"AN EXPERIMENT WITH AN AIR PUMP."

Original picture in the National Gallery.

Above: An Experiment with an Air Pump. Print of the painting by Joseph Wright of Derby in *The life and works of Joseph Wright* by William Bemrose (1885). East Midlands Special Collection Oversize X, Der 3.V38 WRI

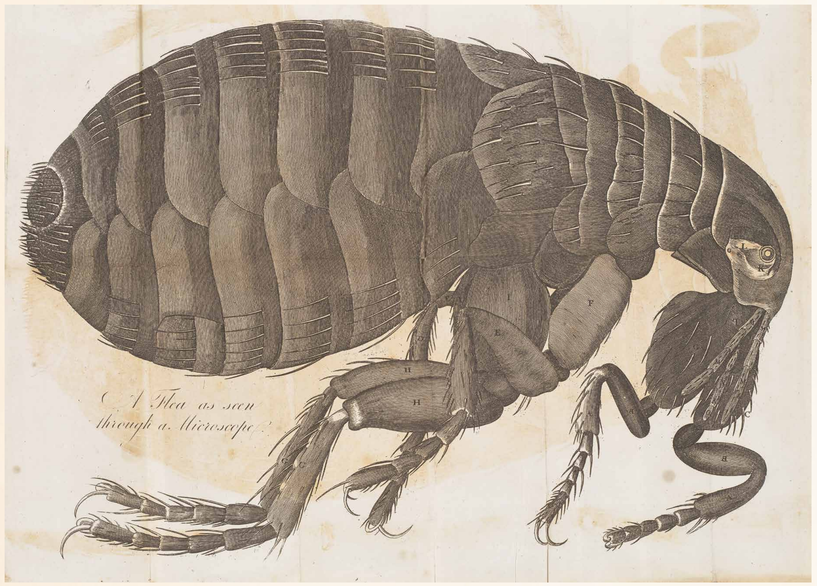
Uncovering Nature

The synergistic relationship between the scientific and the creative in the Romantic period was captured in Joseph Wright's *An Experiment with an Air Pump* (1768).

Writers and artists, men and women, investigated, interrogated and categorised the world around them. They did so in order both to make sense of what they saw and to comprehend its place in their larger understanding of existence. They made use of the 'wonders' of improved technologies to explore and depict the most microscopic forms of life – as seen in the 'Drawing of a Flea' (1811). The early nineteenth century saw the invention of the stethoscope, the use of the first general anaesthetic in a human operation, and the first successful human blood transfusion. Scientists, doctors, artists and writers absorbed and reimagined new taxonomies of the natural world, including those of Carl Linnaeus, in order to 'enlist Imagination under the banner of Science'. Yet, the process was not always straightforward. In the 1790s, the scientist and writer Erasmus Darwin (born in the Midlands town of Newark-on-Trent and the grandfather of Charles Darwin) was publicly lampooned by politically motivated opponents. They equated his scientific and literary experimentation with radical views that had the potential to disrupt the social order. In 1818 Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* drew on her knowledge of contemporary scientific debates to raise important questions about humanity's right to break cultural taboos and to fashion life itself anew. In addition, the influenza epidemic of 1803 and the cholera epidemic of 1831-2 killed thousands and made the human body, so carefully anatomised in medical textbooks, vulnerable in new and terrifying ways.

Table of the muscles of the human body from *Tables of the skeleton and muscles of the human body* by Bernhard Siegfried Albinus (1749). Nottingham Medico-Chirurgical Society Library Oversize XX, WE17 ALB

Below: A flea as seen through a microscope from *The wonders of the microscope, or, An explanation of the wisdom of the Creator, in objects comparatively minute...* (1811). Briggs Collection of Educational Literature, LT109.QH/W6



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