



Made in Derby 2018 Profile

Joseph Wright

Derby's most celebrated artist is known the world over. Derby Museums is home to the world's largest collection of works by the 18th century artist.

Joseph Wright of Derby is acknowledged officially as an "English landscape and portrait painter". But his fame lies in being acclaimed as "the first professional painter to express the spirit of the Industrial Revolution", by experts.

Candlelight, the contrast of light and dark, known as the chiaroscuro effect, and the birth of science out of the previously held beliefs of alchemy all feature in his works.

The inspiration for Wright's work owes much to meetings of the Lunar Society, a group of scientists and industrialists living in the Midlands, which sought to reconcile science and religion during the Age of Enlightenment.

Wright was born in Iron Gate – where a commemorative obelisk now stands – in 1734, the son of Derby's town clerk John Wright.

He headed to London in 1751 to study to become a painter under Thomas Hudson but returned in 1753 to Derby. Wright went back to London again for a further period of training before returning to set up his own business in 1757. He married, had six children – one of whom died in infancy, son John, died aged 17 but the others survived to live full lives.

In 1773, he took a trip to Italy for almost two years and this became the inspiration for some of his work featuring Mount Vesuvius. Stopping off to work for a while in

Bath as a portrait painter, he finally returned to Derby in 1777, where he remained until his death at 28 Queen Street in 1797.

Some of his best known works are A Philosopher Lecturing on the Orrery (1766), which is a major feature of the Joseph Wright Gallery in Derby Museum, and An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump (1768) which is in the National Gallery in London.

Wright included among his connections pottery impresario Josiah Wedgwood and early industrialist Richard Arkwright, who developed the factory system at Cromford.

He also knew Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles Darwin, who would add to the conflict between science and religious belief, half a century later, with the publication of his book The Origin of Species in 1859.

Wright was buried in the churchyard of the now demolished St Alkmund's Church and his remains moved to Nottingham Road Cemetery in 1968. His tombstone is in Derby Cathedral.

Wright's name was also kept alive by Derby College when it named its sixth form after him in 2005.

And in 2013 a blue plaque was put on his former home in Queen Street, Derby.

The Joseph Wright Gallery in Derby Museum is a permanent space dedicated to showcasing the full range of his spectacular paintings alongside small, temporary displays of drawings and prints from the museums' collection.