

Keys to the collection— Stories

William Frith

“The greatest British painter of the social scene since Hogarth.”

—William Powell Frith: *Painting the Victorian Age*,
Harrogate Borough Council, 2011

Born in North Yorkshire in 1819, it was Frith's father who encouraged him to pursue a career in art.

He studied at Sass's Academy, London in 1835 and then at the Royal Academy schools. Frith was a traditionalist who did not embrace modern art developments. He started his career as a portrait painter, first exhibiting at the British Institution in 1838. William Frith enjoyed painting scenes involving many characters representing the full spectrum of the Victorian class system as they met and interacted in public places. In this way, his paintings were genre studies, and the narratives were influenced by novelists such as Charles Dickens and the artist Sir David Wilke.

Later in his career, Frith's paintings illustrated social and moral stories, a popular trend in Victorian times. He retired from the Royal Academy in 1890 but continued to exhibit there until 1902.

Frith died in 1909, St Johns Wood, UK.



The railway station—

Following the huge public success of his previous painting, *Derby Day*, Frith entered a partnership with art dealer Louis Flatow to produce *The railway station* which took two years to complete. Frith used a photographer Mr Samuel Fry to take a series of interior photographs of the station, of engines, and carriages, etc. as aids to the production of his great painting. An architectural draughtsman, William Scott Morton, was employed to paint the structural details—pillars, arches, girders—of Paddington Station. These occupy almost the entire upper half of the composition. This assisted Frith in depicting Paddington Station accurately and in this respect the finished work was a collaborative effort. As the artist, Frith, was paid a huge sum for the painting and Flatow secured the copyright and sole exhibition rights. Over 21,000 people paid a shilling each to see *The railway station* and a black and white engraving of it was made from which many prints were sold. Frith incorporated portraits of himself and his family in the centre of the painting but it was the drama of the scene that captured the attention of his audience. The main talking point was Haydon and Brett—two famous and recognizable Scotland Yard detectives—arresting a fugitive as his wife looks on in distress.

**Geelong
Gallery**

AusVELS level 7 to VCE
geelonggallery.org.au/learn

William Frith
The railway station (detail) 1866
engraving
Collection: Geelong Gallery

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William Frith

British 1819–1909

The railway station 1866
engraving (engraved by
Francis Holl; printed by R
Holdgate; published by
Henry Graves & Co.)
52.0 x 111.5 cm
Collection: Geelong Gallery
Gift of Mrs ED Keighley, 1965

Question

The creation of *The railway station* was a collaborative effort and a business deal. Do these factors compromise its authenticity as a great work of art and Frith as a great artist? Discuss.

Research

Engravings were made of this work of art and black and white prints were sold to the public. Through research, define an engraving and explain the benefit of its subsequent prints to the general public. What impact did this have on the value of an original painting and the art world in general?

Activity

Many small cameos or scenarios can be seen within the complex and active scene of *The railway station*. Choose one of these scenarios and select one of the following activities:

1. Write a creative short story recounting the “who, what, when, where, why, how” revealed in this painting.
2. Using the same points as activity 1, create a storyboard of your chosen cameo.
3. Design a promotional poster for Paddington Station in the 1860s. Include a catchphrase which promotes the service and use the style of poster design current at this time.