Carlyle House
DOCENT DISPATCH
Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority
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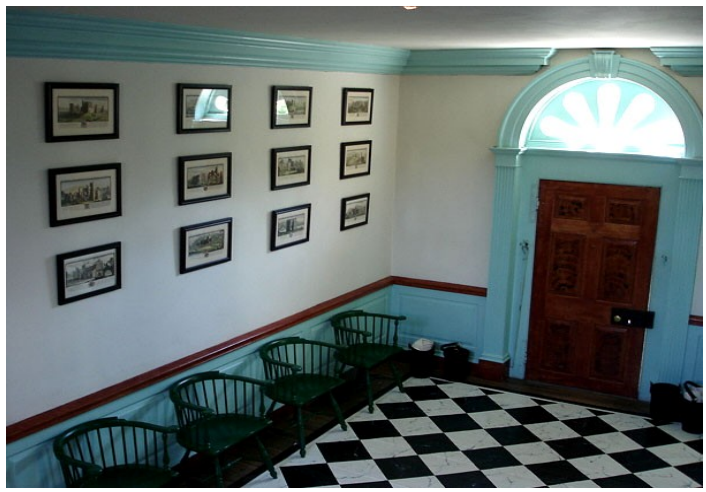
No Pretensions to Art: the Buck Prints of Cumberland

by Erin Adams

In the era before photography, imagine how people went about 'seeing' new places: Herodotus' *Histories* wove stories of magic, explaining the customs and folklore of faraway lands. Travel journals kept by Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta fanned the flames of wonder for their contemporaries. Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* related the stories of rituals, celebrations, and exploits of pilgrims, wandering from holy site to holy site. Johannes Gutenberg completed his astounding new invention around 1450, opening up the possibility that these wonderful stories of adventure and exploration would reach the masses like never before. Surely it can be no coincidence that the invention of the movable-type press occurs shortly before the Age of Reason. By the time of John Carlyle's residence in Alexandria, people were seeing the world through a revolutionary medium—the print.

Once these famous volumes began to be mass-published, the images accompanying them were also mass-produced. Illustrations were no longer solely the single product of a single artist. Printmaking had been first instituted in Europe during the early years of the Byzantine Empire (4th and 5th centuries); however, prints were designed to be applied to cloth. By the 14th century, paper was being produced in Islamic Spain and Germany, and it quickly became the preferred medium for artistic printmaking. Gutenberg's own early career was conducted under the "Master of Playing Cards", who supervised the production of Germany's second-most popular paper products (after religious documents). From Islamic Spain and Germany, prints trickled into other parts of the Continent. Eventually, this approach at generating images of places near and far culminated in the boisterous print business of John Carlyle's day. We will examine this business specifically through the works of Samuel and Nathaniel Buck.

Samuel and Nathaniel Buck were brothers, hailing from Richmond, Yorkshire. The dates of their births are a little uncertain, although it is generally accepted that Samuel was born in 1696 and Nathaniel sometime later.



View of Central Passage with 12 of the 15 Buck prints on the Southwest wall. Photo by Lindsay Borst.

Virtually nothing is known about their training or early employment, except that Samuel's first drawing was published in 1711 when he was fifteen years old. In Richmond, Samuel was briefly associated with the antiquities scholars Ralph Thorsebury and John Warburton. By 1724, however, he had moved to London and set up business at the 'Golden Buck in Warwick Street near Golden Square, St. James.' 1724 was also notable for the brothers, in that it marked the first publication of their collected drawings.

Beginning in 1726, Samuel and Nathaniel embarked on the project that would keep their names in the history of British art. Traveling about the English and Welsh countryside, they set out to create a visual record of the architecture of England. Together, they captured abbeys, castles, municipal buildings and priories all over England

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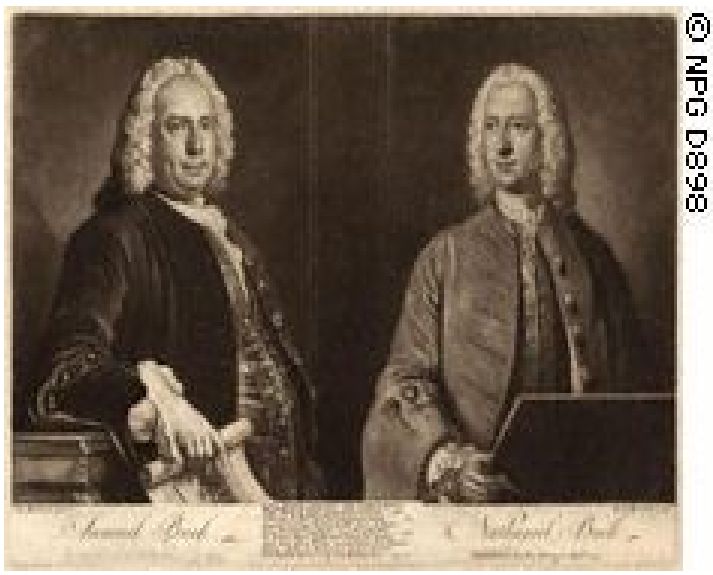
Mary Ruth Coleman, Director
Jim Bartlinski, Curator
Erin Adams, Curator of Education

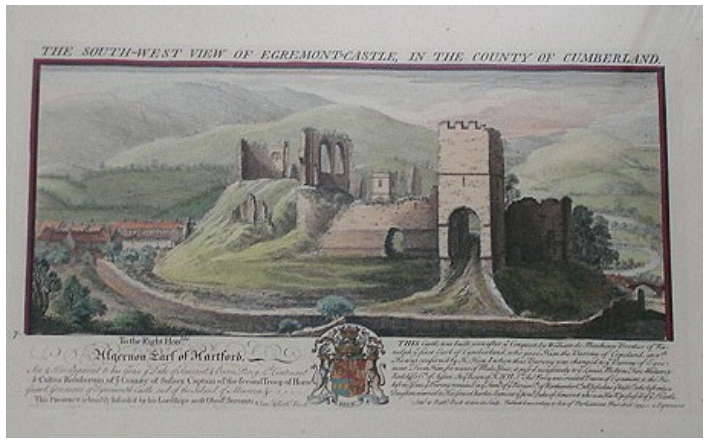
including Wales. The purpose in doing so was twofold: to capture the historical architectural landscape and to make money.

When Samuel and Nathaniel Buck arrived on the prints scene in 1726, they were treading on ground already broken for them. By the mid-17th century, England was beginning to gain a measure of authority in printmaking. Topographical prints and sporting prints showed up in all of the wealthiest homes in England. (Other genres of prints were available, but these two areas were especially sought-after.) Topographical prints were particularly valuable, in that they were the most complete record of the appearance of England available to the general public. These stately views are serene witnesses to the fury of activity that inspired and produced them. Richard Williams, a Welsh castle historian, noted that the Bucks and their contemporaries may have had a couple of catalysts for their interest in architectural history and its remnants, starting with Wenceslaus Hollar.

Wenceslaus Hollar, one of the earliest remarkable print artists, set the trend for topographical prints from 1636-1677. His prints of London were particularly noteworthy, since he had just completed a series of views before the Great Fire of 1666. In the weeks following the fire, Hollar was hard at work developing a new series of views to reflect the devastation. The result—England's bestselling prints of 1667. Such grim subject matter may seem odd to display prominently in one's home, but prints were the great commemorators of historical events. After the Great Fire, English draughtsmen turned their attention to other historic buildings throughout the country. Prominent among these draughtsmen were the Bucks.



Samuel & Nathaniel Buck. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.



The South~west View of Egremont~Castle, in the County of Cumberland, Samuel & Nathaniel Buck. Published 1739.

The Great Fire of 1666 was not the only catalyst for creating a visual record of the English landscape. Periods of political and religious upheaval had left piles of ruined buildings across the country that represented once-thriving communities. After King Henry VIII's break with Catholicism, buildings originally erected to function as abbeys, churches and priories were neglected or reassigned for use by the Church of England. But the greatest full-scale devastation of buildings came during the English Civil Wars. Regardless of which side was in control, the architecture of Britain suffered.

Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, Scotland and Ireland from 1653 to 1658, decided that the standing castles were evidence of Britain's monarchical past and were ineffective in meeting the needs of the newly-republican society. An aggressive system of agriculture and mining tore at the stability of these buildings. Yet instead of demolishing them or reassigning their purpose, many of these ancient buildings were left to decline on their own time. As a result of this self-paced ruination, many of the buildings that the Bucks captured in their views are now either gone entirely, obscured by centuries of vegetation, or are simply a pile of stones.

Over the course of the Bucks' career, they drafted 428 views of England's architecture. The most-well known publication of the Bucks' collected works appeared in 1774 under the title *Buck's Antiquities or Venerable Remains of Above 400 Castles, &c., in England and Wales, with near 100 Views of Cities.* Upon its publication—twenty years after Nathaniel's death—critics denigrated the quality of the works. "Stiff," "hasty," and "poor" were some of the contemporary complaints. "Best in topographical engraving, poor compared with other areas of engraving" was another complaint. (See following note on picture arrangements.) One modern art historian,

Ronald Russell, makes the claim that, "The Bucks' prospects and views make no pretensions to be 'works of art' and features—trees, for example—are merely conventionally represented, but they have much historical value."

Was this historical value what the Bucks were striving for? One is tempted to say yes, given the rapid decline of Britain's medieval architecture. The prints themselves answer the question: Each print—be it an abbey, castle, or priory—contains extensive text. The text mentions the founder and date of the original building and describes the purpose for which it was built. Important events that once occurred at the building are chronicled, and the present owners and managers of the property are identified. About Egremont Castle they write:

To the Right Hon.ble Algernon Earl of Hartford. ~ Son & Heir Apparent to his Grace ye Duke of Someset & Baron Percy, L.d Lieutenant & Custos Rotulorum, of ye County of Sussex Captain of the Second Troop of Horse Guard, Governour of Tynemouth Castle, and of the Island of Minorca &c. This PROSPECT is humbly Inscrib'd by his Lordships most Obed.t Servants ~ Sam:l & Nath:l Buck.

THIS Castle was built soon after ye Conquest by William de Meschines Brother of Ranulph, ye first Earl of Cumberland, who gave Him the Barony of Copeland in w.ch He was confirm'd by K. Hen. I. when that Barony was changed to ye Barony of Egremont. From Him, for want of Male Issue, it pass'd successsively to ye Lucies, Moltons, Fitz-Walters, & Radcliffs E.ls of Sussex. In ye reign of K. H. VI. S.r Tho.s Peroy was created Barony of Egremont, & tho' He left no Issue, ye Barony remain'd in ye Fam.ly of ye Percies E.ls of Northumberl.d, till Josceline ye last E.l, who left only a Daughter, married to His Grace Charles Seymour, ye pres.t Duke of Somerset who is, in Her R.t possess'd of ye s.d Castle.

Sam:l & Nath:l Buck delin et Sculp: Publish'd according to Act of Parliament March 26, 1739. ~

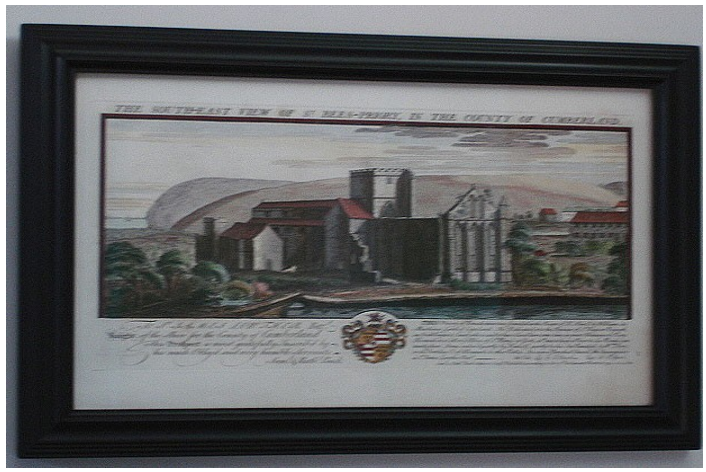
These prints clearly demonstrate the Bucks' interest in architectural history, but it reveals much about their second interest—making money. Understanding the process of printmaking is tricky, characterized by too many artists, unscrupulous publishers, and a judicial system that did not protect the copyright of an artist's work. Much is to be learned about the Bucks' works from the process of creation.

Every print begins with an artist, or draughtsman, as the English term is used. Most draughtsmen worked on a subscription basis: A printmaker would decide his clients wanted a particular set of views and would advertise for subscribers to fund the hiring of a draughtsmen to create the drawing they wanted. Once the draughtsman completed an acceptable drawing, the printmaker would send out the image to an engraver. The engraver would carve the image, in reverse, onto a woodblock or a sheet of metal. The woodblock or sheet of metal would then travel back to the printmaker, where his workshop would complete the final printing. Once the print was on the paper, another artist may have been retained to supply color to the image. This system, although highly developed, presented some significant challenges.

Chief among these challenges was the lack of protection for any one artist or craftsman. Copyright laws in England were not significantly formalized until the Copyright Act of 1735. Just as has been discovered with the oil paintings of Leonardo da Vinci and others, there is much evidence to demonstrate an artist tampering with another artist's work. The second most significant challenge lay in the quality of the image itself. Artists being funded by subscription tended to overwork—trying to complete as many images as they could in order to secure a stable income. The result was not always positive. Printers, engravers, and colorists were forced to work harder to correct some of the inaccuracies and quality issues with hastily-composed art. Artists were not always at fault. Close-fisted publishers forced engravers to continually re-engrave the worn out plates, which resulted in faulty copies.

The Bucks worked as their own draughtsmen and copperplate engravers. They traveled from location to location rendering drawings of the prints they hoped to realize. Of the fifteen-print collection now owned by the Carlyle House, all of the prints were drawings made by the Bucks, and engraved onto copperplates. Samuel Buck's studio in Warwick Street must have kept quite busy with the brothers' frequent travels. They employed

The Southeast View of St. Bees~Priory in the County of Cumberland. Samuel & Nathaniel Buck, Published 1739.



additional engravers and colorists, but were present to supervise the process of translating their own images into prints. From the collection we have, we know that they worked on a solicitation basis. As the above example demonstrates, Algernon Earl of Hartford was eager to have various views, as were Henry Earl of Carlisle, the Reverend Sir George Fleming Lord Bishop of Carlisle, William Duke and Earl of Portland, and many other nobles to whom the prints are "*humbly and obediently inscribed*."

Once one set of prints had been published, they were frequently reprinted or even issued by other printers. By the 1774 publication of *Buck's Views*, Nathaniel Buck had already died. Samuel Buck continued his business until his own death at age 83 in 1779. Their legacy in the British print was secure. Both men were famous artists, savvy businessmen, and honored teachers of their craft. Their prints were being seen both in English collections and in American ones. Printsellers in Annapolis, Boston, Charleston, New York, and Philadelphia advertised the "*sale of a lot of elegant pictures*" which were "*proper furniture for the Halls of the First Personages in this City*." While we cannot know definitively that Carlyle's "*15 do. do. Cumberland prospects*" are indeed Buck prints, they would have been something equally remarkable for their attention to historical reference and material quality.

Sources

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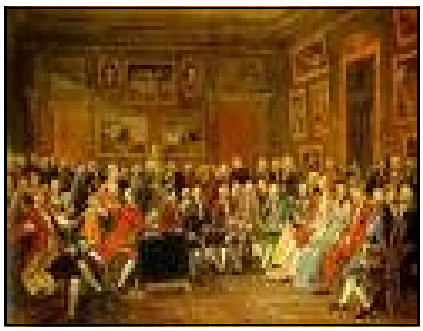

Notice the incredibly high, vertical arrangement.

Hang 'Em High: Picture Arrangements

During the 18th century, works of art produced for mass consumption were mainly decorative canvases purchased to look impressive when expensively framed and hung high in a tight grouping on the walls of an elegant dining room, parlor, or central passage. For the most part, the goal was not to highlight images on a wall for their individual artistic beauty, but to overwhelm the senses with the quantity displayed. In all probability John Carlyle was no different from his contemporaries in this respect and likely crowded his seventy-plus maps, prints, and paintings in this manner onto the walls of his Alexandria estate.

More often than not, the frames of these images were almost touching and as many of them were hung as could be tolerated on a wall. When examined up close, these images tended to be of relatively average artistic quality, as is evident with the Buck prospects of Cumberland County that now hang in the Central Passage. Placing prints of average or inferior artistic skill high on a wall would mitigate the mediocrity of the individual work. It could be said that during the 18th century the maxim of interior design, as it relates to images, was that quantity is better than quality.

The effect of a presentation of this kind, particularly in a passage, was meant to convey to all who entered that a family of power, affluence, and good taste lived in this home. One can argue that if the purpose of the grand stone façade of Carlyle's home was to impress, then it is reasonable to assume that the décor of its interior was meant to do the same.

Prints Exhibitions

Several new exhibitions are opening at several galleries that explore additional aspects of prints, their popularity, and subject matter:

- "Fabulous Journeys and Faraway Places: Travels on Paper 1450-1700" at the National Gallery of Art until September 16, 2007. The Gallery's extensive Prints collection is almost entirely online. www.nga.gov
- COMPASS: an online selection of works from the British Museum. Choose Drawings from the drop-down menu to see other prominent 18th-century prints, including early views of Virginia and North Carolina, and old European masters. www.britishmuseum.org/uk

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