

Hogarth: Hogarth's Modern Moral Series, Marriage A-la Mode

The satirical thrust of *Marriage A-la-Mode* is as much about patronage, aesthetics and taste as it is about marriage and morals. Over and above the title itself, *Marriage A-la-Mode* includes Italian and Dutch Old Masters, French portraiture and furnishings, oriental decorative arts, an Italian castrato singer and a French dancing master, a turbaned black pageboy, a masquerade reference, a bagnio and an aristocratic toilette. And even syphilis, which Lord Squanderfield probably contracted abroad, was popularly known as ‘the French pox’. Thus his emasculated and diseased body is additionally emblematic of the spread of ‘foreign’ culture that has infected and weakened British identity, society and commerce.

It may seem ironic, therefore, that the formal qualities and palette of Hogarth’s *Marriage A-la-Mode* paintings correspond to, and sometimes deliberately evoke, French contemporary art and Rococo design. Such influences and references, however, are part of Hogarth’s satirical agenda. The figures of the betrothed couple in Scene 1 of *Marriage A-la-Mode*, for example, parody fashionable *tableaux de mode* paintings by François de Troy and others. And the clothe-covered table in the final scene is reminiscent of the still-lives of Jean-Baptiste Chardin, in particular *The White Tablecloth* of 1731–2.

Scene 1: *The Marriage Settlement*



William Hogarth

Marriage A-la-Mode: 1. The Marriage Settlement 1745

Oil on canvas

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This scene shows the conclusion of negotiations between the Earl of Squander (seated on the right) and the alderman (seated in the centre) for the marriage of their children. The alderman, a rich merchant, desires a higher social position for his family and thus is buying his way into the aristocracy, while Squander needs money to fund his overly extravagant lifestyle.

Meanwhile, their children are displaying either supreme indifference or misery at the proceedings. The son, Viscount Squanderfield is dressed in the latest Paris fashions, after his recent return from the continent. The black spot on his neck indicates that he has syphilis. The alderman's daughter is inconsolable, but is being comforted by the lawyer Silvertongue. The fact that the couple will be bound together in an ill-matched, loveless marriage is made clear by the chained dogs.

Scene 2: *The Tête à Tête*

The scene is set in a Palladian-style house in the West End of London. The clock on the wall, far right, shows that it is past midday, yet the viscount has just returned from a night on the town and is slumped in a chair, bored and exhausted. A dog sniffs at the woman's cap in his pocket. His wife has also been up all night, ostensibly playing cards. However, her sly look and satisfied stretch suggest that she too has had a sexual dalliance and, unlike her apathetic husband, is for the moment enjoying the novelty of life as a fashionable lady of leisure. She appears to be signalling to someone out of view with a pocket mirror. This and the upturned chair indicate that her lover had to exit quickly, perhaps disturbed during lovemaking by the arrival of the husband.

Scene 3: *The Inspection*

This scene takes place in a surgery. Viscount Squanderfield leans towards the doctor holding a pillbox in one hand and brandishing a cane with the other. The mercury pills he was prescribed are not working and he is making a half-hearted demand for compensation. Neither the doctor nor the angry woman inspires much confidence: both have syphilis and she is most likely a convicted prostitute. The skull on the table portends the fate of everyone in the room including, it would seem, the young girl on the right who dabs a sore on her mouth, an early symptom. Given the close proximity between the girl and the viscount, we can assume that she is a low-born prostitute currently in his pay.

Scene 4: *The Toilette*

The display of coronets on the bed and dressing mirror in *The Toilette* suggest that the old earl has died and the alderman's daughter has been elevated to the position of countess. She is surrounded by hangers-on. She leans on the back of her chair, from which hangs a rope of coral, used by teething children. Her child, however, is nowhere to be seen, suggesting a lack of maternal interest. The lawyer Silvertongue has reappeared, lounging on a sofa. Clearly at ease in the countess's bedroom, he holds a ticket in one hand and points to a screen showing a masquerade ball with the other. The Old Master paintings above their heads, showing mythological and biblical seduction scenes, underscore the fact that the countess and Silvertongue are having an affair.

Scene 5: *The Bagnio*

In England the original meaning for a *bagnio* was a coffee house that provided Turkish baths. By the time that Hogarth painted *Marriage A-la-Mode*, the word had additional significance as a place where rooms could be hired without questions and where prostitutes were available. Having left the masquerade, the countess and Silvertongue continue their assignation a bagnio, their costumes discarded in the heat of passion. The rumpled bedclothes suggest that the couple have been caught 'in the act' by the earl - perhaps he too was hiring a room down the corridor and was tipped off. A sword fight between the earl and Silvertongue has ensued. Here the earl is seen in a death swoon, a wound to his chest, as his tearful wife begs forgiveness. Meanwhile, Silvertongue attempts to escape through the window.

Scene 6: *The Lady's Death*



William Hogarth

Marriage A-la-Mode: 6. The Lady's Death 1745

Oil on canvas

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The final scene takes place in the home of the countess's father situated in the City near the Thames. In contrast to the aristocratic extravagance of Scene 1, we find a house of bourgeois miserliness. The countess is dying from an overdose after reading of Silvertongue's execution. As she passes away in her chair, the grieving nurse holds the countess's child towards her for a last embrace. Unfortunately, the child displays signs of syphilis including the tell-tale black spot and legs strapped in callipers. Meanwhile the avaricious merchant pulls the gold ring from his daughter's hand. Hogarth juxtaposes the tragedy with a moment of pure comedy; the apothecary upbraiding the dim-witted servant to the right, perhaps an attempt by him to deflect responsibility for the overdose.

Marriage A-la-Mode is on display in [Room 6](#) of the exhibition