

RISD MUSEUM

Distant Climes: 18th-Century British Views of Italy, September 1, 2011-June 3, 2012

British artists began to travel to Italy around 1750 to sketch its ancient sites and idyllic countryside. Inspired by the idealized classical landscapes of the most famous landscape painters of the previous century, namely Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin, the Britons carried with them a preconceived idea of what nature looked like—a perfect harmony of form, composition, and space. At the same time, Edmund Burke's philosophy of the sublime, proposed in his *A Philosophical Inquiry into Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), challenged perfectly proportioned beauty, emphasizing instead a vast and sometimes terrifying nature. Accompanying the idealized and the sublime concepts of nature was the British tradition of topographical drawing, which accentuated the accurate description of a particular place through careful pen work and minimal color. The early landscapes of Italy by British artists in this gallery embody this convergence.

Among the drawings presented here, some were executed on site while others were exhibition pieces based on sketches, made after returning from Italy. Indeed, most of these artists used subjects and motifs from their Italian journeys for many years, capitalizing on public interest as well as on the professional authority the Grand Tour—the tradition of visiting Europe's most eminent cultural sites—lent to their practice. When political turmoil severely restricted British travel abroad, beginning with the French Revolution in 1789 and ending with the close of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, these works filled the void of foreign travel and offered British viewers memories of distant lands.

This exhibition is organized in conjunction with *Pilgrims of Beauty: Art and Inspiration in 19th-Century Italy*, on view beginning February 3, 2012.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Jonathan Skelton, British, fl. ca. 1754-1758

Tomb of Caecilia Metella, mid 1700s

Pen and ink and brush and wash over graphite on laid paper

Gift of Miss Elizabeth T. Casey 1988.102.1

This so-called tinted drawing emphasizes pen work and keeps color, applied in broad washes, to a bare minimum. Following the conventions of topographical drawing, the artist portrayed the essential information of the locale with clarity and precision, adding stock figures (called "staffage") for scale. The Roman ruin—the tomb of a patrician woman from the 1st century BCE located outside Rome—is presented as an ordinary sight, one that any British traveler might stumble across on a daily carriage ride.



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Richard Cooper II, British, 1740-after 1814

Near Tivoli, 1770-1814

Pen and ink, brush and wash, and watercolor over graphite on laid paper

Anonymous gift 2005.142.77



Richard Cooper's view of ruins near Tivoli is decidedly generalized, relying heavily on the compositional formulae established by 17th-century artists Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin. Like his predecessors, he presents the landscape as a perfect harmony of forms within the rectangle of the picture frame. Yet true to his own century, Cooper is sure to identify his scene—albeit vaguely—with the many actual ruins tourists encountered on their way to Tivoli. Cooper used his brush like a pencil, modeling his forms with hatched lines as opposed to brushing on color in fluid washes.

Richard Wilson, British, 1713/14-1782

Banks of the Tiber, 1757

Red and white chalk on laid paper

Anonymous gift 2006.122.9



Richard Wilson was one of the earliest British artists to spend an extended period in Rome, staying there for much of the 1750s. While his title for the drawing designates a general location, his broad, monochromatic technique makes the precise site on the Tiber riverbank difficult to identify, indicating the artist's interest in the general over the specific. Wilson's familiarity with the philosophy of the sublime, in which nature is awe-inspiring, grand, and ultimately unknowable, is evident in the effect of light created with white chalk, which mysteriously illuminates the small church atop the hill.

Claude Louis Chatelet, French, 1753-1794

View of Vesuvius Taken from Mont St. Angelo, with a Camaldolite Monastery, 1770-1786

Pen and ink and brush and brown wash with touches of watercolor on laid paper

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The French artist Claude Louis Chatelet traveled to Italy from Paris while working on drawings for the publication *Voyage pittoresque ou description des royaumes de Naples et de Sicilie* (Picturesque Journey and Description of the Kingdoms of Naples and Sicily), an illustrated topographical volume by the Abbé de Saint-Non made for the French audience (Paris, 1781–1786). This drawing is related to one of the final prints made for the volume. Chatelet's grounding in topographical drawing—whose conventions were transferred to France from both Great Britain and the Netherlands—is evident in his

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careful pen work and monochromatic use of wash, as well as his treatment of the subject. He relegated the then-active Vesuvius to the background, almost obscuring it in the haze of a sunny summer day, and focused instead on the hilltop monastery and the peasants below.

John Warwick Smith, English, 1749-1831
The Villa of Maecenas at Tivoli, 1776-1831
Watercolor over graphite on laid paper with scraping
Anonymous gift 69.154.12

John “Warwick” Smith visited the Tivoli region in the late 1770s on a sketching trip with Francis Towne (whose work appears to the right in this gallery). Tivoli was one of the two primary excursions taken by British artists and tourists from Rome. It offered not only an entrée to the idyllic Italian countryside, but also access to the ruins of ancient pleasure palaces, namely the Villa of Maecenas (1st century BCE) and Hadrian’s Villa (2nd century CE). Smith’s composition is experimental, forgoing a classical sense of proportion to instead highlight a prominent foreground tree. His technique combines pen outlines with occasional washes of pure color, while retaining a limited palette of rose and tan.



John Robert Cozens, English, 1752-1799
Lake Nemi with a Distant View of Genzano (and Monte Circeo), 1778-1790
Watercolor applied with brush, graphite
Anonymous Gift 70.118.19



In the later 18th-century John Robert Cozens began to extend the expressive possibilities of the watercolor medium, conveying an emotional response to nature. His many views of Italy, generated from studies he made on his trip there between 1776 and 1779, were extremely influential for British landscape artists of the following generations. The balance of the composition and its measured recession into space refers to the classical compositional formulae of earlier artists Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin, but Cozens’s composition retains little relationship to the technique of topographical drawing found in other works in this gallery. Cozens’s watercolor washes instead emphasize the lyrical quality of diffused light and the impression of atmosphere.

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John Warwick Smith, English, 1749-1831

Assisi in the Province of Umbria, 1794

Watercolor and gouache over graphite on wove paper

Anonymous gift 72.171.39

Named for his benefactor, the Earl of Warwick, John “Warwick” Smith executed this small, highly finished work after returning from his five-year tour of Italy in 1781. The composition is distinctly classical, consisting of foreground flora, tiny figures for scale, and a curving road that leads the eye of the viewer from foreground to background. The artist’s careful pen work clearly describes Assisi’s individual buildings, while at the same time his simplified color palette of blues and greens places an overall emphasis on shapes and broad masses.



William Marlow, British, 1740-1813

The Bay of Naples, 1765-1795

Pen and ink, brush and wash, and watercolor over graphite on laid paper

Anonymous gift 75.116.38

William Marlow traveled to Italy in the 1760s and used the subject matter from his early travels throughout his career, to the extent that he was eventually identified as a specialist in Italian views. This view of a fortress or castle on the water near Naples, possibly on the Bay of Baia, was executed after his return to Great Britain, when he published a group of prints of similar views. His drawing offers a commonplace encounter with the scene, as if drawn from the viewpoint of a fisherman’s boat.



Francis Towne, English, ca. 1740-1816

Castello Madamo, April 22, 1781

Pen and ink, brush and wash, and watercolor over graphite on laid paper

Anonymous gift 84.203.10

Francis Towne made this drawing while on a sketching tour of the Licenza Valley, between the towns of Vocovaro and Tivoli. He took this trip with John “Warwick” Smith, whose works hang to the right and above the mantel. Towne carefully noted the date of the drawing on the verso (April 22, 1781) and also wrote the phrase “light from the right hand” in order to orient his application of watercolor when he returned to the studio. Throughout his career, pen and ink outlines remained the most essential element of Towne’s technique, imparting crispness even to the furthest mountains. His elegantly balanced composition and limited palette confer a generalized, almost abstract quality to the scene.

