

## **A philosopher giving a lecture on the orrery, by William Pether**

Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne



William Pether, printmaker (English, 1731–1795)  
after a painting by Joseph Wright (English, 1734–1797)

**A philosopher giving a lecture on the orrery, 1768**

mezzotint

44.6 × 58.0 cm (image)

45.9 × 58.5 cm (sheet)

Gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959

Baillieu Library Print Collection

University of Melbourne

1959.3509

In 1772, London artist James Northcote referred to Joseph Wright of Derby as ‘the most famous painter now living for candlelights’, referring to the artist’s series of paintings created in the 1760s and depicting scenes set almost entirely in the dark, with a single central point of illumination – usually a candle.

Wright was intrigued by science and philosophy and took inspiration from visits to industrial workshops and experimental science laboratories, enchanted by the contrasts between light and dark that he encountered there. One of these instances produced *A philosopher giving a lecture on the orrery*, a painting reproduced in mezzotint by artist William Pether.

The orrery, a mechanical model of the solar system, sits at the centre of the scene and radiates light from an unknown source (most likely a candle in place of the sun), endowing the object with a spectacular, almost magical presence. The image encapsulates the flourishing scientific scene in the 18th-century Enlightenment period, and the almost religious marvel with which new knowledge was received.

William Pether was a contemporary of Joseph Wright of Derby. In the late 18th century he created a number of prints after originals by Wright and other painters known for their dramatic use of lighting, such as Rembrandt.

## Teaching ideas

The University of Melbourne’s curriculum is rich and varied, and changes from year to year. For more teaching ideas, [contact a collection manager](#).

### Astronomy in World History

Consider the new knowledge that was being created in the 18th century around the time this mezzotint was published. What advances were being made in the field of astronomy and what contribution did the orrery make?

### The Print Room

Study the process of creating a mezzotint. Examine why it became such a popular medium for creating prints after original paintings and discuss what painterly qualities it could emulate in comparison to other print techniques.

### From the Solar System to the Cosmos

Discuss the 18th-century understanding of the solar system. How did models like the orrery facilitate new knowledge, and how was science progressing around the time Joseph Wright of Derby was painting *A philosopher giving a lecture on the orrery*?

### From Plato to Einstein

Discuss the historical advances in understanding of the solar system up until the publication of *A philosopher giving a lecture on the orrery*, culminating in the late 18th-century Enlightenment era. Look at the orrery illustrated and investigate the forms and development of earlier models. Consider developments and discoveries since that period.

### Knowledge, Learning and Culture

Visit the Baillieu Library Print Room and examine *A philosopher* alongside Wright’s other ‘candlelight’ works recreated in mezzotint by Pether: *An alchymist* (1959.3508), *Three persons viewing The Gladiator by candlelight* (1959.3510) and *An academy* (1959.3507). Use these as a starting point for discussing the cultural and scientific scene in Enlightenment England.

### Exhibition Management

Using University of Melbourne collections, find five objects that could be displayed alongside *A philosopher* in an exhibition on a specific theme (for example, scientific discovery).

## Intersecting objects



William Pether, printmaker (English, 1731–1795)  
after a painting by Joseph Wright (English,  
1734–1797)

**An alchemist, 1775**

mezzotint

57.6 × 45.4 cm (plate)

58.4 × 45.9 cm (sheet)

Gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959

Baillieu Library Print Collection

University of Melbourne

1959.3508



William Pether, printmaker (English, 1731–1795)  
after a painting by Joseph Wright (English,  
1734–1797)

**Three persons viewing *The Gladiator* by  
candlelight, 1769**

mezzotint

48.1 × 55.7 cm (plate)

Gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959

Baillieu Library Print Collection

University of Melbourne

1959.3510

To learn more, visit the website of the [Baillieu Library Print Collection](#).

## Further reading

Benedict Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby: Painter of light*, London: Paul Mellon Foundation for British Art, Routledge and K. Paul; New York: Pantheon Books, 1968.

*Joseph Wright of Derby, 1734–1797*, Lichfield Cathedral Arts, 1986.

Jane Wallis, *Joseph Wright of Derby, 1734–1797: An introduction to the work of Joseph Wright of Derby with a catalogue of drawings held by Derby Museum and Art Gallery; published on the occasion of an exhibition commemorating the Bicentenary of the artist's death*, Derby: Museum and Art Gallery, c. 1997.