not dwell, on the actual appearance of contemporary life. His genius was to shift the emphasis from the spectacle of country activity to the people in it and to the underlying psychology that patterned their

Fig. 29 Gallant Company
Watteau, engraving after oil
painting, c. 1720

Fig. 30 The Garden of Love
Rubens, oil

actions and behaviour. He transported the theatrical action into a realm we can perceive as reality, where the costumed characters are not pretending but genuinely experiencing the moment . "For he had recognised that the distinction between theatre and real life is artificial. All dress is costume, a lure and a disguise, and all of us are actors on the social stage we inhabit."[6] Watteau makes us aware in his Fête Galantes paintings of the mystery that is at the heart of love. He was intrigued by the moment of amorous indecision, of deliberate emotional suspense. He organised his pictures according to patterns of behaviour and emotional content in order to reveal psychological undercurrents, the tensions, frustrations and longings in human relationships and social intercourse. To this end he invented and improvised scenes of theatrical interaction, adapting to his picture making the idea of dramatic improvisation which was fundamental to the Commedia dell' Arte.

Watteau's concentration on the psychological aspects of the theatre, and in particular his interest in the Commedia dell' Arte, has led critics to perceive an identification between the activities of the theatrical clown and the artist himself. This line of thought is anticipated in such paintings as "The monkey Sculptress" (Fig. 31) and "The Monkey Painter" (Fig. 32), both of circa 1712, where we are shown monkeys in the act of artistic creation. The tradition of using animals to enact human activities to evoke a moral goes back to antiquity and was also very popular in the middle ages. Watteau was particularly influenced by Claude Gillot who in turn was influenced by the Flemish artist of genre scenes, David Teniers (1610-1690) the younger. Dora Panofsky sees a clear identification with Watteau himself

Fig. 31 Monkey Sculptress
Watteau, oil, 1712

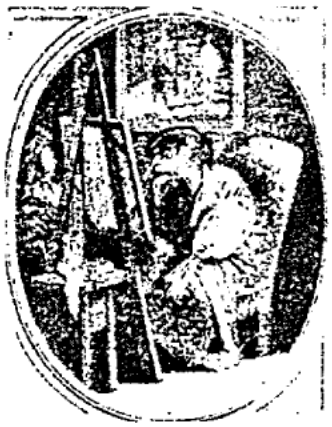

Fig. 32 Monkey Painter
Watteau, 1712

Fig. 33 An Allegory of Malice
Watteau, 1710

in the pathetic expression on the monkey sculptress' face. In a painting entitled "An Allegory of Erotic Malice" (Fig. 33) of about the same date, three monkeys are shown parodying human activities. The one monkey is playing the bagpipes (erotic symbol) and probably alludes to Mezzetin. Another monkey is garlanding a statue of a satyr, whilst the third monkey, dressed in the guise of Pierrot, stands apart. Pierrot, or Gilles, according to Dora Panofsky, was the clown through whom Watteau manifested himself in his own art, a view which is held by many outstanding critics.[7]

The confusion and contradictions which surround the critical interpretation of Watteau's great masterpiece "Gilles" (Fig. 34) of circa 1718, are themselves indications of the complexity of the clown as an image and are also synonymous with the psychological complexities of the interpretation of Watteau's art. The whole narrative structure of Watteau's art insists on meaning but at the same time withholds or voids it. In the words of Norman Bryson: "Part of the brilliance of Watteau lies in the willingness he induces in the viewer to go on with a work of interpretation that is so little substantiated by 'visible marks' and so uncertain of ever arriving at a point where interpretation will have exhausted the meaning of the image."[8] For meaning in Watteau is experienced mysteriously as mood and atmosphere.

The "Gilles" painting portrays a clown standing in the centre of the canvas, gazing frankly at the viewer. Behind him, painted on a smaller scale, are four other main characters. The exact moment in the drama is uncertain; it could be the point where, after the final parade of the characters, Gilles moves to the front of

Fig. 34 <u>Gilles</u>
Watteau, oil, 1717/19

the stage and indicates that the play is over, asking the audience for their financial contribution by rubbing his thumb and index fingers together, or, possibly, the traditional moment during the finale when Gilles steps forward to unfold, with a fool's unblushing candour, the moral of the play. The critics agree, however, that the unusual layout, the expansive and sharply contrasted manner of the actual painting, indicate that it was probably meant for use as a billboard or shopfront.[9] Dora Panofsky sees in the "Gilles", if not an exact portrait of Watteau himself at least a self-revelation, an interpretation which has found considerable favour. This is mostly due to the association of ideas between Watteau the melancholy, dying artist and the tragic figure of the sad clown he often portrayed. However, Donald Posner has pointed out that the "Gilles" whom Watteau knew was not a sad clown. The sad clown was in fact the creation of the great mime artist of the 19th century, Jean Gaspard Deberau. The Gilles whom Watteau knew in the 18th century was "...reprehensible in morals, obscene in language and gross in social behaviour; they did not display the shy, lonely sensitivity and gentle love of life that since around 1850 - but only since then - many critics have thought they see in the picture of Watteau".[10]

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"Think not to find one meant resemblance there
we lash the vices but the persons spare
prints should be prized as authors
shoud be read who sharply smile
prevailing folly dead."

Inscription beneath the engraving
A midnight modern conversation
Composed and engraved by Hogarth.[3]

Chapter 4 CARICATURE : HOGARTH AND DAUMIER

Caricature has always held distinct possibilities for the ludic perspective. Allegorical representations of human folly had, from the inception of the press, been part of the language of the print.

For example, in an engraving by Jacob de Gheyn (1565-1629) (Fig. 35) we can see that various images are used to satirise human vice and folly. We are shown the Captain of the Italian Comedy being held by the medieaval fool, whilst the comic vice figure attempts to steer him in the opposite direction. The fool is dressed as a woman and identified by the cap and bells and the jester's bauble. The Captain is recognized as an actor and comic figure of the Commedia dell' Arte by his dress and the erect phallus. In the drawing of the Captain we can see the influence of the Balli di Sfessanio etchings of Jacques Callot. The comic vice figure has the mask of a dog, representing faithfulness, strapped to the back of his head.[1] He also wears the cockscomb denoting vanity and stupidity. Here we can see how the medieaval mind used the comic image allegorically to point human beings to the right moral actions. In other words, folly exposes truths.

Caricature was an Italian creation. However, by the first half of the eighteenth century the most notable maker of satirical prints was undisputedly the Englishman William Hogarth (1697-1764).

Hogarth was unsurpassed as a commentator on the manners and morals of his time. He was influenced by the ideas of the satirist and novelist Jonathan Swift who held the view that the satirist should laugh mankind out of its

Fig. 35 Comic Actors Satirizing Human Folly
Jacob De Gheyn, engraving

favourite follies and vices. The satirist's tool being the creative paradox, already understood by Aristophanes, that one panders to triviality in order to expose it and that the exposure, rather like the confession in Freudian psychology, had a cathartic healing effect.

Hogarth used as a model the earlier Dutch genre painters. He was also interested in and influenced by the French Rococo movement. The artists of this time were noted for their informality of style, their theatrical connections and their humanitarianism. Throughout his career he showed a very strong pedagogical trait which prompted him to group many of his works under the title "Modern Moral Subjects". It is his willingness to judge and to guide the viewer's judgement which separate him from the ordinary genre painters.[2] In his engraving entitled "Southwark Fair" (Fig. 36) of circa 1733 we see Hogarth giving vent to his misgivings about the contemporary theatre. In David Bindman's words: "Drama is now the barely heeded entertainment of the mob, a condition to which it has been led by its surrender to travesty and its neglect of the great traditions."[3] "Southwark Fair" itself represents the logical conclusion of the contemporary trivialisation of the stage. In the print Hogarth leaves us under no illusions as to the Harlequinade's part in the dissipation of the theatre. In England the dominant character from the Italian theatre to capture the imagination of the general public was the immoral rogue Pulcinello, now simply called Punch. He established himself through the popular travelling marionette shows called Punch and Judy.[4]

The action in "Southwark Fair" progresses from the actors' petty quarrels to their flimsy world of illusion, and then to the real consequences of their actions which

Fig. 36 Southwark Fair
Hogarth, engraving, 1733/4

can cause destruction, not only of illusions, but of real people. Behind such imagery is the idea, dear to the satirists of the time, that the corruption of art was symptomatic of the corruption of society and could bring about the latter by blurring the distinction between illusion and reality. Hogarth viewed the inclusion of the popular Harlequinades, pantomimes and marionettes into drama as symptomatic of this blurring of illusion and reality leading to an attack on the integrity of art.

The leading intellectuals in Hogarth's day shared a dislike of superstition which, in Hogarth's case, extended to a hatred of catholicism and religious charlatanism. One of his "Modern Moral Subjects" is the engraving of 1762 called "Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism - a Medley" (Fig. 37). In it he attacks religious excesses, sorcerers and swindlers. He depicts the methodist preacher George Whitfield as wearing a Harlequin outfit underneath his cassock and underlines his meaning by printing "I speak as a fool" next to the figure of the preacher. Hogarth makes an analogy here between the fool that has degraded the potential of the dramatic art form and the preacher who purveys charlatanism and superstition through an excess of misguided rhetoric.[5]

One of the most important aspects of caricature is that under an apparently naturalistic surface, the artist is using his print or painting as a moral emblem. It is this common feature that links the art of William Hogarth to that of Honore Daumier (1808-1879). Daumier was born into an age which looked hopefully into the future with the certainty that truth and righteousness would prevail. His confidence in humanity and hope for human betterment are the substance from which his images are moulded.

Fig. 37 Credulity, Superstition & Fanaticism
a Medley
Hogarth, engraving, 1762

Daumier was trained early as a lithographer. Lithography, invented by Aloys Senefelder in 1798, had been quickly adopted by the newspapers as an economic means of achieving maximum effect for caricature. By 1830 Daumier was making his first political caricatures for the journal La Caricature, he also began to work with clay, encouraged by his friend, the sculptor Preualt. In 1832 he served six months in Sainte-Pèlagie prison for political offenders for 'perpetrating an outrage against the person of the King'. In 1833 he joined the staff of Le Charivari for whom he worked on and off for the remainder of his life. The editor, Charles Philipon's, specific aim was propagandising through pictures in his journals. He declared his purpose of keeping the republican ideal alive in people's minds by attacking the detested monarchy embodied in the person of the king Louis-Philippe.

An example of this type of political lampooning is the 1834 lithograph "Lower the curtain the farce is ended" (Fig. 38). In it he caricatures the king dressed as a clown lowering the curtain at the end of the parliamentary session, crying out "the farce is over". The analogy is drawn between the circus and parliament implying that nothing of any importance occurs at either venue. The King is identified by his pear-shaped face, first created by Philipon himself, and used by all his caricaturists to represent the monarch.[6] This early caricature shows little of Daumier's true potential which was to be the lampooner of the life and manners of the ordinary person.

In the pages of La Charivari he was dedicated to making the middle class laugh at their own absurdities every

Fig. 38 Lower the Curtain the Farce is ended
Daumier, 1834, lithograph

morning of the year. Not only to laugh at themselves but to ponder their human predicament. It is also important to realise that Daumier came from the ranks of the very people he parodied. Indeed a sympathetic attitude to his victims runs through most of his work. Perhaps it was partly the joy of recognising in them something of themselves which gave the readers of La Charivari such pleasure in Daumier's apparently simple themes for he was laughing not at them but with them.

Daummier gathered the material for his clowns amidst the passing scenes of Paris, in the big city streets, in dingy lodgings and at the fair grounds where the clown was one member of the comedy of human life (Fig. 39). However, when he visualised the trickster and swindler Robert Macaire, he drew on a figure already made famous in the comic theatre by the talented actor Frederic Lemaitre. Lemaitre had himself modelled Robert Macaire on a chance meeting with a nameless fellow at a sidewalk cafe. He described him as follows: "His hair was dressed in a windblown style under a shapeless top hat. One eye was covered with a black patch. A voluminous red flannel scarf covered his face from the nose down and hid the place where a shirt ought to have been but was not. From the pocket of what had once been a green coat with silver buttons cascaded a bundle of many coloured rags, the remains of a splendid scarf. The right hand, with which he gestured magnificently, wore the fragments of a white glove; in his left hand he grasped a huge cane. His red military trousers clung to his shanks and showed dingy white stockings above a pair of women's satin shoes."[8]

In the lithographs we are shown Macaire in numerous professions: actor, painter, surgeon, detective, matrimonial agent, speculator, politician, in all of them

Fig. 39 The Side Show
Daumier, watercolour, 1866/68

cheating his way to success. He is always accompanied by his emaciated stooge Bertrand who does all of the dirty work but sees none of the money (Fig. 40). Daumier drew 101 lithographs on the Macaire theme between the years 1836 and 1838. The elaborate captions to the caricatures were written by Philipon, the editor, and it is partly due to this fact that Daumier is not shown at his best in this series. The true nature of Daumier's satire required no verbal explanation.

Another comic clown character which Daumier developed was the fictitious person of Joseph Proudhomme (Fig. 41). Proudhomme was created by Henry Monnier in his successful farce "The improvised family". The character became a national figure of bourgeois self-inflation, with awkward swagger, bulging bespectacled eyes, Punchlike profile, a collar with gigantic wings and a few hairs bristling from the top of his head. In these lithographs Daumier lampoons the pressures to which the bourgeois are subjected: the money cult, veneration of official honours, the need to be seen in the best drawing-rooms of the new bourgeois aristocracy, the pursuit of cultural sophistication and the self-protecting prudery. Proudhomme is a creature of contradiction, never quite comfortable with his place in the world. Daumier created fifty caricatures using the Proudhomme image. These appeared in Charivari over a period of eighteen years from 1853 onwards.[9]

Daumier saw the clown as a popular comedian whose broad humour was easily understood by the average man. He concentrated on the clown's boisterous good fun, his toughness and trusting naivetee, to portray his firmly held conviction that true strength lay in the commonplace and average (Fig. 42). Daumier's clowns, notwithstanding

Fig. 40 *Ladies and Gentlemen!*
Daumier, lithograph

Fig. 41 I want to leave a Monument
Daumier, lithograph

Fig. 42 Saltimbanques
Daumier, watercolour, 1866/68

their full flavour of life and their intensely vivid personalities, are not the result of pure observation but the outcome of a genuine political faith which centred its hope in a middle-class republic.

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"Comedy is unquestionably the proper mirror
of our time; it is also true that it reveals
our life to us 'through a glass darkly'."

Robert Carrigan
Comedy, Meaning & Form
Harper & Row

Chapter 5 PICASSO AND ROUAULT

The social optimism that fired Daumier's creativity flourished less warmly at the turn of the century when the young Pablo Ruiz Picasso (1881-1973) arrived in Paris from his native Spain. In fact optimism had soured to doubt in the minds of many of the thinking men and women of that time. Picasso's clown, although utterly unlike Daumier's, is no less valid. To the young Picasso the clown was a personification of a non-conformist human type plagued by loneliness who dwells on the fringes of ordinary society. In place of the idealized warmth of Daumier's clowns, Picasso evokes a disillusioned awareness of impotence and loss of spirit. His clowns have a sickly despondency and seem to go nowhere nor do anything beyond their introverted awareness of themselves (Fig. 43).

There can be little doubt that Picasso's early model was Daumier's series of performers executed in the 1860's in which he shows bedraggled saltimbanques, clowns and performers struggling to attract an audience, mount a sideshow or fleeing a hostile city (Fig. 44). A further influence on the artist could have been Cezanne whose painting "Mardi Gras" Picasso would have seen on the 1904 Salon D'Automne. Indeed, if it did not serve as a direct influence, it has been argued that he might have found in it a kind of authorization to use the clown image.[1]

Degas too had treated the subject in a series of pastels which Picasso may have seen. Critics perceive a certain similarity in the tension between the sexes which the two painters have in common. Renoir and Seurat must have also exerted some influence on the young painter, as well

Fig. 43 The Acrobat's Family with a Monkey
Picasso, Gouache, 1905

Fig. 44 Two Acrobats with a Dog
Picasso, Gouache, 1905

as Toulous-Lautrec (1864-1901) whose album of 22 large colour drawings entitled Au Cirque was published in 1905. The illustrators Cheret (1836-1930) and Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) were also actively using the clown as were the writers of the day. Picasso, being the type of artist he was, extracted from all of them what he required for his own personalized vision. However, the passivity and inwardness of his image implies a greater emotional need of the true potential of the clown.[2]

Picasso's most immediate contact with the clown was derived from his visits to the circus. It is related that he went with his friends to the Cirque Medrano at least three or four times a week and after the show would go backstage and spend all evening talking to the clowns. By the early stages of the 20th century the traditional distinctions between the different types of clowns had become confused. The very forms of entertainment and society in which they had played out their parts had largely disappeared. To differing extents, the fool, the jester, the Commedia dell'Arte characters, the juggler and the saltimbanque had all been assimilated into the August and Pierrot clown type of the modern circus. At the Cirque Medrano, Picasso would have seen the great August clown Grock who, in 1905 was just starting his career. Grock stated about his art: "The clown's province is to make humanity laugh at a picture of its own folly: To know what humour is, one must know what life is."[3]

However, the true circus clown which Picasso laughed at and revelled in rarely appears as such in his art. His clowns are more ambivalent in appearance and more complex in meaning. He reverts to the traditional fool, to Pierrot, to Colombine, the saltimbanques and jugglers and, in particular, Harlequin. But the most important

aspect of his interest in the clown is his tendency to identify himself with one or another of the clowns, and especially Harlequin. In the words of C.G. Jung: "And just as Faust is embroiled in murderous happenings and reappears in changed forms, so Picasso changes shape and reappears in the underworld form of the tragic Harlequin."[4] The introspective tone of his imagery fosters the realization that he is not thinking in terms of the Harlequin, for Harlequin is merely an alter ego, the objectified essence of Picasso's own predicament as an artist. Ellen Bransten says: "In the clown's unfortunate exclusion from normal life Picasso evidently detected a resemblance to the artists' isolation in modern society."[5]

In his 1905 painting "At the Lapin Agile" (Fig. 45) Picasso gives his own features to the Harlequin. With auto-biographical and self-conscious symbolism he intensifies the analogy between the clown and the artist, ascribing to Harlequin a rare sensitivity. For, like the artist, the clowns are removed from society's rude purpose; they dwell in a region of rarefied nuances, so fine and sensitive in perception that they have lost all contact with actuality. They appear as invented types through whom Picasso expresses the themes of alienation, jealousy and love that haunt his imagination.[6]

Picasso's tendency to identify himself with the clowns and saltimbanques in his early paintings, however deeply rooted in his own experience at the circus and fair, depends ultimately on the example of the 19th century artists and writers. The notion of the wandering saltimbanques and clowns symbolizing the non-conformist artist is, however, a romantic one. An instance of this being Baudelaire's prose poem "Le Vieux Saltimbanque"

Fig. 45 At the Lapin Agile
Picasso, oil, 1905

which he concludes with an explicit comparison of the old acrobat alone and neglected in his fair booth and the old poet who has outlived the generation he once entertained so brilliantly.[7] Picasso always delighted in transforming reality itself into a theatrical event. Many extant films and photographs show that he played a definite role in these events and often wore a mask or costume improvised for the occasion. The photos show him clowning in the manner of Charlie Chaplin, whom he greatly admired, or Groucho Marx and the other clowns (Fig. 46). Francois Gilots' account of him outlining a clown's features in his shaving mirror every morning and grimacing into the mirror show how closely he identified with the clown.[8] Moreover in works such as "Seated Harlequin (Portrait of the Painter Jacinto Salvado)" (Fig. 47) of 1923 and "Paulo as Harlequin" (Fig. 48) of 1924 he identifies close friends and his own son with the clown providing further proof of his own imaginative identification with such types.

Inevitably Harlequin and the other fools and circus clowns are intimately related to Picasso's most important formal invention, that of Cubism. In the succint words of Theodore Reff:"...Like a Cubist composition, the Harlequin costume of flat bright colours and strongly marked patterns both fragments and conceals the underlying forms, assimilating them to a surface design of great decorative brilliance. Symbolically, too, this interest in a form of concealment that is also a form of revelation, the familiar aspects of things disappearing while their normally hidden ones emerge, links Harlequin as a type and Cubism as a style."[9] (Fig. 49)

Picasso and the Cubists created in art the possibility of revealing the process of creation instead of merely

Fig. 46 Photograph of Pablo Picasso
circa 1965

Fig. 47 Seated Harlequin
(Portrait of the Painter Jacinto Salvado)

Picasso, tempera, 1923

Fig. 48 Paulo as Harlequin
Picasso, oil, 1924

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Fig. 49 *Harlequin playing the Guitar*
Picasso, oil & material, 1918

static states of being. Here again the clown forms an interesting analogy. For it cannot be doubted that Picasso identified the agility, professional skill, grace and courage of the saltimbanques with his own activity as an artist. In Cubism he found a way of externalizing this process. As John Berger says: "From the early twenties onwards Picasso began to make oracular statements about his art. Finding himself treated as a magician - in the fashionable sense of the word - he began to discover within himself a more serious magical basis for his work."[10] This idea is further substantiated by C.G. Jung who comments: "Picasso's object, however, appears different from what is generally expected - so different that it no longer seems to refer to any object of outer experience at all. Taken chronologically, his works show a growing tendency to withdraw from the empirical objects and an increase in those elements which do not correspond to any outer experience but come from an 'inside' situated behind consciousness."[11]

Jung was writing about an exhibition at the Kunsthaus in Zurich in September and October 1932 where 460 works by Picasso were shown. He admits quite freely that he has nothing to say on the question of Picasso's 'art' but only on its psychology and he queries: "Harlequin wanders like Faust through all these forms, though sometimes nothing betrays his presence but his wine, his lute or the bright lozenges of his jester's costume. And what does he learn on his wild journey through man's millenial history? What quintessence will he distil from this accumulation of rubbish and decay, from these half-born or aborted possibilities of form and colour? What symbol will appear as the final cause and meaning of all this disintegration?"[12] Jung concludes: "Picasso and his exhibition are a sign of the times, just as much as the 28,000 people who came to look at his pictures."[13]

From 1900 when he arrived in Paris, until 1923, Picasso persistantly used the clown to convey all the different aspects of his art and his personality. Suddenly, typical of his style and mood switches, he dropped the clown from his imagery. It is possible that he was being assimilated into the fabric of bourgeois values and therefore found it perfidious to use the very image which represented a rebuttal of those values. However, it can be seen that, although his imagery was consistently diverse throughout his career, the majority of his paintings are of women. John Berger states: "A number of the women are portrayed as themselves, others are idealizations, but most are composite creatures - themselves and he together. In a sense these paintings might be called self-portraits."[14] They are self-portraits in the same way that the clown is a self-portrait for they reveal Picasso's creative process of externalizing and establishing his emotional needs and fears through his imagery.

In a series of 180 drawings created over 2 months towards the end of 1953 and beginning of 1954, Picasso once again returns to the clown image. The drawings are autobiographical and reflect the deep regrets of an old man at the decline of his sexual powers. Most of the drawings reflect a young, beautiful woman being admired by Picasso who is either old or ugly or small and always absurd (Fig. 50). A mask is used to intensify the idea that the body ages but the imagination does not; or that behind the mask of age Picasso is as young and virile as ever (Fig. 51). The monkey which, in his earlier work stood for the artist and his freedom, is now a symbol of his slavery to his sexuality, and also reflects the animal nature of sex (Fig. 52). The clown in this series is not the robust Harlequin but the sad Pierrot. He

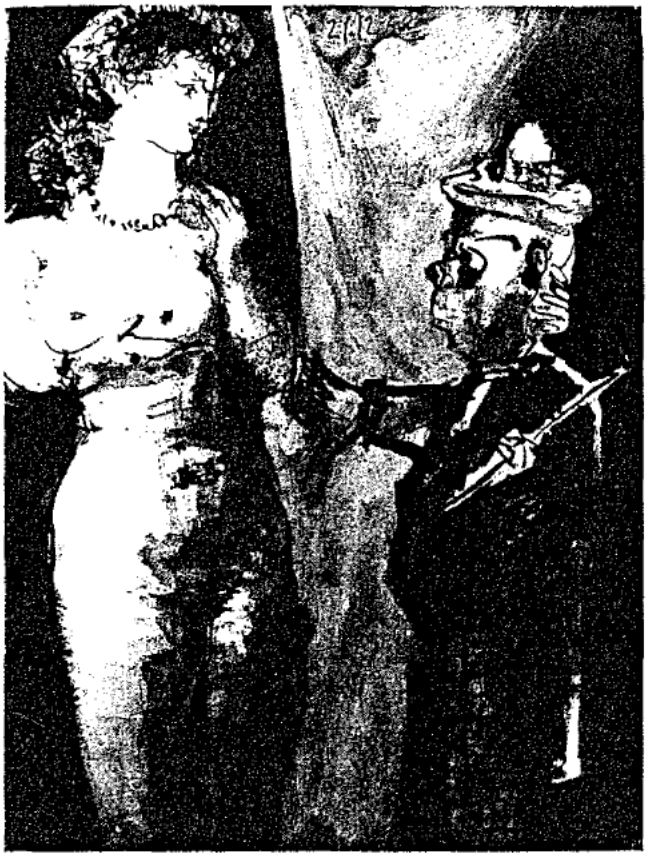

Fig. 50 Suite de 180 Dessins 21/12/53
Picasso, ink & wash, 1953/54

Fig. 51 *Suite de 180 Dessins 5/1/54*

Picasso, ink, 1953/54

Fig. 52 Suite de 180 Dessins 26/1/54

Picasso, watercolour, 1953/4

reflects resignation and sorrow but also understanding of the inevitability of ageing and decay (Fig. 53). Many of the drawings are of the artist in front of his model, at times the artist is a woman, at others a monkey (54). Nonetheless, the whole series is permeated with the presence of Picasso the lover, the artist and, as a result, the clown.

Whilst Picasso used the clown to signify his isolation from society and his retreat into his primitive interior self, Georges Rouault (1871-1958) employed the image to examine the question of good and evil in the light of his sombre moral conscience. Rouault's clown is a rejection of Rousseau's concept of the noble savage that fired Daumier's creative imagination. It is a moral and intellectual rebound from the enlightened philosophy of man's natural goodness, a challenge to the century of humanism and confidence in human reason. Through the thematic content of the whole of his work runs the single-minded conviction that human beings are both victims of folly and creatures of sin.[15]

Rouault painted over 100 paintings and many drawings and graphics on the theme of the clown. In fact of all the artists who have used the image, Rouault has been most consistent in its use. He was early and very powerfully influenced by his teacher, the symbolist painter Gustave Moreau (1826-1898), although, stylistically Moreau's art has very little in common with Rouault's, his choice of colour, his preference for literary themes and his unusual subject matter can be traced to Moreau. Moreau also revealed the work of Rembrandt and Daumier, amongst others, to the young painter, and it cannot be doubted that Rembrandt's deep chiaroscuro was Rouault's formal model, Daumier's social concerns affecting the choice of his subject matter.[16]

Fig. 53 Suite de 180 Dessins 6/1/54

Picasso, ink, 1953/4

Fig. 54 Suite de 180 Dessins 10/1/54

Picasso, ink, 1953/4

The influence of religion fired Rouault's creative output. The artist J.K. Huysmans (1848-1907) and the intellectual writers Leon Bloy (1846-1917) and Jacques Martain were Roman Catholics who shared Rouault's concern for the revitalization of christianity. They all rejected the 19th century christianity which seemed intent on ignoring the brutalization of the workers. In fact, Rouault's images of the clown reflect man alienated by a society based on the technological and materialistic values of the 19th and 20th centuries. Because the clown produces no goods, no consumables, no profits; in terms of monetary value the clown's life seems meaningless: he is a non-functional man in a technological society. Humility was at the heart of Rouault's christian philosophy and his art. He responded fundamentally to the Christ who said: "The publicans and harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you."[17]

Rouault's clown is in actuality - the reincarnation of the medieaval fool, and serves as the pivot in his ethical conception of human inadequacy and divine guidance. To the medieaval mind the fool represented the weakness of man without wisdom, who yielded to the urge for worldly enjoyment instead of devoutly obeying the teachings of Christ. The fool also served as the looking glass for the vanity of human pretensions. Rouault would probably have agreed with Desiderius Erasmus who said: "Nor is it without cause that fools are so vastly pleasing to God; the reason being, I suggest, that just as princes look suspiciously on men who are too clever and hate them...they take delight in duller and simpler souls; so Christ detests and condemns those wise men who rely on their own prudence."[18]

However Rouault in his judgement of man the fool did not have the support which the medieaval theologians would have enjoyed. He was a prophet in the wilderness, a christian outside the fold of modern christianity, attempting to impose a forbidding morality upon a world disinclined to accept it. And because he continued to doubt modern mankind and to distrust its achievements, he kept returning to the clown as man-the-fool who has the stupid audacity to exalt human wisdom and to minimize religious faith, who takes pride in his own ego and knows christian humility only in theory.[19]

Occasionally he identifies the clown with persons like himself who acknowledge their inadequacy, thereby conferring on him the knowledge that christian submissiveness can offer salvation. He once wrote to his dealer, Vollard, as follows: "My one good quality, unless I am mistaken, is that I am not afraid to make a fool of myself."[20] Further, he quite clearly identified the clown with himself and all of mankind with these words: "...I saw clearly that the clown was myself, ourselves,....almost all of us....that this rich, spangled costume is given us by life. We're all of us clowns, more or less, we all wear a spangled costume".[21] And he enlarges: "My failing...is never to let anyone keep on his spangled costume; king or emperor, what I want to see in the man facing me is his soul, and the more exalted his position, the more misgivings I have about his soul."[22]

Rouault's clowns are the typical Pierrot type rather than the August or buffoon type. Pierrot is the doubting, self-deprecating comic figure who always seems to be asking, in the face of insurmountable perplexities and the vicissitudes of life, the question why? Pierrot is,

in fact, the clown most like Rouault himself, that is, the sensitive soul tormented by the knowledge of man's suffering. In several self portraits with a fool's cap on his head (Fig. 55), Rouault abuses his own person, as if asking forgiveness for his transgressions.[23]

Only rarely did Rouault paint a smiling or laughing clown (Fig. 56). Indeed, most of his clowns do not appear in the midst of their performances. The images exist as symbols for contemplation and not entertainment. The moment he usually chose to represent in his paintings is the moment when the man and his comic mask are both apparent and the drama is the mysterious tension between the two. This is in keeping with the new spirit in painting which became evident in a retrospective exhibition of Vincent Van Gogh's work in Paris in 1901. Rouault and his contemporaries saw the exhibition and were clearly influenced by it. The new spirit is explained by Werner Haftmann as: "Art did not content itself with reproducing the visible, but gradually began to make visible, in images, a reality that could not be perceived by the senses."[24]

Rouault returned most often to four distinct subject types in his total output. They are, together with the clown, the judge, who has much in common with Daumier's sentiment in his great series of judges, lawyers and courtroom dramas; the prostitute, who is used as a symbol of corruption of beauty through money, and Christ, in particular Christ mocked, Christ crowned with thorns and Christ crucified. Rouault wrote to Vollard in 1922: "Everyman has his cross to bear. Mine is my art. If there is pride and simplemindedness in confessing this, I don't care. But the fact is that it constitutes my only outlet, however inadequate, and expresses my better

Fig. 55 Self Portrait
Rouault, gouache & pastel, 1929

Fig. 56 Miserere et Guerre:
Who does not frown?

Rouault, etching, 1923

self."[25] The analogy of the images of the clown and the Christ is so apparent in Rouault's art that it can be said in the words of S.T. Niccolls that:"...he presents Christ as the mask of the divine performer who, like Pierrot, has willingly donned the suffering of man's failing and falling."[26]

When one compares the "Head of Christ" of 1938 (Fig. 57) and the "Old Clown" (Fig. 58) of 1917, the close similarities between the large head and eyes, the narrow mouth and elongated nose, as well as the bent pose, are immediately apparent. Also the broad black outlining of contours was a technique the painter used in both clown and Christ paintings. Both figures exist in an undefined space which is not unlike the gold background space of the Byzantine icons. In this way the timeless, archetypal quality of the images are emphazised.

Rouault's image of the clown, in fact all the images he employed, altered in interpretation as his view of life matured. In the first quarter of this century the clowns in Rouault's paintings represented his tragic view of humanity. They are evocations of human degradation and the torment of life. The clown is a tired, broken performer required to entertain at all costs. His "Pierrot" (Fig. 59) of 1910 is a good example of this early clown type. The second phase of his work reveals Rouault in less of a tragic mould and shows him encompassing in his images more of the duality of the true clown. In these paintings the clown is allowed to withdraw from the sharp laughter of the crowd, as the "Head of a Clown" (Fig. 60) of 1936 illustrates, and retire behind his fool's mask. In his final phase, the clown is resurrected as a figure of idealized youth. Although he is still Pierrot and must endure the laughter

Fig. 57 Head of Christ
Rouault, oil, 1937/8

Fig. 58 The Old Clown
Rouault, oil, 1917

Fig. 59 *Pierrot*
Rouault, oil, 1910

Fig. 60 Head of a Clown
Rouault, oil, 1936

Fig. 61 *The Aristocratic Pierrot*
Rouault, oil, 1942

of the crowd, he is not isolated from the joys of life as the "Aristocratic Pierrot" (Fig. 61) of 1942 reveals.

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"The basic schema of the new paintings is that one large rectangle of pure colour is set-off against another with a wide variety of related commotions in margins and on edges; within that schema, visitors will find a new puissance of feeling."

The critic of the London Sunday Times John Russell
being lampooned in Private Eyes
Psecond book of Pseuds.

Fig. 63 Beatrice Glasspoole

Chapter 6 CONCLUSION AND COMMENT ON OWN WORK

When I came to execute the body of work that I am going to discuss, I was fired by the potential of the image of the clown. It seemed to offer a legitimate way of stating something about being human in a progressively depersonalized world. Not by exploring the brutal inevitability of tragedy, but by presenting the multi-faceted potential of man the fool. The clown appeared to me the only symbol or image of humanity which could represent the complexity of modern man.

In the 1978 painting which I called "I am African" (Fig. 62), I set out consciously to present myself as a satire of the feelings current amongst certain sections of white South African society; feelings of unease about our identity with the adopted land of our birth. Previous to this painting I had been aware of a need in my portraiture to identify myself with the sitter. For example, in the painting of my grandmother (Fig. 63) of 1975, I used, as a background, a drawing I had made as a small child whilst staying with her. In my mind it creates a subconscious link between us which gives the image an increased dynamic tension.

With this same need to increase the dynamic tension in the self-portrait, I have written the words "I am African" into the painting to identify myself with the sentiment. To further underline the intention I have painted myself wearing dark glasses and a bow-tie, emulating the black Africans' natural flamboyance. I have also flared the nostrils and pouted the mouth to approximate the facial characteristics. The reflective background serves to isolate the portrait from temporal

reality, rather like the background space of Byzantine icons. The overall effect is not then one of a specific self-portrait but a general feeling of unease and uncertainty, for not only is it impossible for a European to be African, it is also impossible for European culture to encompass the African ethos. Faced with all these incongruities we are forced to laugh. In the words of the philosopher Henri Bergson: "The more a laugher analyses his laughter, the more he finds in it bitterness and the beginnings of a curious pessimism."[1]

In the 1983 painting which I have called "I don't Know" (Fig. 64), I have presented the viewer with a specific incongruity of language. Underneath a portrait of myself I have written the Zen poem:

> "If you want to get the plain truth
> be not concerned with right and wrong
> the conflict between right and wrong
> is the sickness of the mind."

In the portrait I wear a Pierrot type mask with a cigarette in my mouth which points to the poem. Behind the portrait I have painted the words 'I don't know'.

The painting was actually conceived as a humorous response to the position I found myself in as a student having to exhibit my work. It occurred to me that when the examiner was assessing the value of the works exhibited he would come across this painting and be presented with his own paradoxical situation. I hoped that the realization of the inherent humour in the situation would diffuse the gravity in which the examination was being conducted. As, in the words of

I DONT
KNOW

George Santayana: "The foolishness of the simple is delightful; only the foolishness of the wise is exasperating."[2]

Apart from the humour, there can be no denying the perspicacity of the Zen poem which seems to contradict the very logical structure which our language uses to arrive at truths. To the Zen mind the correct position in regard to right or wrong is stillness or balance. It is the tragic irony of our humanness that to act implies choice which involves moving away from truth. If one is forced to make a choice between right or wrong, one is forced into the tragic mould of inevitability. However, by admitting, as I do in the portrait, that 'I don't know', I remain the balance, as the fool whose very ignorance reveals truths.

In my painting "Self-portrait as a Nude" (Fig. 65) of 1982, I set out to explore the deep subconscious nature of our ambivalent attitudes towards ourselves. By painting myself blindfolded, nude and grotesquely muscled, I have placed myself in an essentially comic situation. By presenting the muscled body in its so-called perfect form, yet blindfolding the eyes, which are the windows of the soul, I am pointing to the fact that the body builder expects his body to be examined and admired like a sculpture, but does not expect his personality to be included in the aesthetic. For to expose his personality would reveal the narcissism which must, of necessity, motivate his actions.

The blindfold refers to the muscleman, removed behind closed curtains, from the scrutiny and judgement of his peer group. The exposed genitals and the inevitable self love, reveal the covert sexuality which underlies the

activity. This duality of private and public intent is instinctively understood and is possibly behind the popular sentiment that the activity lacks in taste, or, at the very best, is attached to the grotesque areas of life. The grotesque representing the lowest form of expression.

There can be no denying the fact that, however repulsed by the image, one is, at the same time, equally fascinated. The ironic humour with which I conceived the painting seems to have been accurately expressed, as the most prevalent response to the painting is one of embarrassed laughter. In the words of Enid Welsford: "This great primal joke of the undignified nature of the human body, repeated for centuries, literally ad nauseum, forms a most important part of the stock-in-trade of the buffoon."[3]

In the pen and ink and coloured pencil drawing entitled "Horse and Rider" (Fig. 66) of 1982, my inspiration came from two sources. On the one hand I was pondering the ludic possibilities of Jesus Christ's entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. The mocking crowd, the lowly donkey have a comic ring about them which I wanted to bring to some form of fruition. My mind kept returning to G.K. Chesterton's poem "The Donkey" which ends as follows:

> "Fools for I also had my hour;
> one far fierce hour and sweet.
> There was a shout about my ears
> and palms before my feet."[4]

On the other hand, I was contemplating Picasso's later work, in particular his 180 drawings of 1953/4. The tone of my drawing emulates the frustrated sensuality, the loneliness and longings which Picasso's drawings evoke.

Inasmuch as the paintings and drawings were conceived as specific responses to problems of a philosophical or dramatic nature, the genesis of the graphics are of a more unspecific nature. The two lino cut prints of 1982 entitled "Now Showing Inside" (Fig. 67) and "I Want" (Fig. 68) are a humorous evocation of the diversity of images which lie behind our conscious thoughts. The formal influences are Hogarth's two engravings of 1753 entitled "The Analysis of Beauty" plate I (Fig. 69) and II (Fig. 70). In them he wittily presents his idea that the true standard of beauty is set by nature and not by art. Another influence is that of comics and cartoons which we pick up, scan and then discard. They do not add much to our general knowledge but increase the subconscious pool of reference from which we draw when expressing ourselves. The lino cuts are not meant to be read, nor any conclusions drawn from them; they are merely visual approximations of the confusion which underlies the image we project of ourselves.

In a similar vein, "Figures in the Balance" (Fig. 71) and "Dancers in the Mirror" (Fig. 72) have a strong allegorical impact but, in fact, are not intended as allegory. They were created as a result of a scrutiny of the caricaturists, particularly Hogarth. I was attempting, if anything, to capture in a single image the lightness and poise of the saltimbanques, the sensuality and magic of the sawdust ring and the clown's essential part in it all. The three steel plate etchings "Clowns" (Figs. 73, 74, 75) are an attempt at giving visual form

Fig. 67 Now Showing Inside
linocut. 1982, 44 x 44

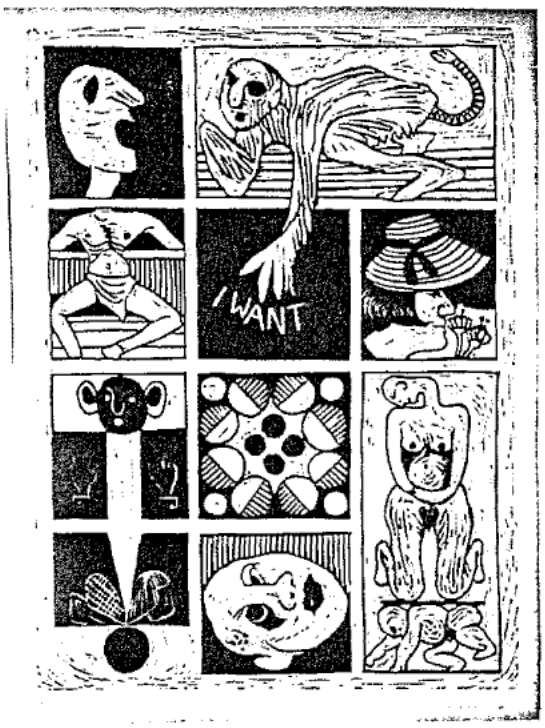

Fig. 68 I Want
Linocut, 1983, 40 x 30

Fig. 69 The Analysis of Beauty Plate I
Hogarth, engraving, 1753

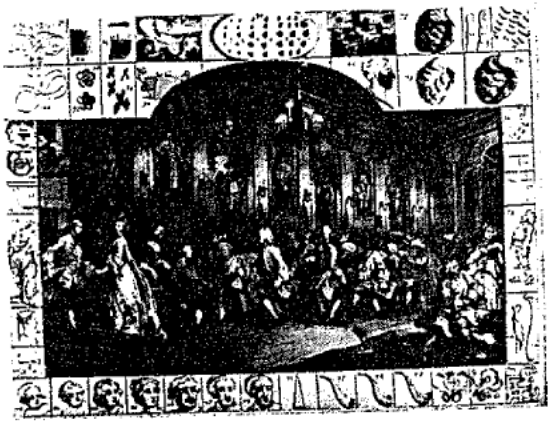

Fig. 70 The Analysis of Beauty Plate II
Hogarth, engraving, 1753

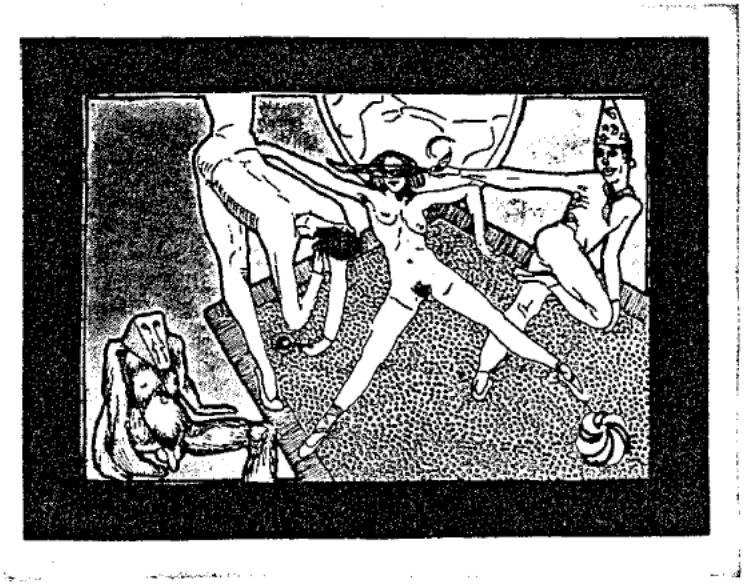

Fig. 71 Dancers in the Mirror
etching, 1983, 25 x 34

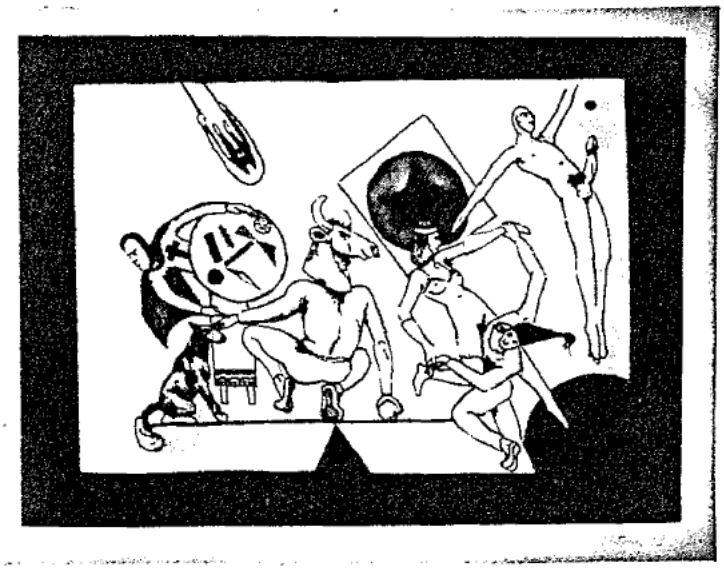

Fig. 72 Figures in the Balance
etching, 1983, 25 x 34

to the nuances of my feelings about clowns. Visual evocation of feelings has long been the central concern in my creativity.

Finally, if I analize my intentions as an artist, I see them best expressed in the words of the mime artist Marcel Marceau: "My art has to bring light to man, as a painter does when he has something to say about society, as Goya and Daumier did. I am not just an entertainer. I want to be a man who will represent as an active witness of my time, I want to describe without words my feelings about the world."[4] The clown is the ideal image to convey these sentiments, for not only is he an image that effectively expresses the condition of modern man, he also affords a dynamic foil to the inevitable paralysis which results from an art responsible only to itself.

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Chapter 6

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