

A Victorian novelist on canvas

Sarah Wise welcomes an enlightening re-evaluation of the revolutionary paintings of William Powell Frith

William Powell Frith: Painting the Victorian Age

ed by Mark Bills and Vivien Knight
208pp, Yale University Press, £40

At the height of his colossal success, William Powell Frith (1819-1909) produced paintings that required a police presence to control the crowds that surged in front of them. But his decline into unfashionability was swift. In 1887, Oscar Wilde declared him to be the artist who had "done so much to elevate painting to the dignity of photography", and the 20th century was no kinder: Roger Fry, writing in 1934, described Frith's painting *The Railway Station* as "an artistic Sodom and Gomorrah". Serious re-evaluation has had to wait until now, with the publication of the first Frith studies and the first retrospective for 50 years (at the Guildhall Gallery in London until early March).

The passing decades have made Frith's work charming, and, for the cultural historian, extremely useful. But time has robbed us of the ability to "read" the canvases as quickly and accurately as his contemporaries could, and this collection of 10 essays, with 150 colour plates, provides help with such lost languages as physiognomy, Victorian fashion and the nature of 19th-century crowds. Also enlightening are Mark Bills's study of the shadow that Hogarth threw over Frith, and David Trotter's exploration of the friendship between Frith and Charles Dickens.

Frith is seen as important mainly for his three great panoramas, *Life at the Seaside*, *Ramsgate Sands* (1854), *Derby Day* (1858) and *The Railway Station* (1862) – each packed



Panorama of plot and physiognomy: 'Derby Day', 1858, by William Powell Frith. Critics and public alike enjoyed making up their own back-stories for each character

with plots and characters, and cramming within their frames an extraordinary sense of bustle. These are paintings you can almost hear.

Like Dickens, Frith was a special correspondent for posterity, and by freeze-framing everyday folk in their "unpicturesque" mid-century clothing, doing humdrum things, his work has, as he'd hoped, had a "chance at immortality". It is difficult for us to appreciate how revolutionary this was for an art world that saw historical and literary scenes as the only proper subject matter for high art. But Frith had tired of churning out endless Merry Wives of Windsor and highwaymen, and felt a strong urge to depict "modern life – with a vengeance", just as novelists had been doing for more than three decades.

Frith's revolution happened almost by accident: sketching on holiday at Ramsgate in 1851, he sensed that groups of people were "unconsciously forming themselves into very paintable compositions", and he was struck by the variety of the human animal. Frith's paintings form a compendium of brilliantly realised human features and expressions, and the viewer's eye works tirelessly to follow the gazes passing from upwards of 80 characters in each panorama. Who is looking at whom, why, and what are they thinking?

As Caroline Arscott points out in her essay "Classification and the Crowd", mid-Victorian class segregations were challenged in such tightly packed public spaces. No one was protected from strange interactions, or from the gaze of one's inferiors/superiors. In

Derby Day, a well-dressed gent looks straight out at us with his binoculars; a rake sneers at a barefoot flower-girl; a hungry waif gazes at a lavish picnic; a concerned woman in a carriage spots the waif and gazes at him. This is just a fraction of the looking and counterlooking that is going on in these intricately plotted paintings, and critics and public alike enjoyed making up their own back-stories for each character.

Like most Victorians, Frith believed the pseudo-science of physiognomy, and was convinced that morality and intellect were readable in the human face. He was constantly on the hunt for the perfect exemplars of a "type" for him to paint, and would scour the streets in search of a particular mouth,

brow, nose or chin that he felt would reveal a certain psychological trait. In the rather glutinous family scene *Many Happy Returns of the Day* (1856), Frith's uncooperative father-in-law was modelled by a distinguished-looking old man from the local workhouse. Cheerfully heartless, Frith painted the real urchin he found near his home in Pembroke Villas, Notting Hill, for *The Crossing Sweeper* (1858), as "a low, dull boy... one degree removed from a pig". Many of his poorest sitters fell asleep in the warmth of his studio, but the tiny acrobat, who appears near the centre of *Derby Day*, thought he was being paid for his performance, and could not be prevented from somersaulting throughout the session.

Frith's panoramas were

comforting works – the very fact that large groups of people interacted with each other to any extent was a pleasant idea to set against more insistent anxieties that alienation was in fact the keynote of industrial-age society, where man was stranger to man.

They were also a sanitised "reality". The *Observer* in 1856 had disapprovingly noted groups of women gawping unashamedly at nude male bathers at Ramsgate, but there is no hint of impropriety in any of these apparently lifelike pictures. Frith himself lived the archetypal Victorian hypocrite's double life, with a wife and 11 children, and a mistress just 20 minutes' walk away in Bayswater who bore him seven more. This is one crowd scene he did not care to commit to canvas.



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