

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Hunter, Michael, project dir. *Bpi:1700: British Printed Images to 1700*. Digital library

Meaghan J. Brown

Volume 41, numéro 4, fall 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1061919ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061919ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Brown, M. J. (2018). Compte rendu de [Hunter, Michael, project dir. *Bpi:1700: British Printed Images to 1700*. Digital library]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(4), 174–177. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1061919ar>

the most secure long-term hosts for major projects once they are complete, their initial funding expended, their guiding personnel retired?

JOSEPH L. BLACK

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Hunter, Michael, project dir.

Bpi:1700: British Printed Images to 1700. Digital library.

Birkbeck: University of London, 2009. Accessed 22 January 2018. bpi1700.org.uk/.

British Printed Images to 1700 (bpi1700) is a digital image collection of prints and book illustrations from early modern Britain. This project has several aims: to contribute to the study of early modern British print history, which lags behind that of Dutch, Flemish, German, and French prints; to make available the rich holdings of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum; and to develop “a rich and sophisticated subject index” for prints of the period. The database is complemented by essays on the history, techniques, and genres of British prints, and reference resources for studying them.

The vast majority of works included are engravings (1398), with etchings (677) and mezzotints (601) making up the top three techniques represented. The relative lack of letterpress (15) and woodcut (37) images speaks to the relatively small proportion of book illustration included. The authors note that print representation outweighs books in the current online collection “mainly due to the Herculean task of locating and cataloguing the vast body of material involved” (About: The corpus). Researchers interested in book illustration should head to the Research tab, which hosts “British Book Illustration, 1604–40”: an enumerative bibliography, in excel spreadsheets, that complements Edward Hodnett’s *English Woodcuts 1480–1535* (London, 1935, repr. 1973) and Ruth Luborsky and Elizabeth Ingram’s *Guide to English Illustrated Books 1536–1603* (Tempe, AZ, 1998). These are not the detailed digital images and metadata that represent print production in the rest of the site, but some fascinating data nonetheless.

Although based on the capacious collection in the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum and supplemented with items

from the National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum and a few other select sources, this database should be valued for the access it provides, rather than analyzed as a comprehensive overview of print production in the period. As the authors acknowledge, “No physical collection of prints can claim comprehensiveness, and the wide dispersal and rarity of many prints means that a comprehensive digital library would be an extraordinarily difficult undertaking” (About: The corpus). What it does hold is a representative sample of print making in, by, and *about* Britain, up to and a bit past 1700.

The corpus definition in the title seems simple, and simplicity in such definitions is either religiously adhered to or cheerfully disregarded; the creators of *bpi1700* have thankfully gone with the latter method. They note that “Both the geographical and the chronological boundaries present certain complications,” and that these complications mean they were treated “as guiding principles to the process of selection” rather than as strict rules. For example, while the earliest works in the corpus date from the 1540s, some early eighteenth-century materials are included, “particularly where they shed light on the Stuart period more generally” (About: The corpus).

The researchers have been particularly liberal in defining the “British” component of their criteria. Although framed as a “geographical boundary,” the authors note “Even a brief overview of early modern British print history reveals a complex picture: foreign engravers working in England; native British engravers working on the Continent; prints made on the Continent, by both British and foreign engravers, but published in Britain, sometimes specifically intended for the British market” (About: The corpus). They go on to include foreign works by foreign print makers that tackle British subject matter, and one wonders why they chose the word “geographic” rather than “national” to frame this project. That said, scholars interested in depictions of Britain in the early modern press, including at major events such as the Armada, the Anglo-Dutch wars, the Revolution of 1688, and the Nine Years’ War—all listed as examples—will be glad of their flexibility.

A scholar researching a topic like the Armada might have a bit of initial frustration while seeking this material. The project’s deep interest in iconographic classification means that it has enforced strict controlled vocabularies in the five entry points to the database: Producer, Person Shown, Subject, Date, and Technique. The subject index is indebted to Iconclass, the system developed in the Netherlands that aims to provide iconographic classifications for “all

representable subjects in western art” (About: The subject index). While this project modified Iconclass to provide additional flexibility—for example, subdividing the category “Society, civilisation, culture” into three—it sticks to Iconclass’s largely rigid, controlled vocabulary. The database provides a search box option, but you must know the proper controlled vocabulary term to search. A search for “Warships” lets you know you can find material under Society > Travel > Ships > Warships, but a search for “War” or “Warship” returns no results: there is no fuzzy matching or flexibility. For most researchers, it might be easiest to drill down through the subject classification system: Military and War > Transportation, military > Warships will also get you there. Although it’s labelled “Search,” I would highly recommend thinking of this as a “Browse” system.

British Printed Images to 1700 interface showcasing twenty-three matching records for the search for “Warships.”

The result of either browsing or searching is a list of images. Selecting a print record provides you with six options: Image, your starting place that links you to zoom and download options; Description, which provides a verbal description of the print and any inscription on it; Production, which provides details about engravers, artists, artistic schools, and the plate’s history;

a comment section; Subject, which lists the iconographic controlled vocabulary applied to this image, and Impressions. By their nature multiplied objects, both print and book illustrations exist in multiple versions and multiple states. To highlight this multiplicity and emphasize the changes that can occur to the image plate over time, the database is organized along the lines of a catalogue raisonné, grouping different states and impressions of a single print in one record. Once inside a “print” record, you can then drill down to individual “impression” records. The Zoom feature, under “Image,” still employs Adobe Flash and seems like a ripe opportunity for International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF) involvement, if this project is ever revised.

There is some question about whether updates are planned for this project. It was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) from 2006 to 2009. There is a great deal of future-focused language: the research section, for example, notes “It is hoped to add further research to this section in due course.” Sadly, that course has probably been run at this point. Indeed, this same tab promises “original research” based on the materials, but if it were uploaded at some point, it seems to be missing at the moment of inspection in January 2018.

While the aesthetics of the site are remarkably up to date, a notice on the home page that it “functions best with newer versions of mainstream browsers. Microsoft Internet Explorer (version 8 or above), Apple Safari (version 3 or above), or Mozilla Firefox (version 2 or above)” makes it easy to read the technical limitations between the lines. The site was certainly not planned for mobile use, and I can attest that its “minimum [recommended] screen resolution of 1024 x 768” is indeed a minimum requirement.

These limitations aside, the images are a helpful introduction to the variety of subject matter found in early modern British prints. Perhaps greater exposure for this resource could revive the promise of future research. The content here—both the images and the iconographic metadata—holds a great deal of promise for researchers and digital humanists seeking a corpora of early modern print history, whether the image sets and Iconclass-based metadata, or the enumerative bibliography of illustrated books. This resource is aging gracefully; I hope it continues to be of use to scholars inventing the next phase of tools for studying early modern prints and print history.

MEAGHAN J. BROWN

Folger Shakespeare Library