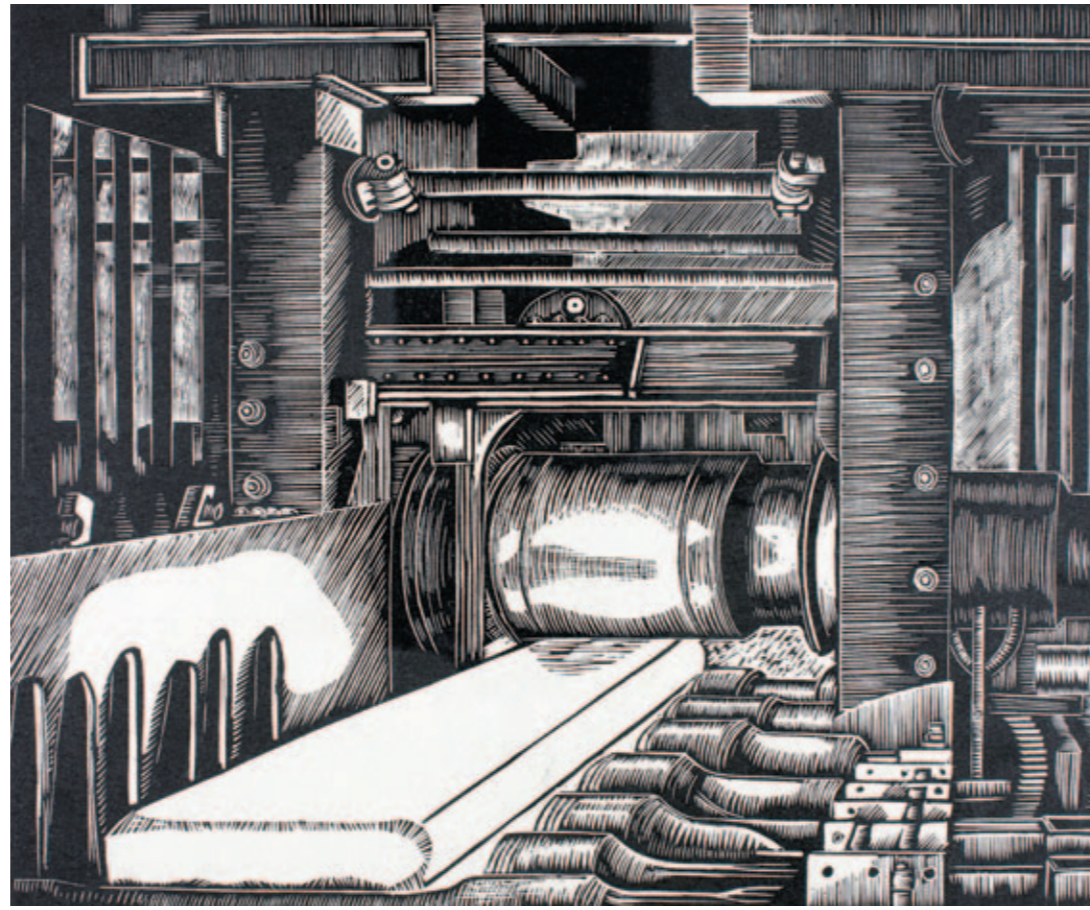
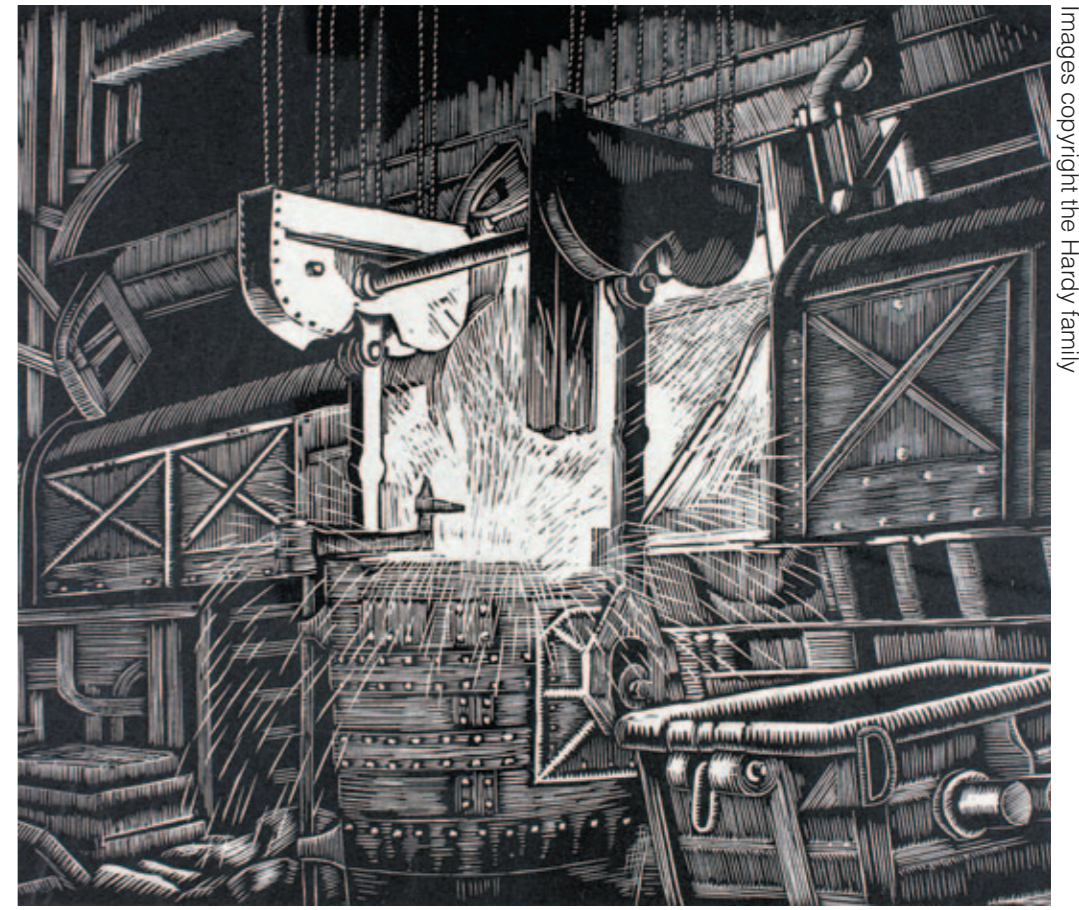


Viva Talbot, Pouring liquid metal into a steel furnace c1930



Viva Talbot, Rolling a slab from a steel ingot, c1930



Viva Talbot: Pouring liquid steel from a steel furnace into a ladle c1930, Woodblock Print

# Woodcut artist who wed her mettle

She was a woman of substance who in the 1930s was given an unusual artistic commission to enter the grimy world of steel-making.

Viva Frances Talbot was a wealthy singer who practised printmaking as a hobby and was given unfettered access to steelworks on Teesside.

Detailed prints by the little-known Viva came to light recently, giving a fascinating personal insight into industrial life in the 1930s.

The talented artist is being widely recognised for the first time with an exhibition of 15 woodcuts opening at MIMA this month.

As the last blast furnace has ceased production on Teesside, the prints are a particularly meaningful record of a now historic industry.

Teesside University research fellow Dr Joan Heggie came across an album of Viva's prints in 2005 when she began researching the British Steel Collection (an archive of 175 years of iron and steel-making on Teesside).

Joan, who now manages the British Steel Archive Project, says: "We were investigating the idea of cataloguing the British Steel Collection and as part of the exercise we

A beautiful aristocrat who chronicled industrial life is finally receiving her dues, as Joan Heggie tells **Tamzin Lewis**.

looked at the diversity of the material in its archive.

"I came across an album of steel-making prints by Viva Talbot and was intrigued by the subject matter as it seemed unusual for a woman. I tried to find out more about her and couldn't find a thing."

Joan, who has an MA and PhD in Women's Studies, adds: "It was a natural thing for me to keep digging away and it became a bit of an obsession."

By tracking down members of Viva's family, Joan has been able to piece together her life and unearth unseen prints from within the family collection.

Viva was born in 1900 in Surrey and a year later her parents moved to the North Riding of Yorkshire where she brought up. She was the daughter of Benjamin, an engineer, inventor and industrialist who invented the Talbot tilting furnace which transformed steel production.

The family settled at Solberge

Hall, an 840 acre estate near Northallerton in 1913, where Viva was schooled until the age of 15. She then attended a girls' school near Harrow and became fluent in French and German. Viva travelled widely across Europe in the inter-war years and as her first love was music and singing, she attended the Salzburg Festival many times.

Viva didn't have formal art training but became an accomplished wood engraver and was part of a social set of artists including Robert Gibbings and Eric Gill.

In 1932 she and her parents travelled alongside Gibbings to the West Indies and Viva's engravings from this period depict indigenous wildlife and plants.

Joan says: "In the 1930s wood engraving was becoming more popular in poster art and advertising. Viva was somehow associated with prominent artists of this period."

By the 1930s, Benjamin was managing director of

Cargo Fleet Iron Co Ltd in Middlesbrough and the South Durham Steel & Iron Co Ltd based in Stockton, and Viva was commissioned to produce a series of industrial lithographs. The prints were released as an album *Steelmaking Illustrated*.

A subsequent album of *Steelmaking Woodcuts* was probably a personal endeavour, completed by Viva because of her interest in the medium.

The meticulous prints show stages in the process of making iron and steel from the sourcing of raw materials to the finished product. There are also woodcuts from this period of Durham collieries.

Joan says: "I think Viva was an incredible talent and her ability to observe these scenes, whether of industrial life, scenes from the countryside or places she had travelled to, is quite remarkable."

"She wasn't recognised in her lifetime but she probably didn't seek recognition. Perhaps she didn't realise the fact that she was extremely talented."

Although Viva was granted access to the working man's world, her social status and family wealth meant that she didn't have to earn her own living. In 1941 she married



Joan Heggie, above, and, left Viva Frances Talbot

Thomas Nussey and became Lady Nussey six years later when her husband inherited a baronetcy.

The couple had no children and lived at Rushwood Hall Estate near Ripon in North Yorkshire.

Joan adds: "She didn't sell work so the vast majority of her images are held by the family."

"The more we can publicise that she existed, the more people will realise that what they have in their drawer is a Viva Talbot. People are gradually getting in touch as the word spreads and as my research

continues."

Viva died aged 83 and a year later in 1984 her family arranged a posthumous exhibition of her work along with Robert Gibbings and seven other printmakers of the 20s and 30s.

Joan says: "I am fascinated by this woman's life and am thrilled that she is getting recognition now. I hoped to gather together enough examples of her work to show that she wasn't a one-trick pony."

"No one could have done these engravings without years of training and practice even if it was voluntary. You couldn't do them easily: it would be like me picking up a paintbrush and painting the Sistine Chapel. Even so, she would probably hate all this attention!"

\*Viva's steelmaking woodcuts can be seen at MIMA from July 14 until November 14. Contact MIMA on 01642 726 720, [www.visit-mima.com](http://www.visit-mima.com)

Woodblock prints by Viva Talbot also runs at the Dorman Museum until July 18. Contact the museum on 01642 813 781, [www.dorman-museum.co.uk](http://www.dorman-museum.co.uk). This exhibition will move to Kirkleatham Museum, Redcar, in August.

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