




JOSEPH
WRIGHT OF
DERBY
(1734-1797)

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- Welcome, today I am talking about Joseph Wright of Derby best known for his starkly lit interiors but I will show he was one of the great artists of the eighteenth century and a master of portraits and landscapes.

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Self Portrait in Van Dyck Costume,
c. 1753-54, 76.2 x 63.5, Derby
Museum and Art Gallery

Self Portrait in Van Dyck Costume, c. 1753-54, 76.2 x 63.5, Derby Museum and Art Gallery

- Let's start at the beginning. He was born into a solid, middle-class family. His father was a lawyer, well-off but not wealthy.
- When he was 17 he travelled to London to study under the well-known portrait painter Thomas Hudson, the master of Joshua Reynolds.
- He painted this self-portrait when he was 19, it is his earliest known work and it shows his mastery of the portrait — and he knows it. The clothes he is wearing tell a story. They were not fashionable at the time but were reminiscent of those in Van Dyck's paintings. Sir Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641) was and still is regarded as one of the foremost portrait painters who has ever painted in Britain and so Wright is showing his confidence and his ability. It shows a young man full of determination, hinting at his future success.

BIO:WRIGHT

JOSEPH WRIGHT OF DERBY (1734-1797, AGE 62)

- Joseph Wright of Derby has been described as 'the first professional painter to express the spirit of the industrial revolution' (Francis Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution*).
- He was the third of five children of a solidly professional family in Derby (his father was a lawyer) and he was educated at Derby Grammar School teaching

himself to draw by copying prints. When he was 17 he went to London for two years and trained under Thomas Hudson, then the most highly reputed portraitist in London and master of Joshua Reynolds from 1740-44. He returned to Derby and painted portraits for three years before going back to London to complete his training.

- His colleagues believed that a career for an artist could only be found in London but Wright chose to spend most of his life in Derby among his friends and family and he received abundant commissions from Midlands society.
- Early Portraits: 1760-1773. Portraits were to become the mainstay of his career but he eventually found the greatest pleasure in landscape painting. Wright rarely flatters and some of his most sympathetic portraits are of children. It was at this time that he learned to concentrate on the play of light over faces and objects.
- Wright was connected with but not a member of the Lunar Society as he lacked scientific knowledge but it meant that he socialised with some of the greatest minds of the industrial age. He exhibited at the Society of Artists and later at the Royal Academy.
- He was called Wright of Derby in 1768 to distinguish him from Richard Wright of Liverpool as first names were not used. Even though Richard Wright is now unknown the name has stuck until the present day.
- Candlelight: 1765 onwards. He exhibited about 35 pictures at the Society of Artist from 1765 onwards and about half of them were 'candlelights', in which a hidden source of light illuminates the painting. They were known as 'fancy paintings' in the late eighteenth century. They were not initially dramatic scientific experiments but included scenes such as this with girls dressing a kitten or boys blowing bladders. In these paintings Wright demonstrates his knowledge of the well-known technique of chiaroscuro, or more accurately tenebrism, a dramatic form of chiaroscuro. Wright was known for his attention to detail and precision in the representation of textiles, texture, and surfaces.
- Four of these early candlelights were more elevated and *Three Persons Viewing the 'Gladiator' by Candlelight* was the first. All four made Wright's name. This one includes three men, including Wright in profile, looking at a reproduction of the Borghese Gladiator a Hellenistic statue by Agasias of Ephesus. In Wright's time it was in the Borghese Collection but it was sold and is now in the Louvre. The original is 1.9 metres tall and is now thought

to be a soldier not a gladiator.

- Society of Artists: from 1769 to 1771 Wright served on the board of directors of the Society of Artists. He later exhibited at the Royal Academy but like Thomas Gainsborough he quarrelled over the hanging of his paintings and in a radical display of independence he withdrew them and set up a one-man show at Covent Garden in 1785. Gainsborough had withdrawn his work from the Royal Academy and display his work at Schomberg House, his home and studio in Pall Mall, the previous year.
- Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797) has been described as 'the first professional painter to express the spirit of the industrial revolution' (Francis Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution*).
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- Mid-1780s onwards he found an increasing interest in landscape. He wrote, "I know not how it is, tho' I am engaged in portraits ... I find myself continually stealing off, and getting to Landscapes". He suffered from depression and towards the end of his life was treated by Erasmus Darwin for asthma and then dropsy (an accumulation of water in the tissues indicative of poor circulation). He died in 1797, aged 62.

TIMELINE

1734: Joseph Wright was born on September 3, 1734, in Derby, England. He was the third of five children born to Hannah Brookes and John Wright, a respected attorney.

1751: At the age of 17, Wright left his formal education behind and began his artistic training in London under the tutelage of renowned portraitist, Thomas Hudson.

1753: He produced his earliest known work, a self-portrait, showing a young man full of determination.

1757: Wright returned to Derby, where he made a name for himself as a portrait and landscape painter.

1762: Wright travelled to Liverpool, marking the beginning of his connections with the region's intellectuals and industrialists.

1765: Wright became an Associate Member of the Royal Academy.

1768: Wright painted one of his most famous works, "An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump". This painting was emblematic of his fascination with the interplay between light and dark.

1771: Wright married Hannah Swift after a ten-year courtship. The couple had six children, but only three survived to adulthood.

1773: Wright spent time in Italy studying the grandeur and drama of its landscapes. His paintings from this period, such as "Vesuvius in Eruption", showcase the influence of these experiences.

1775: Wright returned to Derby and produced some of his most notable works in the ensuing decade, including "Matlock Tor by Moonlight".

1781: He was elected a Royal Academy full member, but he declined the position.

1782: Tragically, Wright's wife Hannah passed away. The following years were marked by the production of paintings with more somber and melancholic themes.

1790: He painted "Romeo and Juliet: The Tomb Scene", a piece that reflects the era's fascination with romantic and tragic themes.

1793: Wright's health began to decline, but he continued to paint, focusing mainly on landscapes.

1795: He produced one of his last landscapes, "Llyn-y-Cau, Cader Idris", showcasing the power and beauty of nature.

1797: Joseph Wright of Derby died on August 29, 1797. His death marked the end of a fruitful career, which made significant contributions to the artistic world, particularly his ability to depict the interplay of light and shadow.

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Thomas Borrow (1709–1786), c. 1762-3, 127 × 101.6 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery
Anne Borrow (d.1799), c. 1762-3, 127 × 101.6 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery

A Boy Admiring a Statuette by Candlelight, after 1760, 47.7 × 51.6 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery

Thomas Borrow (1709–1786), c. 1762-3, 127 × 101.6 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery

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A Boy Admiring a Statuette by Candlelight, after 1760, 47.7 × 51.6 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery

- In 1753, he settled in Derby painting portraits of the leading figures of the town. He was just 19 but was already an accomplished portrait painter. This is the mayor of Derby and his wife, Thomas and Anne Borrow. He made most of his money painting portraits but, like Thomas Gainsborough, his first love was landscapes.
- **(CLICK)** At the same time he distinguished himself as an artist by painting subjects like this, under strong artificial light with strong chiaroscuro and he is best known today for these works. This type of painting was not unique to Wright but he became a leading exponent of this popular subject.

Joseph Wright of Derby
(1734–1797), *A
Philosopher Giving that
Lecture on the Orrery, in
which a Lamp is put in
place of the Sun or The
Orrery*, c.1766, 147.2 ×
203.2 cm, Derby Museum



Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–1797), *A Philosopher Giving that Lecture on the Orrery, in which a Lamp is put in place of the Sun or The Orrery*, c.1766, 147.2 × 203.2 cm, Derby Museum

- This is an example and his first masterpiece painted when he was 32. This painting helped solidify his place among the respected artists of his time. It depicts a scientific demonstration, showing Wright's interest in science and technology and it shows an orrery, a mechanical model of the solar system.
- Wright's neighbour was a clockmaker (John Whitehurst) who was selling tickets for a lecture given by James Ferguson (1710-1776), a Scottish scientist. Such science lectures were very popular and were attended by a mixed clientele. Ferguson had published a book on mechanics and optics and he would illustrate his lectures using a variety of machines and instruments.
- The painting was bought by the 5th Earl Ferrers, an amateur astronomer who owned an orrery himself. We do not know for certain who all the figures are but the man taking notes was a friend of Wright and it has been suggested that Earl Ferrers and his nephew are included in the painting. We don't know the name of the philosopher giving the lecture but the face could be based on the appearance of Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727) who had died 40 years before but whose law of universal gravitation unified the terrestrial and celestial worlds.
- Most artists focused on portraits as that was where the money was but Wright became the first painter to represent the 'modern' world and in this cleverly lit scene he has captured the excitement of the age and the interest of both the

young and the old in science.

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An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump, 1768, 183 x 244 cm, National Gallery



An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump, 1768, 183 x 244 cm, National Gallery

- Another example of his starkly lit interiors. This has become one of his best known works. It shows a white bird in a bell jar from which the air is being pumped out. The natural philosopher waits until the bird has collapsed and then floods the bell jar with air and brings it back to life. Demonstrating science's power over life and death. A well-known art historian described it as 'one of the wholly original masterpieces of British art'.
- At the time, the *Gazetteer's* reviewer singled out Wright's handling of candlelight as evidence that 'Mr. Wright, of Derby, is a very great and uncommon genius in a peculiar way' (23 May 1768).
- Air pumps were relatively common and were used by itinerant lecturers in natural philosophy who toured the country entertaining audiences in town halls and wealthy person's homes. One of the best known was James Ferguson, a Scottish astronomer who was probably a friend of Wright. Typically a small bladder was used to simulate the lungs as **using a live animal** was regarded as '**too shocking to every spectator who has the least degree of humanity**'.
- Wright shows a white cockatoo fluttering in panic and the lecturer looks out at the viewer as if to ask us to judge whether the pumping should continue, killing the bird, or whether the air should be replaced and the cockatoo saved. The boy on the right is either lowering the cage to replace the bird or raising the cage as he knows it will die. Alternatively, it has been suggested he is drawing the curtains to block out the full moon. In an earlier sketch the lecturer

is reassuring the girls and the bird does survive. The cockatoo was a rare bird at the time, **'and one whose life would never in reality have been risked in an experiment such as this'**.

- The full moon could suggest the Lunar Society to his friends as it met every full moon. More about the Lunar Society later.
- Unusually at the time it was painted without a commission and was purchased by Dr Benjamin Bates. An Aylesbury physician, patron of the arts and hedonist, Bates was a diehard member of the Hellfire Club who, despite his excesses, lived to be over 90. Wright's account book shows a number of prices for the painting: £200 is shown in one place and £210 in another, but Wright had written to Bates asking for £130, stating that the low price **'might much injure me in the future sale of my pictures, and when I send you a receipt for the money I shall acknowledge a greater sum.'** Whether Bates ever paid the full amount is not recorded; Wright only notes in his account book that he received £30 in part payment.

NOTES

- Wright worked in Liverpool between 1768 and 1771 and his main income was from portraiture. His portraits have an honest realism far removed from the 'polite' portraiture of his contemporaries.
- Hellfire Clubs were established for 'persons of quality' who wished to engage in immoral activities. The most famous was set up by Sir Francis Dashwood and engaged in mock religious ceremonies, drinking, wenching and banqueting. It was a popular fashion at the time to ridicule religion and commit acts of blasphemy.

The Alchemist Discovering Phosphorus, 1771 (reworked 1795), 127 × 106.1 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery



The Alchemist Discovering Phosphorus, 1771 (reworked 1795), 127 × 106.1 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery, its full name is *The Alchymist, in Search of the Philosopher's Stone, Discovers Phosphorus, and prays for the successful Conclusion of his operation, as was the custom of the Ancient Chymical Astrologers*

- This depicts the German alchemist Hennig Brand (c.1630-c.1710) discovering phosphorus in the 17th century. The interior is a Gothic church rather than a 17th century laboratory and the period was when modern chemistry was emerging from ancient alchemy. Hennig Brand was probably trying to discover the Philosopher's Stone which would turn base metals into gold. Instead he has, to his amazement, discovered phosphorus.
- Wright has idealised the process which involved boiling down 50-60 buckets of urine.
- To the educated viewer at the time the painting raised concerns about superstition. Phosphorus was known as the 'Devil's element' and the religious Gothic church setting and magical light conflicted with rational processes of chemical research as it was conducted at the time. These concerns disturbed 18th century viewers and it did not sell until four years after his death.

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The *Blacksmith's Shop*, 1771,
128.3 × 104.1 cm, Yale Center for
British Art

The *Blacksmith's Shop*, 1771, 128.3 × 104.1 cm, Yale Center for British Art

- This is a blacksmith's shop and Wright has captured a scene from everyday life but it was a very unusual subject to paint at this time. It was one of five variations he painted on the theme of the blacksmith's shop and in this one he is celebrating the dignity of human labour.

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The Iron Forge, 1772,
121.3 × 132 cm, Tate

The Iron Forge, 1772, 121.3 × 132 cm, Tate

- This is a celebration of technology. The hammer was lifted and dropped constantly by water power and the arrangement would have been very expensive and not affordable by the typical blacksmith.
- The blacksmith is showing off his new investment to his family who must be deafened by the noise.
- The area of south-east England known as the Weald (Kent, Sussex and parts of Surrey and Hampshire) has been a major iron-producing region since before the Romans arrived 2,000 years ago. Rivers were dammed to create hammer ponds that were used to power these heavy hammers that would operate all day. What is now tranquil countryside must have echoed with the noise of multiple hammers continually crashing down all day long together with the smoke from the furnaces, countless workers and roads full of carts carrying iron, wood and charcoal.

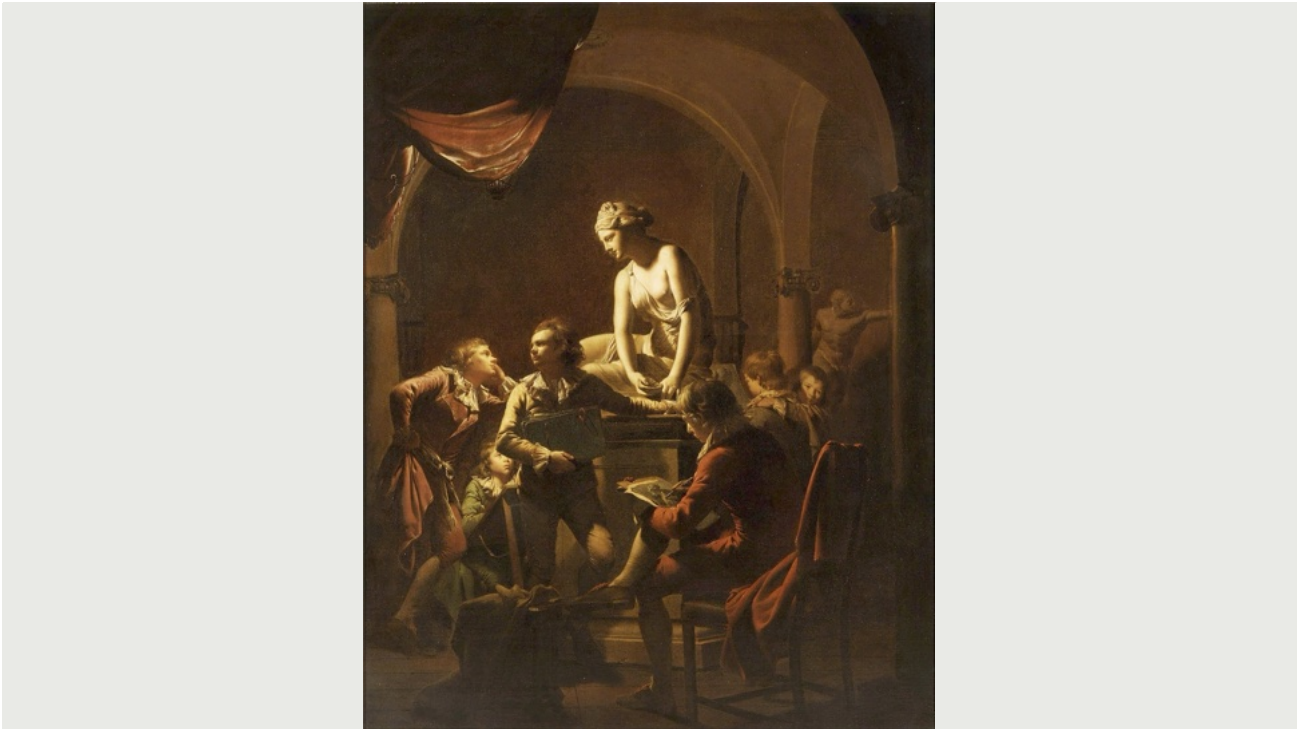
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Iron Forge Viewed from Outside, 1773, 105 × 140 cm, Hermitage Museum

- This is a similar painting of a water powered hammer but seen from outside and combined with a moonlit scene. This painting is in the Hermitage Museum.
- We shall see other moonlit scenes later, a popular subject at the time.
- The moon is also a reminder for me to mention the **Lunar Society**, so called because its members met whenever there was a full moon so that that could find their way home after the meeting.
- Wright was not a member but was closely connected and knew all the members who included , **Erasmus Darwin**, Charles Darwin's grandfather, **Matthew Boulton**, who with **James Watt** invented and sold the stream engines that helped power the Industrial Revolution, the author and anti-slavery campaigner **Thomas Day**, **Joseph Priestley** the chemist and the potter and abolitionist **Josiah Wedgwood**.



Academy by Lamplight, 1770, 127 × 101 cm, Yale Center for British Art

- Not all his scenes depicted science and technology. This is an imaginary art academy where a group of students are gathered round a plaster cast of the Hellenistic sculpture *Nymph with a Shell* now in the Louvre.
- The contemplation of art was regarded at the time as a **civilising activity which would make the person more virtuous** compared with the rough and aggressive masculinity represented by the Hellenistic statue of the *Borghese Gladiator* (100 BCE, Louvre) in the background.

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Cavern, near Naples (from the *Grotto in the Gulf of Salerno* series), 1774, 101.6 × 127 cm, Yale Center for British Art



Cavern, near Naples (from the *Grotto in the Gulf of Salerno* series), 1774, 101.6 × 127 cm, Yale Center for British Art

- By 1773, aged 39, he was an established and internationally known artist. He married Ann (also known as Hannah) Swift (1748/9-1790), the daughter of a Derbyshire lead miner and shortly after set off for Italy with his pregnant wife and two friends.
- They spent some time in Naples and this shows his mastery of capturing light in a cave near Salerno. The painting is one of a series of four that capture the light at different times of the day. The painting reflects the romantic fascination with landscapes and his sense of awe and reverence for nature's beauty.

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Eruption of Vesuvius 1771 seen from Portici, 1774-76, The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens



Eruption of Vesuvius 1771 seen from Portici, 1774-76, The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens

- When in Naples he never witnessed a major eruption of Vesuvius but painted a number landscapes of the volcano erupting based on minor eruptions.
- This represents the sublime in nature. The idea of the sublime is central to the Romantic's perception of the world. About twenty years before he visited Italy Edmund Burke published ***A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful***, and this provided an analysis of the sublime and provided the Romantics a theoretical basis for their approach to the world based on individual feeling rather than reason and logic.

NOTES

- Edmund Burke (1729-97) was born in Dublin and educated there at Trinity College. He is best known for his political achievements: firstly as a Whig MP; and then as the founder of modern conservatism with the publication in 1790 of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*



Portrait of Sir Richard Arkwright, 1780-90, 241.3 × 152.4 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery

Portrait of Sir Richard Arkwright, 1780-90, 241.3 × 152.4 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery

Portrait of Richard Arkwright (1732-1792), English inventor

- **On his return he set up as a portrait painter in fashionable Bath** but was dissatisfied and returned to Derby in 1777 where he spent the rest of his life.
- This is a portrait of the **industrialist and inventor Richard Arkwright**, a leading figure in the Industrial Revolution. He was the **first to open factories** that mechanised the cotton industry, deskilling weaving and enabling him to employ women and children to carry out most of the work.
- Arkwright is painted as a noble figure, highlighting his status in society. The Industrial Revolution gave rise to a new wealthy middle class of industrialists who were to take over from the landed gentry as the main artistic patrons of the nineteenth century.



Arkwright's Cotton Mill by Moonlight, 1782, 99.7 × 125.7 cm, private collection

Arkwright's Cotton Mill by Moonlight, 1782, 99.7 × 125.7 cm, private collection

- This is Arkwright's first factory in Cromford, 30 miles from Derby. A **wonder of the age**. It is difficult today to appreciate the impact of this seven storey structure. It operated 24 hours a day with its lights burning in all the windows. It was an **awe inspiring symbol** of the profound changes about to take place in society. Over the next hundred years the number of people living in the countryside dropped dramatically.
- Wright has **romanticised by showing it by moonlight**. Wright was the first to convey the beauty of the industrial revolution and its power and spectacle.
- There was also a darker side as the factory operated 24 hours a day and children worked long hours in dangerous conditions. It was still twenty years before William Blake coined the phrase 'dark satanic mills' normally thought to refer to factories although some people think Blake was referring to the great churches of England as he was opposed to the established church.

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Portrait of Erasmus Darwin, 1770,
76 × 63.5 cm, National Portrait
Gallery, London



Portrait of Erasmus Darwin, 1770, 76 × 63.5 cm, National Portrait Gallery, London

- Richard Arkwright was also a member of the **Lunar Society** alongside many other famous inventors and scientists. This is a portrait Erasmus Darwin, the grandfather of Charles Darwin, who, as I said, was a member.
- Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802) was a doctor of medicine, a philosopher, inventor, poet and abolitionist. He was well known and regarded as one of the greatest of the Enlightenment thinkers. He was a close friend of Josiah Wedgwood, another Lunar Society member, whose daughter Susanna married his son Robert and their son, the famous Charles Darwin married his first cousin Emma, daughter of Josiah Wedgwood's son (Josiah II).

NOTES

- The Lunar Society of Birmingham was a dinner club and informal learned society of prominent figures in the Midlands Enlightenment, including industrialists, natural philosophers and intellectuals, who met regularly between 1765 and 1813 in Birmingham, England. At first called the Lunar Circle, "Lunar Society" became the formal name by 1775. The name arose because the society would meet during the full moon, as the extra light made the journey home easier and safer in the absence of street lighting. The Society started through a friendship between Erasmus Darwin and Matthew Boulton and their regular meeting to discuss science and the latest inventions grew over time. The members cheerfully referred to themselves as "lunarticks",

a pun on lunatics. Matthew Boulton, Erasmus Darwin, Thomas Day, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, Samuel Galton, Jr., James Keir, Joseph Priestley, William Small, Jonathan Stokes, James Watt, Josiah Wedgwood, John Whitehurst and William Withering attended the Society over a long period. A larger group including Joseph Wright were associated with the Society.

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Joseph Wright of Derby, *Sir Brooke Boothby*, 1781,
148.6 x 207.6cm



Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797), *Sir Brooke Boothby*, 1781, 148.6 x 207.6cm

- Sir Brooke Boothby, 6th Baronet (1744-1824), was an amateur poet and philosopher who was an associate member of the **Lunar Society**. He met the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau when he fled from France and lived nearby. Boothby commissioned Joseph Wright of Derby to produce this portrait to show he followed Rousseau's philosophy.
- We see him reclining by a stream in a wooded glade once known as the Twenty Oaks where he and Rousseau met for discussion and where Rousseau went to write in peace and solitude. He is holding a leather bound book with the name **Rousseau on the spine** rather than a specific title, thus referencing Boothby's interest in the philosopher's entire oeuvre. The landscape setting can be interpreted as referring to Rousseau's idea that all of man's troubles and unhappiness derive from his self-removal from the natural world.

NOTES

- According to Andrew Graciano, the plants in the setting refer to Boothby's interest in botany and the botanical aspect of the painting has previously been ignored. Both Boothby and Rousseau were interested in botany and Rousseau studied local flora when he lived at Wootton Hall.

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Dovedale by Moonlight, 1784-5, 62.2 × 74.3 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

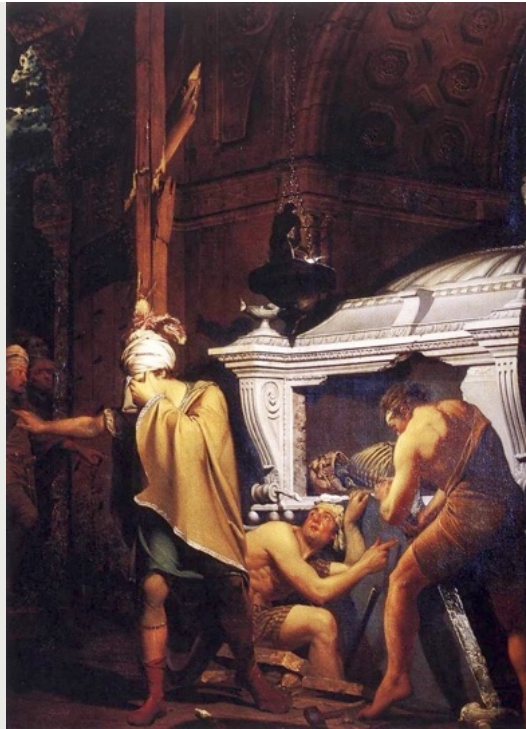


Dovedale by Moonlight, 1784-5, 62.2 × 74.3 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

- This landscape painting showcases Wright's extraordinary skill at rendering light and atmosphere. It is one of five paintings of the picturesque Dovedale valley. The painting reflects the Romantic period's fascination with moonlit scenes. Night transforms a landscape into a mysterious place and moonlight subtly illuminates the scene creating a feeling of secret places and melancholy.
- He gave one of the Dovedale paintings to Josiah Wedgwood and two others he sold to Brooke Boothby.

REFERENCES

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Miravan Breaking Open the Tomb of his Ancestors, 1772, 127 cm × 101.6 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery, Derby

Miravan Breaking Open the Tomb of his Ancestors, 1772, 127 cm × 101.6 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery, Derby

- This is another type of painting by Wright. It depicts a dramatic and somewhat morbid scene from a French novel. It tells the story of Miravan, an Arab nobleman who has come upon the tomb of one of his ancestors with the inscription, **'in this tomb is a greater treasure than Croesus ever possessed.'** Driven by greed, he orders it to be opened and is struck dumb when he discovers only a heap of dust and bones. In his despair he realises he has been tricked and will never enjoy eternal peace as he has disturbed the tomb of one of his ancestors.
- The hidden message is that Miravan, like the scientists of the Enlightenment is driven by curiosity, and this has led to his undoing. It suggests that our curiosity should be tempered by our finer feelings.

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The Dead Soldier, c. 1789, 101.6 × 127 cm, Yale Center for British Art



The Dead Soldier, c. 1789, 101.6 × 127 cm, Yale Center for British Art

- Here, Wright creates one of his **most emotionally charged paintings**. It shows a widow and her baby mourning the death of her soldier husband, evoking strong feelings of sympathy and sorrow.
- The painting was inspired by a poem called *The Country Justice* (1774-77) by John Langhorne.
- It represents a significant departure from his scientific and industrial themes and this painting became **one of his most famous paintings during his lifetime**. It was shown at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1789 to great acclaim.

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The Indian Widow, 1783, 102 × 127 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery

The Indian Widow, 1783, 102 × 127 cm, Derby Museum and Art Gallery

- The painting depicts a Native American widow gazing at the tomb of her deceased husband.
- Wright had never crossed the Atlantic, but reading James Adair's *History of the American Indians* (1775) he had found an account of the vigil kept by the widow of a brave '**for the first moon ... under his mourning war-pole**'.
- It was exhibited at what we believe was his first solo exhibition which he planned the same year he refused to become a Royal Academician.
- This painting was also very popular and he has suppressed his customary prudery by showing her bare breast.
- At the time it was fashionable to think of the Native Americans as 'loyal' supporters of the British in their combined struggle against the rebel Americans.

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The Old Man and Death, 1773, 101 × 127 cm, Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art (Hartford, Connecticut)

The Old Man and Death, 1773, 101 × 127 cm, Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art (Hartford, Connecticut)

- This is an earlier painting that he painted when he went to Italy in 1774. He left this painting to be exhibited at the Society of Artists but it failed to sell.
- It is an unusual story. An old man is accosted by a skeleton in broad daylight. This 'Gothick' theme was popular at the time but Wright has taken it too far making the scene too strange for contemporary taste.
- It is based on a story by Aesop. A poor woodman, overwhelmed by the burdens of age and work, lays down his bundle of sticks and **calls upon Death to ease his woes**. When **Death duly arrives**, armed with an arrow, the **terrified woodman politely asks him for help to pick up his bundle**. The moral of the story is "**Man any miseries will endure | Rather than seek from death a cure.**"

NOTES

- "Perhaps this story of an old man suddenly accosted by a skeleton in broad daylight was too strange, too 'Gothick' for polite audiences. Aesop's original fable tells how a poor woodman, overwhelmed by the burdens of age and work, lays down his bundle of sticks and calls upon Death to ease his woes. When Death duly arrives, armed with an arrow, the terrified woodman politely asks him for help to pick up his bundle. The artist has emphasised the old man's fear by having him shrink back into the shadows, extending his arm as though to push away the advancing skeleton." (Amina Wright, Joseph Wright of Derby:

Bath and Beyond)

- The moral of the fable has been translated as:
 - Man any miseries will endure
 - Rather than seek from death a cure.
- There is a smaller version in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, which may have been commissioned by a collector who saw the original.

Self Portrait, c. 1780, 61 × 73 cm, Yale Center for British Art



Self Portrait, c. 1780, 61 × 73 cm, Yale Center for British Art
Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–1797)

- This is one of the last self-portraits he painted. It shows a mature Wright, with the same determination but more wisdom in his eyes.
- It's a testament to his growth as an artist, comparing it to his first self-portrait and the brushwork shows a more relaxed and confident artist.

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JOSEPH
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Self Portrait, c. 1780, 61 × 73 cm, Yale Center for British Art
Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–1797)

- One of the great artists of the eighteenth century. Often associated just with his artificially lit interiors I hope I have shown you the scope of his work. Especially the way he captured the drama and power of the rapidly changing world of the industrial revolution right at its beginning (no pun intended).
- Thank you