

William Hogarth

The artist behind the Barts staircase paintings

With his sharp wit, gift for drawing and finely honed moral compass, William Hogarth was an 18th-century art superstar and satirist whose rarest work today still adorns the walls of his local hospital – Barts.

When the governors of Barts decided to build the hospital's new North Wing in the 1730s, they wanted the 'wow factor' – a spectacular entrance with a grand staircase complemented by huge, historical paintings filling each wall. Top of their interiors wish list was a Venetian artist Jacopo Amigoni – that is until a local lad made good offered his services, free of charge.

William Hogarth had two motives: he wanted to make a generous gesture to the hospital and also to prove that an English artist could excel at the grand historical style of painting planned for the entrance. Born next to the hospital in Bartholomew Close in 1697, Hogarth was baptised in the church of St Bartholomew-the-Great and grew up in the shadow of Barts.

Lively studies of everyday life

He was the first satirical artist, mocking contemporary Britain through his pictures which were lively

studies of everyday life, sometimes bordering on caricature and comedy, but always with a strong storyline and delivering a moral message.

By the time the Barts commission arose, Hogarth had made his name as an artist and engraver and published the first of his great moral works, *A Harlot's Progress*, with six scenes charting the progress, downfall and death of a country girl lured into prostitution in London. Another of his most famous works, *A Rake's Progress*, is a series of paintings showing the moral decline and eventual tragic end of an extravagant young nobleman.

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The Barts paintings, begun around 1734, offered a different challenge. *The Good Samaritan* and *Christ at the Pool of Bethesda* are biblical scenes that illustrate caring and healing. In *The Good Samaritan*, a traveller, who has been beaten and robbed, is saved not by the two holy men who pass him by but by a Samaritan, from a despised race.

Patients as models

The Bethesda picture shows a scene where Christ heals a man who has been unable to walk for 38 years. Hogarth may have used patients from Barts wards as models for the crowd of sick and injured people around the pool – tradition has it the paintings were used as an early teaching aid for trainee Barts physicians to diagnose the conditions in the painting.

The artist painted *Christ at the Pool of Bethesda* on canvas mounted on stretchers in a studio in St Martin's Lane before moving it to the staircase in April 1736. *The Good Samaritan* was painted on site, with Hogarth perching on scaffolding. Although he painted all the figures, it is believed artist friends helped with the landscape, decorative borders and scrollwork.

The wow factor

On their unveiling in 1737, the paintings took the art world by surprise. In recompense, Hogarth became a governor of Barts – the customary reward for donating £50 or more, although, in his case, the donation was his art rather than money.

Sadly, very few other commissions for similar pictures came his way, and Hogarth returned to painting his modern morality tales, such as *Gin Lane*, an 18th century take on the evils of binge drinking.

Although these satirical works are the source of most of Hogarth's fame today, there is no doubt as to the impact of his biblical works at Barts. The hospital's governors certainly got their 'wow factor' – and, more than two centuries later, these astonishing works still provide a dramatic entrance.

