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**Joseph Wright of Derby, A.R.A.** (Derby 1734–1797)

*Portrait of Charles Hurt of Wirksworth (1758–1834);  
Portrait of Susannah Arkwright, Mrs Charles Hurt  
(1762–1835) and her daughter Mary Anne*

Oil on canvas, in their original Wright of Derby  
neo-classical frames

91 ¼ x 55 ¼ in. (232 x 140 cm.)

A pair (2)



## Provenance

Both commissioned by Charles Hurt of Wirksworth and recorded in the artist's account book, the former among pictures of circa 1790 as 'A full length of Mr. C. Hurt £52.10.0'; the latter among pictures of circa 1787–90, as 'A full length of Mrs. C. Hurt & her Child £81.18.0'.

Thence by descent to the previous owner until 2018.

## Exhibited

Derby, Corn Exchange, *Art and Industrial Exhibition*, 1866, no. 172 and 189.

Derby, Corporation Art Gallery, *Paintings by Joseph Wright... with some Original Drawings and a complete Collection of Prints*, 1883, no. 47 and 53.

London, Henry Graves & Co. Ltd, *Loan exhibition of Works of Joseph Wright ARA of Derby*, 1910, no. 4 and 8.

London, Tate Gallery, Paris, Grand Palais, and New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Wright of Derby*, 7 February – 22 April 1990, 17 May – 23 July 1990, and 6 September – 2 December 1990, no. 134 and 135.

## Literature

B. Nicholson, *Joseph Wright of Derby, Painter of Light*, 2 vols., London and New York 1968, vol. I, pp. 162, 164 and 208–09, cat. no. 94 and 95, vol. II, reproduced p. 190–91, pl. 300 and 301.

J. Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, exh. cat., Tate, London 1990, pp. 208–10, cat. no. 134 and 135, reproduced in colour.

D. Wain, *The Hurts of Derbyshire*, Ashbourne 2002, p. 29, reproduced.

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Joseph Wright of Derby is one of a small and select group of British eighteenth-century artists whose work transcends national boundaries and speaks to a wider global sensibility. His greatest paintings, such as *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (National Gallery, London, fig. 5); *The Orrery* (Derby Museums and Art Gallery); *The Old Man and Death* (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford Connecticut). and *A Grotto in the Kingdom of Naples with Banditti* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston); as well as his daringly original *Portrait of Sir Brooke Boothby* (Tate Gallery, London), have become icons of British art the world over.

These two magnificent paintings are amongst his finest, and they depict two of Wright's close circle of acquaintances in Derbyshire society; members of the commercial and intellectual elite of the Midlands who were the driving force behind the Industrial Revolution; the activities of which Wright was to capture in some of his most famous paintings. Charles Hurt, who came from an old and distinguished family of Derbyshire landowners and industrialists, owned a lead-smelting business at Wirksworth, in the Derbyshire Dales, and was a successful mining engineer. His wife, Susannah, was the daughter of Sir Richard Arkwright, the inventor of the cotton spinning water-frame and the so-called 'father of the modern industrial factory system', which was a catalyst for the Industrial Revolution itself. Her father and brother, Richard Arkwright Jr., were two of Wright's most important patrons and they, Charles Hurt, and Wright himself were all associated with the close knit group whose activities centred upon the Lunar Society and later the Derby Philosophical Society. The landscape in which the sitters are depicted is a view of the Derbyshire Dales around Cromford, with a view of the River Derwent and Cromford Bridge in the background of the portrait of Susanna and her daughter – very likely the grounds of Rock House, where the Hurts and Arkwrights lived for many years.

Charles Hurt was the second son of Francis Hurt of Alderwasley and his wife Mary, daughter of an apothecary from Wirksworth called Thomas Gell. His father's family had been settled at Ashbourne, near Dovedale in the Derbyshire Dales since at least the fifteenth century. His grandfather and uncle both served as High Sheriff of the County – an office Charles himself would hold in 1897 – and his father, who also sat to Wright (as did his mother, see figs 1 and 2), was involved in lead-mining just south of Cromford, where he owned a substantial lead-smelting plant. Charles was probably educated at Eton,<sup>1</sup> as his brothers-in-law the Arkwrights were, and many of his own grandchildren were to be, before inheriting

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<sup>1</sup> A 'Hurt' is listed in the Eton College lists for 1768-70 (see R. Austen-Leigh (ed.), *Eton College Lists 1678-1790*) and at least three Eton school books were in Charles Hurt's library.

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part of his father's lead works and starting his own lead-smelting business at Wirksworth, a few miles south of Cromford.

Whilst his elder brother succeeded to the family estates at Alderwasley Hall, 'a handsome and substantial built stone mansion, situated on rising ground on the west bank of the river Derwent'<sup>2</sup> (see fig. 4), Charles developed a considerable knowledge of both lead-mining and lead-smelting, no doubt much of which was acquired from his father who was a dedicated industrialist, and became something of a celebrated mining engineer, with a particular expertise in the construction of soughs – tunnels bored into the hills for two miles or more to extract water from areas where mines were being sunk. His expert knowledge became part of Derbyshire local history when, in 1797, it led to the rescue of a miner who had been trapped underground by a fall of rocks for eight days but was found alive and well due to 'the influence and persuasions of Charles Hurt of Wirksworth.'<sup>3</sup>

Charles was typical of Enlightenment industrialists in that his intellectual pursuits were many and varied, and as well as engineering he was a keen astronomer and mathematician, as well as an avid book collector. Following his death, in October 1835, his library was auctioned off in a five day sale comprising 1,500 lots; including books on astronomy, mathematics, natural history and other sciences, as well as Classical, French and Italian literature; and his three-inch achromatic refracting telescope, a very sophisticated instrument for his time, is still in the family's possession.

His wife Susanna was born in Bolton on 21 December 1761, the daughter of Sir Richard Arkwright and his second wife Margaret Biggins. Her parents separated when Arkwright was struggling to perfect the machinery that would later make his fortune, however her father took charge of Susanna's education, sending her to study at Mrs Latuffiere's school in Derby (where she was a classmate of the novelist Maria Edgeworth), and ensured that she mixed with all the leading families in the area. Susanna married Charles on 12 June 1780, at the age of eighteen, and she brought with her a dowry of £15,000, payable over four years (an early sign of her father's rising wealth at the time) – the *Derby Mercury* described the bride as 'an agreeable young Lady, with a large Fortune'. Her father, Sir Richard Arkwright (1732-1792), was the inventor of the cotton spinning water-frame (the fundamental piece of machinery which 'contributed

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<sup>2</sup> S. Glover, *History of the County of Derby*, 2 vols, Derby, 1829, vol. II, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Glover 1829, vol. I, p. 328.

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more than any other to the transformation of the industrial face of England”) and architect of the modern factory system, who is widely credited as the ‘father of the Industrial Revolution’. A remarkable, self-made man – the original entrepreneur – Arkwright Senior rose from the poverty of his early life in Preston to become one of the richest commoners in England. As the *Gentleman’s Magazine* recorded after his death in 1792, he ‘died immensely rich’ leaving behind him ‘manufactories the income of which is greater than that of most German principalities’.

Susanna’s marriage to Charles Hurt joined together two of the most influential families in southern Derbyshire. The couple lived at Wirksworth Hall and had eleven children, seven of which survived to adulthood. Their union was typical of the close bond of family ties which bound many of the leading industrial families in Derbyshire, including the Hurts, Arkwrights, Strutts and Milnes, all of whom Wright painted and with whom he was on intimate terms. For an artist who was keenly inspired by the industrial activity of his time, their friendship and patronage inspired many of Wright’s most dramatic images of that industry, and the scientific developments and understanding that lay behind it.

Sir Richard Arkwright himself sat to Wright for a number of portraits during his life, including the famous full-length portrait of circa 1789-90, now on loan to Derby Museum and Art Gallery, in which the great man is depicted seated at a table, upon which is prominently displayed a set of his cotton-spinning rollers (fig. 3). Susanna’s brother, sister-in-law and their six children were also painted by Wright in a set of large group portraits, one of which is in the Derby Museum and Art Gallery, whilst the others remain in family possession. Her brother, who was one of the artist’s most important patrons, also owned a number of other works by Wright; including his *View of Ullswater Lake*, one of the most famous of the artist’s late landscapes, which he acquired at Wright’s studio sale in 1801 (untraced); *A Grotto in the Gulf of Salerno, with the figure of Julia banished from Rome* (private collection), one of Wright’s famous Italian coastal scenes; and two of his Northern Tenebrist inspired exercises in exploring strong effects of *chiaroscuro* – *a Boy blowing up a bladder* and *a Girl looking through a bladder* (both in private collections). Wright also painted a view of the Arkwright’s family home, Willersley Castle (Derby Museum and Art Gallery), and several views of Arkwright’s Cotton Mills at Cromford – the only known case in the eighteenth century, as Nicholson pointed out, when an artist of Wright’s calibre deigned to document the factory system in operation.

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The Hurts were also significant patrons of the artist. However unlike Richard Arkwright, who was an entirely self-made man, Wright's portraits of Charles's parents, both of which are now in Derby Museum and Art Gallery, highlight the apparent dichotomy inherent within Derbyshire's landed gentry. Whilst his father, a man of landed means who could trace his lineage back generations, is depicted proudly displaying a lump of lead ore – literally the 'base material' upon which his wealth was built – his mother is depicted as a lady of refinement and leisure; an open book lying beside her whilst she takes a pinch of snuff from a box inlaid with tortoise shell. Unusually for members of their class in the eighteenth century, their active role in local industry, and the wealth they derive from it does not diminish the propriety of their station, but rather it is enhanced by it. By contrast, the much grander portraits of their son and daughter-in-law depict their sitters much more in the manner of the landed squire and lady of fashion, and are, in Nicholson's view, more typical of depiction of second-generation industrialists. However, though both sitters are depicted out of doors, elegantly dressed and at ease in the landscape, this is no imagined Arcadian setting. In fact the topography is very real and includes a view of the River Derwent and Cromford Bridge in the Derbyshire Dales – the very landscape which was the source of the family's wealth. Indeed it has been suggested that it could be a view of the grounds of Rock House, Cromford, where the sitters' family had lived for many years.

The Hurts and the Arkwrights were typical of the closely bound and interconnected group of leading industrial families in Derbyshire that made up Wright's intimate circle of leading patrons. All of these were members of the commercial and intellectual elite of the Midlands who were the driving force behind the Industrial Revolution; the activities of which Wright was to capture in some of his most famous paintings. Many of them; including men like the natural philosopher Erasmus Darwin (who was also Wright's physician); the ceramicist Josiah Wedgwood; the noted geologist John Whitehurst; and the mechanical engineer James Watt; were members of the Lunar Society – that leaned body of Midlands thinkers with which Wright, Hurt and the Arkwrights were all closely associated.<sup>4</sup> Whitehurst lived at no. 22 Irongate in Derby, only a few doors down from Wright's parents' house at no. 28 Irongate, where the artist may also have maintained a studio, and his *Inquiry into the Original State and Formation of the Earth*, published in 1778, was to have a particularly strong influence on Wright's interest in volcanos, and volcanic eruption, as well as the local geology of Derbyshire. Wright's portrait of Whitehurst, painted

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed account of the activities of the Lunar Society and its members see J. Uglow, *The Lunar men: The Friends who Made the Future*, London, 2003.

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circa 1782-83, brilliantly captures the unassuming nature of the man, yet at the same time conveying his keen intelligence. Darwin, on the other hand, had studied medicine at Cambridge and Edinburgh before taking up practise in Lichfield, not far from Derby, in 1786. He later moved to Derby in 1781 and was probably originally introduced to Wright by Whitehurst in the 1760s, following which the two became lifelong friends. Possessed of an incredibly energetic and inventive mind, Darwin's voracious intellectual appetite had an enormous influence on Wright, and his interests included, but were not limited to, electricity, atmospheric, geology, gases, canals and botany, as well as writing poetry and making advances in medical practise. As a medical doctor Darwin treated Wright for the unidentified sickness which plagued him from about 1767 until his death. And the artist painted several portraits of him between the 1770s and the mid-1790s. For an artist who was keenly inspired by the industrial activity of his time, their friendship and patronage inspired many of Wright's most dramatic images of that industry, and the scientific developments and understanding that lay behind it; such as the National Gallery's *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, painted in 1768 (fig. 5), and *A Philosopher giving that Lecture on the Orrery, in which a lamp is put in place of the Sun* (Derby Museum and Art Gallery), painted in 1766.

Although Wright painted many commissions for members of the Lunar Society and their circle of Midlands intellectuals, including numerous portraits of its members, it was the artist's scenes of contemporary experiments that most directly represent the scientific and philosophical interests of the society. In 1783 Darwin founded an offshoot of the Lunar Society, the Derby Philosophical Society, when the former's activities became increasingly focused on Birmingham. The membership of the new club included several close acquaintances of Wright's, such as Brooke Boothby of Ashbourne Hall, botanist and confidant of the French philosopher Rousseau, Josiah Wedgwood of the original Lunar Society, and Jedediah Strutt, the former business partner of Sir Richard Arkwright and an industrialist and inventor in his own right who also sat to Wright circa 1790. Although neither Arkwright or Charles Hurt were members of either society, they were intimately bound up in that world of intellectual, scientific and commercial enterprise which drew succour from its links to the mainstream of Enlightenment knowledge and transformed it through practical application into the technical innovations that gave birth to the Industrial Revolution. Wright was also at the centre of this world, and its enterprise forms the spiritual core of his art.



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Fig. 1: Joseph Wright of Derby, *Portrait of Francis Hurt*, Derby Museum and Art Gallery.



Fig. 2: Joseph Wright of Derby, *Portrait of Mary, Mrs Francis Hurt*, Derby Museum and Art Gallery.

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Fig. 3: Joseph Wright of Derby, *Portrait of Sir Richard Arkwright*, private collection, on loan to the Derby Museum and Art Gallery.



Fig. 4: Alderwasley Hall, Derbyshire, the Hurt family home where Charles grew up.



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Fig. 5: Joseph Wright of Derby, *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, National Gallery, London.