

Why Ford Madox Brown Painted *Work*

Ford Madox Brown's *Work* was unique in its time in taking as its subject labourers working in an actual London street. It was, however, intended to be more than just a slice of life. Brown had trained as a history painter and his intention was to show through these men the importance of meaningful work. He therefore transformed a fleeting real life scene into a monumental work of art.

Brown was struck by the vigour of navies digging the road near his studio in Hampstead. He felt they were just as picturesque as any Mediterranean peasants. The men were connecting water supplies so they were not just visually interesting but were also performing an important task. Clean drinking water lessened the incidence of alcoholism, the scourge of the lower classes, and freed overcrowded cities from cholera.

The face of Britain was changing dramatically as people flocked from the countryside into the towns to find work. The nature of their work also changed; it was no longer dictated by daylight or the seasons but by bells and clocks. These 'first-born sons of modern industry' as Marx called English working men in his 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, were a visible and often threatening presence on the city streets and their plight became the subject of debate.



Haunt for cholera in *The Penny Illustrated Newspaper* October 1865
Two little girls with their water jugs can be seen walking along the road in *Work*

The Navies

One group of workers, the navies - short for navigators - were particularly prominent. As builders of the infra-structure of the new Britain, its roads, canals and railways, their toil made life better for the whole community. The middle classes admired these itinerant workers but seemed unaware of the great hardships they suffered. Brown was not concerned with their hardship but with their heroic quality and he used them as the centre of his composition. Around them he arranged groups of people who could not, or need not, work. Then, because it was in his nature to elaborate on a theme, he developed his composition to include comments on wider social issues and lightened it with whimsical humour.

The Brain-Workers

Brown was well read and knew the novels of Charles Dickens and Mrs Gaskell describing working class life, but it was while reading Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843) that he conceived *Work*. In this book the medieval *Past* where people led meaningful lives governed by purposeful work, responsibility to the community, and devotion to God, was contrasted with the *Present* where profit was all that mattered. Carlyle argued that what people needed for contentment was the opportunity to participate in work which gave them self-respect and a role in the community. He paraphrased a quotation from the Bible 'I must work the works of him that sent me for the night cometh, wherein no man can work' (John 9:4) and Brown adapted this for the central quotation

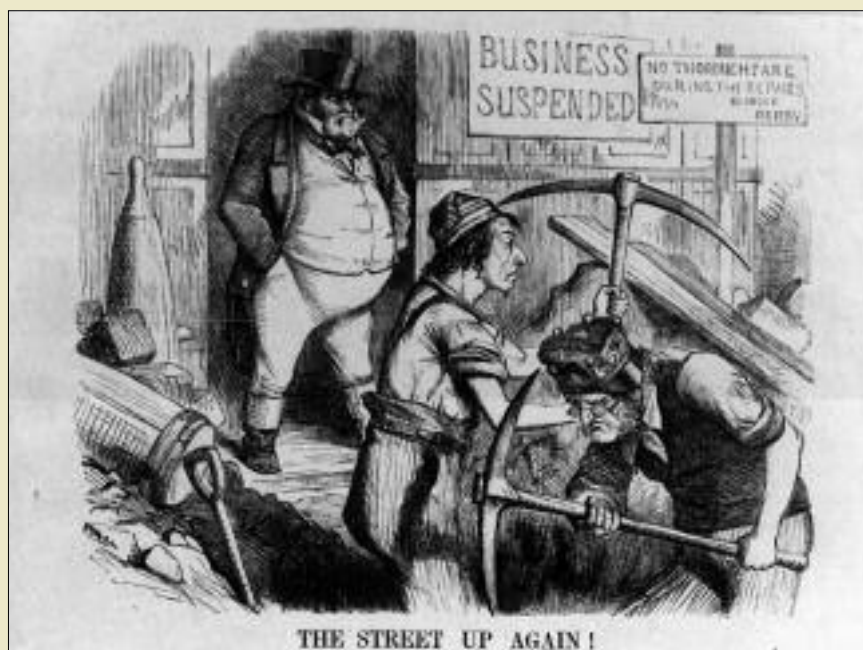
on the frame of his painting. Although Brown does not mention him by name, Carlyle appears in his picture on the far right. He described him as a brainworker who does not appear to work but who can improve the lot of others through the power of his thoughts. He is talking to the Rev Frederick Maurice, a Christian Socialist: another brainworker but one who puts his theories into actions. He founded the first working men's college where Brown taught.

The Value of Work

As a man with a strong social conscience Brown must have been aware of the articles by Henry Mayhew in the *Morning Chronicle* of 1849 surveying the state of London's poor. He wrote 'I shall consider the whole of the metropolitan poor under three separate phases, according as they *will* work, they *can't* work and they *won't* work'. The chickweed seller on the extreme left of *Work* may have originated in Mayhew.

Another popular commentator was Samuel Smiles whose best-selling book *Self Help* 1859 sought to prove that however lowly a person's background he could rise with hard work to become one of the leaders of the new industrial society.

Women's work was also debated at this time. Barbara Leigh Hunt, in *Women and Work* (1857) wrote 'WORK - not drudgery, but WORK is the great beautifier. Activity of the brain, heart and limb, gives



The street up again! A cartoon from *Punch* April 1859

health and beauty, and makes women fit to be the mothers of children'. Brown's depiction of harsh sunlight was intended to show work in all its severity and this is echoed on the frame. He quotes God's punishment of Adam and Eve condemning them to a life of toil - 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.'

The value of hard work and the sense of guilt at wasting time can also be seen in the lives of artists of the period. Brown was typical in filling his diaries with itemised accounts of his progress. When *Work* was first shown in 1865 the *Art Journal* praised Brown's hard work calling him 'indefatigable in research towards the attainment of accuracy'. Indeed the whole Pre-Raphaelite technique of detailed observation equated hard work with quality and achievement. Part of Ruskin's early defence of the Pre-Raphaelites in the *Times* stated that 'the mere labour bestowed on these works... ought to have

placed them above the level of mere contempt'.

When we consider this we can perhaps understand the horror felt by Ruskin when confronted with the paintings of Whistler. The famous libel trial of 1878 concerned the remark by Ruskin that the artist was asking two hundred guineas 'for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face'. When asked: 'a labour of two days, then, is that for which you ask two hundred guineas?' Whistler replied, 'No - I ask it for the knowledge of a lifetime'.

The trial showed that the world had again moved on and that mere industry could no longer be seen as meritorious. Whistler's theory of 'art for art's sake' meant that art did not need the strong moral content seen in *Work*. Brown's masterpiece, however, still retains its freshness and reminds us of a fascinating time in British history.