Joseph Wright of Derby : Painter of Light, Painter of Darkness

Background Notes

Emma Matthews — 9 September 2026



Joseph Wright of Derby, self-portrait at about the age of 40, 1772 (Derby Museum and Art Gallery)

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Joseph Wright of Derby (1734 - 1797) was a provincial painter (his birthplace became part of his name) and a painter of wider ambition during a 50-year career: a portraitist, a painter of "fancy" paintings, scientific subjects and landscapes. He was fascinated by the world of experiment and industry but was also preoccupied with darkness, solitude, melancholy and mortality. Francis Klingender called him "the first painter to express the spirit of the Industrial Revolution". Benedict Nicolson gave him the memorable title Painter of Light, while Matthew Craske has reversed the emphasis, calling him Painter of Darkness. James Northcote, a contemporary of Wright, described him as the most famous painter then living 'for candlelights', and the London Gazetteer called him 'a very great and uncommon genius in a peculiar way'. Peculiar here means singular rather than odd!

Wright was labelled in the 20th century the painter who gave visual form to the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, but we should be cautious using these terms which are 19th century constructions; we risk making Wright illustrate an historical thesis rather than looking closely at the man, his friendships, his patrons and the circumstances in which pictures were made. Matthew Craske, 2020 Paul Mellon art history prize winner, asks us to take seriously the darker, more personal dimensions of Wright's art and evidence of his melancholic and nervous temperament. The recent National Gallery exhibition and catalogue, *Wright of Derby: From the Shadows*, looks beyond the familiar image of the celebrated painter of scientific progress and considers darkness, spectacle, morality, death and uncertainty.

Wright was born at 28 Irongate, Derby in 1734, the third son of John Wright, a prosperous and respected lawyer known as 'Equity Wright'. His father initially disapproved of his son's artistic ambitions, but Joseph was determined. He copied prints and illustrations, sketched street signs and developed an early fascination with making mechanical and optical devices. This paid off and he was sent to London aged 16 to the studio of leading portrait painter Thomas Hudson. Joshua Reynolds had been a pupil of Hudson. Wright spent 2 periods with Hudson returning to Derby in between to develop his portrait painting practice which was to remain his primary output.

Surviving family evidence is in the form of notes by Wright's elder brother Richard and the unpublished memoir of his niece Hannah. Many of his papers were destroyed when he died. The Walpole Institute holds extracts of his letters, diaries and account books which are very interesting. These sources help us see the person behind the paintings: intensely concerned with his health, his circumstances and his relationships. We should be cautious about diagnosing a historical figure in modern medical terms, but contemporary descriptions of nervousness and melancholia can't be ignored. He seems to have suffered periods of depression. Did his state of mind affect his choice of subjects? His repeated return to night, solitude, ruins, old age and mortality suggest that possibility.

Wright's interest in illumination was also intellectual and visual. His world was one in which scientific knowledge was increasingly presented as spectacle. Travelling lecturers demonstrated experiments to paying audiences. Magic lanterns, camera obscura devices, peepshows, perspective boxes and Claude glasses transformed the act of looking into a form of entertainment. Wright understood this well. His paintings of the 1760s and early 1770s repeatedly show people looking—watching an experiment, studying an object, contemplating a flame or examining an image. The viewer of the painting becomes another spectator.



(1) Joseph Wright of Derby, *A Philosopher Giving that Lecture on the Orrery,* 1766 (Derby Museum and Art Gallery)

Wright's two most famous scientific paintings are *A Philosopher Giving that Lecture on the Orrery* of 1766 **(1)** and *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* of 1768. Scientific demonstration becomes a psychological drama. Artificial light illuminates the faces of the spectators, while the bird at the centre of the experiment in the *Air Pump* becomes an object of fascination and distress. Children react differently; an older man appears absorbed in thought; others look on with curiosity or apprehension. The paintings are about science, but also spectatorship, morality and emotion. The National Gallery's recent exhibition emphasised precisely this combination of science and drama. Wright was also aware of wider moral and philosophical debates about education and childhood – innocence and its loss – in the ideas of Rousseau who spent time near Derby. This was a time of debates about aesthetics with discussions of texts such as Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), an analysis of the sublime which provided the Romantics with a theoretical basis for their approach to the world based on individual feeling rather than reason and logic. New interests and friendships will later lead Wright to focus on landscapes. But in the early part of his career before his marriage and trip to Italy in the 1774-5 it was the 'candlelights' that lit the public's imagination – even if it didn't always open their wallets.

Wright's connections with the Midlands intellectual world were important. He knew people associated with and members of the Lunar Society, including Erasmus Darwin, and he moved in circles in which science, medicine, industry and philosophy overlapped. Jenny Uglow's *The Lunar Men*, examines this world: not as a formal organisation so much as a network of friends, correspondents and collaborators whose curiosity crossed the boundaries between science, technology, manufacturing and the arts. The Midlands was an energetic environment in which ideas circulated between people such as Darwin, Boulton, Watt and Wedgwood. One of the world's first factories, Lombe's silk throwing mill was on the Derwent in Derby and lunar man Richard Arkwright was a patron of Wright.

But we should resist making Wright simply "the painter of the Lunar Society". There are many examples of works which were inspired by discussions with friends. Peter Perez Burdett, was a particularly important friend and collaborator until he seems to have fled to Germany in debt and out of Wright's life. Burdett was a surveyor, cartographer and

draughtsman, and his interests in perspective, mapping and visual representation connected closely with Wright's own concerns. He appears in several of Wright's paintings of the late 1760s. The Earl Ferrers, Erasmus Darwin and other patrons and friends formed part of the social world in which Wright worked. The pictures often emerged from these relationships. The *Orrery* was owned by Ferrers and possibly commissioned by him. The *Air Pump* may have been the idea of Dr Benjamin Bates who owned one and bought the painting from the artist.



(2) Joseph Wright of Derby, *Iron Forge Viewed from Without,* 1773 (Hermitage, St. Petersburg)

The *Iron Forge Viewed from Without,* 1773 **(2)** purchased by Catherine the Great and still in the Hermitage, has often been treated as an emblem of industrialisation, and it certainly dignifies industrial labour. Yet Wright's fascination with the forge is also pictorial: the glowing furnace becomes another source of illumination, a natural equivalent of the candle in his indoor experiments. Industry is transformed into spectacle. The National Gallery's recent exhibition similarly placed scenes of working-class labour alongside scientific demonstrations and nocturnal subjects, encouraging us to see a continuity in Wright's fascination with illumination rather than

simply a chronological story of technological progress. *The Earth Stopper,* 1773 and two "fancy pictures" of children support this.

His artistic sources were equally important. Wright was deeply engaged with Old Master painting. Caravaggio's chiaroscuro and the Dutch tradition of tenebrism provided an obvious model for his extreme contrasts between light and dark. Rembrandt offered another model for the expressive possibilities of darkness. Other Netherlandish artists, including Gerrit Van Honthorst, Adam de Coster and Judith Leyster, explored candlelit scenes with a theatrical intimacy that Wright could adapt. Godfried Schalken's (1643-1706) works were available through engravings, including those by Wright's engraver Willaim Pether. Prints were essential to 18th century artistic culture. Wright's own candlelight pictures were subsequently translated into mezzotints by Pether and other printmakers like Richard Earlom and Valentine Green, allowing his inventions to circulate beyond the original paintings. The mezzotint was almost an ideal medium for Wright because it could reproduce the richness of his dark tones and dramatic illumination.

His career also reminds us that he was not simply a Derby painter. After his London training, he worked in Liverpool, married Ann Swift, travelled to Italy and even tried unsuccessfully to establish himself in Bath, before returning to Derby in 1777. Italy was especially important. His landscapes of the Campagna and Naples, and his fascination with Vesuvius, demonstrate how far his interests extended beyond candlelit science. He developed an affinity with landscape artists of the Italian Baroque – Claude Lorriane, Poussin and Salvator Rosa being prime examples.

Back in Derby, Wright developed a new and personal form of landscape painting. This is where the darker interpretation becomes particularly persuasive. Night landscapes, moonlight, ruins and solitary figures suggest an artist interested in reflection and melancholy as much as in scientific illumination. The night could be a time of deep thought, observation and scholarship, but also of isolation and mortality. He knew the power of theatrical display. But he was also a painter trained in the Old Master tradition, a portraitist dependent on patrons, a traveller, a friend, a husband and a man apparently troubled by his own health and temperament.

The recent *From the Shadows* exhibition at the National Gallery encouraged a reconsideration of Wright' imaginative world. It stressed darkness and illumination, observation and spectacle, science and learning, childhood and labour, while placing Wright within a wider European painting tradition rather than treating him as merely a provincial chronicler of English industry.

Wright's later landscapes were often of moonlit parts of Derbyshire and the Lake District and have often been quite literally overshadowed by his more overtly innovative earlier paintings, but they are beautiful and poetic and deserve to be better known. Examples of these include *Dovedale by Moonlight,*1785**(3)** and *Arkwright's Cotton Mill by Moonlight,* 1882 **(4).**



(3) Joseph Wright of Derby, *Dovedale by Moonlight,* 1784 (Derby Museum and Art Gallery)



(4) Joseph Wright of Derby, *Arkwright's Cotton Mill by Moonlight,* 1783, (Private Collection)

Selected Reading

B Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby:Painter of Light (* London, 1968)

J Uglow, *The Lunar Men:The Friends who Made the Future, 1730-1810 (*London, 2011)

M Craske, *Joseph Wright of Derby:Painter of Darkness (*New Haven, CT, 2020)

L Bamford and J Wallis, *Joseph Wright of Derby:An Introduction to his Life and Work through the Collection at Derby Museums (*Derby, 2024)

S. Leach, *Joseph Wright and the Final Farewell (*Cambridge Scholars Publishing ,2023)

C. Riding, J. King *Wright of Derby, From the Shadows* Ex.Cat., London, National Gallery (Global 2025)

https://www.shafe.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/17-09-18thC-British-Art-Joseph-Wright-of-Derby.pdf

DOCUMENTS RELATING TO JOSEPH WRIGHT 'OF DERBY' (1734-97) Author(s): Elizabeth E. Barker Source: The Volume of the Walpole Society , 2009, Vol. 71 (2009), pp. 1-216 Published by: The Walpole Society Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41830757 This is currently downloadable free of charge and has fascinating insights into his connections, artistic methods and other business interests – Wright was quite the moneylender and landlord!

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