ART AND OCCUPATION

Richard Morton Paye

An Engraver at Work 1783

Light from a single tallow candle, reflected by an ornate gilt-framed mirror, draws in our gaze and gives a dramatic effect to the scene [1]. A well-dressed young man (Paye), seated at a desk stares out of the picture, seemingly lost in thought as he pauses to reflect on his night-time labours. His pierced splat-back chair offers him little support but nevertheless it is part of a carefully planned work-station: his right hand rests on a wooden lath supported by two books and holds a cutting tool (burin) poised over a copper plate, which he is engraving; the plate lies on a sloping desktop to aid his work posture; the mirror enhances the light from the candle but also provides a reverse image of the reduced-size portrait so that he can copy it directly onto the plate (the print from the plate will then face the same direction as the original painting); the portrait is propped up beside the mirror...
at the correct height and distance for viewing; the screen in front of the window provides diffused light from the artist’s left for daytime work, thereby avoiding shadows from his right arm and hand and the window board behind the screen gives privacy and minimizes draughts. A plaster cast of the Apollo Belvedere (behind the chair), art pieces on a chest in the left foreground and canvases under the desk on the right [2] hint at Paye’s artistic talents and professional reputation, implying that he is more than just a Chaser (someone who decorates metal by engraving or embossing). This careful candlelit composition is a clear reference to the newly founded Royal Academy, membership of which Paye greatly aspired to but never achieved [3]. The subject being engraved from an original painting (now lost) by Nathaniel Dance is Sir Percival Pott (1713–88) [4], the renowned surgeon, who wrote a treatise on scrotal cancer among chimney sweeps [5]. The engraving was commissioned by Pott’s son Joseph Holden Pott perhaps to celebrate his father’s retirement from practice.

Richard Morton Paye was born at Botley, Hampshire in 1750. Little is known of his early life, ‘though he worked as a chaser from youth, perhaps a family occupation’ [6]. He moved to London in his early twenties where he remained. He gained an early reputation for his use of light in his paintings, drawing favourable comparison to Wright of Derby. Indeed, the above painting was purchased as ‘a Wright’ by Joseph Neeld, Member of Parliament for Chippenham [4]. Paye regularly exhibited at the Royal Academy in London yet only a fraction of his works are known and ‘fewer still are located’ [6]. He never fulfilled his early promise and had to earn a living painting sentimental compositions and children’s portraits [4]. He contracted rheumatic fever in 1807 and later lost the use of his right hand from a stroke but continued to work with great fortitude using his left hand to paint. His last picture is ‘The Gout or A Lecture on Patience’ (1815) [6]. He died in obscurity in December 1821.

In London, chimney sweeps no longer suffer the ravages of scrotal cancer but elsewhere they are at increased risk for malignancies of the lung, oesophagus and bladder [7], and occupational cancer remains a topic of continuing concern [8] particularly in emerging countries [9]. Percival Pott created an awareness [10] that shows no sign of going away [11] but how best to control exposure to hazardous materials in the workplace [12] and what role should legislation play? [13] British Parliament passed regulations in 1788 [14] to protect sweeps but it took another 100 years before proper enforcement was in place [15]. More recently, self-regulation based on common sense, personal responsibility and integrity has been promoted as a more effective approach to worker protection [16]. Only time will tell .

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References
1. Paye RM. Self-portrait of the Artist Engraving. Oil on canvas, 73.5x 60.5cm. Warwickshire, UK: Upton House, 1783.
5. Pott P. Chirurgical Observations Relative to the Cataract, the Polypus of the Nose, the Cancer of the Scrotum, the Different Kinds of Ruptures, and the Mortification of the Toes and Feet. London: T.J. Carnegy for L. Hawes, W. Clarke & R. Collins; 1775.