

A Son of the Soil by James Collinson: painted in 1856

Welcome to this guide in which I'll be inviting you to explore this painting with me for a few minutes.

What do you think of this painting as you look at it, without any background knowledge? What's your first impression? Interesting, dull, puzzling, maybe intriguing? What's the story behind this painting?

Well, it was painted in 1856, most likely towards or at the end of the Crimean War. This war broke out in October 1853 and ended in March 1856. It was fought by an alliance of Britain, France, Turkey and Sardinia against the Russian Empire.

The painter shows us a young man, ruddy and sturdily-built, seated pensively at a table where he nurses an engraved tankard of beer or ale. What do we notice about him immediately that gives us a clue as to his trade and social background?

Apart from the painting's title, 'A Son of the Soil', there are plenty of other clues. Starting with his clothing, what is there to see? It's quite brightly-coloured and not well-matched. It looks worn-in, functional. It was probably purchased second-hand as much clothing was in Victorian times, for working people. Around his neck is tied a worker's smock to cover his clothes and keep them clean. This is a man's equivalent of a woman's apron, and it was common amongst agricultural workers. In fact the smock was the main difference in clothing between rural and urban workers, as smocks were not practical in industrial settings being known to catch in machinery. Notice the unraveling threads. The smock's had a lot of use and is getting worn out. Do you think this is intended to show us the man's poverty or that he's a hard worker? Perhaps both?

The man's face looks weather-beaten. His hands are slightly grimy, not the hands of a gentleman certainly. One of his fingers points to two coins on the table. Why are these shown – what do you think the painter's suggesting to us? Are these his only two pennies in the world, or are we being shown that he can comfortably afford a tankard of ale and have money left over?

So we can guess that this man is a rural worker, probably a labourer in the fields. The addition of the spade underlines the point. Have you spotted the letter R punched

into the handle? What does this mean? It's likely this marks the spade as owned by him. So does this suggest he's a travelling labourer trying to find work, or maybe he's just come in from the fields and is on his way home?

Now let's look around. The man fills up most of the canvas. What does this do for the atmosphere of the painting? Do you find it intimate, drawing your interest in, or maybe intrusive and uncomfortable? Do you feel at ease being so close to this man? We can almost touch him. We could be sharing a pint of ale with him but it isn't likely that he's sharing his table with anyone. How do we know this? Take a look at his face and eyes – the eyes suggest distraction, as if he's lost in thought. His face is preoccupied so he's probably alone. He's thinking hard about something and this something is of course the poster behind him. It says 'Wanted: Army Work Corps Labourers'.

'A Son of the Soil' probably shows a story that contemporary people would have found easy to read. For us, it's not so easy as we're less likely to understand the references, and yet the issue of economic migration is very topical to us today, and this man is facing these very challenges. We're given to understand that he's considering answering the advert and applying to be a worker in the Army Work Corps, leaving behind the familiar, and perhaps a degree of security, in order to find more lucrative work.

Let's find out a little more. The Army Work Corps was set up to provide support to the army in the Crimean war. The rough territory in the war zone, which was on the Crimean Peninsula and around the Black Sea, had no proper roads, and no railway to transport troops and supplies. It was reported to be a quagmire of mud in the winter, making troop movement hard. So a great recruitment drive was launched in England to attract manual workers to the Crimea. The first wave of workers went out early in the war but due to general undisciplined behaviour was later replaced by the more organized Army Work Corps, which is being advertised here. Men were paid 35 shillings a week, a fortune compared to the average agricultural pay of 11 shillings a week. And what's more every worker was to get a bonus of 12 pounds at the end of their contracts, which would have been a huge incentive. That's if they survived of course.

Conditions were poor in the Crimea in both summer and winter. If you survived the sea voyage there, then you might choose between the dangers of catching your death in the cold winters, or dying of dysentery or cholera in the summer heat.

Here's a description based on contemporary accounts:

'In winter, the whole camp was one vast sheet of mud, the trenches in many places knee deep; men died at their posts from sheer exhaustion or starvation. The army was in rags and filth, half frozen and no fires to be had. Rations were a half-pound of mouldy biscuit with the same quantity of salt beef, so hard that one wanted a good hatchet to break it.

'In summer the Crimea was black with flies, clustering on every forkful of food, drowning in every cup, sleeping in solid black colonies on ceilings where the merest glimmer of candlelight woke them, buzzing with high-pitched irritation. Hardly an officer or man but was suffering from diarrhoea or dysentery and, medicine was not to be had.'

How much of this off-putting information would the ordinary recruit in England have been aware of? More than likely not much, but surely everyone would have understood the general risks of a sea voyage and a war.

Why is this man contemplating a risky job in a foreign war zone? Again, contemporary audiences would have been familiar with the other burning issue covered in this painting – that of rural poverty. Many workers in rural communities found jobs hard to come by and salaries low. Cottage industries had been destroyed by industrialization and families were increasingly spread apart by economic migration.

So our young man is caught in this dilemma. Have you noticed how he's picked out by the light shining in from a doorway or window? Shadow surrounds him to the left and light to his right. What do you think this suggests? Is the poster offering a hope in dark times? Are the shadows representing his creeping doubts and fears?

What do you think this worker will do? What do YOU think he OUGHT to do?

We've come to the end of this audio guide now, although you're welcome to spend more time looking at the painting on your own.

Next, you might like reflecting on what you most enjoyed about this brief activity so scroll down to **Wrap up your painting** to have a go at this.