

AMERICA



IN PRINT

POST-WAR AMERICA PROVIDED A RICH ARTISTIC LANDSCAPE FOR PRINTMAKERS, AND SO ARTISTS BEGAN TO CREATE THEIR OWN TAKE ON 'THE AMERICAN DREAM'. **ALICE WRIGHT** LOOKS AT THE EVOLUTION OF THE MEDIUM IN THE EVER-CHANGING USA

As Donald Trump begins his reign as 45th President of the United States, there is heightened interest in America's position in the world and what it means to be American. To this end, the timing of a major new exhibition exploring how printmaking flourished in the US during a period of great change seems particularly apt. *The American Dream: pop to the present*, opens at The British Museum this March, drawing on the museum's extensive collection of prints, as well as important loans from institutions such as New York's Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition features many American artists who embraced printmaking as the ideal medium to express America's power and influence, and to address social issues.

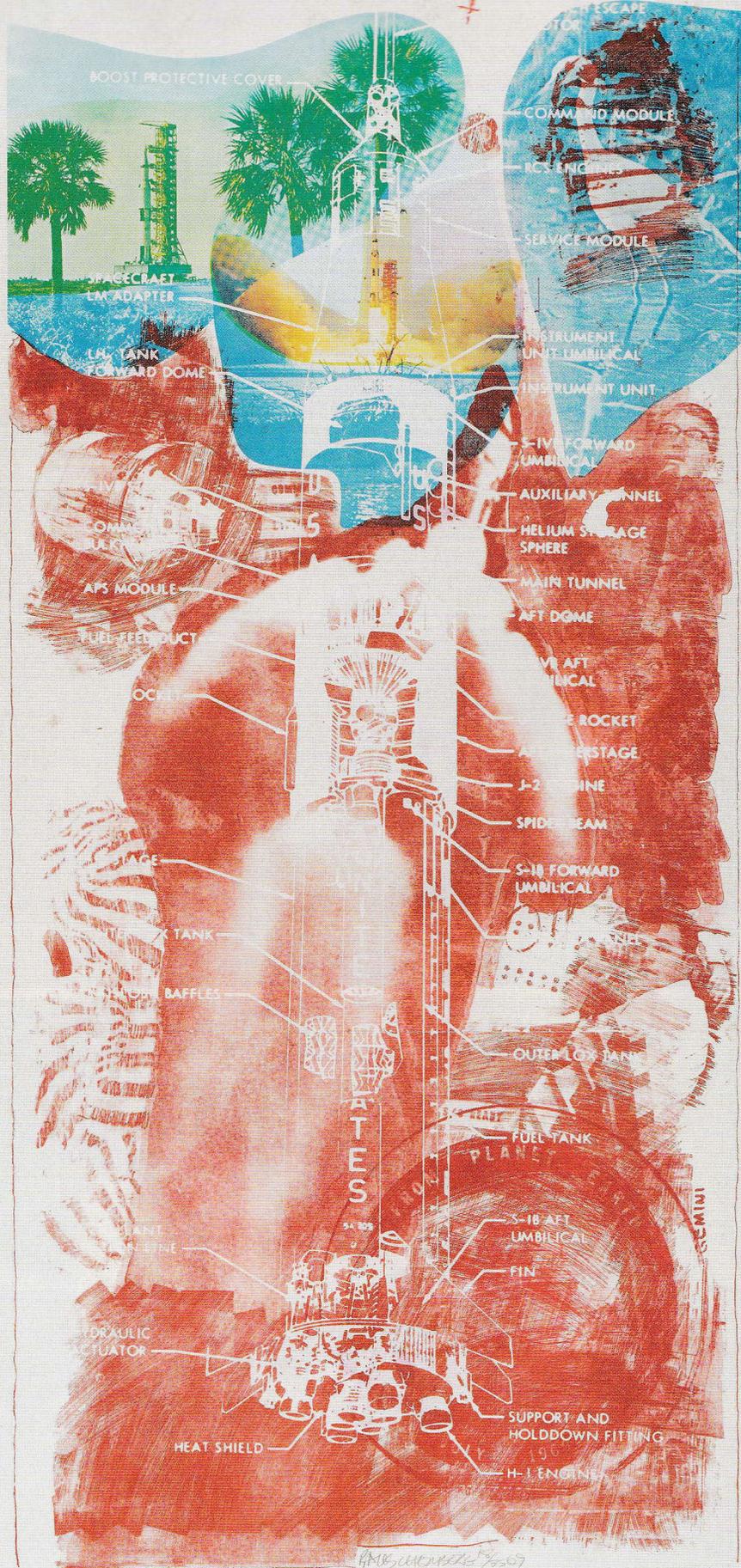
The timing of the show is largely a coincidence, says its joint curator Catherine Daunt. But she notes a number of recent exhibitions across London focusing on American art, such as the Robert Rauschenberg retrospective at Tate Modern, suggesting "something in the air... maybe a feeling that it's a transitional time".

The show follows on from the museum's 2008 exhibition, *The American Scene: Prints from Hopper to Pollock*, featuring work by American artists from the first half of the 20th century. Sensing an appetite for a subsequent exhibition focusing on the second half of the 20th century and the 21st century, Stephen Coppel, Catherine's co-curator of *The American Dream*, has focused on building up the museum's collection in that area. "About two thirds of the works in the show are from the British Museum's collection," says Catherine. "And about 100 of those are works that have been acquired by the British Museum since 2008. It's been an intense period of building the collection."

The show will include some of America's greatest artists, such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Ed Ruscha, Louise Bourgeois and Andy Warhol, names widely known, but not necessarily for their prints. Many took up printmaking in the 1960s, inspired by the bold, eye-catching imagery of post-war America and spurred on by a revolution in the production and consumption of prints during the decade.

A key factor was the founding of new print workshops, such as Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE) on Long Island and Gemini G.E.L in LA. "The printers who were working here were really proactive in persuading [those] who had already made a name for themselves as artists or sculptors to go and work with them and try their hands at printmaking," says Catherine. The collaboration between printers and artists fostered radical experimentation with media, elevating printmaking to a major art form.

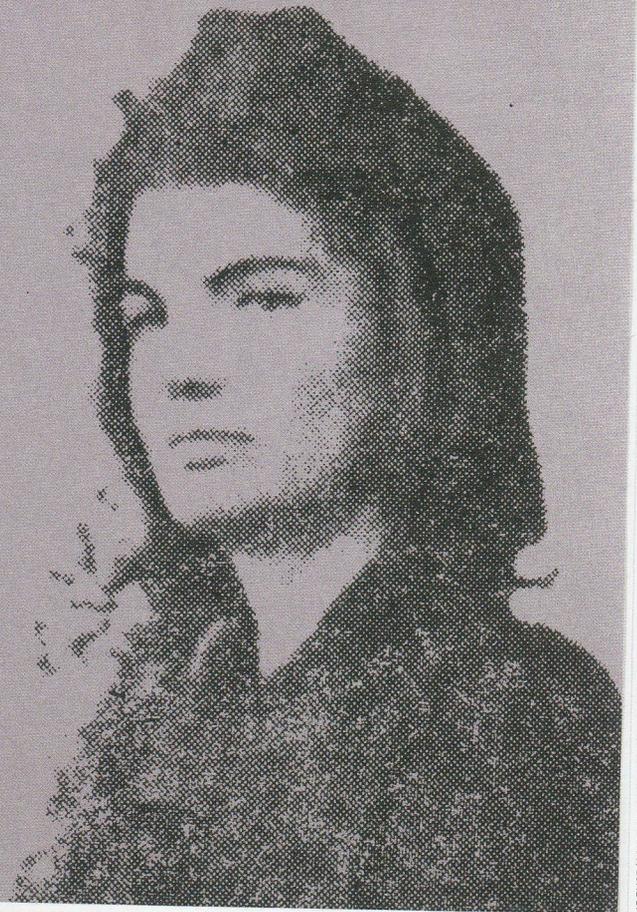
Jasper Johns was among those who blazed a trail to the workshops. Although initially sceptical >



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LEFT Jasper Johns, *Flags I*, 1973, colour screenprint, 69x89cm

ABOVE Robert Rauschenberg, *Sky Garden* from *Stoned Moon*, 1969, colour lithograph and screenprint, 226.06x106.68cm



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about how printmaking would suit his work, he was soon deploying it with expertise and vision to convey nuances and complexities not previously associated with the medium. His innovations revolutionised printmaking and his 1973 silkscreen, *Flags 1*, is seen as a masterpiece in the field. Working with master printer Hiroshi Kawanishi at Simca Print Artists, Inc in New York, Johns devised a series of 31 screens used in five stages to create a vivid and painterly effect, with a richness and depth of colour rarely produced in silkscreened works.

Flags 1, which will be on display at The British Museum, is one of more than 40 works Johns made based on the US flag. He has said he is attracted to painting “things the mind already knows”, and in a 1978 interview he explained: “To me the flag turned out to be something I had never observed before. I knew it was a flag, and had used the word flag; yet I had never consciously seen it. I became interested in contemplating objects I had never before taken a really good look at. In my mind that is the significance of these objects.”

The print shows two flags side by side. The left is rendered in encaustic while the right is in oil paint and has more varied marks, brighter colours and a layer of gloss varnish, offering two interpretations of the same subject

As artists began to realise the creative possibilities of printmaking, an expanding and increasingly affluent American middle class opened up a growing market for prints. “There was a wide audience for more affordable art,” says Catherine, “printmaking filled that gap for people.” And the growing audience made printmaking an attractive and powerful medium for commenting on the issues of the day, from works of celebration, to those touching on darker and more controversial themes.

One of the stars of the show at The British Museum is likely to be Robert Rauschenberg’s *Sky Garden*, part of his *Stoned Moon* series. In 1969 Rauschenberg was invited by NASA to witness the launch of the historic Apollo 11 mission from Cape Canaveral (then known as Cape Kennedy). NASA’s Art Program asked him to commemorate the first manned spaceflight to the moon and Rauschenberg was granted unrestricted access to the Florida facilities, where he roamed the buildings and grounds and met astronauts and other personnel.

Rauschenberg had become disillusioned by a period defined by civil rights movements and the Vietnam War, but he came away from the launch with renewed optimism and began work on *Stoned Moon* (1969-70), a series of 34 lithographs which reflect that sense of hope. >

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Andy Warhol, *Jackie II (Jacqueline Kennedy II)*, from *11 Pop Artists*, vol. II, 1965, published 1966, colour screenprint, 60.9x76.1cm; Edward Ruscha, *Standard Station*, 1966, colour screenprint, 49.6x93.8cm; Kara Walker, *no world from An Unpeopled Land in Uncharted Waters*, 2010, oil on canvas, 60.9x93.8cm

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At more than two metres high, *Sky Garden* is the most monumental of the series. When it was created in 1969 it was the largest hand-pulled lithograph ever created. It juxtaposes imagery of the rocket with Cape Canaveral's natural surroundings, echoing the sensory overload of witnessing the launch.

While *Sky Garden* celebrates America's achievements, other works on display in *The American Dream* commemorate darker moments in its history. *Jacqueline Kennedy II* is a screenprint by Andy Warhol taken from a photo of Jackie Kennedy at the funeral of her husband. Following the assassination of John F. Kennedy on 22 November 1963, Warhol became transfixed by the media spectacle it triggered. He began trawling newspapers and magazines for images relating to the assassination, focusing on photographs of Jackie Kennedy before and after her husband's death.

In early 1964 Warhol began silk-screening eight of these photographs, and made more than 300 'Jackie' paintings. Many could be arranged together to form larger compositions, showing the same image on repeat. The repetition echoes how the news media can work, bombarding its audience with certain words and pictures.

The number of artists who have made prints may surprise visitors, and Catherine believes many will also be impressed by the range of techniques used, and the size and scale of some

of the work. *Stowage*, by Willie Cole, is a more recent print reflecting on the legacy of slavery in the US, and at almost three metres wide, it is the largest single sheet print on show at the exhibition. "It's enormous," says Catherine, adding, "it's a really important work, by an artist who's perhaps not that well known. He's made a lot of work about the issue of race."

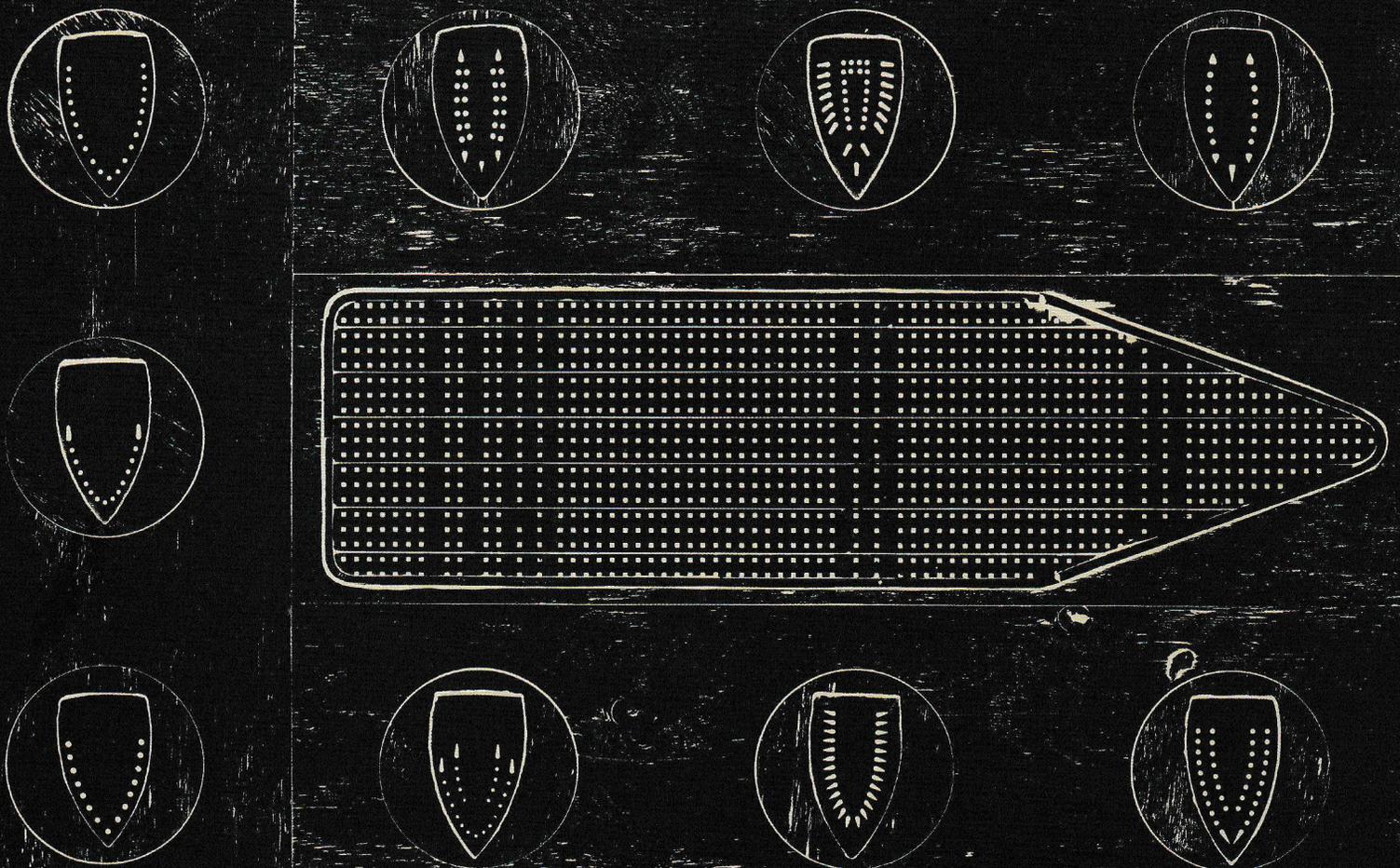
Stowage was inspired by a woodcut of a slave ship from the 1780s, but here Cole has used the imprint of an ironing board to represent the diagram of the ship. This is surrounded by the imprint of twelve irons, suggesting the distinctive markings of different African tribes. The aquatint *no world* by contemporary artist Kara Walker, made in 2010, offers a similarly powerful meditation on America's history of slavery.

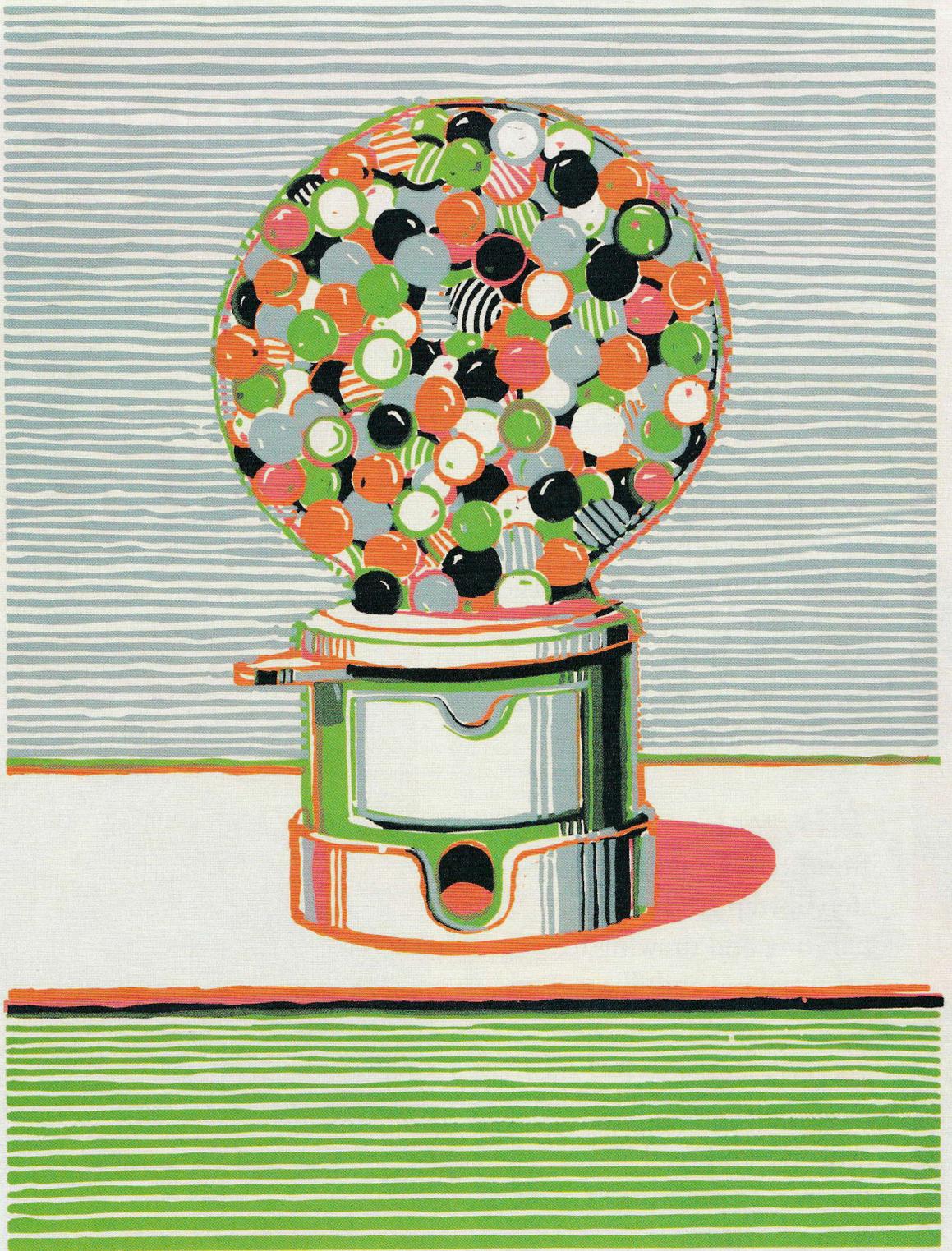
Charting the past six decades of American art, the exhibition aims to show that the sense of excitement unleashed in the 1960s endures to this day. Some of the most recent prints on display are by Ed Ruscha, who has been working with printmaking for more than 40 years.

American artists are still pushing the boundaries of printmaking, exploring its creative potential for responding to, and addressing, the important issues of our times.

***The American Dream: pop to present*, sponsored by Morgan Stanley and supported by the Terra Foundation for American Art, runs at The British Museum, London from 9 March to 18 July 2017**

RIGHT Wayne Thiebaud, *Gumball Machine*, 1970, colour linocut, 62x46cm
BELOW Willie Cole, *Stowage*, 1997, woodcut on Japanese paper, 125.9x241.5 cm





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**THE GROWING AUDIENCE MADE PRINTMAKING
AN ATTRACTIVE AND POWERFUL MEDIUM FOR
COMMENTING ON THE ISSUES OF THE DAY
FROM WORKS OF CELEBRATION, TO THOSE
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