

NINES WORKSHOP IN DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP PROPOSAL

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- Project title

A Web-Mounted Database of Mid-Victorian Wood-Engraved Illustrations.
(This project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board)

- Project description

This project aims to digitise upwards of 500 wood-engraved illustrations from mid-Victorian books and periodicals, to iconographically describe the images, and to mount them on a searchable web-mounted database.

- Scholarly rationale

The middle decades of the nineteenth century marked a golden age of illustration. As wood engraving became the dominant mode of reproducing images, many successful artists designed the pictures which would be cut and printed from the woodblock to accompany texts. Academically important collections of these illustrations are in existence, but they are housed in disparate museums and libraries, and are difficult to access for scholars working outside the UK.

A digital archive of these images would promote the scholarly study of many aspects of this previously neglected mode of visual representation. Victorian literature is rarely published complete with its illustrations, making it difficult to analyse its original mode of signification. Being able to compare images from the same or different texts will allow scholars to test their interpretations and encourage new and innovative ways of approaching the material.

In particular, the dual method of describing the pictures (bibliographically and iconographically, in terms of their pictorial content) will open up research questions, such as how racial, sexual, and class differences are codified in these pictures, or what the relation might be between the pictorial content of Victorian illustration and other visual genres like painting. The advantage of this project is that it will allow such modes of viewing to be undertaken alongside more traditional analyses of the work of individual artists or engravers. The project will therefore be of value to a variety of users, including literary critics, art historians, cultural critics, and book historians.

- Technical and theoretical problems

1. *Devising a stable and standardised iconographic system:* We are currently exploring possibilities for iconographically describing the content of the images, enabling users to search the database as fully as possible. We have looked at pre-existing classification systems, including Iconclass, but none of the systems currently available provide adequate flexibility for our needs. We have therefore decided to construct our own searchable, controlled vocabulary for use within the database, and would like to address the potential problems and concerns surrounding this at the workshop.

2. *User-based analysis:* Another of our concerns is anticipating the various ways in which users from different disciplines will seek to interrogate and navigate the database. We would hope to explore these themes of digital user-friendliness with other participants in the workshop.

3. *Web-based image display:* The project is currently exploring various options for the display of database images on the web. There are a variety of techniques and software options through which images can be selected, viewed, resized, and arranged by the user, and we would like to discuss these alternatives in the workshop.

- Project phases

This is a three year project, with a number of different phases.

Year 1: The aim of the first year of the project is to digitise and catalogue upwards of five hundred wood-engraved illustrations from 1862 (as a sample year representative of mid-Victorian illustration). As well as drawing on the major collections discussed above, which focus in the main on images extracted from periodicals, illustrations have been taken from novels, poetry anthologies, and a variety of other literary sources.

Information about each illustration and its digital counterpart is recorded on a paper proforma for entry into the database. Proforma details include: bibliographic information, title of illustration, title of work illustrated, artist, engraver, digitiser, date of digitisation, and holding institution. The images are digitised, saved as high-quality archive TIFF files, and then resized and reformatted for display in JPEG format within the database.

Year 2: The majority of the second year of the project will be taken up with the construction of an Access 2000 database, and the inputting of the paper proforma information into this database. Project members will also trace missing bibliographic details in libraries and archives, and work will begin on designing the iconographic system to be used for the description of the images.

Year 3: During the third year, the iconographic description of each of the archived images will be completed, and this information will be added to the database. At the conclusion of the project, the database is to be mounted online by the Visual Arts Data Service (VADS).

- Current state

The project is currently approaching the end of its first year.

- Digital technology

Digitisation and image manipulation: Scanners (Canon CanoScan LiDE 20, and hp Scanjet 5470c); digital camera (Horseman Digiflex II camera, with Jenoptik Eyelike MF 6 mega pixel multi-shot digital capture back, running on Jenoptik Eyelike software); Adobe Photoshop CS.

Database construction: Access 2000.

Iconographic description: The use of Iconclass software is still a possibility, though we are more likely to attempt to construct our own controlled vocabulary for this part of the project.

Web-mounting: To be undertaken by VADS, though precise image-display software yet to be decided upon.

- Technical support

Within home institution is available: a part-time database developer, an external database consultant, a digital photographic studio, and training in web-design (Macromedia Dreamweaver) and image-manipulation software (Adobe Photoshop).