Paul Revere, artist (after Henry Pelham) and engraver (1735 - 1818)
*The Bloody Massacre perpetrated in King-Street Boston, 1770*
Line engraving and etching, watercolor on laid paper
1983.876

Printed maps and pictures were a feature in some colonial households as early as 1650 and were part of the everyday lives of many colonists by the end of the eighteenth century. The popularity of these prints was due in great part to their affordability; from one etching or engraving, multiple copies or "prints" could be made and sold at a reasonable cost. Most of the prints, particularly the earlier ones, were imported from England by settlers with strong ties to their "home country." Looking overseas for their culture, they collected prints for information, entertainment, and decoration. The increased immigration of artists, engravers, and printsellers to the colonies in the 1700s spurred the growth of a native print trade, resulting in the establishment of print shops and businesses by the time of the Revolutionary War. Many prints had as their subject events leading up to and taking place during the colonists' war for independence.

The year 1770 was a time of great tension in Boston. To the disdain of the colonists, British troops were ordered to occupy the city to enforce new taxation laws. On March 5, a group of colonists began harassing a British sentry on guard in downtown Boston. Other British soldiers arrived and attempted to quiet the colonists, but the
taunting prevailed. The colonists threw snowballs and oyster shells at the soldiers, shouting “lobsters” and “bloody backs” to mock their red uniforms. When a British soldier began firing in retaliation, other soldiers joined in, killing five colonists. The fight became known as the “Boston Massacre.”

Paul Revere, a pro-independence activist, immediately recognized the commercial and propaganda value of the massacre. Like many American-born engravers in the 1700s, Revere was a silversmith who also learned the techniques of incising (or cutting into) copper to produce a plate for printing. When Henry Pelham, his friend and fellow artist, showed Revere his drawing of the Boston Massacre, Revere copied the idea and made a print in an astonishingly short period of three weeks. Revere’s was available to the public for purchase weeks before Pelham’s own print was completed.

Revere’s pictorial record of the event was highly successful, presenting the colonists as victims of unfounded aggression. They are unarmed and appear bewildered and subdued, with dead and wounded compatriots lying bloody at their feet. The British soldiers, masked in smoke, stand in a firing-squad line as their superior signals them to shoot into the crowd. It is no surprise that the print incited further anti-British sentiment in the colonies.

Adapted from "To Please Every Taste: Eighteenth Century Prints from the Winterthur Museum” teacher packet, Terra Museum of American Art
QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Prints were a way of visually documenting important events before the invention of the camera. Have students look at newspapers for photographs of recent new events; what “story” does each photograph tell? Have students explore objectivity of photography by questioning if each “story” is being told from a particular side or angle. What is each photograph’s intended purpose?

2. Paul Revere’s importance in American history extends far beyond his skill as a printmaker. Have students research his life and his contributions as silversmith, patriot, and manufacturer (Revere copper and brass).

3. With prints, artists can produce multiple copies of the same image. What technology do we use today to make reproductions of pictures? Have students name ways that printmaking is used today.

4. While the slide of this image is in black and white, the actual print is painted with watercolors. For an additional fee, handcolored prints could be purchased in the 1700s. Why do you think people were willing to pay more for color? In what ways can color affect the appearance of an artwork?

5. See “Printmaking Processes” in “Sample Lessons” section.