

MIRRORS

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PIP DICKENS

Opposite: *Dreaming Girl 2*, 2017, oil on canvas, 76 cm x 76 cm

# MIRRORS

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# Foreword

In 2016, Pip Dickens started working on a new series of paintings – *Mirrors*. Her ideas unfolded slowly and her enquiries were still evolving when I visited her tucked away studio in Lancaster this summer. Upon entering her inner sanctum, there they were - her '*Mirror Heads*' gazing at me; motionless creatures with a strong presence, emanating a myriad of emotions.

The preliminary studies of these mirror-headed figures suggested an anthropomorphic source with an inner and an outer life, ambiguous and changeable - a dualism that recurs in Dickens' painterly expressions. Often her concepts draw attention to binary, contrasting or opposing appearances or, perhaps, a divided state of being. In a time when society is obsessed with selfies and celebrity, her new body of work could not be more relevant - contemporary *memento mori* – reminding us of our actual demise perhaps? For Dickens of course it is an examination of the hopes and fears of the individual referencing the vanity of earthly life and the transient nature of all worldly possessions and quests.

By applying a variety of subtle shades, she emphasises the charisma of her mysterious personages and alters their status. Her characters come to life, scrutinising, following and pursuing the viewer to engage in a silent dialogue. Dickens' *vanitas* - where '*mirror oddballs*' dominate her canvases - are a voyage, probing new pictorial and intellectual means to explain the world around us and beyond.

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# Artist Statement

This series of new paintings began as an exploration into mirrors and reflections. Using antique shaped mirrors, stencils were made of their distinctive outlines. Some sketches and paintings resulted in studies about light, shadow and interior worlds. The initial source of reference was my hall at home. This naturally dark space is brightened by accumulated old mirrors populating each wall. They face one another exchanging restless, moody projections - 'Technicolor' red lead glass light saturates each surface triggering flickering, pulsing silhouettes of external world motion - branches and leaves; the swift passing of birds; they scan and swipe passing traffic and then...nothing. The glasses grow dark and still.

These moody, flickering projections together with thoughts about what mirrors do and how we interact with them gradually introduced human elements. The resultant paintings are reductive offering simple outlines and stances yet do portray character and mood - what Kevin O'Brien in the following essay accurately describes as being 'deliberately ersatz'. Recently I was studying Gauguin's *'La Belle Angèle'* (1889) and was struck by the accompanying text provided on the Musée d'Orsay's web page. The painting was described as *"a striking illustration of Gauguin's main aesthetic concerns is the heteroclite assembly of various sources of inspiration which he regarded as primitive and in the simplification of forms."* My heteroclite approach of accumulated collections of influences and their reduction to a kind of quintessence has been at the heart of this research and marks new developments and explorations toward a distinct 'language' within my practice.

Some of these paintings acknowledge (yet do not describe) the explosion of de-formalised self portraiture through mobile 'phone technology - a self-regarding yet popular activity which, in the main, rarely offers much context to the third party viewer. Selfies are a kind of mirror but a

mirror is a magic device. It is other worldly. It may be a portal through which, like Alice and her Looking Glass, we can climb through to explore worlds both familiar and unfamiliar.

These paintings are incongruous - some are whimsical, some may seem dark or disturbing but most attempt to question through animation of the inanimate to what degree we use masks of our own making to deflect others from seeing our true selves.

What are these figures? Where are they? What are they doing and why do they challenge our gaze? Perhaps they are wholly unaware, lost in their dream world on the other side of the glass.

Cinema's 'Master of Suspense', Alfred Hitchcock, in his groundbreaking interviews with French film maker, François Truffaut, remarked: "There's no such thing as a face—it's non-existent until the light hits it." We might say the same when confronting and thinking about how mirrors are 'activated'.

Much has been written about the portrait and also the phenomenon of the mirror in painting. However, the real curiosity is painting itself and its magical properties - how it commands our attention and stimulates thoughts we may have not thought before.

**Pip Dickens**

# MIRRORS

## HALL OF MIRRORS

In the hallway of her house, Pip Dickens hangs a collection of the sorts of old-fashioned mirrors popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The shaped and bevelled edges of these plane mirrors combine decorative charm, with a practical invitation to check oneself.

The way Dickens displays them is unusual. Grouped together in a silvered flock, they reflect inverted views of surrounding spaces, making the hall seem bigger and reflecting alternative images of the everyday. Some of them appear unnervingly in reflection on the wall behind you in this pocket-sized Versailles.

Yet these are the mirrors of the common man. Middle and working-class mirrors designed to enrich modest houses. Mirrors of parents, great aunts and grandparents, their colour warmed by the patina of time, bearing silent witness to memories of people and places no longer imagined.

Curiously, while grouped together, each mirror is different from its neighbour because of its size and shape. But together they lie in wait for a passing someone to activate their lens.

As a crowd they exercise control by rejecting the intimacy that mirrors normally invite. To consult them would be a form of nightmarish group therapy, discussing personal vulnerabilities with an anonymous crowd in which every member wears the same face.

Remove one from the mob, and trust is restored. Once again, they become the familiar and intimate objects that connect us with the usual silent conversations we have with mirrors in which we confront age, image, make-up, a self reflective moment, or perhaps vanity, self-loathing, and the

disappointment of self-reflection; in short, psychological *other*.



*Family*, 2017, oil on canvas, 79 cm x 78 cm

A taxonomic approach to this collection would miss the point. Any encounter with mirrors is always in the present and exceeds their materiality. Although quotidian, they are hard to pin down and our relationship with these objects is elaborate. We think we understand them - and so, wooed by their familiarity, we share our innermost and darkest thoughts with them.

But they play with our trust. Perhaps because we see ourselves reflected, we are encouraged to believe that they offer a truth, an indifferent depiction of a common reality.

This is how Pip Dickens presents her mirrors to us. Her home display is her trophy wall, each exhibit a particular example of a type within the species, to be examined through painting.

In her statement Dickens refers to the external and internal life of mirrors and the effect of this duality upon her

paintings. She responds to the transient and cinematic moments mirrors offer and the way they gather and reflect the filtered light within their scope. In considering the levels of duality and the inner and outer possibilities of mirrors, the opportunities are dazzling.

## MIRRORS AND PAINTERS

Dickens knows that mirrors are much more than a painterly trick intended to present a counterfeit reality. They unsettle our place in the world and challenge our visual senses. They open an *otherness* of space and time and invite us to question the places we inhabit as well as our relationships with truth and reality.

Through mirrors, artists present the familiar in often-extraordinary ways. Among countless examples are the enigmas and contradictions within Van Eyck's *'Arnolfini Portrait'*, Velazquez's *'Las Meninas'*, Manet's *'A Bar at the Folies-Bergère'* and Magritte's *'Le Faux Miroir'*. Puzzling paintings such as these invite endless attempts to codify their contents and uncover their meaning.

In her paintings, Pip Dickens makes direct reference to a Velazquez painting of the Infanta, Margarita Teresa, daughter of Philip IV of Spain. This painting was part of a series that chronicled the development of this young girl until she could be married off to her uncle (also her first cousin) at 15 continuing the horrors and tragedies of the Habsburg lineage until her death aged 21.

The apogee of this series is the enigmatic *'Las Meninas'*. Much ink and paint has been spilt in trying to understand this painting. Picasso painted forty-five versions of it while luminaries of art history and psychology and social theory have tried to interpret the contradictions of this logically impossible painting. Yet we still remain no closer to understanding the paradoxes of its space and reflections – and not least the mirror at the centre of this composition.

Michel Foucault's penetrating analysis of *'Las Meninas'* in *'The Order of Things'*[1], implies that the paradoxes of paintings cannot be addressed through the usual art historical approach that asks 'what does this art mean?' Suggesting instead, that it's more fruitful to ask 'what does this art do? In this essay, Foucault's main concerns are with Velazquez's use of space but rather than offering a solution

to a puzzle, he accepts that some paintings are a starting point for speculation with no possibility of completion. Paintings of this kind may require a different approach to looking at them, one that accepts that they cannot be read or understood in a logical framework and our



*Dreaming Girl 3 (Infanta)*, 2017, oil on canvas, 79.4 cm x 76.1 cm

interpretations of paintings should not be based simply on iconography, style and context. Instead, we should accept their internal paradoxes and appreciate how they reach beyond representation.

## 'OTHER' MIRRORS

In his writings Foucault adopts the mirror as a metaphor for the complexities of space. To accommodate interpretations of *real* space, he introduces the term 'Heterotopia' as a conceptual device[2]. Heterotopias are worlds within worlds that mirror what is outside and at the same time challenge and upset that view. "Heterotopias [...] bear strange relationships to other places". Foucault writes. "They point to *otherness* while neutralising, reversing or even suspending our relationship with *real* space"

Foucault describes mirrors as *utopias* since they are "placeless places." And then as *heterotopias*, because they occupy spaces that are at once real and connected with the surrounding environment and are "absolutely unreal". To pass through a mirror would mean entering a visual (un)reality which is "over there". Yet Foucault recognises that this formal approach to space is an incomplete account of how we experience it. In *'Of Other Spaces'* (1967) Foucault

praises the ‘monumental work’ of Gaston Bachelard [3] saying that, “The phenomenologists have taught us that we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space, but in spaces that are imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well.” Here Foucault clearly acknowledges the value of the internalised, imagined and lived in experiences of space.

When Foucault says of ‘*Las Meninas*’: “But it isn’t a picture: it is a mirror”[4], he opens a fascinating range of possibilities. If paintings can be mirrors and thus metaphors for our encounters with space, mirrors and paintings are both grounded in real space and are a portal for the internalised and poetic interpretations we bring to them.

## PROPS AND EXTRAS

The possibilities of encountering the dualities of the virtual and the real as well as the formal and the poetic are important for Pip Dickens’ work, but it’s also important to bear in mind that mirrors in painting, film and literature frame only what the artist wants us to see. They are devices to relate certain kinds of space, time, allegory and narrative.

As well as the medium of painting, Dickens is also fascinated by the medium of film and in particular the films of Alfred Hitchcock. She is concerned with both the *texture* of film as well as the incidental and unremarked elements of films; these concerns provide compelling insights into her paintings.

When Marion Crane checks in at the Bates Motel, she first appears in the office mirror on the wall opposite the camera. Norman Bates enters behind her and for a split second they are captive in the same space. They are together in a real and virtual world. Norman immediately assumes his position behind the counter opposite Marion but her reflection in the mirror remains left of shot. It’s all over in a flash. It’s significant because this is not the first time we have seen Marion in mirrors. Hitchcock has already established that Marion is a thief and has already reflected her dual morality elsewhere. In *Psycho* (1960) mirrors are Hitchcock’s metaphor for the tenuousness of the good and bad behaviour that he knows we are all capable of. These momentary incidents, refracted in mirrors and silhouettes, shape our sub-conscious thoughts and impression of plot.

In *Orpheus* (1950) Jean Cocteau presents an hypnotic example of the mirror’s filmic potential. In this retelling of the Greek Myth, Orpheus is a poet who puts on a pair of magical gloves, which enable him to pass through a mirror into the underworld in search of his dead wife. We follow on through the camera lens. This unforgettable scene bridges our *reality* and a metaphysical world beyond the mirror. Cocteau’s guardian of this underworld tells us of the inevitable loss that accompanies this transition, ‘Two worlds struggle to coexist, the world of life and the world of death’.



*Whilst Olympia Sleeps*, 2017, oil on canvas, 53 cm x 48 cm

The frequent mirror scenes in Martin Scorsese’s work[5] occur when reality slips away from the protagonist. We see this in *Taxi Driver*, *The Wolf of Wall Street* and perhaps most remarkably in *Raging Bull*. In his dressing room mirror Jake La Motta repeats Marlon Brando’s tragic, ‘*I coulda been a contender*’, speech from Elia Kazan’s 1954 film *On the Waterfront*. Usually Scorsese’s mirrors provide a locus for rehearsal and self-dialogue and a space to question sanity. Through the mirror in *Raging Bull*, he also takes the opportunity to connect with cinematic tradition and boxing history.

In her painting ‘*Whilst Olympia Sleeps*’ Dickens also connects with tradition when she speculates about Manet’s painting, ‘*Olympia*’ (1863). The naked Olympia reclines on a bed wearing the accoutrements of a Parisian prostitute, confidently staring out and confronting us, she holds us with her gaze, daring us to look back. ‘*Olympia*’ shocked Paris. In this painting Manet rejected the etiquette of idealism and represented a demimonde, who by exposing



herself and her profession exposed the hidden social mores of the bourgeoisie. The bed linen spills out of the canvas, we are transfixed by Olympia's stare – as with Orpheus's underworld, we pass into her space. The painting is a stage and a mirror.

The painting's controversy continues to the present and in recent years attention has switched to the black servant girl and speculation about Manet's motives for this racial reference. In *'Whilst Olympia Sleeps'*, Dickens has moved the black servant girl to the front of the canvas, the tilt of her 'head' is quizzical confronting us with a blank stare. As is the way with mirrors, we can't resist looking for reflections of our world in her head. The title invites us to re-imagine the scene of Manet's painting. Dickens' Olympia, is reduced to a white mirror silhouette, reclining, half hidden on a striped bed in the middle space of the painting. Have we passed through the mirror and are now looking at it from the back of the room where the servant girl has turned to confide in us? Or has there been a temporary reversal of the subject's hierarchies, a coup d'état, whilst Olympia sleeps?

#### THE PASSIVE VOICE

It's clear that as well as being metaphors, mirrors are also effective catalysts to establish duality and present the binaries of past and present, life and death, good and bad, madness and sanity, real and virtual, here and there. Yet mirrors remain utterly passive, offering no memories or contents save what we bring to them. Their silence and inconspicuous capacity for metaphor and duality makes them silent and faithful stooges, allowing artists to contrive what they wish to reflect at us. Perhaps this is why Pip Dickens personifies them and redresses the balance by allowing them to take centre stage in her paintings. As well as being the individuals from her collection, her mirrors also represent the fraternity of mirrors that hang on walls in halls, changing rooms, offices, bedrooms and toilets as well as those used by painters, writers and filmmakers.

Dickens offers troubling, deliberately ersatz images of humans; personified mirrors stare out blankly, inviting us to stare back, in the hope of catching a glimpse of ourselves in our familiar world. But their world is metaphysical and we are not where we should be. And when we persist in looking, we find only smoky hints of things that might have

replaced us. Magus mirror-heads obey the customs of psychological portraiture, pressing themselves to the front of the picture plane to confront us. Their body language establishes vulnerability and the tilt of their heads suggests a longing to communicate.

In paintings such as *'Grey Mirror'*, *'Red Mirror'* and *'Family'*, Dickens paints the mirror simply as an object and again pushes it to the front of the picture plane, sandwiched in the shallow space between the viewer and the wall. Her depictions of space are ambiguous; the walls in *'Grey Mirror'* are in fact fictive spaces created by rich and complex impasto passages of paint. The mirror frame scraped through the paint commands immediate attention, defining what we are looking at and at the same time inviting us to look for ourselves.

Over the course of this series of mirror paintings the paint has become thicker and bolder. Impasto paint is applied and then scraped through as if attempting to excavate a buried reflection or retrieve something essential. Like the un-dead, looking into them we are denied our own reflection and the steam of our breath on glass. It's unsettling to be robbed of our image and to be confronted with our absence; all proof of existence which mirrors normally attest has been expunged.

#### Kevin O'Brien

Kevin is a painter and Senior Associate Lecturer of Fine Art at Leeds Beckett University. He lives and paints in London.

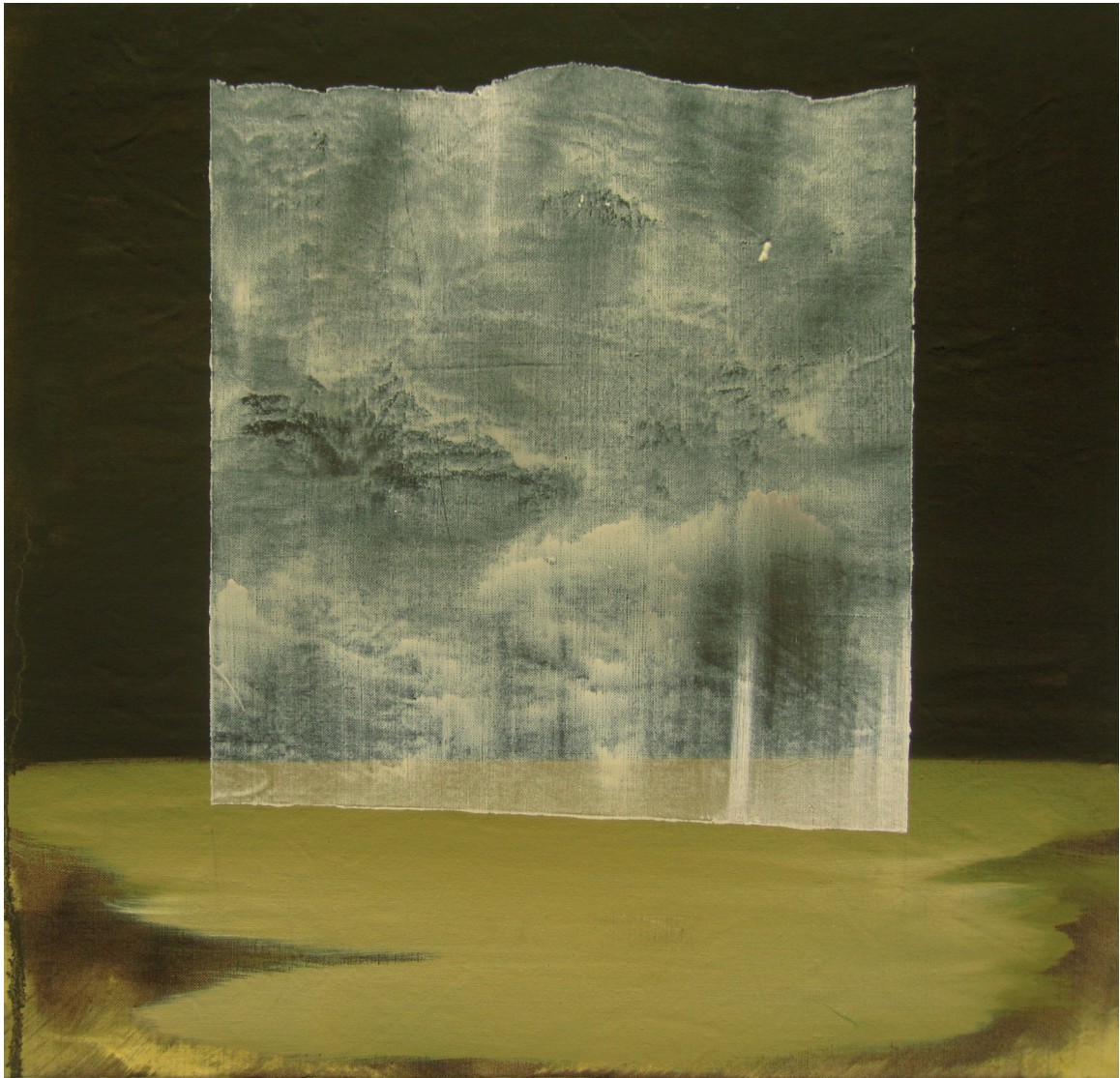
[1] *'The Order of Things'* An Archaeology of Human Sciences (1966). Foucault, Michel. Published by Vintage.

[2] *'Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias'* Foucault, Michel. Originally a conference paper published 1967, published posthumously in 1984. This essay gave rise to Heterotopian studies and it's influence remains significant throughout many areas of study and Geographical speculations.

[3] *'The Poetics of Space'* 1957, Bachelard, Gaston. Published by Beacon Press

[4] *'The Order of Things'* An Archaeology of Human Sciences (1966). Foucault, Michel. Published by Vintage.

[5] *'Taxi Driver'* 1976, *'The Wolf of Wall Street'* 2013, *'Raging Bull'* 1980. Scorsese, Martin. Director, producer, screenwriter, film historian.



*Through the Glass*, 2017, oil on canvas, 50.6 cm x 52.5 cm



*The Circle*, 2017, oil on canvas, 66.6 cm x 76.5 cm



*Dreaming Girl 6*, 2017, oil on canvas, 49.6 cm x 52.2 cm



*Dreaming Girl 1*, 2017, oil on canvas, 90 cm x 90.5 cm



*Dreaming Girl 5*, 2017, oil on canvas, 78 cm x 77.5



*Mirror Head 2*, 2017, oil on canvas, 78.5 cm x 76.5 cm



*Dreaming Girl 7*, oil on canvas, 92 cm x 91.5 cm





*Secret Life of Mirrors*, 2017, oil on canvas, 52.8 cm x 50.1 cm

# PIP DICKENS

Born in Nottinghamshire in 1962, Pip Dickens now lives in Lancashire. She is a lecturer of Painting at Lancaster University and a member of the recently formed 'Teaching Painting' organisation.

## Education

1998-2000 Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, MFA Painting

1993-1996 Leeds Metropolitan University, BA (Hons) Fine Art

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2017 'Mirrors', Storey Gallery, Lancaster
- 2013 'Pip Dickens', Campden Gallery, Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire  
'Pip Dickens - SCREEN', Rugby Art Gallery, Warwickshire, supported by Arts Council of England
- 2012 'Toward the Light - Pip Dickens', The Brindley Arts Centre, Cheshire. Touring Exhibition  
'Pip Dickens - Patterns of Shadows', Daiwa Anglo Japanese Foundation, London  
'Pip Dickens - New Works', Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery, University of Leeds
- 2011 'Hajime - The Beginning...', with sound compositions by Professor Monty Adkins, University of Huddersfield. (Leverhulme Trust Award Project)
- 2010 'Towards The Light - Pip Dickens', selected and new works, Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford, Yorkshire. Supported by the Arts Council of England Touring Exhibition
- 2008 'Fabrications', Brass Gallery, Leeds
- 2001 'Pip Dickens', Cassian de Vere Cole Fine Art, London
- 2000 'Pip Dickens', Cassian de Vere Cole Fine Art, London
- 1998 'Pip Dickens', Yorkshire Television, Leeds
- 2015 'In Light of the Monochrome': Exhibition and Symposium. Bradford College of Art and Media, Bradford, Yorkshire
- 2014 'Celebrating Figuration and Abstraction: Elvira Bach - Pip Dickens - Gernot Kissel (1939 – 2008)', Foundry Gallery, London
- 2013 'Inverse-Evoke: Art & Text', R K Burt Gallery, London, curated by Renée Pfister Art & Gallery Consultancy
- 2012 'Brittle Crazie Glasse', curated by Lucy Newman-Cleeve of Man & Eve Gallery, London at Islington Mill, Salford
- 2011 'Colour in Art', Beldam Gallery, Brunel University, London
- 2009 'On Your Wall', Leeds Metropolitan University Gallery, Leeds  
'Mill', works on paper, Monika Bobinska Gallery, London
- 2006 'Nocturnal', Sarah Myerscough Fine Art, London
- 2004 'Double Take', The Business Arts Council, San Francisco, USA  
'Edna', Retrospective of past winners of the Edna Lumb Art Travel Award, Leeds Metropolitan University Gallery  
'In The Mix', Tangent Contemporary Art at the San Francisco Marina, USA
- 2003 'Starting A Collection', Art First, London  
'Illusion', Sarah Myerscough Fine Art, London
- 2002 Sharon Ben-Tal, Pip Dickens & Laurel Hunter', Tangent Contemporary Art, San Francisco, USA  
'Beneath The Surface III', Sarah Myerscough Fine Art, London  
'Best of Art 2002', Sarah Myerscough Fine Art, London
- 2001 'Bittersweet', Danielle Arnaud Contemporary Art, London

### Group Exhibitions

- 2017 'Fully Awake', organised by 'Teaching Painting' group, curated by Ian Hartshorne and Sean Kaye. House For An Art Lover, Glasgow

The Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery | University of Leeds  
Cartwright Hall Art Gallery | Bradford Museums & Galleries  
And numerous private & corporate collections

**Website: [www.pip-dickens.com](http://www.pip-dickens.com)**

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