What do Tina Fey and Amy Poehler have in common with Charles Philipon, Nadar, and Honoré Daumier? For all of them, humor serves as a medium of biting political critique, and the results are not easily forgotten, even when the real-life targets have stepped to the edge of the limelight.

As the recent year of political spectacle has reminded us, the media is not only a mirror of the times (or even a cracked mirror, as Henry James termed Daumier’s art), but is also an agent of the formation and circulation of political sentiment within a community of readers and viewers. Contemporary media uses visual jokes to make us intimate with the follies and weaknesses of the great personalities of our time. 2008 was a year not only of caricatures, but also political toys, Saturday night comedies, rude bumper stickers, and YouTube performances that have skewered one famous politician or another.

But the comic barbed edge of today’s political visual culture is nothing new. It owes a large debt to the development of the sophisticated and deliciously insulting art of political satire in the hands of French caricaturists of the nineteenth century. In the wake of the expansion of the rights of freedom of speech in France over three distinct periods in political history (in the early 1830s of the July Monarchy; in the liberal period of the Second Empire in the later 1860s; and finally again in the Third Republic, most especially in the years after the Republican victory of 1879), this vibrant and expressive modern art of political caricature exploded, discovering its venues in journals, reading cafés, and the windows of newly fashionable printers’ shops in Paris. Artists gave form to their opinions in a broad range of public images—lithographic caricatures, satirical journals, illustrated books, political posters, and, by the end of the century, in poster advertisements for the new pleasures of a spectacle-consuming public.

This exhibition explores how humor functions in these images to question, and to destabilize, established power relations. Generating a sense of control (or superiority, to follow Baudelaire’s thinking) for the viewer, jokes empower individuals in a moment of shared critique or knowledge. And while these pleasures and powers of the joke might be fleeting, they may also serve to create a consensus of opinion—in the moment of the exposure of the flawed politicians, or of the rendering of civic justice through the exercise of the viewer’s eye and critical judgment.

We have grouped the caricatures in five areas. The first, The Golden Age of Parisian Caricature—King Louis Philippe and the Humor of the Pear, features the early years of the flourishing caricature press, from about 1830 to 1835. Some of these images refer to a famous cartoon made in 1831 by Charles Philipon at his own trial for publishing offensive caricatures. Philipon’s cartoon of the King as a pear (la poire), a slang term for fat-head, became the touchstone image of political resistance and spread as a symbol of artistic resistance to the Monarchy. The section on The Modern Parisian Woman—From Bourgeoise to Bas-bleu includes a range of satires on the women who test the boundaries of the separate sphere that women allegedly were intended by nature to inhabit. The Politics of Army and Church presents biting original drawings that target conflicts within these largest, most powerful institutions of the Third Republic. One drawing exposes the farce enacted by Royalist Baron Clement-Gustave de Lareinty and Republican Minister of War Georges-Ernest Boulanger, who saved both their honor.
and their own lives by dramatically misfiring in
a duel fought over their political ideals. *An Eye
on Empire—The Fates of Napoleon III* echoes the
spirit of Philibon and Daumier in its raw and
uncompromising lampoons of the current leader,
Napoleon III, especially in the early and final
years of his ambitious bid for political glory. The
caricatures in *Allegories of the Modern Republic*
invest a classically garbed figure with the identity
of France under the Third Republic, deploying the
female form as a vessel of a political idealism at
odds with the machinations or strategies of male
politicians of the day.

While the specific references in some of these
prints are best understood by specialists of French
history, many of the meanings remain accessible
to the contemporary eye. The ephemeral quality
of the newspaper pages tells us the jokes were
meant to be consumed rapidly, as one walks
past a newsstand or picks up a paper in a café.
The strong graphic language, especially in the
hands of such talented artists as Daumier, André
Gill, and Alfred Le Petit, speaks to the ability of
printmakers to sum up the agitations or debates
of the day in a few significant forms conceived to
send their message fast. In the visual economy of
public humor, less decidedly becomes more. And
the grotesque details of a political body offered up
for satire (an anthropomorphic pig, a pear-shaped
King, an overly distorted nose or ear) remind us
that some forms of humor do indeed transcend
their day. If anything in this exhibition leaves you
smiling, an artist achieved one of his goals.

– Elizabeth C. Childs

**RELATED EVENTS**

**Gallery Talk:** Wed, April 15, 6 pm,
Kemper Art Museum, Teaching Gallery.
Elizabeth C. Childs and Steven C. Hause will lead
an informal discussion about the works on display
in *The Political Eye*.

**Exhibition:** *Paris from the Commune of 1871 to
the Exposition of 1900: Images from the Russell
Sturgis Photograph Collection*, Olin Library,
Special Collections, January 26 to March 30,
2009, Washington University Danforth Campus,
Mon–Fri, 8:30 am–5 pm. More than 1,000
images from the Russell Sturgis Photographic
Collection are available at [http://digital.wustl.
edu/19centuryarch/index.html](http://digital.wustl.edu/19centuryarch/index.html). For information,
call 314-935-5444.

**FURTHER READING**

Charles Baudelaire, “Of the Essence of Laughter
and Generally of the Comic in the Plastic Arts”
and “Some French Caricaturists,” in *Selected
Writings on Art and Artists: Baudelaire*, trans. P. E.
Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

Elizabeth Childs and Kristen Powell, eds.,
*Femmes d’esprit: Women in Daumier’s Caricature*
(Middlebury, VT: Christian A. Johnson Memorial

Elise Kenney and John Merriman, *The Pear: French
Graphic Arts in the Golden Age of Caricature* (South
Hadley, MA: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum,

Identities in France, 1830–1835* (University Park, PA:

**FURTHER COLLECTIONS FOR STUDY**

**French Revolution Pamphlets**

This collection of 220 pamphlets from 1787 to
1812 is available for study in Olin Library, Special
Collections, Washington University Danforth
Campus. For information, call 314-935-5495.

**Periodicals of the French Women’s Movement,
1870–1940**

This microfilm collection is a promised gift
being established in the Microforms Department,
Washington University Libraries. For information,
contact professor Steven C. Hause at shause@
wustl.edu.

**Carlson Collection of Nineteenth-Century
French Caricatures**

This collection in the Mildred Lane Kemper Art
Museum includes approximately 450 French
caricatures from 1830 to 1900, which will soon be
available online through the Museum’s searchable
database. For information, contact Assistant
Registrar Kim Broker at kim.broker@wustl.edu or
314-935-5385.