Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

**WRIGHT of Derby, Joseph**

Derby 3.IX.1734–29.VIII.1797

Joseph Wright, invariably called "of Derby", came to London in 1751 and studied (in two periods, 1751–53 and 1756–57) under the successful portrait painter Thomas Hudson. He exhibited oil paintings with his distinctive use of light from 1765. He was a tobacco merchant (and amateur pastellist) Richard Tate (q.e.) in Liverpool between 1768 and mid-1771. Among the active intellectual community there was the surgeon Matthew Turner, two of whose daughters (e.g., Costard) are thought to have been given lessons by Wright, who arranged for them to exhibit drawings at the Society of Artists in London in 1777. There have been the subjects of two of his monochrome pastels. He travelled to Italy in 1773, returning to Bath and Derby from 1777. He became an associate of the Royal Academy in 1781, but declined the offer of full membership three years later.

Wright was a prolific draughtsman, leaving some 350 sheets in various media. Many are in black and white chalk on blue paper. From his early years with Hudson he made portrait studies in black chalk after Van Dyck, Lely, Kneller and Richardson (a number of which are in the Derby Museum and Art Gallery). During the 1760s he experimented by adding wash to these chalk drawings. It seems to have been in Liverpool at the latest that he made his grisaille, or monochrome, pastels. Studies of heads, they have often been described as in black and white chalks or in charcoal. They are in a sufficiently soft material for the collector to whom many belonged, William Bemrose (1831–1908), husband of the artist's granddaughter, to have affixed a label to the back of one "NB This drawing will be spoil’d if touched by finger, brush or...". As Shelley has demonstrated (Barker & al. 2009) one at least [J.806.102] is in fabricated crayons which should be regarded in many senses as pastel, but there remains no unanimity of description. We include below some examples that may be in soft chalk.

They were made as independent works of art (œtes d’expression or tronies as much as portraits, although it has been suggested that the models included several artists in Wright’s circle), and explore the artist’s fascination with light (requiring the variety of tone available from pastel) without the distraction of hue. Several self-portraits are lit from the right (including one that has been miscatalogued as by Pether, q.e.), the others from the left. These portraits seem today remarkably innovative, with a forward-looking immediacy; their subdued tonality is intentional, rather than as once thought indicative of the influence of Hudson’s somewhat heavy style. Wright certainly knew Frye’s mezzotints (probably from Frye’s pupil, William Pether), which came out of the Irish tradition continued by Healy and others, and also one of their sources, Piazzetta. Wright used pastel again very rarely: not at all during his trip to Italy 1773–75, and only once or twice after his return, in a couple of monochrome self-portraits whose dating is uncertain and two much later studies using coloured pastel. He also made grisaille studies in oil.

**Monographic exhibitions**

Wright 1883; *Paintings by Joseph Wright, A.R.A., commonly called “Wright of Derby”, together with some original drawings and prints*, Derby, Corporation Art Gallery, 1883


**Bibliography**

Barker 2009; Barker & al. 2009; Bénézit; Grove; Grundy 1930, pp. 345ff; New Haven 1979; Nicolson 1968; Nicolson 1988; Rosenberg 2007; Seé 1911; Waterhouse 1981; Wright 2007

**Pastels and chalk drawings**


**J.806.102 SELF-PORTRAIT, monochrome pastel/buff ppr, 47x39.4, inscr. “Joseph Wright of Derby/ copied by Wm Pether” (Derby Museum & Art Gallery, desc.: Hannah Wright, artist’s niece; 1868 sale, day 4, Lot 107, as by Pether; William Bemrose 1870). Exh.: Derby 1870, no. 203; Wright 1883, no. 54, as by Pether; Wright 1990, no. 45; Wright 1997, no. 78; Wright 2007, no. 49, as ?Wright or Pether. [Wright, ??Pether] φ

**J.806.103 SELF-PORTRAIT, monochrome pastel/buff ppr, 47x39.4, inscr. “Joseph Wright of
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1.806.109 Mrs Pole, later Mrs Erasmus DARWIN, née Elizabeth Collier (1747–1832), with her son Sacheverell Pole, pstl, 1770 (Mr Wheeler Galton, Claverdon, 1914). Lit.: Pearson 1914, 1, pl. xvi [Figtr; cf. Gardner]

1.806.111 Mrs Thomas HADEN, née Sarah Wallis, wife of the mayor of Derby, niece of Sarah, Mrs Richard Wright, the artist’s sister-in-law, pstl, 54.6x43.2 (desc.: sitter’s grandson, Francis Seymour Haden, 1897. London art market 1975). Lit.: Nicolson 1988, fig. 39

1.806.118 Man in exotic costume, ?Richard or William Tate, black, white chalk, 42.9x29.5 (Louisville, Speed Art Museum, inv. 1963.30). Exh.: Wright 2001, no. 52, fig. 43; Wright 2007, no. 52. Lit.: Nicholson 1968, no. 155, fig. 121; Barker & al. 2009, fig. 12

1.806.116 Man in exotic costume, ?Richard or William Tate, black, white chalk, 42.9x29.5 (Louisville, Speed Art Museum, inv. 1963.30). Exh.: Wright 2001, no. 52, fig. 43; Wright 2007, no. 52. Lit.: Nicholson 1968, no. 155, fig. 121; Barker & al. 2009, fig. 12

1.806.12 Young man, pstl/bl. ppr, c.1781 (PC 2009). Lit.: Barker & al. 2009, fig. 10, as ~Old John Stavely, pnt.


1.806.123 Young man in a turban, black, white chalk/ppr, 43.8x29.8 (Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, inv. PD.228-1991. Henry Reitlinger; desc.: London, Sotheby’s, 20.XI.1986, Lot 46 repr., est. £8–12,000, withdrawn; legs). Lit.: Wright 1990, no. 71 repr.; Bryant 2003, p. 411, fig. 4, as in PC; Wright 2007, no. 39; Barker & al. 2009, fig. 13


Anon. related pastels

SELF-PORTRAIT, pnt., c.1780 (New Haven, Yale Center for British Art)

---cop., pstl, 44x39 (Ian Askew, Wellington Folly, Sussex; sale p.m., Donnington Priory, Dreweatts, 14. IV.2015, Lot 149 repr., est. £400–600)