

## Collecting

# Has GPS destroyed the art of maps? These Enlightenment masters show us how it's done

An exhibition at Tefaf Maastricht presents 18th-century city plans not merely as scientific tools of the age, but great works of art in their own right

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In his short story “On Exactitude in Science” (1946), Jorge Luis Borges writes of an empire where cartography became such an obsession that a 1:1 scale map was created to cover the entire land. As years passed and interest was lost, only threadbare remains of the chart could be found in wind-swept hinterlands. The tale challenges how we see and define the world. Time mocks our attempts to control space. And as factual as we try to be, subjectivity, imagination and the mythic are never far away.

These relationships — tumultuous and generative — are at the heart of the forthcoming *Cities, like dreams* exhibition at the Tefaf art fair in Maastricht. The title comes from Italo Calvino's evergreen *Invisible Cities* (1972): “Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, and their perspectives deceitful.”

A collaboration between Daniel Crouch Rare Books and Michael Hoppen Gallery, the exhibition is intended as a corrective to any assumption that maps are just tools. To Crouch, they are vastly more than that. “The great thing about maps is that they are both scientific instruments and works of art,” he says. “I say to my staff that you must remember that what we sell primarily is a story. And that could be about many different things, but they are really only interesting when they tell a story about who we are and what we're doing.”

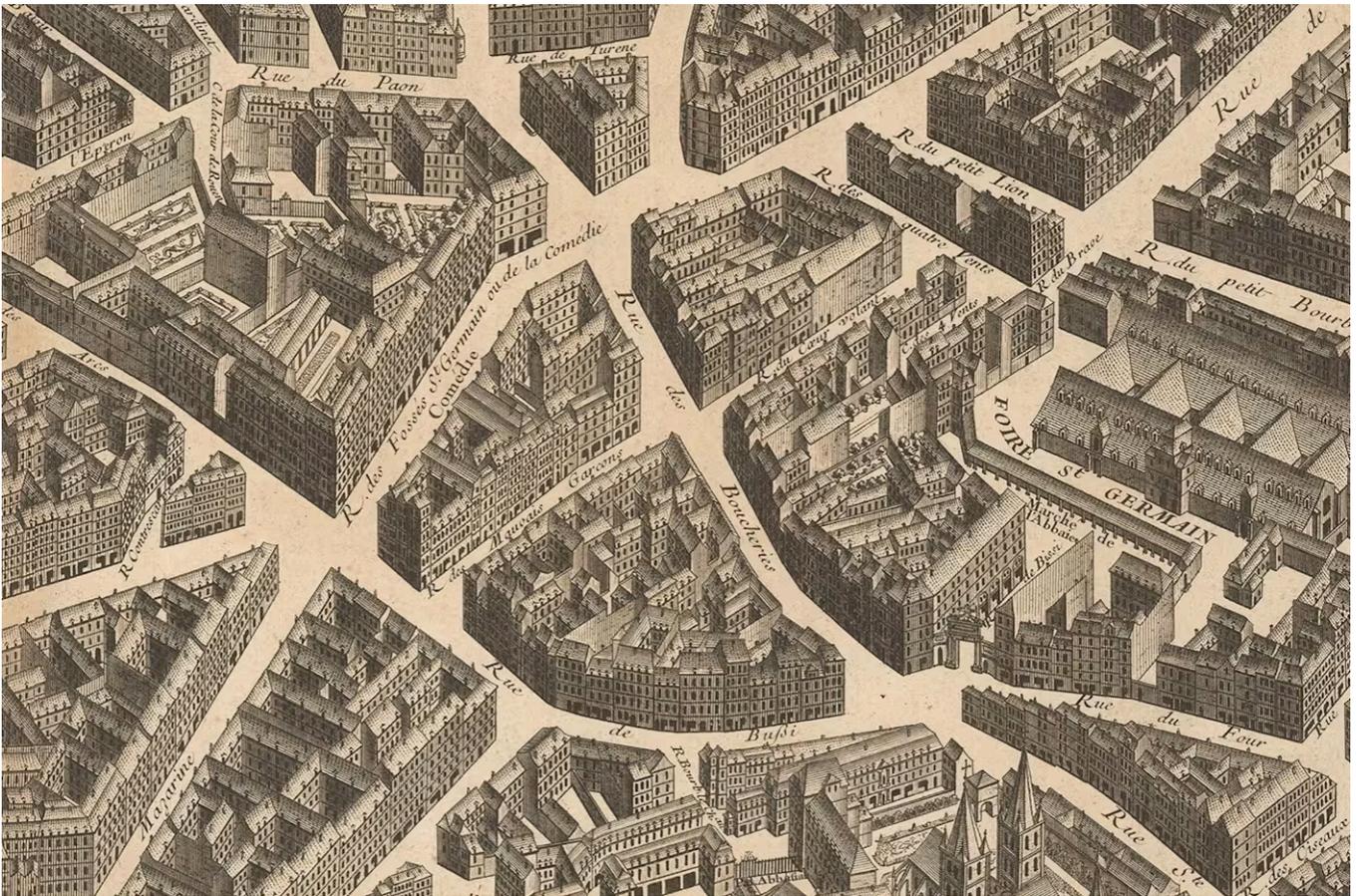
The story here is one of dualism. First, there is a very fine collection of 18th century city maps, cartographical products of the Enlightenment. They appear, initially, to be simply rational, objective surveys of emerging urbanisation, impressive for their precision and ambition. Yet all engage in storytelling, consciously or otherwise. In many cases, they are less a charting of the existing environment so much as an arcadian dream.



Large, engraved wall-mounted version of the Turgot map of Paris (1739) © Courtesy of Daniel Crouch



Bird's-eye view of the western tip of Île de la Cité in the Seine, projected from the west looking east, from the Turgot map... © Courtesy of Daniel Crouch

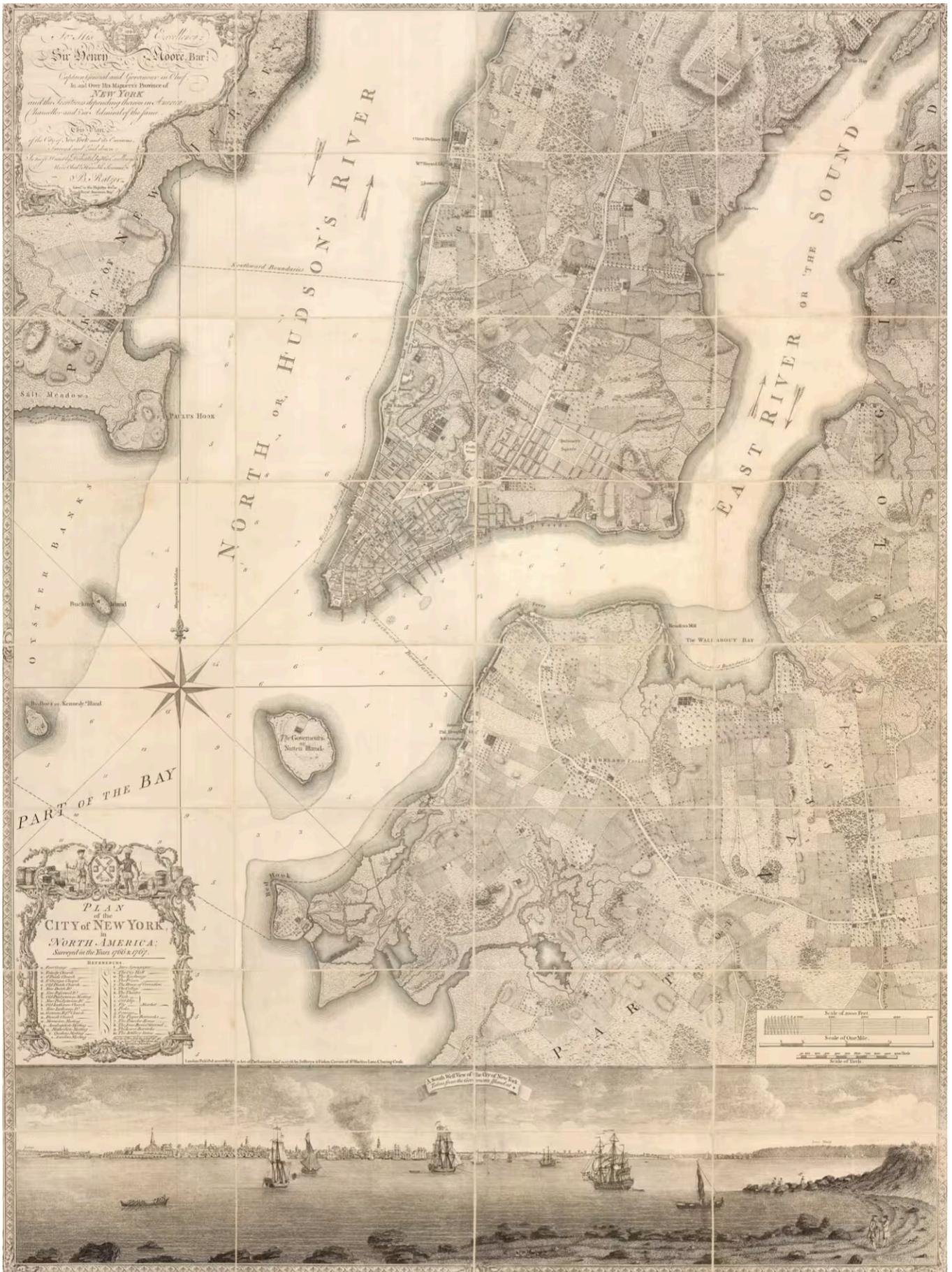


... and a detail just south of that image to what is now the 6th arrondissement of Paris, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, overlooking Rue de Buci and Rue Mazarine © Courtesy of Daniel Crouch

The Turgot map of Paris (1739) is a staggering feat — it took several years for the surveyor Louis Bretez to chart virtually every house, tree and courtyard of the city. And yet it feels like a requiem now to the *ancien régime* that would fall to the revolution 50 years later, papering over dysfunction and inequality with a rationalised veneer of order. Bernard Ratzel's "Plan of New York" (1767-70) depicts a semi-agrarian yet recognisable colonial settlement, with woods, farms and fortifications. And yet this space too is on the verge of another transformative revolution, used by the British military in their campaign to quell the uprising.

"Before long," Crouch observes, "the perspectives are going to change quite radically. This is the end, or the beginning of the end, of a lot of these huge European dynastic regimes. This is their high point, their zenith, but it's also, and they don't realise it, their last gasp." Fortifications were, he tells me, largely symbolic by this stage due to the impact of cannon warfare, and cities now battled more with the elements (Amsterdam's canals) or their own citizenry (Paris).

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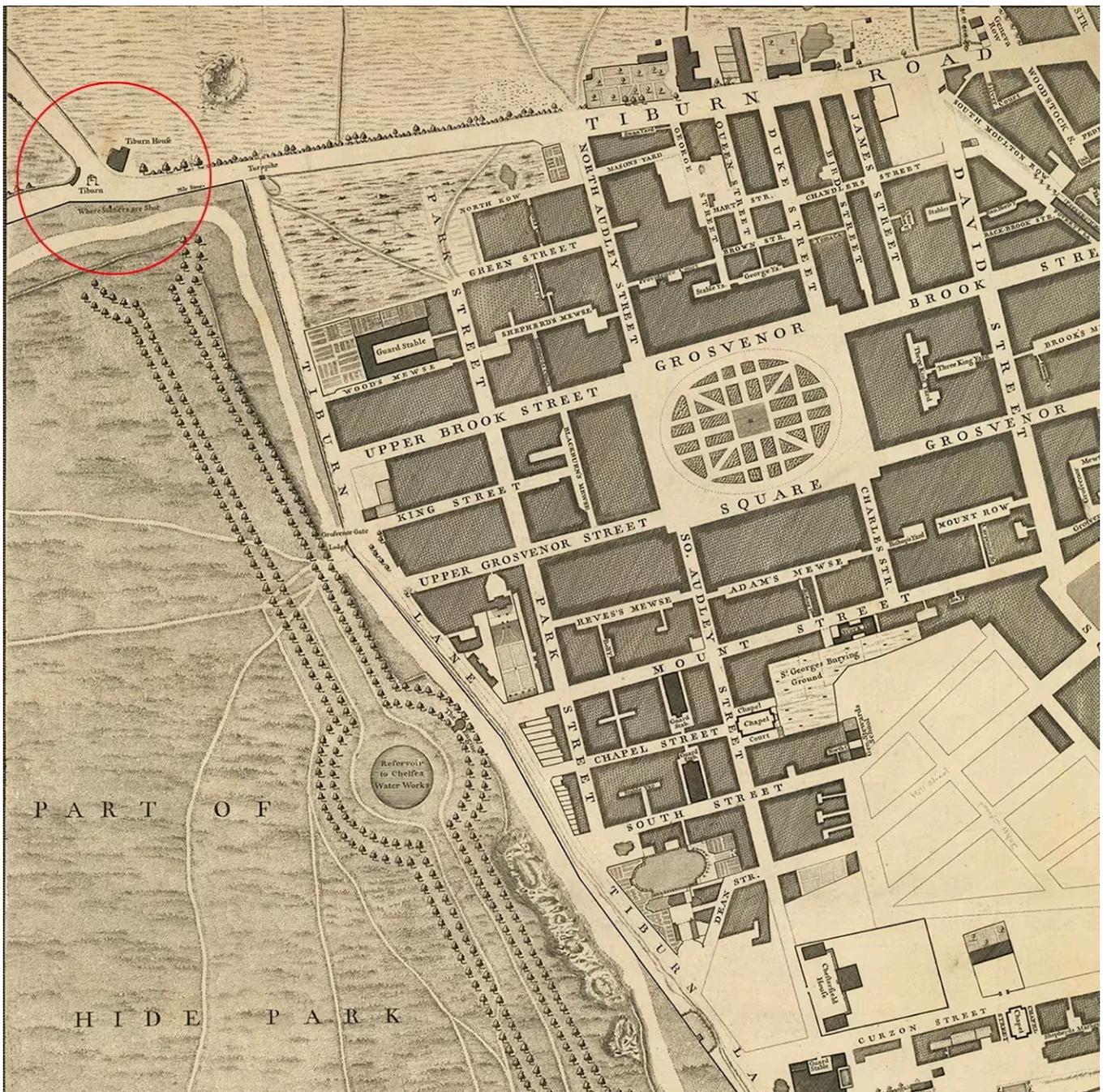


Bernard Ratzer's large engraved map of New York from 1776 shows southern Manhattan, eastern New Jersey, a large chunk of Brooklyn and the New York harbour at Governor's Island © Courtesy of Daniel Crouch

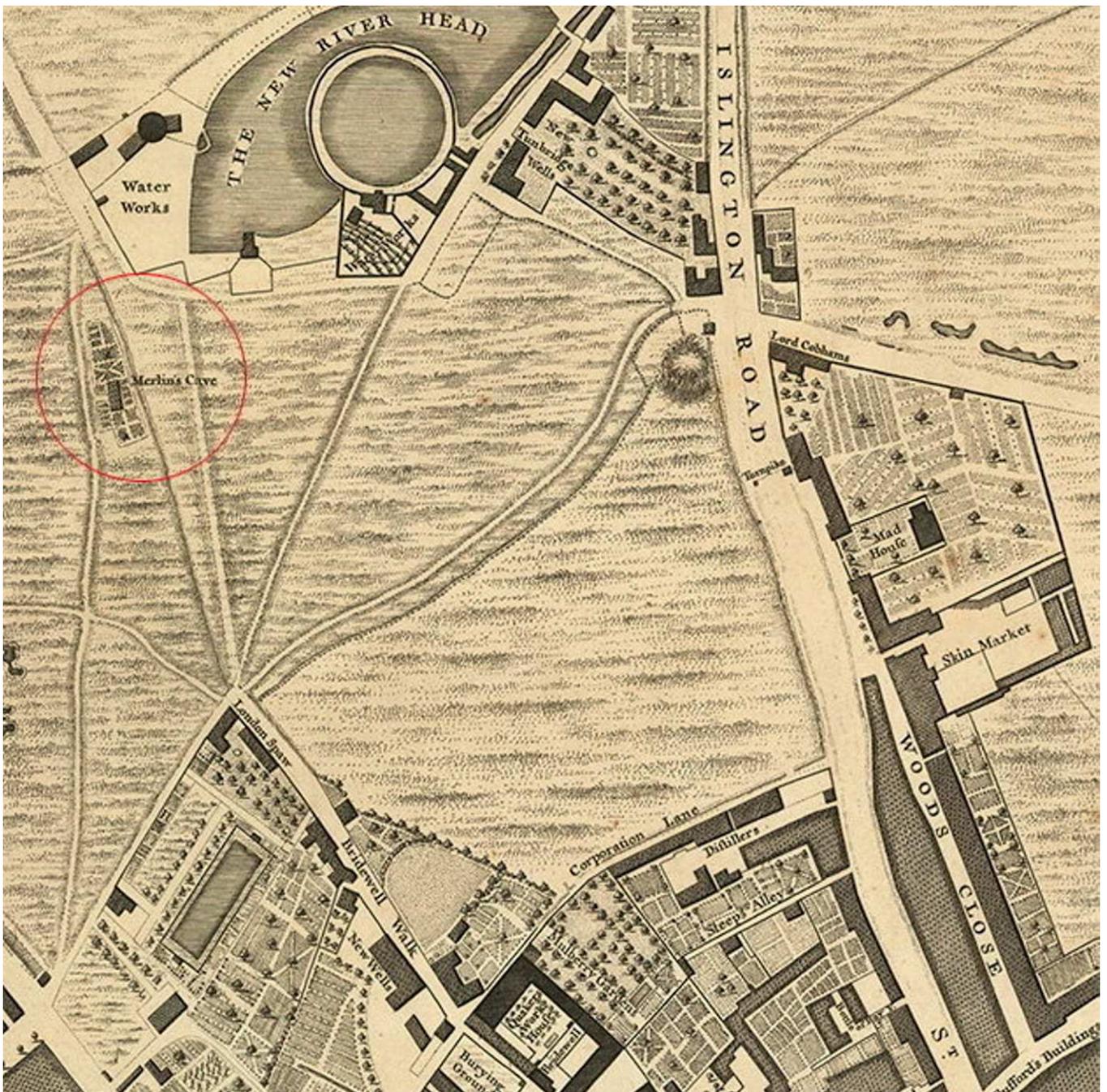
Political statements can be personal as well as grand. Jean Rocque's "A Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster and Borough of Southwark" (1746) is a colossal achievement, and according to Crouch, created partly as vengeance. "Rocque was a French Huguenot immigrant. And his main purpose in making the map, apart from earning a crust, was to demonstrate that London was now bigger than Paris, because he wanted his adopted city to be dominant, and to poke two fingers up at the French." Metropolitan rivalries aside, it's fascinating to see areas like Hampstead, Highgate and Richmond as villages, a feeling that they have retained even after being swallowed by the city. "Commuting starts happening in about 1746, you can trace it to that map."



Details from 'A Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster, and Borough of Southwark' (1746), Jean Rocque's map of London ©  
Courtesy of Daniel Crouch



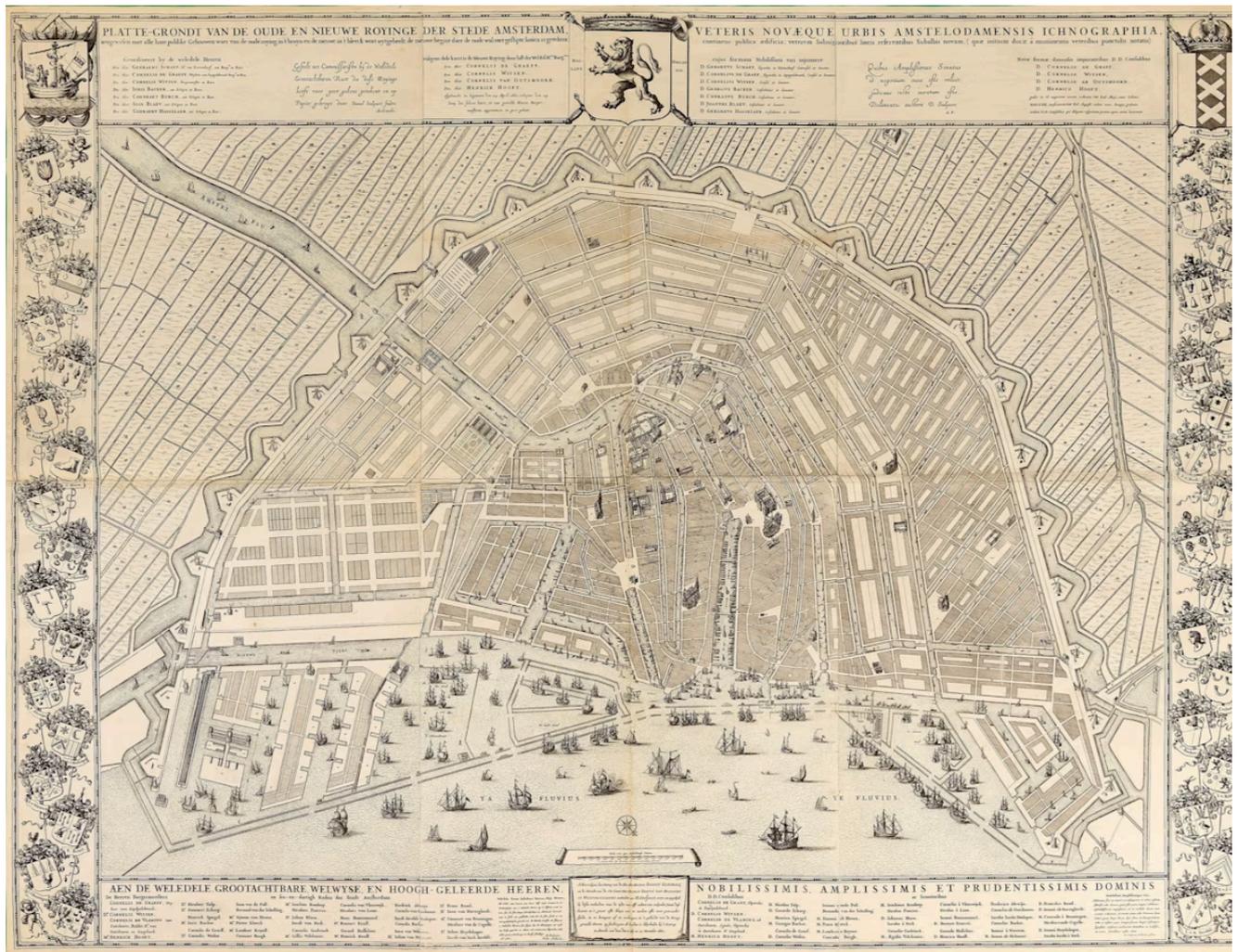
View of Mayfair on Rocque's map: the western edge of 'Tiburn Road' is now Oxford Street, while the encircled area, home of the Tyburn gallows, is now Marble Arch © Courtesy of Daniel Crouch



Detail from Rocque's map of what is now Clerkenwell: Islington Road is now St John Street, Bridewell Walk is Exmouth Market. Circled in red is an old tavern called 'Merlin's Cave' © Courtesy of Daniel Crouch

For all the grandeur then, it's these tantalising details that catch the eye in Roque's chart, from the Tyburn Tree (near present-day Marble Arch) to Merlin's Cave tavern, Islington. The Enlightenment was driven by scientific enquiry and maps are mathematical translations of three-dimensional space into two. Yet small features like these allow the cities to reveal the lives lived there, whether noble or disreputable.

“In the Turgot Paris map,” Crouch points out, “there are vast amounts of wood, and you realise how much was needed within the walls of Paris just to heat the place. In Amsterdam, you see the gallows on an island, and you realise the only humans depicted on that map are the dead ones. And in London, [you see] the Lord Mayor’s Barge and the Lord Mayor’s Procession. On this apparently scientific 24-sheet plan of London from 1746, you can see Pissing Alley, Whore’s Nest . . . You can learn a lot about what’s going on in the city.”



Daniel Stalpaert's map of Amsterdam in 1662 © Courtesy of Daniel Crouch

The second element of the exhibition works in conversation with the maps. Michael Hoppen Gallery brings Sohei Nishino's photographic diorama collages, for which the contemporary Japanese artist spends months walking the streets — London, New York, Tokyo, Jerusalem, Rio — photographing thousands of buildings and perspectives, before splicing them together to create a panoramic view of the city. They are startlingly vivid and immersive encapsulations of the vibrancy of the modern metropolis. “Everything everywhere all at once,” Crouch laughs. “Without being too psychological, you get the gestalt, the impressionistic view of the whole, which is so much more than any one part.”



Sohei Nishino's Diorama map of London, 2010, displayed by the Michael Hoppen Gallery © Courtesy of the artist and Michael Hoppen Gallery

These urban maps convey a sense of exploration and the joy of discovery, even across centuries. Despite all the wonders of GPS, it feels like a sense of romance has been lost comparing these charts to the apps on our phones. Has utility overridden beauty? Motivations in the 18th century may have been questionable or nefarious (empire, military, taxation) but there is something heroic about the ingenuity and effort of cartographers armed with compasses and theodolites, triangulating from vantage points of towers and steeples. However rational the intent, the stories therein feel fantastical, from the cunning of the Turgot map's isometric *perspective cavalière* that makes Paris appear three-dimensional, which Crouch compares to riding "Pegasus through the sky above Paris", to La Serenissima advertising its glories to the wider world in Lodovico Ughi's plan of Venice (1729), a labyrinth city that still defies easy navigation, to the tides, pilgrimage routes, constellations, and secretive Shogunate castle in an 1803 "Map of Edo".

Frozen at the moment of their devising, they are also testaments to transience, in spite of the permanence their patrons were seeking. This might be a melancholic thought but equally there is consolation in knowing nothing is truly set in stone. Maps like these captivate us not because of special spatial innovations and accuracy, but through their subtext of time, transformation and loss.

*March 14-19, tefaf.com*

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