

THE SUBLIME AND THE PICTURESQUE

Although landscape painting would eventually be seen as a major field of achievement for British artists from Gainsborough to Turner and beyond, by the second half of the eighteenth-century it was still perceived as a rather inferior genre. The same period, nevertheless, saw the definitive emergence of the artistic development that would reach its culmination in the work of the great Romantic painters.

It should be emphasised, however, that British landscape painting took shape gradually, from a combination of various factors and through a variety of mediums. The tradition of topographical representation, which in England may be traced back to Wenceslaus Hollar, had been perpetuated by a number of draughtsmen and painters, among whom some minor Dutch artists; it made some progress towards genuine landscape painting through the popularity of such subgenres as the hunting scenes that John Wootton, for instance, specialised in. Meanwhile, from the 1720s onwards, the growing infatuation of connoisseurs with the classical Italianate landscapes of **Lorrain, Poussin** and their followers, also reflected in the rise of the English landscape garden with all its pictorial associations, meant that there was some opportunity for English painters to benefit from the new fashion. George Lambert, a friend of Hogarth's, variously fused topography, Dutch naturalism and – increasingly from the 1730s – the Italian style in his landscapes (see **2** for an early example of his manner, partly Classicising and partly within the Anglo-Dutch tradition). Meanwhile, topographical views acquired new dignity and prestige with Canaletto's arrival in London; although he remained most famous for his elegant urban views, in which London was made to look like Venice and appeared in all the majesty its richer citizens might wish (**3**), he also produced views of the countryside that did have some influence on contemporary English artists.

The first major English landscapist was **Richard Wilson**, who after an early London career as a portrait painter went to Rome (1750), where, like Reynolds, he was able to assimilate Classical precepts and techniques with considerable artistic success. Although working mainly in the high idealising tradition and fascinated by the work of Claude Lorrain, Wilson was also a keen observer of nature and took numerous walks around Rome to capture the atmosphere of the *Campagna*; his Italian paintings, such as *Rome and the Ponte Molle* (**4**) show he was able to find a style of his own, defined in particular by simplicity of outline, a rather limited palette relying on subtle nuances and contrasts, and an acute sensibility to shimmering light and atmosphere. On his return to England, in 1757, Wilson began to paint English views and landscapes in an Italianate manner, as well as drawing on his memories for views of classical sites. Gradually, however, and especially as

he found increasing inspiration in his native North Welsh mountains, he developed a more specifically British approach to landscape, illustrated here by the well-known *Mount Snowdon from Llyn Nantlle* (5), where the rules of Classical landscape composition are adapted to the severe grandeur of the mountain, and the later *Cader Idris*, whose bold ‘close-up’ structure results in an innovative, forceful simplicity (6). It is all the more suggestive that Wilson, despite gaining widespread recognition from his peers and successors (he was a founding member of the Royal Academy), should have struggled to make a living from his landscape paintings. Other artists would actually be more successful working in specialised genres, such as the animal portraits, often including landscape in the background, that George Stubbs has remained famous for (7).

If landscape in oils remained a rather hazardous venture, it was nevertheless gaining ground, at the same time, through the growing popularity of watercolours – a cheaper medium that was particularly well adapted to the diffusion of culture among a prosperous middle class. **Paul Sandby**, a gifted draughtsman who had discovered the wild scenery of the Scottish Highlands as a military topographer there in the late 1740s, became a respected RA artist with his delicate views of landscape and famous sites, as in the *Windsor* series, of which one plate may be seen here (8). Although Gainsborough, who declined to paint from nature himself, called Sandby “*the only man of genius*” who painted “*real views of nature in this country*”, it should be noted that his influence was particularly strong on two generations of watercolour topographers who would base their work primarily on the depiction of architectural landmarks. A radically different approach to landscape watercolour and drawing was that adopted by the eccentric, Russian-born Alexander Cozens, whose admiration for Claude Lorrain led him to devise a method by which ink blottings on paper could be turned – through a combination of chance and design – into daring, monochrome landscape sketches, verging on the sublime and nearly ‘abstract’, yet firmly grounded in Classical rules and theory (9). His son John Robert, who spent several years travelling across the Continent in the late 1770s and early 1780s, adapted his manner to the actual depiction of grand European scenery, such as Swiss mountains and Italian hills, which aristocrats would visit on the Grand Tour (10, 11). The uncompromising bleakness of many of his quasi-monochrome compositions – which has led some art historians to evoke an ‘Elegiac tradition’ in the history of the English watercolour – can be seen in retrospect as an early symptom of the insanity that overtook him in his last years. In fact, the director of the lunatic asylum where Cozens was confined, Dr. Monro, was a keen art collector and amateur painter, and he commissioned two young artists to copy Cozens’s watercolour drawings for engravings; this was a crucial episode in the history of British art, since those young artists were Thomas Girtin and Joseph Turner, and the latter, in particular, acknowledged Cozens as a major formative influence.

Another watercolour artist of a similar temperament is Francis Towne, a provincial drawing master whose mountain views of British as well as European mountain scenery show a somewhat mellower sensibility, as well as a more liberal use of homogenous washes of colour which neatly combine with his precision of outline (12). Meanwhile, the growing passion for spectacular or even terrifying mountain scenery was exploited by very diverse artists. One was the Strasburg-born entrepreneur **Philip James de Louthembourg**, a stage-painter who was well-acquainted with the requirements of visual drama, as in his later *Avalanche dans les Alpes* (13), and who even anticipated more modern entertainments with his *Eidophusikon* (1781), a miniature theatre in which he showed “moving pictures” of nature, including a number of mirror, light and sound effects. In a quieter mood, the clergyman **William Gilpin** popularised the idea of the ‘picturesque’ in Nature, which he defined as a pleasing irregularity or roughness that was peculiarly adapted to painting, and which he pursued through a number of illustrated guidebooks listing the beauties of Great Britain – an affordable alternative for those middle-class lovers of landscape who could not go on the Grand Tour. Despite his celebration of grand, wild scenery, however, Gilpin’s notion of the picturesque is a fairly constricted one and, as his own over-tidy productions tend to prove, he remains faithfully obedient to old rules of composition (14).

In the closing years of the 18th century, English watercolour painting would take a decisive turn away from the conventions of both topography and classical composition. To a large extent, this break was the achievement of Thomas Girtin, a London-born artist who was Turner’s early rival as well as friend, and whose early death at the age of 27 did not prevent him from becoming one of the major Romantics. Girtin was first apprenticed to Edward Dayes, a skilful watercolourist in the topographical manner popularised by Sandby, and an important part of his training, just like Turner’s, consisted in drawing meticulous representations of the old castles, ruined abbeys and medieval cathedrals which held increasing appeal to the popular imagination (15).

From 1799 onwards, however, Girtin did away with any kind of conventional central motif and, similarly dispensing with the foreground or *repoussoir* that had been a compulsory element of Classical composition, invested his watercolours with the freer, ample sense of space that is conspicuous in the serene *White House at Chelsea* (16). An enthusiastic lover of natural scenes and atmospheres, Girtin went on several long walking tours, especially to the North of England, where he spent many hours working outdoors. He was thus led to put an end to the primacy of line that had hitherto ruled watercolour composition, replacing pen by pencil and then applying free brushstrokes on paper to achieve subtle yet often startling tonal effects, organised along powerful structural lines, as in his *Stepping Stones on the Wharfe* (17).

Yet Girtin, like many landscape artists in England, also had an eye for street views and cityscapes, a sensitivity which appears in the 1802 *Rue St. Denis* (18) as well as in the gigantic panorama of London which kept him busy for much of his last year and opened in 1802 under the name of *Eidometropolis*. His very last works, however, are again landscapes, in which a more intimate mood is displayed, and where tranquil, nondescript objects serve as the basis for subtly dynamic patterns of lights and lines, so that it may be an open question whether Girtin's late naturalism does not amount to a step on the path towards abstraction (19).

Yet the innovations of Romantic artists such as Girtin and Turner did not change at once the whole state of the fine arts in Britain: a more classical, indeed conventional, conception of landscape lived on in the works of painters such as **Thomas Hodges**, whose addition of exotic 'local colour' to classical composition suggested that the 'grand manner' would have much scope to thrive in 19th-century Imperial Britain (20).