

THE WONDER OF SCIENCE CAPTURED IN A PAINTING:

UFFIZI TO HOST JOSEPH WRIGHT OF DERBY'S CELEBRATED *EXPERIMENT*, ON LOAN FROM THE NATIONAL GALLERY IN LONDON

A masterpiece rarely loaned by the National Gallery is to go on show in Italy for the very first time, until 24 January 2021

K metro 0 – Florence - **Faces betraying dread, worry, wonder or curiosity**, their different expressions subtly revealed by the light of a lantern and by the feeble glow of the moon, people a famous 18th century picture entitled ***An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, painted by English artist Joseph Wright of Derby in 1768. This unquestioned masterpiece, owned by the National Gallery in London**, is now coming to Italy for the very first time, to the Gallerie degli Uffizi in Florence, for display in an exhibition due to run until 24 January 2021 **entitled "Art and Science". The exhibition is curated by Alessandra Griffo** and will be hosted on the second floor of the museum (in Room 38, situated between the Leonardo da Vinci and the Michelangelo and Raphael rooms).

Man's response to scientific research is the main theme of this work, which is also on this occasion a symbol of the **cultural bond between London and Florence** in the fields of history, art and nature.

The experiment conducted by 17th century Irish chemist Robert Boyle to create a vacuum using an air pump was fairly old news by the time Wright of Derby painted this picture in 1768, but it was certainly still being repeated for educational purposes in a variety of different venues, and indeed much the same was happening in Florence at the time. Leopold of Lorraine, then the Grand Duke of Tuscany, had begun in the 1770s, first in the Pitti Palace for his own children and then for a broader audience in the newly-established Museum of Physics and Natural History in the Specola, to have similar experiments conducted and demonstrative workshops organised in order to acquaint people with the more important laws of chemistry and physics then known. The instruments used by the institute, similar to the pump shown in the painting, were later assigned to the Museo Galileo in Florence which still owns them today.

The painting depicts a meeting in an English country house. The audience, a mixed bag, is far from expert, but it is precisely this assortment of different human types that allows the artist to depict their expressions with a certain theatrical quality, an effect bolstered by his strongly contrasting handling of light and shade and by his decision to clothe in a magician's garb the man

at the heart of the composition, who can decree the bird's death by simply turning the stopcock and removing the air from the glass bell. Even the artist's choice of a white parrot rather than the more common canary highlights the contrast between its white plumage and the surrounding darkness.

The experiment's astonished audience must, of course, include the person observing the painting, because the fact that the figures, the instruments and the setting itself are almost life-size creates the illusion of a room within a room, thus producing a realistic effect accentuated by the quality of the artist's sharp, meticulous and extremely detailed painting technique.

In the exhibition, Wright of Derby's large painting is juxtaposed with **other works illustrating the practice of studying by candle light and of pursuing thought in the depth of the night:** for instance **Bartolomeo Cavarozzi's** *St. Jerome in his Study with Two Angels* (1617), or **Enea Vico** 's drawing entitled *The Academy of Baccio Bandinelli* (1560). The exhibition is completed by a 19th century *Mantel Clock in the shape of a cage*, a precious item on loan from the Imperial and Royal Apartments in the Pitti Palace, whose shape immediately conjures up the bird cage from which the dove, the unwilling star of the experiment illustrated by Wright of Derby in his painting, was so callously plucked.

British Minister of State for Media and Culture John Whittingdale remarked: *"Italy and the UK share an illustrious history of inspiring global progress in art and science; a tradition which has been upheld for centuries and which stands firm today. This exhibition at the Uffizi Gallery celebrates our commitment to building strong and lasting connections between our two nations through cultural exchange"*.

Gallerie degli Uffizi Director Eike Schmidt added: *"Wright of Derby's painting confers a monumental quality on man's response to scientific experimentation, illustrating emotions and describing figures as though they were in a narrative painting, the noblest form of painting up until that time. The scene is immersed with astonishing immediacy in the spirit and mood of the Enlightenment, which was also experiencing a moment of glory in Florence at that time. It was in 1769 that Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo decided to open the Uffizi to the public in an effort to educate people, yet the city's most frequently visited museum at that time was the Museum of Physics and Natural History known as La Specola. Science in the 18th century held sway also on the banks of the Arno"*.

Exhibition curator Alessandra Griffo, for her part, explained: *"In addition to being a milestone*

in the history of English 18th century painting, An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump painted by Joseph Wright of Derby in 1768 also attracts our attention today with unexpected topicality as we battle with COVID-19, because our responses to scientific research – indifference, awareness, reflection, curiosity or fear – are one of the picture's main themes. Yet as with all great masterpieces, the picture offers numerous different levels of interpretation, some of which are evoked in the exhibition by the decision to display five of the Gallerie degli Uffizi's own works alongside it. On the one hand visitors can explore the specifically artistic theme of nocturne painting, while on the other they are encouraged to ponder the sensitive issue of respect for the dignity of animals".

JOSEPH WRIGHT OF DERBY: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Joseph Wright, known as "Joseph Wright of Derby" after the city in which he was born in 1734 and died in 1797, trained in London as a portrait artist. Becoming a master of the art of portraiture – a genre of which the British were especially fond – he ended up devoting much of his career to that art. Starting some time around the mid-1760s, however, he also began to produce a series of works characterised by sophisticated lighting harking back to the 17th century tradition of Caravaggio and Dutch painting, either depicting fairly humdrum subjects, genre scenes and art academies by candlelight or, as with the *Experiment* on display in the exhibition dated 1768, addressing novel scientific and technological themes documenting a sensibility widely held in the Age of the Enlightenment by a society that had already been striding for some years in the direction of the Industrial Revolution. Travelling to Italy in 1774–5, Wright of Derby was inspired to produce views and landscapes remarkable once again for their scenographic handling of light and shade: the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, fireworks over Rome or the gaping interiors of caves and grottoes. Along with a series of paintings filled with pathos illustrating passages from literature, these pictures, some of which he painted after returning home, were to pave the way for the pre-Romantic ethic of the Sublime.