

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

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. Wright boarded with the tobacco merchant (and amateur pastelist) Richard Tate (*q.n.*) in Liverpool between 1768 and mid-1771. Among the active intellectual community there was the surgeon Matthew Turner, two of whose daughters (*n. s.n.* 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 1773; they may 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 end of that decade 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 spoilt if touched by finger, brush or...”. As Shelley has demonstrated (Barker & al. 2009) one at least (J.806.129) 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 (têtes d’expression or tronie) 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.n.*); 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, AR.A, commonly called “Wright of Derby”, together with some original drawings and prints*, Derby, Corporation Art Gallery, 1883

Wright 1990: *Wright of Derby*, London, Tate Gallery, 7.II.–22.IV.1990; Paris, Grand Palais, 17.V.–23.VII.1990; New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 6.IX.–2.XII.1990. Cat. Judy Egerton

Wright 1997: *Joseph Wright of Derby, 1734–1797*, Derby Museum & Art Gallery, 1997. Cat. Jane Wallis

Wright 2007: *Wright of Derby in Liverpool*, Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery, 17.XI.2007 – 24.II.2008; New Haven, Yale Center for British Art, 22.V.–31.VIII.2008. Cat. Elizabeth E. Barker & Alex Kidson

Wright 2025a: *Joseph Wright of Derby: life on paper*, Derby Museum and Art Gallery, 23.V.–7.IX.2025. Cat. Lucy Bamford & al.

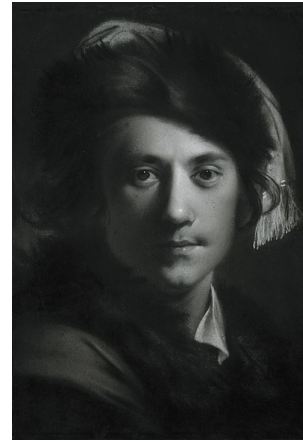
Wright 2025b: *Wright of Derby: from the shadows*, London, National Gallery, 7.XI.2025 – 10.V.2026. Cat. Christine Riding & al.

Bibliography

Barker 2009; Barker & al. 2009; Bénézit; Grove; Grundy 1930, pp. 345ff; New Haven 1979; Nicolson 1968; Nicolson 1988; Rosenberg 2007; Sée 1911; Siemon 2025; Waterhouse 1981; Wright 2007

Pastels and chalk drawings

J.806.101 SELF-PORTRAIT in a fur cap, grisaille pstl/gr.-bl. ppr, 42.5x29.5, c.1765–68 (Chicago, Art Institute, 1990.141. James H. Ricau, New York, 1968. David Nisinson, New York; acqu. 1990, Clarence Buckingham Collection). Exh.: New York 1991, no. 23 repr.; Chicago 2004; Wright 2007, no. 50. Lit.: Nicolson 1968, no. 165, fig. 71, as charcoal; The Art Institute of Chicago News and Events, “Museum News: Acquisitions”, .VII.–.VIII.1990, p. 8 repr.; Roger Kimball, “An Artistic Volcano”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 3.VI.1991; Michael Kimmelman, “Pontormo to Seurat: from Chicago to the Frick”, *The New York Times*, 1991; Judy Egerton, “Joseph Wright of Derby: self-portrait in a fur cap”, *The Art Institute of Chicago museum studies*, XVIII/2, 1992, pp. 112–23, fig. 1; Martha Tedeschi, “Forward”, *The Art Institute of Chicago museum studies*, XVIII/2, 1992, pp. 108–11; Wood & May 1993, p. 209 repr.; Wood & Mancoff 2002 repr.; Barker & al. 2009, fig. 15; Siemon 2025, fig. 12 [related to pnt., Wright 1990, no. 94] φ



J.806.103 SELF-PORTRAIT, monochrome pstl/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. 43; Wright 1997, no. 78; Wright 2007, no. 49, as ?Wright or Pether. [?Wright, cf. Pether] φα



J.806.105 SELF-PORTRAIT, in a black feathered hat, monochrome pstl/ppr, 53.3x36.8 (Derby Museum & Art Gallery, inv. 1953-186. John Leigh Philips 1809. W. Bemrose 1883). Exh.: Derby 1883, no. 43; Norwich 1959; Wright 2001, no. 53, fig. 44; Wright 2007, no. 53; Wright 2025a. Lit.: Nicolson 1968, no. 168, fig. 70, as c.1767–70; Barker & al. 2009, fig. 9, n.42, as c.1778; Jonny Yarker, review of Wright 2025a, *Burlington magazine*, .XI.2025, fig. 5, as chalk φ



J.806.107 ?Peter Perez BURDETT (c.1734–1793), cartographer and artist, ?self-portrait in exotic costume, black, brown, white chlk, charcoal/ppr, 36.2x29.8, c.1770 (New Haven, Yale Center for British Art, inv. B1977.14.6320. Mr & Mrs Paul Mellon 1968). Exh.: New Haven 1979, no. 72 repr., as self-portrait; New Haven 2001, no. 12 repr.; New Haven 2007, no. 40, unknown; Wright 2007, no. 51, as ?Burdett. Lit.: Nicolson 1968, no. 166, fig. 69; Gillian Forrester, in Wright 2001, no. 51, fig. 42, identifies as Peter Perez Burdett; Barker & al. 2009, fig. 11 φδσ



J.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, I, pl. xvi [?attr; cf. Gardner] φ



J.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 φ



Miss Ann Rose TOOKEY (London, Christie's, 12.XII.1908, Lot 49, 6 gns; Holland; T. W. Waller, sale p.m., London, Christie's, 10.VI.1910, Lot 90, as Wright), v. British sch.

J.806.114 Harriet WRIGHT (1778–1860), the artist's daughter, pstl, 42x33.3 ov., c.1783 (Mrs James Cade, née Anna Romana Wright, daughter of the artist; desc.; London, Christie's, 10.VII.1990, Lot 91 repr., est. £15–20,000). Exh.: Wright 1883, no. 121 Φσ



J.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 φ



J.806.118 Young boy reading, grisaille pstl/ppr, 45x31.5 (Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. 2024.21. Mr & Mrs William Bemrose; their son Brig.-Gen. W. Wright Bemrose 1908, 1930. London, Sotheby's, 30.XI.2000, Lot 1; Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox; English PC; London, Sotheby's, 14.VII.2010, Lot 52 repr., est. £200–300,000, £260,000 [=£313,250]; Jean-Luc Baroni; PC 2011; acqu. 2024). Exh.: New York 2011, no. 38 repr.; Los Angeles 2024b. Lit.: Grundy 1930, p. 351 repr.; Barker & al. 2009, fig. 14; Siemon 2025, fig. 17 Φσ



J.806.12 Old man, pstl/bl. ppr, c.1781 (PC 2009). Lit.: Barker & al. 2009, fig. 10, as ~Old John Stavely, pnt. φ



J.806.122 Young man in a turban, black, white chlk/ppr, 43.4x30.6 (Henry Scipio Reitlinger, L.2274a. London, Christie's, 5.VII.2016, Lot 79 repr., est. £12–18,000, b/i. Guy Peppiatt Fine Art, exh. Master Drawings New York .I.2020) φσ



J.806.123 Two small boys with cherries, grisaille pstl, gch./ppr, 43x35 (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, inv. WA1978.52, attr. Philippe Mercier. Don Gerald Reitlinger 1978) [new attr. 2024] φν



J.806.124 Woman in exotic costume, ?Polly or Peggy Turner, black, white chlk/ppr, 43.8x29.8 (Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, inv. PD.128-1991. 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 φ



J.806.126 Study of a girl in a turban with pompom and frilled collar, ?Peggy or Polly Turner, black, white chlk, 43.8x29.2, inscr. *verso* "Joseph Wright of Derby 1768 delin..." (C. H. Turner [Charles Hampden Turner (c.1773–1856), FRS, of Rook's Nest, Godstone]. Miss A. Loughlin; London, Sotheby's, 19.III.1981, Lot 153 repr., £4000; Spink, exh. English portraits, 1981; PC; London, Sotheby's, 9.VII.2014, Lot 177 repr., est. £80–120,000, b/i; New York, 26.I.2022, Lot 42 repr., est. \$70–90,000). Exh.: Wright 1990, no. 72 repr.; Wright 2007, no. 40. Lit.: Barker & al. 2009, n.2 n.r.; Siemon 2025, fig. 16 φσ



J.806.128 ~cop. Thomas Moss Tate, chlk, 42x30, inscr. *verso* "Mr Tate to M Benson" (Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, inv. PD.127-1991. Legs Henry Reitlinger). Lit.: Wright 1990, p. 137 n.r.

J.806.129 Young woman, grisaille pstl/bl. ppr, 40.3x28 (New York, MMA, inv. 2007.40. Artist; ?desc.: great-granddaughter, Mrs William Bemrose, née Margaret Romana Simpson (1837–1901); her husband, William Bemrose (1831–1908), author of monograph on Wright; their son, Brigadier-General William Wright Bemrose (1859–), Littleover Hill, Derby, 1930. Denys Eyre Bower, Chiddingstone Castle; trustees of legs; London, Christie's, 5.VI.2006, Lot 52 repr., est. £50–80,000, £187,200; Katrin Bellinger, acqu. 2006, Rogers Fund). Exh.: Wright 1883, no. 133 part; Canterbury 1962; New York 2011, no. 37

repr.; New York 2013. Lit.: Grundy 1930, repr.; Barker & al. 2009, fig. 3 Φσ



Anon. related pastels

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

J.806.133 ~cop., pstl, 44x39 (Ian Askew, Wellington Folly, Sussex; sale p.m., Donnington Priory, Dreweatts, 14.IV.2015, Lot 149 repr., est. £400–600) φ

