



Two new works by Thomas Roberts (1748-1777)

WILLIAM LAFFAN AND BRENDAN ROONEY

OUR RECENT MONOGRAPH ON THOMAS ROBERTS (1748-1777) PUBLISHED SIXTY-FOUR autograph works, a marked increase on the previous estimate of his extant oeuvre as being ‘roughly forty’.¹ We noted at the time that ‘sixty-four corresponds exactly with the number of works that Roberts exhibited in his lifetime, although this is merely coincidence: not all of the extant works were exhibited, nor do all his exhibited works survive.’² Nevertheless, we suggested that this number of surviving paintings tallied reasonably accurately with the body of work that Roberts completed in the short decade of his professional life and that ‘our knowledge of his artistic production [was] approaching completion’.³ It is pleasing then to note that two further works have come to light and have been correctly identified as a direct result of the monograph and its accompanying exhibition at the National Gallery of Ireland (NGI), thereby increasing Roberts’ identified body of work to sixty-six paintings. Both are significant landscapes which relate to previously known paintings and expand our knowledge of this most elegant and rarefied of Irish artists.

While the consistency of his technique and the brevity of his working life make it problematic to insist on too firm a chronology for Roberts’ undated paintings – the vast bulk of his oeuvre – there does seem to be a progression, from about 1774, towards larger paintings of more tempestuous subject matter. The first and probably earlier of the two new discoveries (Plate 2) seems to be something of a transition picture en route to the storm scenes. In unusually fine state of preservation, it shows a man on horseback crossing a typically precarious bridge; a family of travellers, meanwhile, rest from their journey (Plate 1). These figures are closely comparable to the similar family to be found in one of the superlative works Roberts painted for the viceroy, Lord Harcourt (Laffan and Rooney, cat. 50). In contrast, however, to the serene Harcourt pictures, the right-hand side shows a torrent pouring down the side of a mountain, which comes close to this more

1 – *Thomas Roberts (1748-1777), detail from MOUNTAINOUS LANDSCAPE WITH TRAVELLERS BY A BRIDGE; WITH DUNMOW CASTLE, COUNTY MEATH IN THE DISTANCE, n.d., oil on canvas, 63 x 98 cm (private collection)*



2 – Thomas Roberts, *MOUNTAINOUS LANDSCAPE WITH TRAVELLERS BY A BRIDGE; WITH DUNMOW CASTLE, COUNTY MEATH IN THE DISTANCE*, n.d., oil on canvas, 63 x 98 cm (private collection)

‘sublime’ sensibility which has been detected in some of Roberts’ landstorms, including works dated 1774 and the following year (cat. 55, 57).⁴

Of particular interest in this work is the appearance in the upper-left-hand corner of a robustly castellated structure closely based on Dunmow Castle, county Meath, which we know Roberts had drawn, almost certainly in connection with the antiquarian pursuits of his patron William Burton Conyngham (1733-1796). Although his original drawing, which was recorded in Burton Conyngham’s collection, is lost, the composition is preserved in a copy by William Beranger (c.1729-1817) (Plate 3).⁵ This part of county Meath was well known to Roberts: he had painted Burton Conyngham’s home at Slane Castle and worked at Beauparc, both within a few miles of Dunmow Castle. As with his reuse of elements of the ecclesiastical architecture of Castle Dermot, county Kildare, in his *Irish Capriccio* painted for Sir Watkin Williams Wynn (1749-1789) in St James’s Square, London (cat. 54), this illustrates how the antiquarianism of Burton’s circle was creatively adapted by the artists he patronised and how the reuse of elements of Ireland’s antiquities give, if nothing more, a distinctly Irish flavour to Roberts’ art.

The second work (Plate 4), again unpublished, is a large and impressive landscape showing mendicant travellers on a path in a wooded river landscape.⁶ The picture carried with it an early provenance to the Yorkshire textile magnate Henry Butterfield (1819-1910), of Cliffe Castle, Keighley. However, no Irish connection can be established to take the provenance back further, and over the years the picture has lost its attribution to

Roberts. In composition, detail and, particularly, mood, it is extremely close to Roberts' famous *'Ideal Landscape'* in the National Gallery of Ireland (Plate 5), a work which hitherto had stood somewhat alone in the artist's oeuvre with no exact point of comparison being offered by other landscapes. Both pictures, and indeed two further landscape including, respectively, a round tower and a rainbow (cat. 61, 62), are comparable in size and ambition to the Landstorms, but show much more tranquil scenes. It is, however, with the NGI work that the new picture offers particularly compelling comparisons. Both share almost identical serpentine expanses of water flowing off into the distance, and similar – and distinctly Irish – monastic settlements perched high on a crag in the distance.

While it is satisfying to add two further works to Roberts' oeuvre, there are almost certainly other pictures extant and awaiting identification. *View of Croagh Patrick* (cat. 24), for example, has not been seen since it was with Tooth & Co in London in 1951, and our knowledge of it depends on a black and white photograph with which it was advertised in the *Connoisseur*. Equally puzzling is the question of what happened to the companion picture to *A Landscape with Travellers on a Road to the Left* (cat. 57). It was described as *A Ruined Church Among Trees* when the paintings were sold together at

3 – Gabriel Beranger (1729-1817), after Thomas Roberts, *DUNMOW CASTLE, COUNTY MEATH*,
n.d., pen and ink and watercolour on paper, 22.8 x 28.9 cm (National Library of Ireland, MS 1958 TX)



Christie's on 23rd June 1950, and while the former – previously known solely from an illustration in Ellis Waterhouse's *Dictionary* – turned up just in time for inclusion in the 2009 exhibition, the latter seems to have disappeared, for now anyway. Other works by Roberts were recorded at sales in the nineteenth century. Some caution is necessary in assuming that these were all by Thomas rather than his brother Sautelle, or, indeed, by either, but the most tantalising is the work he seems to have done for the Leesons, notably, *A View in Lord Milltown's Demesne at Russboro in the county of Wicklow*, which has not been seen since it was sold in Dublin in 1820.⁷ This would represent the most exciting Roberts rediscovery of all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere thanks to Sir Robert and Lady Goff, Arabella Bishop at Sotheby's, and Clementine Kerr and Nicholas White at Christie's.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Anne Crookshank and Desmond FitzGerald, Knight of Glin, *Ireland's Painters, 1600-1940* (New Haven and London, 2002) 146.
- ² William Laffan and Brendan Rooney, *Thomas Roberts, Landscape and Patronage in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Tralee, 2009) 12.
- ³ *ibid.*
- ⁴ Tom Dunne, 'Sensibility and the sublime in the storm paintings of Thomas Roberts (1748-1777)', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, XII, 2009, 186-213.
- ⁵ William Burton's Conyngham's ownership of Roberts' original drawing is recorded in *Grose's Antiquities*. In general, see Peter Harbison, *William Burton Conyngham and his Irish Circle of Antiquarian Artists* (New Haven and London, 2012).
- ⁶ Sold at Sotheby's, London, 7th July 2011, lot 368.
- ⁷ Sold at Thomas Jones, Dublin, 2nd March 1820, lot 44.

4 – *Thomas Roberts, A WOODED RIVER LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES ON A PATH AND MONASTIC RUINS PERCHED ON A CLIFF*, n.d., oil on canvas, 99 x 137 cm (private collection)

5 – *Thomas Roberts, 'IDEAL LANDSCAPE': A LANDSCAPE WITH A YOUNG BOY ON A WHITE HORSE AND CATTLE BENEATH A WATERFALL*, n.d., oil on canvas, 111.5 x 152.5 cm (National Gallery of Ireland, NGI 4052)

TWO NEW WORKS BY THOMAS ROBERTS

