

When Satire Becomes Art

The long and lively history of political caricature

BY ANN LANDI

A BRILLIANT POLITICAL CARTOON can sum up the follies of the day (or the era) with a lightning-quick precision unavailable to even the most economical editorial writers. The graphic satirist has at his or her command a whole arsenal for lampoonery: exaggeration, speech balloons, and the usual draftsman's tools of line, shade, and even color. As "Infinite Jest: Caricature and Satire from Leonardo to Levine," a show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, up through March 4, makes clear, humorous or scathing works on paper, such as those by Goya or Daumier, can reach a level of artistry that goes far beyond most political cartoons on the op-ed pages of newspapers.

Caricature, the exaggeration of features and physiognomy to often comic effect, goes back to ancient times, but it was



Top and Tail, 1777, by an unknown British artist, is an example of the "Nobody" prints that mocked fashion victims who wore enormous hairdos.

Leonardo's drawings of small grotesque heads that seemed to set the most important precedent, even if his intent was to make studies of extremes in nature, not to mock or parody. The word comes from the Italian *carico* and *caricare*, meaning, respectively, "load" and "to exaggerate," and the members of the 16th-century Carracci family in Bologna were the first to apply the terms to pen drawings of strange human heads. They paved the way for artists who "saw that selected components could be distorted without obscuring the identity of the subject," according to Constance McPhee, associate curator at the Met, in her introductory catalogue essay for the exhibition. In Northern Europe, Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder expanded upon the medieval practice of decorating the margins of manuscripts with drolleries



**David Levine's *Claes Oldenburg*, 1969,
depicts the Pop artist in the
shape of his 1966 sculpture *Soft Toilet*.**

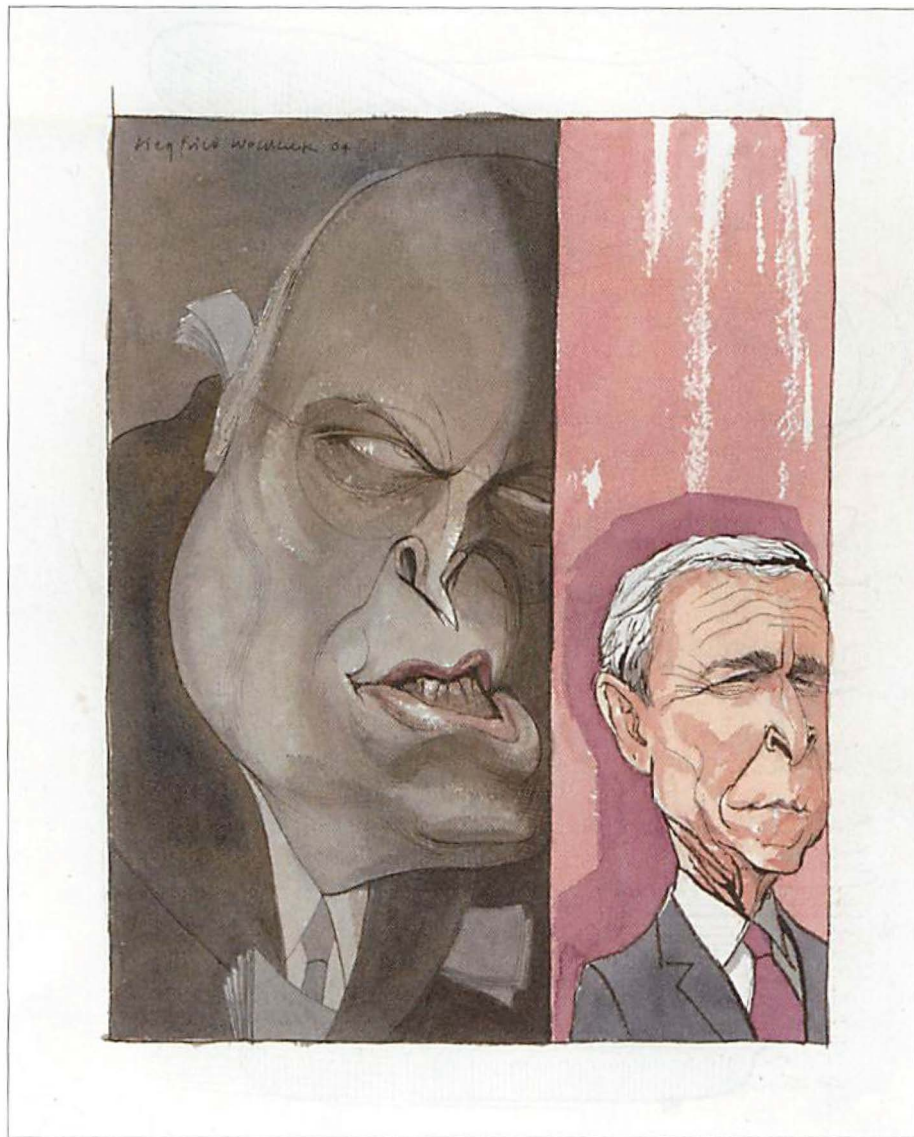
and odd creatures, filling their canvases with hybrid life forms that still startle and inspire today.

Animals, particularly birds and monkeys, have appeared in satirical works since the Middle Ages, the latter proving particularly handy to “ape” the bestial aspects of human behavior. The Met’s show includes a 16th-century woodcut by Nicolò Boldrini spoofing the Laocoön group, the famous Hellenistic sculpture, showing the principals as writhing apes rather than men. The original target, an obscure theory of anatomy, is lost in the thickets of time, but the lampoon of a revered masterpiece is still wickedly funny.

In 1827, the British engraver Thomas Landseer produced a set of 24 prints using the antics of monkeys to satirize human folly, while an anonymous French artist around the

same time produced a still terrifying figure of a huge ape holding two human figures by their heads as chimps attempt to crawl up their legs. In 1812, the British social satirist George Cruikshank called on a cast of marine animals to spoof the notorious excesses of the Prince Regent, the future King George IV, showing the prince himself as a gigantic whalelike creature and his most recent mistress as a mermaid. Insects are also irresistible sources for caricature: one drawing from 1808, by Thomas Rowlandson, shows Napoleon as a fat spider trapped in his own web; a lithograph by Henry Louis Stephens transforms P. T. Barnum, who liked to describe himself as the Prince of Humbugs, into a smugly smiling face appended to a six-legged beetle.

Though the political context and inspiration for many of



ABOVE Siegfried Woldhek originally created *Bush's Voice (Cheney)* for the Dutch paper *NRC Handelsblad* during the presidential campaign in 2004; he revised the image in 2010.

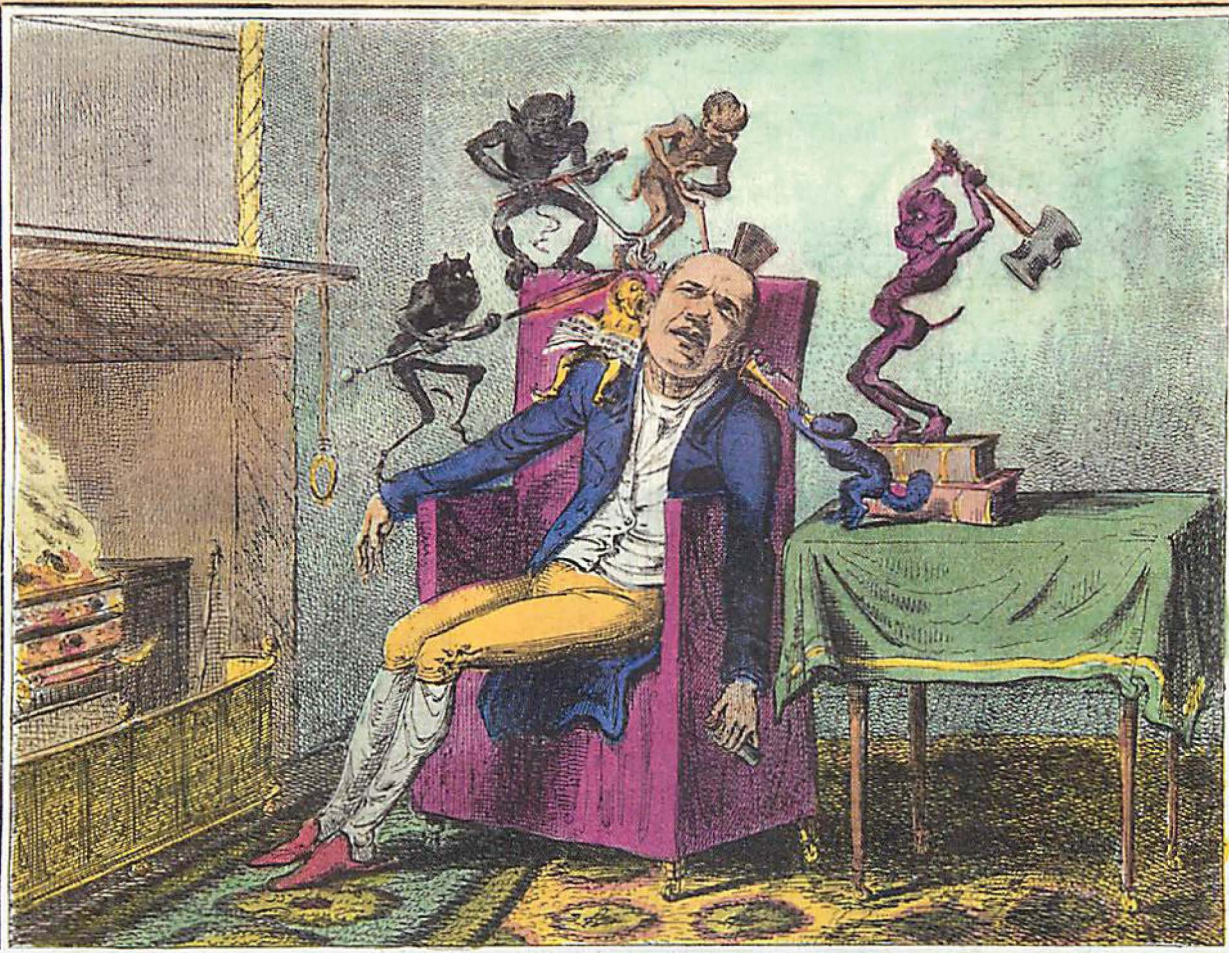
OPPOSITE In *The Head Ache, A Print after George Cruikshank*, 2010, Enrique Chagoya digitally reproduced a 1819 etching and replaced the original head with a drawn portrait of President Obama. Then he transformed the whole thing into a new etching (top). *Les Deux ne font qu'un (The Two Are but One)*, ca. 1791, by an unknown French artist, depicts King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette as a two-headed creature pulling in both directions (bottom).

these works are obscure to us today, some still speak clearly across the centuries. Many amusing examples take aim at contemporary fashion—the insanely towering wigs of the prerevolutionary French court, the wasp-waisted corseting of an English dandy, or the mutton-chop sleeves popular in the Victorian era. William Hogarth, perhaps England's most famous satirical engraver, applied the terminology of classical architecture to men's wigs to illustrate class divisions.

For many, the Met exhibition's greatest appeal may lie in caricatures closer to our own time. The late David Levine captured Claes Oldenburg as an approximation of one of the Pop artist's own sculptures, *Soft Toilet* (1966), echoing the critical nature of the essay he was illustrating. The Dutch caricaturist Siegfried Woldhek portrayed a monstrously looming Dick Ch-

eny whispering behind a curtain into the ear of a squinty-eyed George Bush. Enrique Chagoya appropriated an 1819 print by Cruikshank to show Barack Obama besieged by demons at the time of his struggles to pass health-care reform. The nasty little creatures, representing the conservative media and Republican politicians, blow a trumpet into his ear and attack his head with hammers and corkscrews as the president loosely grips a bottle of medicine.

At a time when cartoons critical of contemporary politics carry enough power even to elicit death threats, "Infinite Jest" is a reminder that visual sallies have a long and lively history and that no public figure is ever safe from the satirist's gimlet eye. The pen can always prove mightier than the sword, in more ways than one. ■



The Head ache



Les deux Ne font qu'un

L.M.A.P.5