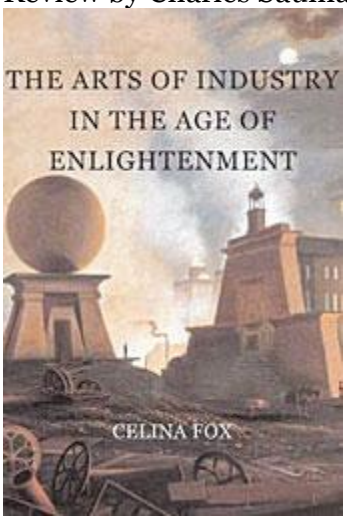
The Arts of Industry in the Age of Enlightenment

Review by Charles Saumarez Smith



The Arts of Industry in the Age of Enlightenment
By Celina Fox
Yale University Press £40, 576 pages

In the days when I was involved in postgraduate teaching at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, we used to take students on a tour of the north of England in order to help them understand the nature of 18th-century culture.

In the first two days, we would visit the surviving gentry houses of Stamford and the great palaces of the plutocrat nobility outside York, including Beningbrough and Castle Howard. On the third day, we travelled westwards to view the relics of early industrial history, including the Piece Hall at Halifax, where pieceworkers from the surrounding countryside would bring their cloth to be sold, and Quarry Bank Mill at Styal, where the thundering machines of the textile mill demonstrated the productive aspects of the late 18th-century economy.

This third day devoted to the economics of proto-industry was about those aspects of 18th-century design that are too often forgotten: not the life of the grandees as recorded in diaries, but the hard graft of the estate managers and factors, the mapmakers and surveyors, millwrights and foundrymen — all those people who constructed the harbours and housing and piston engines that led to Britain's industrial pre-eminence. Their visual records are not the opulent portraiture of Reynolds and Gainsborough, painted in London and Bath, but the more economically descriptive and forensic art of Joseph Wright of Derby, whose "An Iron Forge" is now at Tate Britain, and "The Blacksmith's Shop" at the Yale Center for British Art. Their literature consists not of novels and poetry, but trade manuals and encyclopaedias.

These visual relics of 18th-century industry were first studied during the second world war by Francis Klingender, a German Marxist who published a pioneering monograph on *Art and the Industrial Revolution* in 1947. After the war, they were collected by Sir Arthur Elton, a documentary filmmaker and friend of John Betjeman who assembled a vast collection of industrial ephemera at Clevedon Court in Somerset. In the 1970s, there was a great vogue for industrial history, as evident in the pioneering research of social and economic historians who were responsible for the establishment of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum in Shropshire.

Celina Fox, a former keeper of paintings, prints and drawings at the Museum of London, has evidently devoted much of her life to the study of the visual material that was produced as a record and by-product of 18th-century industry: those beautiful technical drawings that described how machinery

worked and were produced not with deliberate aesthetic intent but simply as an accurate depiction of how the different parts of a machine were constructed; and the models that were assembled by George III to show his courtiers the beauties of industrial art. Some parts of this narrative are reasonably well known – for example, the work of Robert Hooke in the 17th century and of Boulton & Watt in the 18th century. But much more is obscure, lost to archives and record offices all over England, where it has been placed by descendants of the landowners who were often responsible for investment in new technology.

Fox has now assembled her research in a large and extremely impressive book, *The Arts of Industry in the Age of Enlightenment*, which adjusts the balance of one's understanding of the 18th century away from high society towards the trades. Thomas Gainsborough appears as the younger brother of a dissenting minister in Henley-on-Thames, who submitted a clock with two pendulums for a prize given by the Royal Society of Arts. There is much information about the improvements made to ink, crayons and paper-making. What emerges very clearly is that the Royal Academy, with its urge to professionalise the practice of the fine arts, derived from a broader movement, which began with the Gentleman of Spalding, to improve the teaching of drawing. When the Royal Society of Arts was first established by William Shipley in 1754, it gave prizes, sometimes quite generous, to children who submitted drawings, and a private art academy had already been established the year before in Glasgow.

Occasionally the sheer wealth of material overwhelms Fox's text. But for anyone who wants to know more about the intellectual origins of industrialisation and the social ideas that led to design innovation, this book covers a very broad territory, taking in the conventions of portraiture and topographical painting, from the early days of the Royal Society to the establishment of a Museum of Manufactures in the 1850s.

Financial Times: Life and Arts. February 2010