



‘Ashford copys and rivals Roberts’:¹ new evidence for Thomas Roberts and William Ashford at Powerscourt

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THE CORRECT ATTRIBUTION OF AN UNFINISHED PAINTING IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY of Ireland to Thomas Roberts (1748-1777) brings the total known works by the artist to seventy-one. The work offers evidence of the artist’s working methods and provokes a re-evaluation of the question of artistic precedence between Roberts and his artistic rival, William Ashford (1746-1824).

Once owned by the Earl of Yarborough, Roberts’ *Wooded Landscape in Powerscourt Demesne* is closely comparable to a composition of the same scene by Ashford, *View of Powerscourt Demesne* (Plates 1, 2). Both views include similar features: a gnarled tree as the composition’s focus, with grouped deer positioned beneath, and the peak of the Great Sugar Loaf in the distance. Ashford’s composition deviates slightly in that it includes garden buildings of the Powerscourt estate and the added narrative of an armed huntsman emerging from the shadows. Ashford and Roberts were close in age, and although Ashford hailed from Birmingham, both adopted Dublin as their home. Each artist exhibited views in 1772 of Tinnehinch, county Wicklow, and later painted contrasting views of Carton Demesne, county Kildare, and Dawson Grove, county Monaghan. While such overlap of subject matter was common amongst eighteenth-century artists, strikingly similar compositions by rival artists were less so. In their book, *Thomas Roberts: Landscape and Patronage in eighteenth-century Ireland*, William Laffan and Brendan Rooney suggest that ‘Roberts’s composition is derived from that of Ashford rather than the other way around.’² They argue that Ashford’s view is ‘wholly typical of his oeuvre’ and that Roberts’ landscape is a ‘direct imitation of Ashford’s manner generally’.³ However, there is evidence to suggest a contrary view.

Roberts’ landscape at Powerscourt is dated 1774; therefore, its position in an overview of his stylistic development is certain. Viewing Ashford’s known works in

1 – Thomas Roberts (1748-1777), *WOODED LANDSCAPE IN POWERSCOURT DEMESNE*

1774, oil on canvas, 112 x 153 cm (private collection; courtesy Sotheby’s)

2 – William Ashford (1746-1824), *VIEW OF POWERSCOURT DEMESNE*

n.d., oil on canvas, 107 x 145.5 cm (courtesy Denver Art Museum)



3 – William Ashford (1746-1824), *IDYLLIC LANDSCAPE*
1778, oil on canvas, 110.8 x 151.7 cm (courtesy National Gallery of Ireland)

opposite 4 – Thomas Roberts (1748-1777), *WOODED RIVER LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES ON A PATH*
n.d., oil on canvas, 99 x 137cm (private collection; courtesy Sotheby's)

5 – Thomas Roberts, *EXTENSIVE RIVER LANDSCAPE WITH A RUINED ABBEY AND ROUND TOWER*
n.d., oil on canvas, 103 x 128.2 cm (private collection; courtesy Christie's)

chronological order, his undated *View of Powerscourt Demesne* is an anomaly amongst his earlier, more expansive compositions. Instead, the composition closely resembles Ashford's more enclosed and denser landscapes of the late 1780s, such as *Jacques and the Wounded Deer* of 1786.⁴ It's also notable that the motif of animals positioned beneath a gnarled tree reoccurs elsewhere in Roberts' oeuvre and not Ashford's, as seen in *Rocky Landscape with Horse, Cow and Sheep*.⁵ Compellingly, Ashford exhibited *View in Powerscourt Park, County of Wicklow* at the Royal Academy, London, in 1789. In Anne Crookshank's catalogue of Ashford's works, his landscape at Powerscourt is the only noted depiction of that demesne by the artist.⁶ It is probable, therefore, that Ashford's *View of Powerscourt Demesne* and the painting exhibited in 1789 are one and the same. Moreover, this is not the only instance in which Ashford imitated Roberts.

Part of the National Gallery of Ireland's collection, Ashford's *Idyllic Landscape* is painted in the style of Roberts' *Wooded River Landscape with Figures on a Path* and another landscape by Roberts, *Extensive River Landscape with a Ruined Abbey and Round Tower* (Plates 3-5). As well as evidently comparable compositions, Ashford's *Idyllic Landscape* includes elements familiar to Roberts' repertory: monastic ruins, filtered





6 – Thomas Roberts (1748-1777), *VIEW OF THE DARGLE* (n.d.), oil on canvas, 94cm x 135cm (courtesy National Gallery of Ireland)

7 – *Reflectogram of VIEW OF THE DARGLE* (courtesy National Gallery of Ireland)

light, and individually delineated foliage. The painting, commissioned by Roberts' former patron, the 2nd Duke of Leinster, for his house at Carton, county Kildare, is dated 1778, a year after Roberts' death, and may have been an homage to Roberts on Ashford's part, a reference to his departed friend and main rival. While the circumstances of Ashford imitating Roberts' landscape at Powerscourt more than a decade later are unknown – although it may have been commissioned by Richard Wingfield, 4th Viscount Powerscourt, as a complement to Roberts' landscape – it's credible that exposure to multiple versions of Roberts' landscape may have left a lasting impression on Ashford.

An unfinished landscape in the National Gallery of Ireland, once tentatively catalogued as 'attributed to George Barret' and titled *View of the Dargle*, is now attributed in

full to Roberts (Plate 6), and is directly comparable to Roberts' signed and dated *Wooded Landscape in Powerscourt Demesne*, appearing to be an unfinished version of the same scene. The perspective – directly facing the gnarled tree as the composition's focus – is interchangeable with Roberts' and not, by contrast, Ashford's angled perspective. Likewise, the Great Sugar Loaf rises from a low position in the composition, unlike its prominence in Ashford's. It's also notable that the Gallery's unfinished landscape, measuring 37 x 53 inches, is the same size canvas as Roberts' *Landstorm...*, a similar painting on stylistic grounds to Roberts' signed landscape at Powerscourt.⁷ Another version of *Landstorm...*, again the same size canvas, highlights Roberts' practice of painting multiple versions of commercially successful landscapes.⁸

In an attempt to gain further insights on the unfinished landscape, Muirne Lydon, a paintings conservator at the National Gallery, undertook non-invasive technical analysis of the painting by way of infra-red reflectography (Plate 7), an imaging method that provides insight into an artist's working methodologies. As waves of infrared radiation pass through layers of paint, darker pigments absorb the infrared light, appearing dark in the resulting infrared reflectogram, while lighter pigments reflect infra-red, appearing transparent. A reflectogram might highlight areas of underpainting, *pentimenti*, or pencil markings outlining compositional elements. Presenting none of the aforementioned, the reflectogram of Roberts' unfinished landscape reveals an assured artist setting down the composition with precision and without deviation. The darker pigments draw attention to a confident sketch of the tree for which not a single branch was altered. Likewise, there were no modifications made to the positioning of the Great Sugar Loaf or even the coarse grasses in the foreground. The exacting nature in which the composition was produced suggests it was a formulaic exercise for the artist, probably as a result of prior experience with the same composition. Therefore, one can reason that it was likely painted subsequent to Roberts' signed and dated *Wooded Landscape in Powerscourt Demesne*.

The unfinished painting in the NGI is a welcome addition to Roberts' oeuvre, providing us with insight into the conceptual mind of Ireland's leading landscape painter of the eighteenth century. Roberts died in Lisbon in 1777, just shy of his 29th birthday, and the painting may be one of the many left unfinished at his death. Despite a tragically short career, Roberts' artistic point of view lived beyond him, not only in the greatness of his collected works but also in its attempted emulation by his contemporaries.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Thomas Campbell, *Dr Campbell's diary of a visit to England in 1775* (Cambridge, 2011) 87.

² William Laffan and Brendan Rooney, *Thomas Roberts: Landscape and Patronage in eighteenth-century Ireland* (Kerry, 2009) 193.

³ *ibid.*, 195.

⁴ Gorry Gallery, *An exhibition of 18th, 19th and 20th century Irish paintings* (Dublin, 1995) 7.

⁵ Laffan and Rooney, *Thomas Roberts*, 372-73.

⁶ Anne Crookshank, 'A life devoted to landscape painting: William Ashford', *Irish Arts Review Yearbook – vol. 11*, 1995, 119-30.

⁷ Laffan and Rooney, *Thomas Roberts*, 388-89.

⁸ Sotheby's, London, 4th July 2013, lot 201.