

## **“WRIGHT OF DERBY - FROM THE SHADOWS”**

**John Hayward reviews the current exhibition of candlelit paintings by Joseph Wright of Derby: National Gallery until 10 May 2026.**



*Self Portrait in a Fur Cap, 1765-8, Art Institute of Chicago  
(aged about 31)*

I have been obsessed by Joseph Wright of Derby (Joe to his friends) for many years, so it was good to see that the National Gallery has put on an exhibition of his candlelit paintings - current until 10 May 2026. This London show is long overdue, being more than 30 years after Judy Egerton's stupendous exhibition of his work at the Tate in 1990.<sup>1</sup>

Joe's work does not fit into neat categories. He has been described as a painter of light, a painter of darkness (in truth he was both) and a painter of the Enlightenment. His landscapes and pictures of Vesuvius erupting (not in this show) take him forwards into

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<sup>1</sup> The catalogue is out of print; I bought my copy from the Kenwood second hand bookshop!

the romantic era. The show's curators (Christine Riding and Jon King) have made much of his pictures being about the "act of looking." But they are much more than that. His regular source of income was from portraits, but many of his other works depict intense drama and their impact is pure theatre. As viewers we are invited to take part as well as to learn.

Joe's candlelit paintings in this show occupy the period 1765 to 1773, when he got secretly married and took his wife on a Grand Tour to Italy (where their first child, Anna Romana, was born in Rome). His reputation was made by *"Three Persons viewing the Gladiator by Candlelight"*, exhibited at the Society of Artists in 1765, followed by *"A Philosopher giving that Lecture on the Orrery, in which a Lamp is put in place of the Sun"* (1766) and his masterpiece *"An Experiment with a Bird in the Air-Pump"* (1768). These last two paintings were unlike anything an English artist had produced before (depicting scientific demonstrations) and they remain as captivating now as they were then. Both have striking chiaroscuro and are beautifully lit by one candle, partially obscured. The Air Pump painting is owned by the National Gallery, but the Orrery painting lives in the Derby City Museum and Art Gallery, which has lent several of its Wright paintings for this exhibition.



*A Philosopher giving that Lecture on the Orrery, in which a Lamp is put in place instead of the Sun, 1766*  
*Derby City Museum and Art Gallery*

These two paintings are the stars of the show. Each portrays a theatrical demonstration, and we see individuals in the audience transfixed by what they (and we) see. The orrery is

being shown in a private house, perhaps that of Lord Ferrers, on the right, who subsequently bought the painting. The air pump demonstration is one that could be seen in public meetings across the midlands in the 1760s, though a cockatoo would have been too valuable to risk. The demonstrators in both paintings are professionals, used to presenting to a varied audience. The orrery may be being demonstrated by John Arden, and the bird pump by John Ferguson FRS, both well known to local audiences.

Both paintings deserve viewing close up as well as at a distance. During the orrery demonstration, notes are being taken by the man at the back, who is Peter Burdett, a cartographer and friend of Joe's, who also appears in the painting of the gladiator. The other audience members are unknown; the painting of the two children watching the planets is quite wonderful, lit by candlelight which highlights their faces and plays on the fabric of their clothing.



*An Experiment with a Bird in the Air Pump, 1768*  
*National Gallery, London*

The air pump painting deserves especially close attention. It is a very large picture and, in this exhibition, it is possible to get close enough to it to see the detail. I have seen this painting often, but never as close. For example, the painting of the glass beads in the hairgrips of the two little girls in the centre (both distressed at the condition of the bird) is stunning, as are the complicated reflections in the shiny surface of the table. The overall result is almost photographic. It is an astonishing piece of work.

To my surprise, the curators seem not to have grasped the point of the demonstration being shown. The interpretation panel states that the lecturer is pumping the air out of the glass bowl containing the bird. But nobody is holding the handle, as he has done this already. That is why the bird is depicted collapsed in the bowl. The glass jar in front, glowing with light from the candle behind it, does not contain a human skull; it is not large enough. Nobody can actually agree what is inside, perhaps some animal specimen, but it is not important. The important issue is what the demonstrator is doing with his left hand.

The whole point of this demonstration is to show that if a vacuum is created in a chamber containing a living creature such as a bird, it will quickly become sick and die. But if air is let back into the chamber, it will completely recover. Of course, timing is essential, but our demonstrator has done this before, and we can be confident that no birds were harmed in this demonstration. To make sure that he gets his timing right, the man in the left foreground (possibly Dr Benjamin Bates, Treasurer of the Hellfire Club, who later bought the painting) is holding a watch.

The two people on the left appear to have eyes only for each other; they are usually thought to be Thomas Coltman and Mary Barlow, who later married. Joe painted their portrait outside their substantial Midlands estate, a picture in the National Gallery's collection. Others, including Bendor Grosvenor, think the man is Peter Burdett. I don't think the resemblance is there, but to be honest it's not important compared with what is happening centre stage.

The two little girls are distressed, fearing for the life of the white cockatoo, but the adult behind them (perhaps their father, who we can presume has seen this show before, indeed maybe commissioned it) is reassuring them, pointing up to the glass bowl as if to say: "Watch what happens next." The demonstrator is in the process of opening the tap to let the air in, so that the bird will recover. The demonstrator holds the power over life and death, but the purpose of the demonstration is not to torture the bird but bring it rapidly back to life. Wright has depicted the moment at which the tap is opened. On the right of the picture, a boy is taking down the bird cage in readiness to put the bird back inside. Behind the boy, through the window can be seen a "sixpenny" moon shining through the trees.

In his excellent review of this exhibition, Bendor Grosvenor has noticed that the mezzotint of this picture (shown nearby) shows a small jet of air entering at the top of the glass bowl; as the air re-enters, it brings with it some moisture, because the seals need to be wet to obtain an air-tight seal. That is why we can see it, but the jet can only barely be made out in the oil painting.

Of course, no experiment with living creatures is free of risk to their welfare and survival. Nowadays there is a rigorous code of conduct regarding the treatment of laboratory animals. The bird/air pump demonstration would not pass a modern ethics committee. But in 1768 this sort of demonstration brought a basic understanding of science to a wide public. Viewers were not only able to look at the drama, but to learn, becoming part of a

theatrical event. Natural philosophy, as science was then called, was at the cutting edge of the Enlightenment and that is what Joe is depicting.

Joe Wright was not a natural philosopher himself, but he knew many of those who were, especially members of the Lunar Society, who met monthly in Soho, Birmingham for a long lunch followed by discussions and demonstrations late into the evening. Their meetings were timed with the full moon, to make travelling home safer. Joe knew Josiah Wedgwood, John Whitehurst (who was a neighbour), Matthew Boulton and William Withering. Erasmus Darwin<sup>2</sup> (a polymath who wrote poetry, classified plants and was interested in steam engines and chemistry) was a doctor who was Joe Wright's GP. Joe painted his portrait twice. At the end of his life, Joe had heart failure and was successfully treated by Darwin, who used digitalis discovered by Withering some years earlier.

Joe was very proud of his air pump painting (which was a sensation at the Society of Arts annual exhibition in 1768) and hoped to sell it for 200 guineas. He failed to do so and became despondent, a characteristic of his personality.<sup>3</sup> His friend Peter Burdett, who had moved to Liverpool, suggested that Joe should join him, as there were good prospects for portraits of local businessmen (made rich from the slave trade, as we now realise). Joe spent two years in Liverpool, where his portrait business did well, 28 sitters being recorded in his account book. He also painted more candlelit paintings, including the "*Two Girls Dressing a Kitten by Candlelight*" 1769-70, well known to us at Kenwood.

On his return to Derby he painted more nightscapes, three of which are shown, all loaned from Derby. *An Earthstopper on the Banks of the Derwent* (1773) shows a labourer in rough jerkin and breeches, blocking up the den of a fox. No candles, but a lantern provides illumination, with a full moon in the sky – the Joe Wright trademark. Close examination of this painting shows that he used a considerable amount of impasto to paint the trees in the background. When viewed at an angle, these patches of impasto reflect the light and the leaves glisten. This is a striking effect when seen in this exhibition and is not visible in a photograph.

Joe painted five scenes of blacksmiths working in forges at night – the illumination comes from the fire and from the glowing white-hot bars of metal. The second of them has made it to London - *A Blacksmith's Shop* (1771). The blacksmith, who seems to be working in a ruined church, is about to hammer a piece of white-hot iron; his wife and child are very close by (too close for safety but not for dramatic effect); a horse is saddled to one side at the back, presumably waiting for an emergency set of shoes; the moon peeps out from the clouds.

On the right-hand side of this forge painting is the contemplative figure of an old man, holding a staff. The same man can be seen in the Air Pump picture, sitting looking at the floor rather than at the demonstration. He seems to be a Father Time figure, providing a *vanitas* theme to the image of life versus death. In the forge his purpose is less clear. The

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<sup>2</sup> Grandfather to Charles Darwin, who proposed natural selection as the origin of species.

<sup>3</sup> The painting was eventually bought by Dr Benjamin Bates for £130



curators make a good case that this figure is taken from one drawn by Thomas Frye, showing that Joe Wright was familiar with Frye's work.

The most extraordinary painting in the show has perhaps the longest title ever written: "*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*" (exhibited 1771, re-worked 1795). This is not a demonstration, but the depiction of a spectacular chemical event. Phosphorus was discovered by the German alchemist Hennig Brand in 1669, when he distilled boiled and concentrated urine, which contains phosphates. The phosphorus (a new element) appears in a bright bluish-white cloud emitted from a hole in the top of the apparatus. What a moment that must have been!



*The Alchymist searching for the Philosopher's Stone, 1771, re-worked 1795, (detail)  
Derby City Museum and Art Gallery*

In the picture, Wright has painted the philosopher sunk on one knee with his right hand outstretched in amazement. A boy at the back, writing notes, stops what he is doing and looks in wonder. The man in the middle bridges their ages; to me he looks rather like Joe himself. Wright has depicted a theatrical frozen moment in time. I love the chaos and detail of the books and paper stacked on the shelf behind the philosopher. As usual, there

is a trade-mark moon in the sky; the time is 8.00pm. Not surprisingly, this painting did not sell in 1771, and Joe hung on to it, eventually re-working it to its current version in 1795, two years before his death.



*Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples, 1776-80  
Tate (not currently on display)*

On his tour of Italy, Joe went to Naples and saw Vesuvius active, although there was no major eruption at that time. But it caught his imagination, and he painted it in full-scale eruption many times, always at night with a full moon. These paintings caused a sensation when he moved to Bath in 1775, hoping to emulate the success of Thomas Gainsborough who had left for London the year before. But nobody bought them and his venture proved a failure, so that after less than two years he moved back to Derby.

Joe was the only major painter at that time to have a successful career based outside London. He continued to paint portraits but, like Gainsborough, he would “steal away” to paint landscapes, often at night, which may be a feature of his episodes of depression. These often lasted months at a time, when he was unable to work. The illness was not understood then and there was no effective treatment. But he lost none of his skills, and these nightscapes (several of them are in Derby) are captivating. He produced several paintings of cottages on fire at night – dramatic and a commentary on local rural poverty.

The National Gallery curators have produced an orrery (1750) and an air pump (1774-93), each of which is very like those in the paintings. The orrery works by the turning of a

handle. It would have been great if that could have been demonstrated, say once a day, so that we could have seen it in action – rather like John Joseph Merlin's silver swan at the Bowes Museum, Co Durham, which was put through its paces at the Science Museum some years ago.

This is a finely assembled exhibition, but I left feeling slightly disappointed. Joe's painting of scenes at night, lit by Vesuvius, or fireworks (Rome) or of cottages ablaze did not stop in 1773 and it would have been good to have seen more of his chiaroscuro work. Perhaps there were space constraints. There is nothing about Joe's personality or his interests or his family and little about his illness. As a young man he was strikingly handsome and enjoyed dancing. He was a keen musician (like Gainsborough) and played the flute to a high standard. He deserves this attention.

This show will travel to Derby in May; if you have never been, do visit the Derby City Museum and Art Gallery, where you will see a wider selection of Joe Wright's work and be able to understand why Derby is so proud of him.

Bendor Grosvenor's review can be found at  
<https://britishartjournal.co.uk/wright-of-derby-from-the-shadows/>

You can also watch my presentation on the life of Joe Wright on the Friends of Kenwood YouTube page:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qROJVCgNmU&t=1410s>

**John Hayward**  
**19 January 2026**