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## Title of Object

Cottage on Fire

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Joseph Wright of Derby

**Country:** Great Britain (England)

**Date of Object:** c. 1786-1787

**File Created:** 10/18/2016

**Accession Number:** 84.53

**Author of File:** Linda Goldenberg

**Material/Medium:** oil on canvas

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Department:** Paintings

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 3/9/2017

**Culture:** British (English)

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## Tour Topics

Group 4, Highlights 1600-1850, passion-place, Passion for place, global grand tour, light, fire, tragedy, nature, landscape, daily life, architecture, emotion, drama, age of enlightenment

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. What do you find unusual in this picture? This is a composition of contrasts. Shall we look and see what the contrasts might be.
2. This is an emotional picture. What is your first reaction when thinking about what you see? How does it make you feel? How does Wright create a sense of drama or emotion?
3. Wright has created two different dwellings. What are they? Roman ruins next to a simple cottage in the English forest, does this seem realistic? What do you think the artist is trying to say by placing them this way?

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## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

1. The scene, of a cottage burning, would have been an unfortunate but common sight; with the majority of cottages heated by coal and with roofs made of thatch at this time, fires happened regularly. Wright painted 9 versions of this subject matter (including Mia's). The image captures the tragedy of the fire and indifference of nature to the scene. In the left half, we can make out ruins of an old castle, a story of time passing, a former glory now diminished. (Yale University) The location is thought to be Needwood Forest which is on the Derbyshire-Staffordshire border and was near the home of Wright's friend and keen amateur artist Thomas Gisborne. (Derby Museums)

2. This nocturnal scene features dramatic contrasts: the hot red light of the fire versus the cool white moonlight, the cottage abruptly consumed by flames as opposed to the slowly decaying castle. Unusual light effects fascinated Joseph Wright, who knew several prominent English scientists investigating the nature of light and vision. (label)

3. Joseph Wright of Derby was fascinated by contrasting light effects and made a name for himself painting genre scenes dramatically lit by lamplight. In the early 1770s, he also began to paint landscapes depicting Italian and British scenery. Wright married these two interests by transposing his candlelit aesthetic into open-air views. (Yale University)

Wright was famous for his dramatic "chiaroscuro" effects of extreme lights and darks. He was the first painter to depict the Industrial Revolution with its raging furnaces and candlelit factories that sometimes burned to the ground, killing women and children working there. Two major events in Italy shaped his work: He witnessed the violent eruption of Mount Vesuvius outside of Naples and watched a massive fireworks display in Rome. His use of explosive flames and light mixed with dark and shadowy light to produce "sublime" feelings of awe mixed with terror. The dramatic presentations draws the viewer into/up close to inspect the action taking place. We don't belong there but we need to look. Wright might suggest that people are the victims of progress but he was not known to be a social critic.

4. These paintings were sometimes made as pairs, with one showing a view by day and the other by moonlight. (Wikipedia) Cottage on Fire, hot, dramatic and explosive, is one of a pair created for a patron. The other, "Moonlight with a Lake and Castellated Tower," is cool, serene and peaceful (The canvas appeared in an exhibition at the Tate in 1990, with the view and castle described as "imaginary", and was last recorded in an unknown private collection in Montreal. However, the castle has now been identified as Warwick Castle, by the river Avon.). These contrasts were an integral part of his versatility.

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## Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

1. Joseph Wright of Derby was born in the town of Derby in central England, and save for short stints in Liverpool and London, lived in that city his entire life. He was known even during his lifetime as Joseph Wright of Derby, to distinguish him from another artist of the same name. Even though Wright of Derby was the more talented of the two, he was stuck with the geographical identifier on his name. (Khan Academy) Joseph Wright of Derby was a landscape and portrait painter in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. He has been acclaimed as "the first professional painter to express the spirit of the Industrial Revolution." (Wikipedia) He was one of the most inventive and accomplished artists of his day.

His work would greatly influence the painting of Turner and Constable in the next century. Wright was born in 1734. He trained as a portraitist under Thomas Hudson in London. At age forty (1774) Wright

took the grand tour of Italy which changed his painting style forever. He became passionate about landscape painting and was influenced by the landscapes of Claude Lorrain. He may have been influenced by the Netherlandish painters working the style of Caravaggio whose presentation of light contrasts are magical. Wright's work floated between the Romantic era (with his picturesque settings and the industry that was steadily encroaching on it) and the Rococo (with curvy, sensuous trees, flickering lights and decorative coloring)

2. Wright was a member of England's most progressive intellectual circles of the 18th century. He painted portraits of the Midlands' famous intellectuals, merchants and pioneering industrialist. Many of his clients were members of the Lunar Society, which attempted to popularize science. (The members called themselves The Lunatics). Wright's paintings about scientific experimentation were unique in Britain. He was meticulous in presentation of complex human situations, accurate depiction of scientific apparatus and skillful use of a single light source. He shocked people with his "An Experiment on a Bird In the air pump," showing a horrified audience as a bird was nearly suffocated to demonstrate a vacuum pump. Moonlight as a reference to the LUNAR SOCIETY often shows up in his painting. (Wikipedia)

3. Wright's passion for the English countryside is seen in its beautiful forests and dancing rivers. In "composed" pictures, Wright often included the clear luminous light of Italy's skies and deposited architecture of Roman or Greek buildings in the most unlikely settings where they would have never really existed.

4. Wright's paintings on rapid development of scientific knowledge have metaphorical meanings. These paintings represent a high point in scientific enquiry which began undermining the power of religion in Western societies." (Wikipedia) Also, as mentioned in his bio at the Tate Gallery, the modernity of his painting "lies in its heroic treatment of a theme from common life. According to the high-minded art theories of the period, such a prosaic scene of ordinary working men did not warrant such a dignified treatment. The extraordinary light effects and dramatic composition endow the scene with an almost religious grandeur..." and for a "history" element to the painting, we can see allusions to that with the ruins of the castle in the background. Basically, he has painted a scene from common life in a grand style (Tate)

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### Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This nocturnal scene features dramatic contrasts: the hot red light of the fire versus the cool white moonlight, the cottage abruptly consumed by flames as opposed to the slowly decaying castle. Unusual light effects fascinated Joseph Wright, who knew several prominent English scientists investigating the nature of light and vision. After a trip to Italy in 1773-75, where he witnessed a violent eruption of Mount Vesuvius and a spectacular fireworks display at the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome, Wright made sensational lighting effects the keynote of many of his landscapes.

Wright's work prefigured trends in Romantic landscape painting a generation later: themes of tragic destruction would become popular in the 19th century in both England and France. At the same time, this picture reveals its kinship with the decorative landscape styles of the 18th century, seen in its gracefully curving trees, flickering highlights, and simplified coloring.

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## Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Prop: photograph "Moonlight with a Lake and Castellated Tower" for comparison.

1. A COTTAGE ON FIRE, by Rodney Shewan, Arts Magazine August 1986
2. Phaeton Encyclopedia of arts, artist Oxford, 1978
3. Object presentation by Kay Miller
4. Yale Center for British Art: The Critique of Reason: Romantic Art, 1760-1860:  
<http://interactive.britishart.yale.edu/critique-of-reason/527/cottage-on-fire-at-night>
5. Canaletto, Wright of Derby, Turner and Constable - Capturing Warwick Castle:  
<http://www.ourwarwickshire.org.uk/content/article/canaletto-wright-of-derby-turner-and-constable-capturing-warwick-castle>
6. Joseph Wright Gallery, Derby Museums: <https://www.derbymuseums.org/spaces/joseph-wright-gallery>
7. Joseph Wright, Dovedale by Moonlight: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dovedale\\_by\\_Moonlight](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dovedale_by_Moonlight)
8. Joseph Wright of Derby: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph\\_Wright\\_of\\_Derby](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Wright_of_Derby)
9. Khan Academy, article on Joseph Wright: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/late-europe-and-americas/enlightenment-revolution/a/wright-of-derby-a-philosopher-lecturing-on-the-orrery>
10. Joseph Wright of Derby, An Iron Forge, 1772: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wright-an-iron-forge-t06670>