



'Woman's Work', a Medley 1861
Florence Claxton 1838-1920
Oil on canvas

Large print version
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Manchester Art Gallery



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Claxton was a graphic artist who drew satirical cartoons for magazines. This is her only known oil painting, which she painted when she was 22 years old. She did not find it easy to sell. There was a feeling that she had crossed a line: while a political message poking fun at men was tolerable in print, in a publicly exhibited oil painting it was too radical.

We do not know if Claxton and Ford Madox Brown saw each other's paintings. It is likely that the resemblance of Woman's Work to Work (to the right) is a coincidence.

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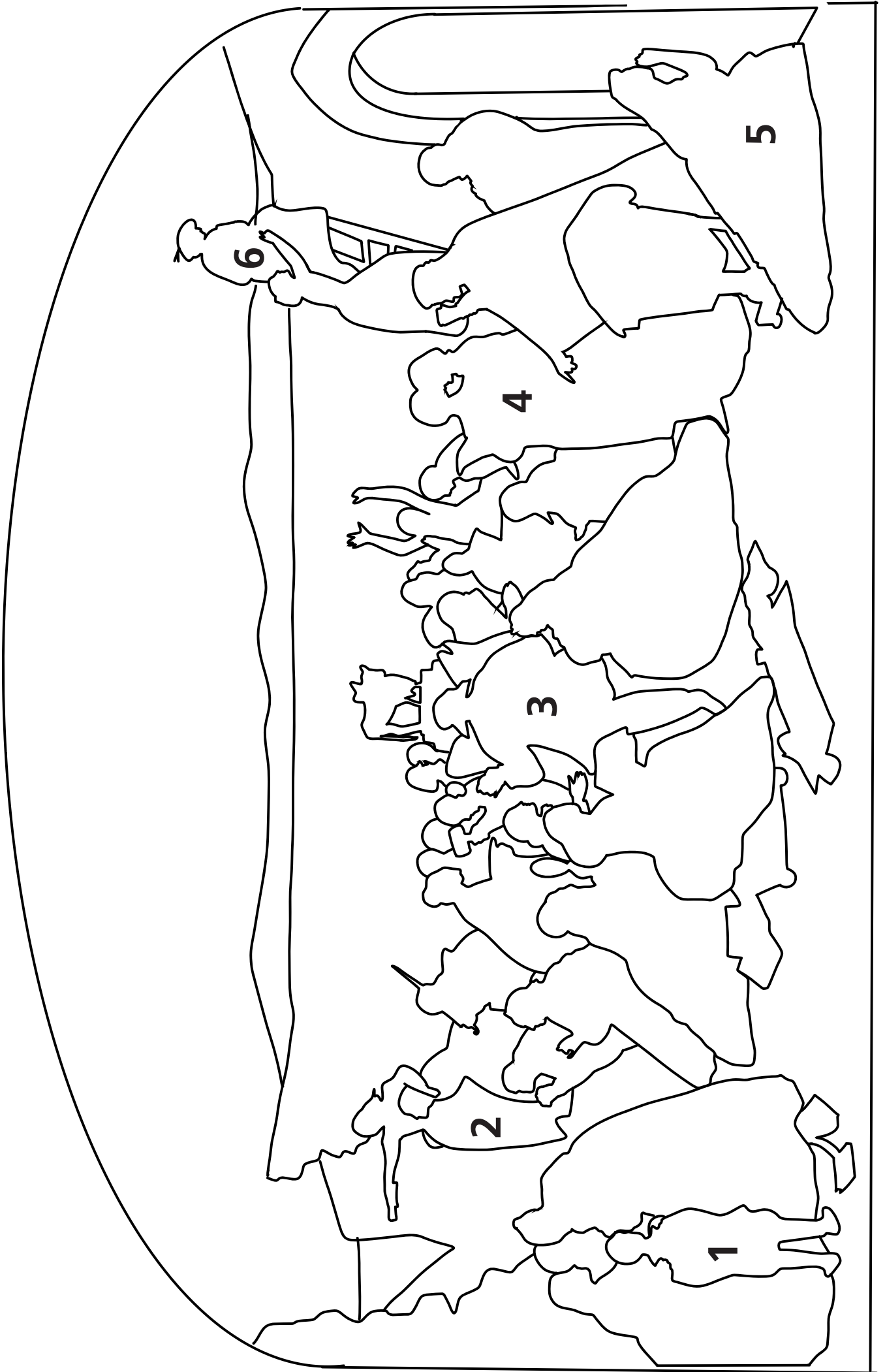


Figure Groups

1. Three governesses quarrel over who should teach a child from a dull looking book. A governess was a female teacher who lived with a family. Their position was difficult: higher status than most staff but not part of the family, so they were often lonely.
2. The wall of social convention is breaking; a woman points to the freedom of emigration. In the 1860s single, middle-class women were encouraged to emigrate to find employment or a husband. Claxton's family emigrated to Australia when she was twelve, returning when she was 19.
3. Devoted women surround three men - young, middle-aged, and old. A woman holds a crying baby in the background. Beneath the golden calf, a symbol of false gods, is written 'THE PROPER STUDY OF WOMAN IS MAN'.
The sweets which the young man drops represent 'airy nothings' – lightweight ideas and conversation – all that women were considered capable of understanding.
4. The clergyman shows the single woman a list of suitable professions, including 'Tracts' (distributing religious publications) and 'Triviality'. The lawyer points her back towards the carpet of domesticity.
5. A woman sinks exhausted before a locked door. She might be being denied medical treatment or perhaps the chance to be a doctor herself. The man behind her has the key.
6. A famous French artist, Rosa Bonheur, has climbed the ladder of art to freedom. Is the woman who is following her Claxton herself?