

WILLIAM POWELL FRITH

(Yorkshire 1819 - London 1909)

Little Seamstress

with signature and date 'W.P. Frith./1865.' (lower right)

oil on board

35.6 x 29.3 cm (14 x 11½ in)

LITTLE SEAMSTRESS PLAYS UPON A COMMON THEME in Victorian England, namely the depiction of a seamstress as a symbol of respectable working women. During the period in which William Powell Frith painted this work, there were an increasing number of Parliamentary reports and newspaper series, such as the social reformer Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, that revealed the working conditions under which women factory workers lived. Women working in mills and factories were usually assumed to have abandoned any emotions for their families and to possess low moral standards.

Artists wishing to evoke compassion for the working classes would utilise them as a symbolic identity, since they represented a morally pure worker with whom a middle and upper-class audience could sympathise with, and so for many Victorians, the seamstress satisfied their perceived need for such a symbol. Female authors and artists tended to treat the seamstress as a subject of honest work, with whom many viewers could empathise. Conversely,



William Powell Frith, *Little Seamstress* (Detail)

men tended to perceive the seamstress as a symbol of piety and vulnerability, a figure in need of protection. In either form, the seamstress was a popular subject in art and literature. Since, as Susan Casteras explains in *Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art*, 'a true lady was not supposed to work, especially for pay, and Victorian society obviously accorded respect to the inactivity and economic non-productivity of middle and upper-class women' (London, 1987, p. 103).

However, unlike the plain and earnest type of seamstress who figured in many contemporary paintings, Frith's seamstress is well-dressed, glossy-haired and apparently from a high level in society, attested to by the fact that her tools are not those of work but of leisure. As she coyly confronts the viewer's gaze, it

is apparent that the title, *Little Seamstress*, is a term of affection for a child who has some interest in sewing. In contrast to the reformers' imagery of seamstresses produced in this period, Frith's is a nostalgic Victorian portrait, created using his excellent draftsmanship and attention to detail; the light on the child's hair, and the sheen of the silk dress, is particularly fine. She is a romanticised image of youthful beauty, and as such is comparable to works by Vigee le Brun, Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin and Edwin Landseer, a comparison further enhanced by Frith's classically triangular format of the sitter.

A contrasting treatment of the same subject can be seen in Richard Redgrave's (1804-89) *The Seamstress* (fig. 1), showing a girl working late at night in her bedsit. With paintings like this Redgrave became known for scenes of contemporary social life; 'scenes of pathetic and sentimental subjects'. The seamstress in this painting possibly stays up all night in order to finish her job. According to the clock on the wall it is nearly half past two in the morning and dawn is coming up, but she still has lots to do. A pitcher, a wash-tub, dishes on the shelf underneath the window, and a bed in the room, suggest a miserable condition in which she cannot afford to pay for more than one small room. Furthermore, her stiffened fingers and swollen eyelids might easily evoke sympathetic feelings towards her.

Frith enjoyed huge public success, demonstrated by the fact that on six separate occasions railings had to be erected in front of his pictures at the Royal Academy, to restrain the eager crowds. His works were acclaimed as panoramas of Victorian life, like his work *Poverty and Wealth* that precedes this entry in the catalogue (cat. no. 29). Like this latter work, *Little Seamstress* draws on contemporary themes of class and wealth by employing the familiar motif of the symbolic seamstress, whilst at the same time remaining, in essence, an attractive portrait of a young girl.



Richard Redgrave,
The Seamstress, 1846
(Figure 1)

