

Industrial identity and landscape

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Topic/landscape

My 'landscape' is late eighteenth-century English portraiture as a conceptual setting for the emergence of a new masculine identity, an identity rooted in economic production. The organised manufacture of goods within a system characterised by the division of labour led to an increased number of large-scale industrial sites, sites that were entwined with the identity of the manufacturer. When some of these wealthy and powerful men were visually represented they were depicted against a background of such sites. A particularised identity attached to organised industrial production was, therefore, signified through the specificity of a depicted landscape. This was the subversion of a portraiture tradition in which aristocratic and/or wealthy, landed, sitters were posed in front of a (sometimes fictitious) rural landscape or stately home.

My core interest is in how identity in a portrait is constructed. Likeness is often considered as the primary signifier and yet it is a nebulous and problematic concept. My research is into how the cumulative effect of the internal juxtaposition of subject, objects and setting in a portrait can also play a key role in evoking both personal and social identities, the latter being a category of distinction described in the eighteenth century by John Locke as the abstract ideas upon which a genus is founded, the 'nominal essence' of a thing by which it is named and classified.¹

In the late eighteenth century the presentation of an industrial identity in portraiture adapted pre-existent traditions and conventions in order to stabilize its emergence. In John Opie's portrait of the mine adventurer Thomas Daniell (1786) and Carl von Breda's painting of Matthew Boulton (1792) ([Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery](#)), the rural landscapes and classical homes of the gentry and aristocracy were replaced by the engine of a Cornish copper mine in the Opie, and Boulton's Soho manufactory in the von Breda. Objects related to industrial production appear in both. Daniell is presented with a sample of copper ore by his mine captain whilst Boulton examines his mineral collection. The portrait of Daniell is an obvious reference to commercial activity but the depiction of Boulton is far more equivocal: the classical façade of the Soho manufactory could, at a casual glance, be that of a stately home and the minerals could represent the gentlemanly pursuit of geology. However, Boulton's interest in minerals, as is clear from his correspondence, was always linked to possible industrial usage. In both portraits, drapery, a common convention in portraiture, is used to slightly distance the men from the industrial landscape whilst simultaneously suggesting that landscape as a spectacle. Thus their identities are protected from an overly

close involvement in the commercial world and yet implicated in the production of the sublime.

A trade token depicting the ironmaster John Wilkinson (first distributed in 1787) was used to create a conceptual landscape through spatial practice. Through its physical distribution as a form of currency within the geographic arena of his business dealings it was an instrument for the creation of both the mental and social space of industry. His likeness on the coin, forever linked to an industrial scene showing his ironworks on the reverse, was redolent of the King's profile on coins of the realm and provoked a poem in which Wilkinson was satirized as setting himself up as an 'Iron Monarch'.

The intersection of landscape and identity in these portraits is a connection between the real and the imagined. There is an associative bond between the viewer, at the location of the finished portrait; the artist, at the location of the production of the portrait; and the sitter, at both the location/landscape represented in the portrait and the location/landscape in which he existed. It is the interconnection of these differing 'landscapes' that creates the perceived, conceived and lived space of a portrait and leads to a consideration of a wider conceptual space encompassing not only the portrait but also the imagined life of the sitter in an industrial landscape.

My research considers the portraits against a context of the performance of industrial landscapes as spectacle through tourism and through imagery.

Approach/influences/inspiration

Portraits are inextricably linked to identity and my starting point was the contention that identity needs a conceptual location (or landscape) from which it can be constructed and manifested. The fractures inherent in any identity are stabilised through the multiplicity of 'landscapes' in which it is played out, thus an identity of wife may be located in the physical landscape of the home or the conceptual landscape of the marriage whilst the same identity may be transmuted into that of an academic within the physical landscape of the university or the conceptual landscape of a research project.



John Opie: Thomas Daniell and his mine captain, Thomas Morcom. 1786. Copyright of the Royal Institution of Cornwall, The Royal Cornwall Museum. Can be viewed at The Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro, by prior arrangement.

Portraiture has the potential to produce a multiplicity of spaces of identity, both personal and social. We have only to consider the National Portrait Gallery to understand how this genre of art can be employed to construct an overall identity of (at the NPG) the British nation; group identities of (for example) monarchs, athletes, and politicians; and individual identities, from a questionable likeness of Shakespeare to a highly abstract depiction of Sir John Sulston through the display of his DNA. This imbrication of identities is constructed through the hang and the purpose of the NPG but can be evoked in portraits through internal and external representation and contextualisation. My contention is that identity is evoked through a multiplicity of conceptual landscapes that frame our understanding of the subject. Thus, a portrait hung in a boardroom offers a different identity than when it is hung in the genealogical display of a family home. If spatial practice is a key element of identity production in portraiture then it applies to both internal and external landscapes, conceptual, depicted, and actual.

In order to unpick the layered identities in these portraits I had to understand not only the art historical practice of portraiture but also the economic and social particularities of late eighteenth-century industrial society. Industrial development created new physical landscapes marked by factories and related buildings but it also produced new conceptual and lived landscapes manifested through economic and trade links. How these were written onto and into existing landscapes and social frameworks was crucial to an appreciation of why some of the new industrialists chose to be portrayed against a background of manufacturing premises and labour.

The industrial landscapes represented in the portraits I discuss were produced through economic development, trade practice, human relationships and leisure behaviour. As well as drawing upon recent works of economic and social history I also used authors such as John Locke and Adam Smith to frame questions about the ways in which identity construction and political economy were theorised in the period in which these portraits were produced. I made use of a multiplicity of sources as wide-ranging as poetry, estate papers, wills, tomb monuments, patent specifications, and dictionaries of biography and trade produced during the eighteenth century to inform my understanding of how identity and industry were linked in the period. Eighteenth-century accounts of manufacturing sites, written by industrial tourists, enabled me to provide a context for the conceptualisation of the spectacle of industry. My theoretical approach is indebted to the thinking of Henri Lefebvre and his triad of perceived, conceived and lived spaces.

Endnote

1. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, fifth edition, 1706, (ed.) Roger Woolhouse, London: Penguin Books, 1997, 3.3.15, p 374.

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