

The Dinner Hour, Wigan by Eyre Crowe : painted in 1874

Welcome to this guide in which we'll be spending a few minutes with this painting.

So, we know by the title that we're in the North of England, in the heart of the cotton and coal mining area of Wigan. The picture is rich with detail, as it spills out before us a large number of women workers taking a lunch break from their busy and noisy day.

The composition is bold, giving us a series of lines that lead our eyes across the canvas. There's the line of the wall and all the figures, which marches across the base, and there are several vertical lines of buildings and chimneys that pull our eyes up and down. Then there's the diagonal lines that take our eyes into the distance. In this way the painter is inviting us to look all over the picture and appreciate its general layout. But next, we might feel that we want to look at the detail.

The painter has set the scene with a mass of red brick factory buildings that spread from edge to edge of the canvas and dwindle away into the horizon. They tower up against a yellowish sky, into which several tall chimneys belch smoke. There are more chimney stacks too, set here and there, some smoking and some not. Imagine the acrid smell in the air, and the way it might catch in your throat as you breathe in, even on a fine day like this.

Let's look at the buildings for a moment. They have many and large windows, and this would suggest we're looking at mills. Mill workers needed good light to do their fine work. But there's an odd detail on the top row of windows on the right hand building. They look blocked in, although there are skylights above. Could this be a storage floor perhaps rather than a working floor?

Lower down the smaller building on the right has a sign on it. Could this be a pub, or perhaps it's an office? A gaggle of workers moves past it, heading off the canvas to somewhere else. They might be a returning shift, or a shift just on their way for lunch. They look like they're in a hurry.

Meanwhile a young woman stands in front of them, arms uplifted. What is she doing? Take your eye to the left and notice there's a woman closer to us balancing

on the wall and leaning on the lamppost. She's about to throw her friend something – it looks like two apples. Below this woman are a mother and baby. It's quite likely that this is a worker whose baby has been brought to be fed in the lunchbreak. This was quite a common practice given that there was no such thing as maternity leave of course.

All along the wall are women at lunch or at rest. Moving from right to left along the wall, we can see a great variety of poses. One woman is leaned forward, one is drinking, one is hunched over a task, two women chat in a secretive way. Can you see how their body language suggests they could be gossiping? If you magnify the dark-haired woman you can see that her eyes swivel outwards as she leans towards her companion, as if she's taking a peep at whatever or whoever she's discussing. Or, is she looking out at us, looking in at her? What do *you* think?

Moving along again, there are more figures eating, resting or chatting – which catches *your* eye in particular? Let's pause and consider the woman reading a letter. It's maybe surprising to see this, although education had improved in the 19th century, so many workers could probably both read and write. In fact some mill owners wouldn't take staff on who were illiterate, and some even put on literacy classes for their workers.

It's interesting to then notice that this quiet reader is juxtaposed with an entirely different sort of character - a shadowy figure waving a bottle of alcohol in the air, perhaps checking if it's empty. Magnify the detail - we can just see her, framed between the two women sitting on the wall. Our attention is drawn to this vignette because of the bright red shawl of the woman leaning away from us, so the painter obviously means for this message to be clearly observed. Not all workers are happily and industriously occupied, in their lunch hour.

Have you noticed that most of the women are wearing large aprons or pinafores that cover their clothes? These go from neck to floor, and were common for mill workers given the fluff and oil filled environment they worked in. They must have been hot in summer, worn over bulky skirts as we see here, and most especially in the heat of the mills. Conditions would have been uncomfortable here, as mills had to kept humid to stop the cotton from breaking, and hot too -up to 80 degrees Fahrenheit in

fact, which is almost 27 degrees Centigrade. The air would have been filled with fluff and the noise would have been literally deafening. Contemporary accounts tell us that all mill workers used to have cotton fluff in their hair and on their clothes, and that these also carried the smell of the mills, a faint oily smell. No wonder these women are making the most of their lunchbreak!

Nearly all are wearing clogs and stockings. These clogs are heavy, soled in wood, and were famous for making a great clatter on the cobbles. But a few women, including the one who's apparently gossiping, have bare feet. This is likely to be an allusion to poverty. What would it have felt like to be barefoot on these dirty, greasy and gritty cobbles? Imagine the textures pressing into the soles of your feet, and the sensation of the soot coating your skin.

In the centre of the canvas is a policeman patrolling his beat, but no one pays any attention to him, nor he to them. He's an isolated figure, authoritative and upright. What does his presence in the centre of the painting suggest to you? Perhaps there's a bit of a history of drunkenness and scuffles at dinner hour? Or has the painter put the policeman there to suggest to us an oppressive authority structure under which these women have to work, in the mills?

This artist, Eyre Crowe, was known for painting scenes depicting social realism. His audiences weren't always great fans of this approach. Apparently one critic wrote of the painting, when exhibited, that it was 'a pity Mr. Crowe wasted time on such unattractive materials.' But from a modern viewpoint, what do *you* think about the social realism of this picture? The women are all pretty, healthy-looking, well-fed, and clean. Yet we know at this time, in 1874, Western Europe was already a year into a great economic depression that lasted until 1879 and caused widespread suffering, job loss and falling wages. Is this image of bonny working women rather idealized then? Some have suggested that Crowe is indulging a romantic vision of the noble worker, but others feel he's making a serious effort to record aspects of life around him that few other artists are depicting. Interestingly he was not wealthy and is known to have frequently struggled for money, yet he chose to paint scenes that were neither fashionable nor commercial. So what do *you* think – is this painting

celebrating the strength of working women in tough conditions, or glossing over those conditions and showing a false face of contentment to middle class viewers?

Now let's make our experience of this painting a little more vivid by imagining ourselves stepping into it. See yourself walking towards the woman at the front of the picture, who stoops over her pails. You're ready to buy something for lunch. Is she selling soup, gruel or tea? You buy a mugful and take a sip. If it's gruel, you'll taste a watery brew of oats or potatoes, water and milk. If it's soup, it's still probably based on potatoes but maybe it's given extra taste with a bit of fatty bacon or mutton. Tea was more expensive than beer, so you might be disappointed if you were hoping for tea.

Now you hear the factory whistle blowing the end of dinner hour, so it's time to go. Where are you headed? Are you a worker or a visitor? Is it back to the mill, or on somewhere else?

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.