

Joseph Wright of Derby and the Men and Art of the Lunar Society

In an age of discovery where science and industry went hand-in-hand, 18th century England saw not only the flowering of the Industrial Revolution, but also that of the self-made man; who came not from money but from industry. It was a time of gentleman's clubs or societies, where like-minded men would meet and discuss; engineers and so-called 'natural philosophers' the latest innovations of the day. One man above all would document in art the extraordinary individuals associated with one of these clubs, that man would be Joseph Wright of Derby, and that club that would become synonymous investigation and discovery would become known as The Lunar Society.

However, this age of discovery was also an age of contradictions with the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau clashing with the Age of Enlightenment. Further complications would also witness the end of an era with the rise of the Anti-Slavery movement and the American war of independence. Joseph Wright of Derby would be the one artist that would document this extraordinary era across these contradictory divides. This lecture will not only feature the works of Joseph Wright of Derby in this context, but also feature paintings by Sir Joshua Reynolds - first President of the Royal Academy, Benjamin West who would also later become a President of the Royal Academy, Nathaniel Dance, and those who were on the periphery of this club who were also achieving great things in this period, such as Captain Cook and Sir Joseph Banks. In this lecture I shall, through the paintings of Joseph Wright of Derby explore the lives, achievements, common interests and connections between a unique group of individuals from this period who either attended the Lunar Society or were associated with it; men such as, James Watt, Matthew Boulton, Josiah Wedgwood, Erasmus Darwin, Joseph Priestley, Richard Arkwright, Joseph Wright of Derby and others.

The industrialists amongst these men would be, in their time, referred to as philosophers practising what we would now call joined-up thinking, eventually we would invent a new name for them - scientists however, they would call themselves the Lunar Men.

Short reading list:

Egerton, Judy (Ed), ***Wright of Derby***, (Tate Gallery Publications, 1990)

Egerton, Judy, ***The British Paintings***, (National Gallery Company, 2000)

Holmes, Richard, ***The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science***, (Harper Press, 2008)

The Lunar Society Exhibition handbook, (Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 1966)

Uglow, Jenny, ***The Lunar Men: The Friends Who Made the Future***, (Faber and Faber, 2002)

Vaughan, William, ***British Painting: The Golden Age***, (Thames and Hudson, 1999)