

Chapter 2. PICTURING WORK

Christiana Payne

The Enlightenment concept of work was a highly positive one. Traditionally, the biblical designation of labour as the curse of Adam reinforced the aristocratic notion that work was degrading, and workers were seen as deserving their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy. But this way of thinking was gradually giving way to a new perception of work as valuable in itself, and hence of workers as useful citizens. In his influential work, *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), John Locke argued that labour is the true source of property rights; nearly a century later, Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) reinforced the positive view of work by asserting that labour is the source of all wealth. Voltaire summed up the new attitude to work succinctly in his novel *Candide* (1759) when he declared that work was the answer to the three major problems of life: boredom, vice and poverty. At the end of the novel, after many adventures, the characters meet a 'good old man' who is living a life of perfect contentment. Candide observes that he must have a vast estate, and the old man replies: 'Only twenty acres ... my children help me to farm it, and we find that the work banishes those three great evils, boredom, vice, and poverty.' As a result of this meeting, Candide and his companions decide that they should stop arguing about philosophical questions and get down to cultivating their garden. The men take up field-work and carpentry, the women take care of the cooking, the sewing and the laundry. Candide has been reunited with the love of his life, and at first this is very much a mixed blessing, as she has become unattractive and headstrong, but the women settle down under the influence of honest labour:

There was no denying that Cunégonde was decidedly ugly, but she soon made excellent pastry. Pacquette was clever at embroidery, and the old woman took care of the linen. No one refused to work, not even Brother Giroflée, who was a good carpenter, and thus became an honest man.¹

The problem of the evil in the world was thus solved at a stroke – although, of course, one cannot be sure whether Voltaire was being entirely serious, or merely ironic in offering such a simple solution.

Eighteenth-century visual images of work and workers are generally attractive, portraying work in the way that Voltaire presents it: a wholesome occupation, beneficial both to the individual and to society in general. The illustration of processes in the French *Encyclopédie* helped to stimulate a widespread sense of work as a spectacle, worthy of being observed either in person or through paintings. Elite patrons both commissioned genre depictions of people at work and, on occasion, chose to be represented as involved in useful work themselves. Gender distinctions are important in images, as they are in *Candide*. Muscular, heroic male labourers, and women employed in peaceful domestic occupations begin to proliferate in art. In addition, a broadly Protestant insistence on the moral value of work colours many paintings and prints in this period. Across Europe and the Americas, the rise of the middle class and the development of industrialization favoured a recognition of the value of work and its role in creating prosperity. It is only towards the end of the period that we find in art a consciousness of the darker

side of industrialization and the consequent exploitation and degradation of the worker.

Visual images are important sources of information on work practices and processes, but they need to be used carefully. What they tell us is not necessarily how things were, but how people thought they should be. Often, they provide evidence of the attitudes and values of their time, rather than of what actually happened in the past. A painting that seems to illustrate work or workers may turn out, on closer investigation, to be a representation of a myth or allegory. In other cases, it may become clear that an interest in work was not the main priority of the artist, his or her patron, or their wider public. An apparent interest in the early phases of the industrial revolution, for example, might take second place to a concern with dramatic effects of light and shade. A depiction of a woman worker – or even of a child street seller – could be little more than an excuse for titillation and erotic allure. Paintings that seem to show a new sympathy for the working classes may turn out to be about the charitable efforts of the wealthy, either spurring them on to greater efforts or encouraging self-congratulation and complacency. The most interesting and sophisticated images work on several different levels, depending on who is looking at them, either in their own time or across the centuries.

Work in Myth and Allegory

In the seventeenth century, a new interest in modern, non-elite life transformed art. Genre scenes and landscapes became popular with collectors, especially in the Netherlands, and artists influenced by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-

1610) occasionally produced large-scale paintings in which everyday work is prominent. Usually, however, when work was depicted on a larger scale there was a justification for its appearance within mythology, biblical history or allegory. Nicolas Poussin's *Summer* (1660-1664)² is one of a series of Four Seasons that the artist painted towards the end of his life for the Duc de Richelieu. *Summer* shows labourers harvesting wheat in the fields: women are working alongside men, cutting the crop with a sickle and binding it into sheaves. However, its official subject is the story of Ruth and Boaz from the Book of Ruth in the Bible: the work goes on in the background, but the foreground shows Ruth asking Boaz if she can glean in his fields. Similarly, Diego Velázquez's *The Spinners* (c. 1657)³ is not simply a representation of women in a tapestry workshop, as it used to be thought, but a complex allegory relating to the mythological story of the contest between Arachne and the goddess Athena. In both paintings, however, work processes are clearly shown. Velázquez's three women are, respectively, carding, winding and spinning wool. Less convincingly, Poussin shows his labourers carrying sheaves of wheat to a threshing floor, apparently on the side of the field, where horses are threshing it.

At about the same time, the Le Nain brothers painted *The Forge* (1640s)⁴, a depiction of a blacksmith at work, with his family gathered around him. This, too, may be a disguised mythological subject, a modernised version of the story of the goddess Venus at the forge of Vulcan. However, the figures are represented with great dignity and tenderness: the blacksmith and his wife look directly at the observer, with thoughtful and intelligent expressions. Not surprisingly, the painting has been seen as marking a new recognition of the essential humanity of ordinary people. Part of the appeal of the subject, however, lay in its dramatic chiaroscuro.

Caravaggio and his followers were adept at portraying figures illuminated by artificial light sources, firelight or candlelight, and it could be argued that the artists were primarily interested in the play of light upon the features of their humble protagonists, hence the attention devoted to the features and expressions on the faces.

A more sustained study of the faces of the poor is found in the work of the Italian artist Giacomo Ceruti (1697-1767). His painting, *Women working on Pillow Lace (The Sewing School)* (fig. 1) is one of a group of some fifteen large paintings that were probably made for the noble Avogadro family of Brescia in the 1720s, and are now known as the Padernello cycle. Art historians have noted the sombre melancholy tone and starkly realistic style of Ceruti's work. In this example, a group of young women are making pillow lace in the cramped conditions of a bare, unfurnished room, with no windows. The young women are fairly well-dressed, but their expressions suggest fatigue and melancholy, slightly relieved by the presence of a girl in the centre who reads to them as they work. Three of the figures look directly at the viewer as if challenging or inviting our sympathy, while one girl, to the right of the centre, seems not to be working and may be ill or disabled. It is not hard to imagine that they are orphans, forced to labour in an institutional setting, listening to a reading that is morally improving rather than entertaining. Other paintings in the same cycle depict beggars, and it is likely that they are connected with the charitable works considered appropriate for a noble family.⁵ Even this painting is not a straightforward depiction of work: the subject of the sewing school could also have an allegorical meaning. It appears to have been developed from paintings by Bernhard Keil (1624-87), a Danish artist who worked in North Italy and was known as Monsù Bernardo. He repeatedly treated the subject of sewing as an allegory of the senses of touch and

sight. As with the Le Nain brother's *Forge*, however, Ceruti's approach is strongly suggestive of a new sympathy with working people.

Work in Genre Painting

On a smaller scale, many seventeenth-century genre paintings depicted people at work. Although much Dutch and Flemish genre is concerned with leisure – the tavern scene, the village merrymaking, for example – there are also significant numbers of paintings showing craftsmen in their workshops, or women engaged in domestic tasks in the home. As Christopher Brown has argued, Calvinism meant that a high moral value was placed on the practical benefits of work. A very popular set of prints, *Het Menselijk Bedrijf (The Work of Men)*, was issued in 1694 by Jan and Caspar Luicken. They showed a hundred occupations, mainly involving men, though women appear in some of the plates, each one accompanied by religious verses. Painters took up similar themes, depicting men as fishermen, tailors, cobblers, knife-grinders and weavers, while women are shown preparing fruit, making pancakes, ironing, sewing and spinning.⁶ The paintings of women at work are especially celebrated today. Johannes Vermeer's *Milkmaid* (c. 1660)⁷, Caspar Netscher's *Lace-maker* (1662)⁸ and Nicholas Maes's *Woman Scraping Parsnips* (1655)⁹ have a serenity and harmony that could lull the most ardent feminist into a belief that domestic work is a sacred duty. These paintings have a strong contemplative element, and children are often included in such scenes, demonstrating how mundane tasks can educate and create a bond with the next generation.

This aspect of the depiction of women's work was developed further by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699-1779) in eighteenth-century France. His paintings of servants and mothers give a new dignity to everyday occupations. Unlike his flamboyant contemporary François Boucher (1703-1770), who specialized in paintings of nude nymphs and goddesses, Chardin demonstrates a reserved, almost a Puritanical, approach to the depiction of women. In Chardin's work, they are well covered up, not consciously alluring, often lost in reverie, suggesting a capacity for thought even in the lowly servant class. Sometimes there is a hint that this reverie is erotically charged, as in the *Cellar Boy* and *Scullery Maid* (1736 and 1738)¹⁰, designed to face one another as companion pieces. When prints of Chardin's works were sold, verses – added by the engravers – would occasionally draw attention to such possibilities. The overwhelming impression given by his work, however, is of the satisfaction to be found in labour.

Chardin's early paintings show servants at work: *The Kitchen Maid* (1738)¹¹ is scraping vegetables and depositing them in a dish of very clean water, but her thoughts are elsewhere as she holds her knife suspended over a turnip and looks into the distance. *The Young Schoolmistress* (fig. 2) may be a servant, an older sister or a young mother. The painting celebrates the importance of education, a favourite Enlightenment theme, but does so with a suggestion, in the expression on the older girl's face, that teaching a child to read may be frustrating as well as enjoyable. The theme of education occurs so often in Chardin's work that one can only assume that his reverence for the task was sincerely felt. However, the engraver, Lépicié, encouraged a very different interpretation when he added an inscription to his print of the painting. 'If this charming child', he wrote, 'takes on so well the serious air and

imposing manner of a schoolmistress, may one not think that pretence and artifice come to the fair sex no later than birth.' The inscription subverts the whole idea of a young woman being engaged in valuable work, representing her instead as one practising arts which will later enable her to flirt with men.

From the 1740s, Chardin progressed to a higher level of society in the world he represented in his paintings, showing middle-class mothers gently instructing their children in embroidery or the saying of grace before a meal. *Saying Grace* and *The Industrious Mother* (1740)¹² were given by the artist to the King, Louis XV, following their success at the Salon of 1740. The women in both paintings are working on several levels: doing needlework and serving food, but also educating their sons and daughters so that they will grow up into useful, pious citizens like themselves. The creamy brushwork emphasizes the profusion of white linen, underlining the links between cleanliness and godliness. In these paintings Chardin's attitude seems to be unambiguously approving of the educational role of mothers. It is significant that his seductive portrayals of useful and satisfying work move gradually up the social hierarchy. In the second half of the century, as we shall see, elite portraiture also adopted Voltaire's theme of work as a suitable occupation for the wealthy as well as the poor.

Industry and Idleness

The importance of industriousness as a virtue in the masculine sphere was emphasized in the same decade, the 1740s, in William Hogarth's popular series of engravings, *Industry and Idleness* (1747, fig. 3). In his announcement in the press,

Hogarth declared that his series was 'shewing the Advantage attending the former, and the miserable Effects of the latter'.¹³ This series illustrates how two apprentices can start from the same humble beginnings – but one rises to be Lord Mayor of London, while the other takes to crime and dies on the gallows. Quotations from the Bible accompany the scenes throughout. The two apprentices begin as weavers, working on large looms. The idle apprentice snoozes, while the industrious apprentice pursues his trade diligently. The message of the series as a whole is that hard work and application can take a poor child up to the apex of the social scale. Idleness, conversely, is presented as the root cause of misfortune, although in this first plate we see some of the other factors involved, notably drunkenness and promiscuity. The idle apprentice (helpfully named as Tom Idle) is accompanied by a tankard of beer, a pipe of tobacco and an advertisement for *Moll Flanders*, while a cat, symbol of rampant sexual desire, stands on its hind legs to play with his shuttle. Meanwhile, the industrious apprentice (Francis Goodchild) attends diligently to his work. The series became very well known, being used as the basis for sermons and hung in schoolrooms.

The same theme is transferred to a rural setting in George Morland's pair of paintings from c. 1790, *The Comforts of Industry* and *The Miseries of Idleness*.¹⁴ The industrious family is placed in a comfortable cottage, with plentiful food and well-maintained clothes. The wife's industry is demonstrated by the bright whiteness of her baby's dress and of her own apron, shawl and bonnet. The idle family, meanwhile, is in a hovel, wearing tattered clothing and with little to eat. As in Hogarth's *Industry and Idleness*, the viewer is given clues to the vices that accompany idleness: the father of the idle family has a pipe, and a tankard and barrel

are placed on the floor, while the mother wears a fashionable hat and patterned scarf. The implication is that the poor have only themselves to blame for their situation: with sufficient industry they would avoid the temptations of drink and vanity and be able to rise to a higher level. Like Hogarth's series, these paintings were reproduced as prints. Reaching a wide audience and extending their influence down the social scale, such images helped to shape the later Victorian idea of the 'deserving poor'.

Other depictions of the rural poor in late eighteenth-century England are less straightforwardly didactic, however. Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) had great success in the 1770s and 1780s with his 'cottage door' paintings, such as *The Cottage Door with Children Playing* (1777-8).¹⁵ These pictures show families relaxing at the end of the day outside their cottage homes. The light is soft and the women and children look plump and healthy, so on one level these scenes are idyllic. However, the fathers of the family may be shown staggering home under a heavy burden of faggots, the cottages themselves are tumbledown, and the children's clothes are ragged. The purchasers of such paintings were usually landowners. It seems that the appeal of these paintings lay in a complex blend of sentimental envy and charitable sympathy. The purchasers could hanker after the simple life (and several did take to living in cottages at this period) but at the same time they could feel their sympathies – their sensibility – engaged by the visual evidence of poverty, and could congratulate themselves on their participation in the paternalistic charity that was an accepted part of their social position.

The visual evidence of the poverty of rural labourers was often used as a counter-argument to the concerns raised by anti-slavery campaigners in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Apologists for slavery argued that the slaves in the plantations were well looked after by their owner: they were, it was claimed, clothed and fed and had security, unlike many members of the poorer classes in England. The paintings of Agostino Brunias (1730-1796), an Italian artist who worked in the Caribbean, depict slaves on the plantations, but he never shows them in the fields. Instead, they are shown dancing and enjoying themselves, or else in the marketplace. *Market Day, Roseau, Dominica* (fig. 4) shows mulatto women selling and buying cloth, while darker-skinned slaves sit in the background or in the shadows. The scene looks peaceful, prosperous and harmonious. Brunias worked for Sir William Young, Commissioner and Receiver for the sale of lands in Dominica, St Vincent and Tobago. His patron was keen to present a favourable image of life on the islands, to encourage investment and counter anti-slavery propaganda, and Brunias's images were widely circulated in the form of prints.¹⁶ The most degrading and back-breaking work of the period – cutting sugar – did not, therefore, become a subject for art.

Slaves occasionally appear in portraits of their owners, such as those of Dominique and Marguerite Deurbroucq (1753)¹⁷, by Pierre-Bernard Morlot. Dominique is accompanied by a boy in a silver slave-collar, holding a dog, a symbol of fidelity, while his wife is offered sugar by a young woman in an immaculate white dress and headscarf. In such paintings, the health and neatness of their slaves act as a testimony to the presumed care of their master and mistress. Like the cottage door paintings, these images are ambiguous. They may reflect a real sympathy for the

slaves on the part of their owners, or they may have functioned as a gratification for their vanity, demonstrating their sensibility along with their wealth.

The Encyclopédie and its Influence

One of the most important sources of images of work in the Enlightenment was, of course, the French *Encyclopédie* (1762-72, 1777). The *Encyclopédie* includes many depictions of the mechanical arts, laid out in a diagrammatic way so that the processes can be easily understood. The authors claimed to have respect for craftsmen. As Denis Diderot put it in his article on Art: 'it is up to the liberal Arts to rescue the mechanical arts from the scorn where prejudice has held them for such a long time'.¹⁸ These images have been intensively studied by historians. William H. Sewell, jr has compared them with earlier prints and concluded that the workers are represented as 'docile automatons' in an 'early capitalist utopian vision'.¹⁹ Cynthia Koepp is also cynical about Diderot's apparent interest in workers and thinks that it was the machines rather than the human beings operating them that interested him.²⁰ More recently, Celina Fox has said that they should be judged in the context of the graphic conventions of the day, and that the figures look like mannikins because of artistic shortcomings, not sociological manipulation.²¹ The *Encyclopédie* plates undoubtedly reflected, and disseminated, an interest in a wide range of working practices, even if the workers themselves were not afforded a great deal of autonomy or individuality.

Geraldine Sheridan has shown that there is much information about women workers to be found in these images, and in the related set of plates, *Descriptions des Arts et*

Métiers, published by the Académie Royale des Sciences between 1761 and 1788.²² She has identified a corpus of around two hundred images showing women at work, including plates prepared for the *Descriptions* but never actually published. She finds that, in contrast to earlier prints, the figures are represented without caricature, sexual objectification, or Christian moralizing: ‘the worker is always justified, even dignified by the work itself’.²³ These images suggest that women’s participation in the artisanal trades was more extensive than we would think from written records alone. They are shown performing both highly skilled, and physically demanding tasks.²⁴

The format of the *Encyclopédie* depictions of work was taken up by two painters of genre scenes, the Swedish Pehr Hilleström (1732-1816) and the Belgian Léonard Defrance (1735-1805). Hilleström, who studied with Chardin in Paris in 1757–8, painted several pictures of industrial scenes, including *In the Anchor-Forge at Sörderfors: The Smiths Hard at Work* (1782).²⁵ This is an ambitious work, nearly two metres wide, with many figures in a spacious, dramatic setting. Five men stand in active, muscular poses, their arms raised and their sleeves rolled up, alternating hammer blows as they work on a huge anchor. To the side, a group of well-dressed visitors, including two women, is being shown around the forge by a man in a long blue coat, who is evidently explaining the processes to them. The man in the blue coat is the owner of the forge, Adolf Ulrik Grill, who commissioned the painting in 1782. His companions look as if they could be portraits of specific individuals, but most of the workers have their faces turned away from us. The glow of the furnaces is contrasted with large areas of shadow in the upper part of the painting.

Foundry and forge scenes were popular subjects with painters, because of the potential they offered for dramatic chiaroscuro. Léonard Defrance, a painter who took an active part in revolutionary politics, painted many scenes showing work processes, including a tannery, a tobacco factory, a coal mine, a marble quarry, a forge, a foundry and a printing workshop. His repertoire obviously suggests an interest in work that was linked to his politics. Indeed, he was so active as a revolutionary that he took part in the destruction of Liège cathedral in the 1790s. His paintings include a series of four scenes showing a visit to the printing press of his friend Clément Plomteux, painted c. 1784, with advertisements for the works of Rousseau, Voltaire and other philosophes on the walls.²⁶ In 1778, however, Defrance wrote that he had to paint 'night subjects' such as foundries for his patron, the prince-bishop. This was François Charles de Velbruck, the ruler of Liège, who regarded himself as an enlightened prince.²⁷ The drama of industrialism is particularly evident in Defrance's *Interior of a Foundry* (fig. 5), in which the manipulation of the molten metal is presented as a spectacle, witnessed by a fashionable couple and a child. In nearly all Defrance's paintings of work, well-dressed gentlemen and ladies are shown visiting the scenes and taking a great interest in the processes. Unlike Hilleström's painting of the anchor-forge, however, Defrance's pictures are small – cabinet size – rather than monumental. The ladies in his paintings have particularly extravagant hats, perhaps to emphasize the contrast between frivolous fashion and honest toil. The workers, in each case, look vigorous and healthy, and, as in the *Encyclopédie* illustrations, they have little individuality.

There are similar scenes by British painters. In the same decade, the 1780s, the Scottish painter David Allan completed a series of four scenes, in oils, for the 3rd Earl

of Hopetoun, showing the stages in the process of converting lead ore from his mines into lead bars.²⁸ In the first scene, child workers pound lumps of crude lead ore, watched by the Earl and his Countess. In the second, the ore is washed in a large tub. The final scenes show lead being smelted in a furnace, and then the bars are weighed, watched over by an official who makes sure that every sixth bar goes to the owner. In all four paintings, the workers are anonymous, as they are in the plates of the *Encyclopédie*. Such paintings demonstrated the patron's enlightened interest in the latest industrial processes, as well as providing reassurance that his workers were in good shape. The boys pounding the lead ore with paddles, for example, look as if they are playing a game, and all the figures are well-dressed. The processes are shown taking place in spacious, airy structures of wood and brick, which look tidy and well-ordered.

In late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century England, the painters Paul Sandby Munn (1773-1845), Philip James De Loutherbourg (1740-1812), Julius Caesar Ibbetson (1759-1817) and J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851) all produced paintings that play on the dramatic chiaroscuro of industrial scenes. Ibbetson's watercolour of *The Iron Forge at Merthyr Tydfil* (1789)²⁹ is an interior scene, comparable in format to Allan's paintings, but without the well-dressed spectators. Here, once again, the artist exploits the potential of the subject for drama: one of the workers casts a giant shadow on the wall, the figures being, in other respects, dwarfed by the carefully-drawn machinery. Munn, De Loutherbourg and Turner all painted industrial landscapes in Coalbrookdale, the Shropshire valley, which became a major centre for the production of iron in the eighteenth century. Turner's early oil painting, *A Lime Kiln, Coalbrookdale* (c. 1797)³⁰ shows the kiln by night, its flames reflected in a pond

and transforming spindly trees into eerie silhouettes against the sky. There is more than a hint of the damage done to the natural world by industrial pollution. De Louthembourg's painting, *Coalbrookdale by Night* (1801)³¹ depicts the Madeley Wood iron smelting furnaces in the valley, also known as Bedlam furnaces, because the noise of the processes was associated with the activities of a madhouse (the famous Bethlehem Hospital). The warm glow of the furnaces is contrasted with the cold light of the moon; in the foreground, a woman and child pick their way through a landscape littered with sections of cast iron pipes and collars of monstrous proportions. The scene is reminiscent of medieval visions of hell. Munn painted a watercolour from the same viewpoint, *Bedlam Furnace, Madeley Dale, Shropshire* (1803)³², which shows the scene by day, but against an overcast sky that contrasts with the glow of the furnaces. Smoke from the coke hearths spirals into the atmosphere, merging with the dark clouds. All these paintings show effects which were a gift to artists, but their settings in landscapes raise questions about what it is actually like to live in such a place: the cottages of the workers are uncomfortably close to the foundries and it is evident that work, and noise, go on far into the night.

Work in the Countryside: Harvesters and Blacksmiths

Questions of individuality and of the effects of industrialization are also raised by two very famous sets of depictions of work, by Joseph Wright of Derby and George Stubbs (figs. 6 and 7). Both are set in the countryside rather than in the new industrial towns. Wright's blacksmith's shops and iron forges led to him being hailed by Francis Klingender in 1947 as 'the first professional painter directly to express the spirit of the industrial revolution', though this characterisation is now seen to be

problematic.³³ The first of these paintings, *The Blacksmith's Shop* (fig. 6) was exhibited and engraved in 1771. The blacksmiths are shown working by night in a ruined building, presumably a church or abbey since there is a carving of an angel on the spandrel above them. Their vigorous movements have attracted much praise. Recently, Celina Fox has written that Wright 'invests these men with expressions of concentrated intelligence and monumentalizes a moment when honed skill and judgement are required to accomplish successfully as a team a complex and mutually dependent series of action', while the setting is 'surely intended to emphasize the spiritual dimension of labour'.³⁴ The muscular arms and rolled-up sleeves of the principal figures strike a new note in depictions of work, and probably influenced, directly or indirectly, many later depictions of the worker as hero, from Ford Madox Brown's *Work* (1852-65)³⁵ to nineteenth-century trade union banners and twentieth-century Soviet posters. The print after *The Blacksmith's Shop* may also have been known to Hilleström and Defrance, whose industrial scenes date from a decade or so later.

However, Wright's first idea for the painting, recorded in his account book, is headed 'Subjects for Night Pieces', and specifies the sources of light – the bar of iron, the moon and a candle. He does not seem to have set out to glorify work, indeed his only specific thoughts about the figures of the blacksmiths concern an 'Idle fellow.' Instead, he appears to have been thinking mainly about the chiaroscuro effects and the way he can use a narrative to justify them:

A Blacksmiths Shop – Two men forming a Bar of Iron into a horseshoe – from whence the light must proceed. An Idle fellow may stand by the Anvil, in a time

killing posture, his hands in his bosom, or yawning with his hands stretched upwards, & a little twisting of the Body. Horse shoes hanging upon ye walls, and other necessary things, faintly seen being remote from the light – Out of this Room, shall be seen another, in wch. a ffarier (sic) may be shoeing a horse by the light of a Candle. The horse must be saddled (sic) and a Traveller standing by The Servant may appear with his horse in his hand – on wch. may be a portmanteau – This will be an indication of an Accident having happen'd, & shew some reason for shoeing the horse by CandleLight – The Moon may appear and illumine some part of the horses if necessary – 36

The ecclesiastical details may have been prompted primarily by Wright's desire to show the three light sources, so that a ruin was needed, and an abbey would be a plausible ruin. The old man seated to the side on the right, apparently lost in thought, may be one of the travellers who has taken shelter in the forge.

Since Klingender's time, many scholars have pointed out that blacksmith's shops are hardly indicative of the industrial revolution, since they had existed for centuries and the figures are using traditional methods. Two slightly later paintings by Wright depict iron forges with tilt-hammers in action, but even these were not particularly new devices. Significantly, both the paintings of iron forges include a figure who could be construed as an 'idle fellow'. There is a man with 'his hands in his bosom' in the *Iron Forge* of 1772 (now in the collection of Lord Romsey), while a man slouches, with his back to the wall, in *An Iron Forge from Without* (1773).³⁷ Wright may have been thinking of Hogarth's industrious and idle apprentices, and intending to make a contrast between industry and idleness. It is tempting to assume that the paintings

would have appealed to the rising middle classes – and the buyers of the prints may indeed have come from this section of society – but three of the four paintings were bought by the traditional aristocracy. Lord Melbourne purchased *The Blacksmith's Shop*; one of the iron forge paintings was sold to Lord Palmerston, the other to the Empress Catherine the Great of Russia.³⁸ Catherine was a reader of the *Encyclopédie* and was keen to promote industrial development in her own country. As in the cases of the Earl of Hopetoun, François Charles de Velbruck and Adolf Ulrik Grill, these industrial genre scenes were commissioned, or purchased after their completion, by patrons who were taking an active role in exploiting, or encouraging, the kinds of processes they depicted.

Workers look somewhat less heroic in the depictions of reaping and haymaking by George Stubbs (1724-1806), who is otherwise known mainly for his depictions of horses and jockeys. These paintings show traditional processes, unchanged by the agricultural and industrial revolutions, and familiar to their contemporary viewers from pastoral poetry as well as from actual observation in the countryside. In all, seven harvesting paintings by Stubbs are known: two pairs of oil paintings, dated 1783 and 1785, and three enamels, from 1794 and 1795. Stubbs also produced mezzotints, based on the first versions of the scenes, but these are rare, suggesting that they were not commercially successful. In the oil paintings, reaping and haymaking are contrasted, but it seems that the haymaking scenes were more popular, since two of the enamels are of this subject and only one of reapers.³⁹ These paintings are all extremely beautiful, but they have puzzled modern art historians since the workers are suspiciously clean, fashionably dressed and apparently untouched by the dirty and strenuous aspects of their labours. They are typical of the artist, however.

Stubbs was a meticulous painter and experimented with enamel colours so that he could get an even smoother finish for his paintings: rags, mud and dust would have held no aesthetic appeal for him. His horses and jockeys are similarly immaculate. Stubbs gradually refined his compositions in the course of painting the series of reapers and haymakers, creating harmonious rhythms and proportional relationships which are very satisfying to the eye.

The last of the enamels, *Reapers* (fig. 7) has the workers lined up like characters in a play, looking respectfully towards the mounted overseer. The three male labourers are cutting the crop and setting up the sheaves, while the woman has the lighter job of making straw ropes to bind them. The placing of the church spire in the centre of the composition suggests divine approval for the class relationship depicted in the painting, as well as referring to the customary thanks given to God for the harvest. Costume is carefully observed. The woman on the far left wears a splendid hat but also has arm protectors and an apron; the men wear buckled shoes and their breeches are neatly buttoned. Although they cut the wheat with a sickle, the stubble is very short, suggesting, rather, that it has been cut with a scythe. The overall effect is, therefore, contrived rather than realistic. On the other hand, the labourers have specific and contrasting features and could almost be portraits of known individuals.⁴⁰

A number of other British artists depicted agricultural workers in the fields in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, but they are often shown resting rather than working: sheltering from a storm, as in Richard Westall's *A Storm in Harvest* (1796)⁴¹, or enjoying a lunch break, as in Francis Wheatley's *Noon* (1799).⁴² In this case, it is not idleness that is shown, but an acceptable period of rest in the midst of

labour. Even in the early nineteenth century, when a new vogue for naturalism and open-air study stimulated many artists to paint convincing harvest scenes, the actual work often goes on in the background, while the foreground focus is on resting groups. Peter De Wint's large *Cornfield* of 1815⁴³ is a good example of this tendency: raking, gleaning and stacking of corn are evident in the middle and far distance, but the family group of labourers in the foreground is sitting amongst the sheaves eating a meal. The emphasis on rest and relaxation is a traditional feature of the pastoral poetry from which many artists drew their inspiration. James Thomson's poem *The Seasons* (1746) was a particular favourite. Thomson describes haymaking and reaping, but he makes hard work sound more like play:

Before the ripen'd field the reapers stand,
In fair array; each by the lass he loves,
To bear the rougher part, and mitigate
By nameless gentle offices her toil.
At once they stop and swell the lusty sheaves;
While thro' their cheerful band the rural talk,
The rural scandal, and the rural jest,
Fly harmless, to deceive the tedious time,
And steal unfelt the sultry hours away.⁴⁴

This passage follows on from a long hymn to the blessings of 'industry' which provides 'whate'er/Exalts, embellished, and renders life/Delightful' (ll. 141-3). Similarly, in a less widely read poem, *The Fleece* (1757), John Dyer praised industry 'which dignifies the artist, lifts the swain,/And the straw cottage to a place turns.'

Before the principle was stated definitively by Adam Smith, Dyer was confident that industry was the source of a nation's wealth: it is, he claimed, '... chief by numbers of industrious hands/ A nation's wealth is counted' (Book III). Both Wright's blacksmiths and Stubbs' reapers represent pleasing images of the 'industrious hands' that were seen as creating national prosperity.

Women and Children at Work: Fancy Pictures of the later Eighteenth Century

In visual depictions, women workers are often prettified and eroticized. In the later eighteenth century, paintings and prints of female street sellers, milkmaids and domestic servants were popular as so-called 'fancy pictures', and often amounted to little more than an excuse to show an attractive woman, presumably one who in real life would be sexually available to the elite patron. The most reproduced plates in Francis Wheatley's popular series, the *Cries of London* (1790s) were those representing women – such as the milkmaid, the strawberry seller, the match seller, the primrose seller. As Isabelle Baudino has commented, these images deny the practical realities of women's work, removing all references to poverty and destitution. The women are shown as impeccably and elegantly dressed, with fashionable hairdos and flawless complexions.⁴⁵ They have a delicate prettiness, hardly convincing in the light of their outdoor occupation and their presence on the street, and their slender arms look incapable of carrying the loads they are depicted with – the heavy baskets of fruit or substantial milk churns. Wheatley's images are part of the long tradition of depictions of street sellers, exemplified in France by the *Cris de Paris*, studied by Vincent Milliot.⁴⁶ In Wheatley's hands, as in the *Cris de Paris*, they are given an almost explicitly erotic charge.

The same is true of many genre paintings of domestic servants. In sharp contrast to Chardin's modestly dressed servants, the young woman represented in Henry Morland's *Laundry Maid Ironing* (fig. 8) is clearly meant to be sexually attractive: she wears a low cut gown, and her soft, pale hands and arms show no evidence of the redness and soreness that would have been the inevitable accompaniments of eighteenth-century methods of doing laundry. Her clothing is also, surely, too fine for a servant, though contemporary accounts make it clear that servant girls of the time – especially in wealthy households – liked to keep up with fashion. Like Wheatley's prints, this painting was very successful commercially. One of a pair, no fewer than five versions were exhibited during Morland's lifetime, and the paintings were also reproduced as mezzotints in 1769.⁴⁷ The figure in the companion picture, *Lady's Maid Soaping Linen* is even more explicitly alluring: she looks up from her work to direct an inviting glance towards the viewer, a slight smile on her pretty face.

Child workers, too, were commemorated in fancy pictures. Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Strawberry Girl* (1772–3)⁴⁸ represents a very young girl who is selling strawberries on the street. The title of the painting may imply that she is working in Strawberry Gardens, a popular leisure resort where it would have been impossible to retain her innocence for long. John Russell's pastel painting, *Love Songs and Matches* (1793)⁴⁹ is similarly ambiguous in its appeal: a beautiful young boy is holding up a love song alongside his basket of matches, wearing tattered clothes and accompanied by his begging dog. For such children to have to support themselves by working in the street implies severe poverty and deprivation: they have presumably been orphaned or abandoned by their parents, and they all were too likely to be tempted into theft or

prostitution.⁵⁰ It is not at all clear whether the buyer or viewer is meant to be stimulated to charitable activity by such works, or simply to find them alluring.

Portraiture: men and women at work

The fancy pictures were not meant to be identifiable individuals, though they were often drawn from specific models. Another phenomenon of the later eighteenth century was the vogue for portraits of domestic servants. These reflect the new value placed on work, combined with an awareness of the need for loyalty. The latter was especially important at a time when revolutionary activity made employers aware of the potential dangers of having servants living in their houses: they might betray or blackmail their masters and mistresses or even (since they had control of the food supply) poison them. Giles Waterfield and Anne French note that early examples by the Swedish court painter David von Ehrenstahl (1628–1698) suggest that it may be legitimate to associate likenesses of servants with the work ethic of Protestant countries.⁵¹ Supporting evidence for this interpretation comes from the unique painting of his servants by the staunchly Protestant William Hogarth. This painting, now entitled *Heads of Six of Hogarth's Servants* (c. 1750–5)⁵² was probably made with a practical purpose in mind: to demonstrate his skills to patrons who came to his studio considering a portrait commission. Nevertheless, there is no mistaking the human sympathy and understanding of individual character that it projects. Although there is no record of their names, the painting testifies to Hogarth's affection for his servants. Later in the century, there are major cycles of portraits of the servants of great houses in England. In 1783 the Duke of Dorset commissioned a set of 46 miniature portraits of the servants at Knole, of which 21 now survive. The artist,

Arnold Almond, has presented his sitters as fashionable and respectable. In the 1790s the Yorke family at Erddig began commissioning portraits of their servants, each one accompanied by a verse composed by the master of the house. The first seven – including portraits of a gamekeeper, a blacksmith and a housemaid - were painted by a local artist, Jon Walters of Denbigh, between 1791 and 1793, while Philip Yorke I composed the verses. The tradition continued at Erddig into the twentieth century. ⁵³

The portraits of elite sitters in this period also show a growing respect for the moral value of work. It was still most common for sitters to be represented as gentlemen or ladies, in fine clothes, striking a pose, and surrounded by evidence of their wealth and social position. Nevertheless, there are some notable portraits that show wealthy sitters engaged in some form of work. Authors were represented in the act of writing, like Denis Diderot in his portrait by Louis Michel van Loo (1767); actors and actresses were shown in character, acting a part on stage. The French chemist and discoverer of the role of oxygen in combustion, Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier, was a nobleman, but he was depicted by Jacques-Louis David surrounded by instruments, including a barometer, a gasometer, a water still and a bell jar (1788).⁵⁵ He too is caught in the act of writing, pausing only briefly from his researches to look up at his wife who has apparently visited him at his work.

Women were typically shown engaged in some form of needlework. Sir Joshua Reynolds's portrait of *Anne, Countess of Albemarle* shows her knotting (1757–60)⁵⁶, while *Mary, Duchess of Richmond* is depicted bending over a circular tambour frame, intent on her embroidery (1758–60).⁵⁷ The unidentified lady in Joseph Wright of

Derby's *Portrait of a Woman* (c. 1770)⁵⁸ proudly displays the filet lace that she has been making: she is holding two netting shuttles, and her scissors and workbag lie on the table beside her. Even Madame de Pompadour, the flamboyant mistress of King Louis XV of France, was depicted working at embroidery. François-Hubert Drouais's *Madame de Pompadour at her Tambour Frame* (1763–4)⁵⁹ shows her in the last year of her life. She is wearing a lavishly embroidered dress, liberally supplied with lace, bows and ribbons; but she is doing some form of needlework, though the angle of the frame means that we cannot see what she is making. This portrait of Madame de Pompadour is very different from the earlier pastel of her by Maurice Quentin Delatour (1752–5)⁶⁰, in which she is shown as a patron of the arts. In Drouais's portrait, instead of amusing herself in a dilettante fashion with literature and art, she is involved in useful work, like Voltaire's *Pacquette*.

Such examples may well have been known to John Singleton Copley when he painted *Mr and Mrs Thomas Mifflin* in 1773 (fig. 9). This portrait of the man who was later to become the quartermaster general of the Revolutionary army and the governor of Pennsylvania, with his wife, might seem to be the perfect expression of American values. The harsh lighting and direct gaze of Mrs Mifflin suggest honesty and sincerity, while the composition implies a marriage of equals. The prominence given to the fringe loom, and the accuracy with which it is portrayed, demonstrate respect for the moral value of work. Nevertheless, the different roles of husband and wife, he with his book and she with her handiwork, are very much in line with the gendered division of labour expressed in the European art of the time.

Occasionally we find artists giving non-elite working people the lavish attention that was normally reserved for elite portraits. Johann Zoffany's portrait of *John Cuff and his Assistant* (fig. 10) was painted just one year earlier than the Mifflin portrait. It was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1772 entitled 'An Optician, with his Attendant', and it seems that it was bought by Lord Grosvenor for the large sum of £200, passing by the early nineteenth century into the collection of King George III. It is remarkable in the respect it shows for the skill of the elderly John Cuff, shown here in the act of polishing a lens, perhaps for a microscope, watched by his equally elderly assistant. Cuff was renowned as a maker of optical instruments, and he was patronized by the King, who had invited him to watch the Transit of Venus from his newly constructed observatory in the Old Deer Park, Richmond, in June 1769, and supplied him with the tools of his trade in the last years of his life. Zoffany probably painted Cuff in the year of his death, but it is not known whether the portrait is a posthumous one. It has been suggested that the artist planned the picture as a memorial to a vanishing world, the world of the pre-industrial craft workshop. Certainly, these two men in their beautifully tidy workshop look like relics of the past. It is known that Cuff struggled financially in the latter years of his life as large workshops offered stiff competition, although their economies of scale were regarded as going hand in hand with a decline in quality.⁶¹ Like the servant portraits and the depictions of industrial scenes by Hilleström, Defrance and Allan in the 1780s, the painting celebrates the skills of the artisan, but also the implied benevolence of those who employ him.

Conclusion

Voltaire's characterisation of work as the antidote to poverty, vice and boredom finds many echoes in the visual images of the period. The interest taken in work processes, evident in the paintings by Hilleström, Defrance, Allan, Wright and Stubbs, demonstrates the role of work as an antidote to boredom. This is further emphasized in the portraits of the well-to-do engaged in some form of useful activity. The contrast between industry and idleness, a theme that is stated most explicitly by Hogarth, shows work as the enemy of vice and the remedy for poverty. Hogarth's industrious apprentice, Francis Goodchild, is an unconvincing stereotype, but the portrait of his servants – and the illustrations to this chapter of paintings by Ceruti, Wright, Stubbs and Zoffany – show that artists could also achieve a recognition of the humanity of the workers that occasionally gave them real dignity and individuality.

It would be wrong, however, to take these images as proof of a new egalitarianism. In the contexts within which the paintings were displayed, commissioned and bought, they could be seen as reminders of the efforts of the wealthy rather than the poor, the factory owners rather than those who toiled in them, the benefactors rather than the recipients of charity. Ceruti's lacemakers may have functioned as a celebration of the charitable activities of its patron, just as Zoffany's portrait of Cuff was a reference to the patronage of George III. The rigid divisions of the social hierarchy, and the gendered division of labour are very evident in the images. Even in paintings by the revolutionary sympathizer Defrance it is clear who are the workers and who are the elite visitors. This assertion of the social hierarchy is at its most explicit in Stubbs's *Reapers*, in which the farmer or overseer sits on his sleek horse, raised physically above his workers. The images also conform to traditional ideas about designated

roles for women, whether they are shown with modesty by Chardin, Copley and Stubbs, or as objects of sexual desire by Wheatley and Henry Morland.

The images of work produced during the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries generally represented it in a positive light. By the end of the eighteenth century there are the first hints of a recognition of the darker side of industrial development, not only in the landscapes by Turner, Munn, and Ibbetson, but also in the images of the *Chimney Sweep* and of *London* in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1794). Early in the new century, in 1804, Blake coined his memorable phrase 'these dark Satanic Mills' in his *Preface to Milton: A Poem*. Although scholars argue that this phrase may actually refer instead to the universities or the churches of Blake's time, in popular belief it sums up the exploitative nature of early industrial development, with its attendant evils of child labour, urban overcrowding and miserable poverty. In the nineteenth century the worker was to become a symbol of the inhumanity of man to man, downtrodden and neglected. For the artists discussed in this chapter, however, work was a visual spectacle, well worth visiting and watching, as well as a guarantee of virtue and a route to prosperity.

¹ Voltaire, *Candide or Optimism*, translated by John Butt (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1947), 143, 144.

² Musée du Louvre, Paris.

³ Museo del Prado, Madrid.

⁴ Musée du Louvre, Paris.

⁵ Andrea Bayer, ed., *Painters of Reality: The Legacy of Leonardo and Caravaggio in Lombardy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press/New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), 218-19, 227.

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- ⁶ Christopher Brown, *Scenes of Everyday Life. Dutch Genre Painting of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1984), 89, 90-93, 149.
- ⁷ Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
- ⁸ Wallace Collection, London.
- ⁹ National Gallery, London.
- ¹⁰ Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow.
- ¹¹ National Gallery of Art, Washington.
- ¹² Musée du Louvre, Paris.
- ¹³ Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth, Vol II, High Art and Low, 1732-1750* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1991), 289.
- ¹⁴ National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh.
- ¹⁵ Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio.
- ¹⁶ Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies 1700-1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 37-69.
- ¹⁷ Musée de l'Histoire de Nantes.
- ¹⁸ (1:714).
- ¹⁹ Steven Laurence Kaplan and Cynthia J. Koepp, *Work in France: Representations, Meaning, Organization, and Practice* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 278.
- ²⁰ Ibid, 241.
- ²¹ Celina Fox, *The Arts of Industry in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 274.
- ²² Geraldine Sheridan, *Louder than Words: Ways of Seeing Women Workers in Eighteenth-century France* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2009), passim.
- ²³ Ibid, 15.
- ²⁴ Ibid, 218-9, 223.
- ²⁵ Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.
- ²⁶ Françoise Dehousse, et al., *Léonard De France: L'Oeuvre Peint* (Liège: Editions du Perron et Eugène Wahle, 1985), 167.
- ²⁷ Ibid, p. 155.
- ²⁸ National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh.
- ²⁹ Cytharfa Castle Museum and Art Gallery, Merthyr Tydfil.
- ³⁰ Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.
- ³¹ Science Museum, London.
- ³² Tate Britain, London.

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- ³³Francis D. Klingender, *Art and the Industrial Revolution*, ed. and revised by Arthur Elton (first published 1947) (Chatham: Evelyn, Adams and Mackay, 1968), 51.
- ³⁴Fox, *The Arts of Industry*, 428.
- ³⁵Manchester Art Gallery.
- ³⁶Elizabeth E. Barker and Alex Kidson, *Joseph Wright of Derby in Liverpool* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 67.
- ³⁷The Hermitage, St Petersburg.
- ³⁸Judy Egerton, et al., *Wright of Derby* (London: Tate Gallery, 1990), 99-104.
- ³⁹Judy Egerton, *George Stubbs, Painter: Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 468-477.
- ⁴⁰Christiana Payne, *Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780-1890* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 83-4.
- ⁴¹Private collection.
- ⁴²Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Payne, *Toil and Plenty*, pp. 84-87.
- ⁴³Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
- ⁴⁴Autumn, ll. 153-161.
- ⁴⁵Isabelle Baudino, 'Eighteenth-century Images of Working Women', in *Aspects of Women's Work in Eighteenth-century Britain*, ed. Isabelle Baudino et al., (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 173, 176
- ⁴⁶Vincent Milliot, *Les cris de Paris ou le peuple travesti. Les représentations des petits métiers parisiens (XVI^e-XVIII^e siècle)* (Paris: Sorbonne, 2014[1995]).
- ⁴⁷Martin Postle, *Angels and Urchins: The Fancy Picture in 18th-century British Art* (Nottingham: Djanogly Art Gallery/ Lund Humphries, 1998), 85.
- ⁴⁸Wallace Collection, London.
- ⁴⁹Holburne Museum, Bath.
- ⁵⁰Ibid, pp. 83-4.
- ⁵¹Giles Waterfield and French, Anne, with Matthew Craske, *Below Stairs. 400 Years of Servants' Portraits* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2004), 17-18.
- ⁵²Tate Britain, London.
- ⁵³Ibid, pp. 64-5.
- ⁵⁴Musée du Louvre, Paris.
- ⁵⁵Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- ⁵⁶National Gallery, London.
- ⁵⁷Goodwood House.
- ⁵⁸Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- ⁵⁹National Gallery, London.

⁶⁰ Musée du Louvre, Paris.

⁶¹ Martin Postle, ed., *Johann Zoffany RA: Society Observed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 227-8.