Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MUFFIN MAN H172/A



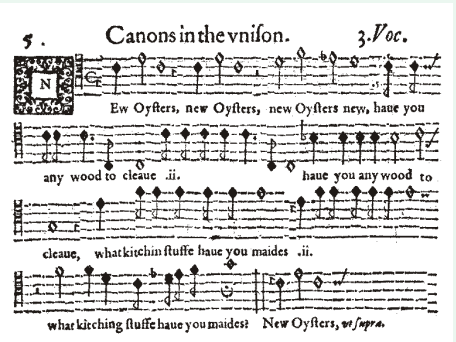
For centuries London streets were thronged with street sellers trying to persuade people to buy their goods. This was what the streets looked like in about 1400, according to John Lydgate(1370-1451) in his poem 'London Lyckpeny':

Then to the Chepe I began me drawne,
Where mutch people I sawe for to stande;
One ofred me velvet sylke and lawne,

An othere he taketh me by the haunde,
Here is Paris thred the fynest in the launde,
I never was used to such thyngs in dede
And wanting mony I myght not spede.

Then went I forth by London stone,
Throughout all Canwyke street;
Drapers mutch cloth me ofred anone
Then comes me one cryd hot shepes feete;
One cryde makerell ryster grene, other gan greete
One bad me by a hood to cover my head,
But fore want of mony I myght not be sped.

There were so many street sellers partly because people lacked fridges to store food vegetables, butter, eggs, fish, bread etc. Also, although horse traffic could be heavy, it was far easier to travel by foot and to conduct business in the street than it is today, when the motor car rules. The coming of fridges and motor cars has destroyed this way of life.



The sight and sound a street filled with all sorts of traders came to symbolise the bustling variety of city life. In the seventeenth century, for example, several English composers - Thomas Weelkes, Thomas Ravenscroft and Orlando Gibbons - being the most famous, set the cries of these street traders to music. Such people made their living writing music for church, so the challenge of turning the cacophony of street sounds into beautiful song provided both a challenge and a humourous break from their usual devout texts. The music on the right is a simple round by Thomas Ravenscroft which uses the words of a street oyster seller - have a try singing it!

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The tradition of drawing and painting the various street sellers and their wares also began in the seventeenth century. This tradition lived on until the nineteenth century, when the street sellers eventually disappeared. The illustrations on the right show just a few of the sets of prints and paintings of this kind which were produced. They are (from the top) a pin seller, a crab-meat seller, a gingerbread seller and a strawberry seller. Such subjects allowed artists to escape from the endless round of high society portraits and to explore the vibrant (but sometimes wretched) lives of lower class people. Perhaps the most famous example of a painting in this tradition is William Hogarth's *Shrimp Girl* (below), in which an anonymous girl who would otherwise have been forgotten is shown as both lively and beautiful.









A list of street cries from a broadsheet published in the reign of Charles II (1660-85):

Cabeches ! Kitchen stuff !
Glasses ! Cockels ! Hartti Chaks !
Mackrill ! Oranges, Lemens !
Lettice ! Place ! Olde Iron ! Aqua vitæ!
Pens and Ink ! Olde bellows ! Herrings !
Bui any milke ? Olde Dublets!
Mussels ! Tinker! Pippins !
Bui a matte ! Coales ! Chimney swepes!
Bui brumes ! Camphires !



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Muffin men don't usually feature in the prints of London street sellers, although a muffin seller does make an appearance in a well-known nursery rhyme:

Have you seen the muffin man, the muffin man, the muffin man?
Have you seen the muffin man who lives in Drury Lane?

Occasionally images of them can be found - the picture on the right was published in *Punch* in 1892. It is very similar to the model in this box, so perhaps the model maker based his model on this cartoon.



In recent years American style muffins have become increasingly common in British shops - soft, puffy, sweet cakes, often with fruit flavouring (left). These, however, are not what the muffin man on English streets would have been selling. Muffins are flat bread-like buns which are intended to be toasted and eaten spread with butter and, perhaps, some jam or honey. Photographs of the traditional muffin can be seen below. A more chewy relative of the muffin is the crumpet (right), which is also eaten toasted.





