

# THE ILLUSTRATED NEWS

A PUBLICATION OF IRELAND'S GREAT HUNGER MUSEUM

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It is with great pride that I welcome you to Ireland's Great Hunger Museum at Quinnipiac University, and the inaugural edition of "Ireland's Great Hunger Museum Illustrated News." The museum's holdings of paintings, sculpture and other visual media comprise the world's largest collection of Famine-related art. The museum's goal is to educate the public about this great human tragedy in Ireland's history, the greatest demographic disaster of 19th-century Europe, as well as to expand its outstanding collection of Irish and Irish-American art.

The collection already stands as a testament to what is exceptional in key strands of visual culture in 19th- and 20th-century Ireland. It follows a unique strategy and focus. Because it is the first of its kind, the museum is charged with getting the story of the Great Hunger right, both for now and for the future, and it will do so through exemplary museological, historic, artistic and educational practices.

We look forward to you visiting the museum.

Grace Brady  
Executive Director  
Ireland's Great Hunger Museum



## WOOD ENGRAVING

There are ambivalences in even the most realistic images that allow them to be read in different ways, making them palatable to audiences of different backgrounds and persuasions. Constructed by a chain of hands, the opportunities for the insinuation of multiple and competing perspectives in newspaper illustration was rife. From the original sketch by the artist in the field, to the elaboration of the sketch by the home-based artist onto wood panels in the office, to the dividing of the image into blocks, to the printing of the image, the process of production was a protracted one that offered many opportunities for manipulation. This, in turn, led to many variations in consumption, according to the interests of the readers. In this way, the illustrated newspapers were read as avidly in Ireland as in England.

In wood engraving, the engraver worked on hard, close-grained wood, made from box-tree, cut in transverse slices, about an inch thick; the slices were racked and seasoned in gradually heated rooms (ideally for five years). When ready, the blocks were trimmed, bolted together with brass nuts and bolts, polished, drawn in reverse (or transferred upon), and the lines set across the joins, before dismantling. Because a full-page illustration could take weeks to engrave, several engravers were put to work simultaneously on single images. Thus, a bolted-

block process was devised to minimize the time involved in the production process.

The block was separated, piece-by-piece, into three and a half by two-inch blocks, as fast as the draughtsman finished that section. In such instances, the engravers never saw the whole of the drawing together, as harmony, coherence and aesthetic considerations were sacrificed to the imperative of getting the paper out on the street. Some illustrations, therefore, look considerably better than others. The consequences of several engravers working on a single illustration are fundamental to any reading of it.

In the bolted-block process, the master engraver guided the tone and texture; he was followed by the jobbing engravers, who set the lines across the joins of the block, before dismembering it, and passing the portions to the various engravers who were instructed to concentrate on the center section of their portions. Each portion, therefore, had an edge prepared by the master engraver; this edging smoothed out the reunification of the image. The final image was determined, not only by the artist and the draughtsman, but also by the engravers, and by this technique, the consequence is a house style that harmonizes all their efforts. While we can discern recurring features in the work of certain illustrators, the analysis of their work is greatly complicated by the fact that it is but one element in an aesthetic collective.





The engraver followed the structural lines of the interior in cutting his blocks. In this way, the architectonic qualities of the print are exploited to full technical and conceptual effect. Each of these stages in the process reveals complexities and characteristics integral to the final result. As the staff engraver was trained to accommodate his style to make it consistent with that of his colleagues, stylistically it is not possible to tell where one hand left off and another began.

The technical exigencies of illustration, publication and distribution tended to neutralize the individual skills of the illustrator, subordinating individuality to profit, and producing a marked degree of conventionality and homogeneity. It would, nevertheless, be a mistake to dismiss newspaper illustration as uniformly bland, as many of the better artists managed to transcend the limitations of illustration by virtue of their own compositional control and universalizing powers. In this regard, there is a qualitative difference between local and foreign illustration. The draughtsmen invested greater care in the illustrations sent in by the “special artists,” such as those sent to Ireland, partly because their own knowledge of the locations and conditions was evidently less than that of the Special in the field, and partly in the knowledge that it was the foreign coverage that gave the newspaper its credibility and it, therefore, behooved them to take appropriate care. The newspapers themselves created opportunities for the artists to show off their abilities in the form of double-page spreads. Apart from making the paper look serious, double-page illustrations enabled the

artist, so favored, to demonstrate his virtuosity on a scale commensurate with his more fine-art skills. The double-page illustration was printed on a tougher rag paper that encouraged a sense of permanence and engendered a culture of collection, thereby counteracting the ephemerality usually associated with newspapers. Such preference shown to artists was a public acknowledgment of their standing. When the engraver had reassembled the block, it was delivered to the electrotyper, who made a wax mold that was covered with a thin coating of black lead to conduct electricity. The mold then was suspended in a solution of sulphate of copper and sulphuric acid, and a sheet of copper. A current was passed through the solution, the copper sheet decomposed, and particles deposited on the mold, producing an exact copy of the engraved block. This was then filled with metal, mounted on wood, and passed to the printer who had his ‘overlays’ ready for printing. The main pitfall at this stage was either over or under-inking.

Wood engraving blocks were type-high, locked into the letterpress, and printed with type, and were thus a major advance on previous techniques that required separate printing. It was not long, however, before even this development was obsolete. Although the old feeder machines could turn out 1,500 impressions in an hour (while the type side was printed at the rate of 12,000 per hour), the new Ingram Rotary could print both sides of

the sheet at once, cut to size, fold, and turn out at the rate of 6,500 per hour. The new machine only required four men to do the work of thirty. If a block was well engraved, there was virtually no limit to the number of impressions that could be taken. Employed for their nimbleness, women and girls completed the final stage, placing each number in its cover. Some 425,000 impressions—a not unusual number for a Christmas issue—if placed side-by-side it would cover more than 660 miles, Mason Jackson, the editor of the Illustrated London News tells us. And as they were printed on both sides, this represented a printed surface of more than 1,115 miles, using almost 80 tons of paper and 2,300 weight of printing ink, each week.

Publishing thus involved complex negotiations and interactions between proprietors, authors, illustrators, engravers and readers.

#### A CONTRIBUTION FROM

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