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Appropriating Identity: William Hogarth, Thomas Gainsborough, and Britain's Myth of the Self-Made Man

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ABSTRACT

Britain's self-made man was defined by taste, money, influence, and most importantly, middle-class rank in the early decades of the Industrial Revolution. During the mid-1700s, a change began to take place between the social classes, stripping the aristocracy of their role as Britain's foremost connoisseurs and trendsetters. The shift from aristocratic indulgences to those of the newly wealthy middle class stemmed from a number of factors. For one, the economy was changing during the 18th-century. An industrial environment, which often included factories and workers, was the new-found key to the financial success of self-made men. As David Kutcha explains, "late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century English aristocrats lost control of the meanings of consumption, as political, economic, and clothing reformers succeeded in portraying aristocratic men as prodigal parasites living off of a virtuous and industrious nation" (135). To prove that the individuals in England's highest social class were unworthy of their role as connoisseurs of taste, middle-class reformers attacked the aristocracy, declaring that the upper classes were unworthy of their status and were living off the successes provided by industry and self-made men.

Portraiture created in Britain during the 18th- and 19th-centuries, particularly paintings by William Hogarth (1697-1764) and Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), exemplifies the myth of the self-made man, as well as the shift in social class dominance. Moreover, portraiture emphasizes the middle-class's adoption of aristocratic visual language, while in turn depicting men as wealthy industrials who benefit the national economy and define the manly character of England. Although middle-class reformers were determined to prove that the titled class was effeminate and parasitic, it was the aristocratic ideal of masculinity that the middling ranks adopted as their own. English artists Hogarth and Gainsborough were influential in addressing the tension produced by the shifting social lines of the Industrial Revolution. Bound to Britain's wealth for their own survival, both Hogarth and Gainsborough sought the patronage of the rising middle-class while sustaining their own notions of the self-made myth.



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British art in the eighteenth century. Hogarth, A Rake's Progress. This is the currently selected item. William Hogarth, Marriage A-la-Mode (including Tête à Tête). This is perhaps hard for a modern audience to identify but there would have been a significant number of Hogarth's classically educated audience who

got the gag: Nero was a corrupt womaniser who fiercely persecuted Christians. To the very classically aware Georgians (George II was then King) the message was clear, Christian morals are not to be found here. William Hogarth, *A Rake's Progress*, plate 3, "The Tavern Scene," 1735, engraving on paper, 35.5 x 31 cm. A Decadant Decline. *Appropriating Identity: William Hogarth, Thomas Gainsborough, and Britain's Myth of the Self-Made Man*. Bookmark. Download. This definitive study elucidates the context for Huang Xiangjian's painting and identifies geo-narrative as a distinct landscape-painting tradition lauded for its naturalistic immediacy, experiential topography, and dramatic narratives of moral persuasion, class identification, and biographical commemoration.