



# The history of the Castletown collections, 1720-1960

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THE LONG GALLERY AT CASTLETOWN WAS ORIGINALLY DESIGNED AS A PICTURE gallery, but owing to the death of William 'Speaker' Conolly in 1729 the room was left unfinished.<sup>1</sup> It is unclear whether Speaker Conolly had already formed the nucleus of a collection or whether his nephew, William James Conolly (d.1754), laid the foundations of the family collection at Castletown. William James was the first member of the family to make the Grand Tour, in 1726-27. His marriage to Lady Anne Wentworth in 1733 brought many works of art into the Conolly collection, although many of these remained in England and, as discussed elsewhere in this volume, never made it to Castletown. The purpose of this article is to give a general overview of the Conolly collection's formation, focusing on the two most important phases of its development, c.1760-1800 and c.1850-76. The three key figures are Tom Conolly (1738-1803), his wife Lady Louisa Lennox (1743-1821), and the less well-known Thomas Conolly MP (1823-1876), who inherited Castletown in 1858. Ebullient, extravagant and not particularly cultured, he completed a grand tour in 1870-71 and made one or two important contributions to the family collection.<sup>2</sup> No eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century inventories of Castletown's contents are known to exist, and the earliest surviving inventory of Castletown House was compiled in 1893-94. On its own it would be of little use were it not for a surviving contemporary photographic record of the interior.<sup>3</sup> Other photographs reproduced in Vol. V of the *Georgian Society Records* in 1913, and later photographs and sales catalogues from the 1960s, also help to build up as rounded a picture as possible of the original collection and the connected hanging and arrangement of the Green Drawing Room and the dining room, two key ground-floor rooms.

When Castletown's ground-floor rooms were being remodelled in the 1760s, Tom and Louisa Conolly moved to Leixlip Castle. Lady Louisa's correspondence for the years 1764-68 contains general references to the building work rather than to any one room in

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1 – *Pompeo Girolamo Batoni (1708-1778), JOHN STAPLES (1734-1820) OF LYSSAN, CO TYRONE 1773, oil on canvas, 249 x 175 cm (Museo di Roma)*

particular, with the exception of the new dining room. A small number of payments for textiles used in the ground-floor rooms are recorded in her accounts for the period 1767-75. She purchased three small paintings from the Dublin branch of Josiah Wedgwood's shop on 2nd April 1775, though it is unclear what genre they were.<sup>4</sup> Payments for pictures are also found in Tom Conolly's accounts of 1767-70. Of particular interest are the four payments (ranging in price from £10 to £68 5s) to the artist Robert Healy between 2nd November 1767 and 30th January 1770 that relate to the important series of equestrian pictures that was once at Castletown. He also made a payment of £34 2s 6d on 31st October 1769 to his brother-in-law, John Staples, for several paintings Staples had bought on Lady Louisa's behalf.<sup>5</sup> An undated letter from Lady Sarah Lennox to her sister Emily, Duchess of Leinster described a similar commission to buy paintings on the Conollys' behalf:

Dear Sister,

I told you a story about Smiths pictures in saying they were rather dear, for I have seen them myself & must give you an account of them.

There are large finished pictures of 60, 40, 30 & 20 pound. [There] are small finished ones of 16, 14, 10, pound, there are largish unfinished ones, of 5, 4, 3, guineas, &...

Now the unfinished are thus, one clump in the foreground is quite finished, the background wants the finishing touches, or else the whole is the dead colouring & a second touch, but not the last high finish which Smith was so famous for. Where there [are] no figures of cattle the unfinished look like common paint[ed] finished landscapes. Many look as if they might be highly finished by a little finishing to a hill or a distant clump, & in short all are prettily colour'd & designed, all the skies are finished as to colouring [though] not blended together.

I have bought 5 for 5.5 [guineas] that in my mind are beautiful & were thought so by Mrs Smith who is a very good judge. Ly Louisa has also bought some. I am so certain that my sister Louisa will like them that I shall venture to lay out ten guineas for her in 2 or 3 of the small, (almost as finished) sort, for I am sure she will never forgive me losing an [opportunity] which can never be regained of buying such pretty things so cheap ... I don't know your taste ... I therefore beg you will write me your order directly & your directions for what you like best, figures, cattle, castles, cottages ... water, [or] snow pieces...<sup>6</sup>

This letter, dated *c.*1776/77, provides a revealing insight into the sisters' attitudes to paintings and their acquisition. Bargain-hunting rather than connoisseurship was to the fore, with the works of the English landscape artist William Smith of Chichester (1707-1764) very much to their taste. The role of clumps of trees in contemporary landscape design was evidently much appreciated. Individual paintings appear to have been acquired less for their aesthetic value than for their decorative potential. In the absence of any eighteenth-century pictorial evidence, the Castletown print room of 1768 reveals much about

Lady Louisa's personal choice in paintings, her taste in picture frames and the decorative manner in which she would have hung her closets and dressing rooms. The print room suggests that she arranged her paintings with a symmetrical formality, selecting the most elaborate frames for paintings of the greatest personal interest. There was a short-lived fashion in the 1760s for hanging paintings with elaborate decorative cords with bows and tassels. How widespread this method of display was is unclear, but it was used by George III and Queen Charlotte at Buckingham House in 1763 and by Lady Louisa Conolly at Castletown in the late 1760s.<sup>7</sup> Such hanging methods were by their very nature ephemeral, and the only surviving indication of Lady Louisa's preference lies in the fictive gilt cords, bows and tassels of Richard Cranfield's pier glasses in the dining room at Castletown.

Although Tom Conolly was painted by Anton Raphael Mengs during his grand tour, this does not necessarily indicate a substantial interest in the arts. The only noteworthy Irish artists that he patronised were George Barrett and Robert Healy, with the former documenting his estate and the latter his sporting interests. In 1784 he commissioned four landscapes of Castletown from the London-based Irish artist Edmund Garvey (1740-1813), discussed elsewhere in this volume (see pp.156-60).<sup>8</sup> He also patronised another London-based Irish artist, the miniaturist Richard Bull (active 1777-1809). Bull discussed his portrait of Tom Conolly in a letter to William Robert, 2nd Duke of Leinster:

May it please your Grace,

When Mr Conolly was here last he did me the honour of sitting for his picture, which he was so kind to promise to show your Grace, as I was ambitious that your Grace might see what improvement I have made. Mr Conolly having expressed a wish to have it engraved which I suppose had his time permitted would have been executed. By Mr Conolly's permission I have taken an exact copy of it only higher finished, having more time to complete it. It is in the hands of the first engraver here & if anything can stamp an additional value on a print of such illustrious character, it must be dedicating it to your grace. I would not presume to take such a liberty without your Graces Approbation. The Engraver has promised to have it finished in six weeks. If your grace approves & will The Engraver has promised to have it finished in six weeks. If your grace approves & will favour me with the number you wish to have for your friends I shall take care to have the very best impressions carefully delivered. There will be a few proofs touched, colour'd & plain, although executed in the first manner the price of the prints will be moderate 3/6 plain, colour'd 7/6...

I remain with the highest respect your graces most Dutiful & very humble Servt.

Richard Bull.<sup>9</sup>

Bull, who was educated at the Dublin Society Schools, moved to London c.1790, where he worked successfully for a large and fashionable clientele. While in London in 1795, Tom Conolly had commissioned Bull to paint his portrait and to have it engraved, with

the artist hoping to dedicate the engraving to the Duke of Leinster.<sup>10</sup>

The Green Drawing Room, or Saloon, given its central position and status, was the most important of the ground-floor State Rooms. It was remodelled and redecorated during the period 1764-68, when Tom Conolly's accounts record a substantial payment of two £223 1s 5d to Richard Cranfield on 28th September 1768 for carving and gilding work to the drawing rooms and dining room in a manner similar to the State Rooms at Leinster House, upon which they were based. By the 1760s the Saloon and Red Drawing Room had been hung with the expensive fabrics that were considered the most appropriate backdrop for displaying paintings and replacing Castletown's original panelled interiors of the 1720s.<sup>11</sup>

The earliest records of the picture-hang in the Green Drawing Room date from the late nineteenth century. They describe the dense, saturated Italianate method of picture-hanging common to the *salone* of the great palazzi of Florence and Rome and experienced by grand tourists such as Tom Conolly. Many eighteenth-century great houses were laid out with visitors in mind, with rooms of parade intended for entertaining on a grand scale. Works were frequently hung not by style, genre or subject matter, but by size and frame-type. The quality of individual paintings varied considerably, and works of secondary importance, or copies, were also frequently included. The rationale for this approach was to impress the viewer with the scale, density and richness of the room's overall ensemble, of which the paintings formed an essential part. The frames were fixed to the walls using a variety of methods, including the bows and tassels favoured by Lady Louisa, and the frames' design was often repeated in the gilt, walnut or ebonised furniture arranged symmetrically beneath them.

In the early nineteenth century, the Prince Regent, a great connoisseur of seventeenth-century Dutch painting, sometimes confined himself to single-file picture-hangs in rooms such as the Blue Velvet Room at Carlton House.<sup>12</sup> Surviving nineteenth-century photographs of Castletown reveal that Thomas Conolly chose a single-file picture-hang as part of the c.1870 redecoration of the Red Drawing Room (see p.112). The earliest surviving Castletown inventory, dating from 1893-94 provides a wealth of useful information on the Victorian single-file picture-hang, which consisted almost exclusively of religious paintings and amounted to eighteen pictures in total. By cross-referencing this inventory with late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century photographs, it is possible to identify some of the works, most of which were copies after Old Master paintings.<sup>13</sup> Above the door leading into the Green Drawing Room hung a copy of Raphael's *Madonna della Seggiola*. In the centre of the east wall hung a reduced copy of Veronese's *Feast at the House of Simon*, previously in the collection of the Earl of Shaftesbury. The largest painting in the room was a full-scale copy of *The Virgin and Child with Saints Jerome, Mary Magdalene and Angels* by Correggio (1489-1534), which hung on the east wall in the late nineteenth century before being re-hung over the chimney piece c.1912 (Plate 2). This copy by Giovanni Mazzolini (d.1876) was acquired in Rome in 1871 by Thomas Conolly. Mazzolini was a well-known copyist working in Rome in the mid- to



late-nineteenth century, and it is possible that he may have also provided Conolly with several other copies which hung in the Red Drawing Room.

Thomas Conolly showed little evidence of connoisseurship in hanging his newly redecorated drawing room with a series of copies after well-known Italian Renaissance paintings. There was, however, one important exception to the rule – a rare work of impeccable provenance by the seventeenth-century Spanish master Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-1682), which hung just to the left of the chimney piece. Spanish works, which had been rare in Irish collections prior to the Napoleonic Wars, were now much sought-after by collectors. The painting in question, *Christ after the Flagellation*, is now in the collection of the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois (Plate 3). It is one of only two versions of the subject painted by the artist. The painting was in the collection of King Louis-Philippe of France, who installed it in his famous ‘Spanish Gallery’ at the Louvre in 1842, from whence it was removed following the Revolution of 1848. King Louis-Philippe’s collection was sold following his death in England in 1850.<sup>14</sup> It is likely that Conolly acquired the painting in London at the auction of the late king’s collection at Christie’s in May 1853, for later that year he lent it to the Irish Industrial Art Exhibition in Dublin. The work, which was listed in the exhibition catalogue as No. 48, *The Saviour*

2 – *The Red Drawing Room, looking south-east in 1912*  
(from *THE GEORGIAN SOCIETY RECORDS*, V, 1913, pl.XXVIII)





3 – *Bartolome Esteban Murillo, CHRIST AFTER THE FLAGELLATION*  
c.1670, oil on canvas, 127 x 146 cm (Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois)

opposite 4 – *The dining room at Castletown in 1912*  
(from *THE GEORGIAN SOCIETY RECORDS*, V, 1912, pl.XXVII)

*being Scourged*, was without doubt the most important painting acquired by the Conolly family in the nineteenth-century.<sup>15</sup>

The dining room at Castletown was created by Tom and Lady Louisa Conolly in the 1760s and contained a considerable number of family paintings, totalling twenty-three in number by the end of the nineteenth century. With the exception of one or two genre paintings, and an enlarged copy of Raphael's *School of Athens*, the majority of the paintings were portraits.<sup>16</sup> Little had changed by the time the room was photographed by the Irish Georgian Society in 1912 (Plate 4). Charles Jervas' matching portraits of Speaker Conolly and his wife Katherine, being of the right size and shape, served as overdoors, and they were balanced on the opposite wall by another pair in identical frames. The matching size of the paintings and the uniformity of the eighteenth-century picture frames would suggest that they had been placed there as part of the original decorative scheme in the 1760s. Though they are no longer in their original position, all but one of the four paintings is still at Castletown. Above the chimney piece hung a magnificent full-length portrait in a gilded neoclassical frame surmounted by an urn. This work, the focal point of the room, was a portrait of John Staples (1734-1820) of Lyssan, county Tyrone, by

Pompeo Batoni. Staples was the husband of Lady Harriet Conolly, sister of Tom Conolly, whom he had married in 1764. Due to his brother-in-law's influence, Staples was elected to the Irish House of Commons as MP for Newtown Limavady in 1765. Following the early death of his wife, he departed for Italy, visiting Florence, Capua, Naples, Rome and Venice between 1772 and 1774.

While Tom Conolly had patronised Mengs, Staples preferred his more fashionable rival Batoni, then at the height of his powers. The sitter is depicted full-length against an idealised classical landscape, his hand resting on the pedestal of the Ludovisi Mars, a work praised by Winckelmann<sup>17</sup> and frequently used by Batoni as a prop in his paintings (Plate 1). Other props which recur in Batoni's paintings are the Corinthian capital and the fragment of broken frieze surmounted by a griffin which appeared in over a dozen paintings. This work, which is regarded as an exemplary of its genre, is signed and dated 'P. BATONI PINXIT ROMAEE / ANNO 1773'. No evidence has so far come to light which would indicate how or under what circumstances the painting arrived at Castletown. Tom Conolly and John Staples must have been close, with Staples certainly owing his political career to Conolly, and it is possible that it was given to his brother-in-law in gratitude or in friendship. The painting and its neoclassical frame were an almost exact fit for the space above the chimney piece and it may therefore have formed part of the original picture-hang of the room.

Two notable pieces of sculpture also formed part of the Castletown collection. The





first was a janiform herm of Brutus and Seneca joined in the Antique Manner after the two-faced god, Janus. This uncommon work by an unidentified eighteenth-century sculptor was most likely produced in Italy for the Grand Tour market. Though there is no documentary evidence to support it, it is probable that this double-headed herm, representing Brutus and Seneca as *Man of Thought and Man of Action*, had been acquired by Tom Conolly on his grand tour in 1758. Busts of Brutus and Seneca were popular with eighteenth-century collectors, and were widely copied. The Antique model for the frowning Brutus is now believed to represent the Athenian orator Demosthenes. The bust can be seen in a photograph of the entrance hall taken in the late nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> The second sculpture is a copy of *A Boy with a Dolphin* after Bartolomeo Cavaceppi (1716-1799). The original was first advertised by Cavaceppi in 1768 as a work by Raphael executed by Lorenzetti.<sup>19</sup> The work was popular, and versions exist in the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, at Tsarskoe Selo, at Ickworth, at Althorp, and in various other collections. It was copied by, among others, Joseph Nollekens (1737-1823), in whose workshop the Castletown version was produced.<sup>20</sup> Given that Nollekens did not arrive in Rome until 1761, the work could not have been acquired by Tom Connolly on his grand tour. It seems probable, therefore, that this sculpture belongs to the second phase of collecting at Castletown, and was most likely purchased by Thomas Conolly MP while in Rome c.1870.

Irish country house collections of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tended to contain a great many works of mixed quality; Castletown was no exception. For the most part, paintings were acquired for decorative purposes to furnish interiors rather than for their intrinsic merit as individual works of art. It is evident from both the archival and photographic records that the picture-hangs in Castletown's reception rooms were altered several times between Tom and Lady Louisa Conolly's redecoration in the 1760s and the family's sale of the contents in 1966. With some notable exceptions to the rule, the documentary record shows little evidence of connoisseurship in successive generations of the Connolly family. Instead, a strong desire to record for posterity the portraits of family members and friends, their horses, and their estate emerges.

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## ENDNOTES

The following abbreviations are used:

IAA	Irish Architectural Archive
NLI	National Library of Ireland
TCD	Trinity College Dublin

- <sup>1</sup> Ann Keller, ‘“In Great Vogue”; the Long Gallery at Castletown’, in Elizabeth Mayes (ed.), *Castletown, Decorative Arts* (OPW, Trim, 2011) 57.
- <sup>2</sup> Suzanne Pegley, ‘Landscapes of Power: the social network of the power elite in mid-Victorian Ireland, case study of Thomas Conolly (1823-76) of Castletown, Co Kildare’, unpublished PhD thesis, Maynooth University, 2017.
- <sup>3</sup> IAA, photographs in the Castletown box files.
- <sup>4</sup> TCD, Conolly Papers, MS 3966, Accounts of Lady Louisa Conolly.
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, MS 3964, Accounts of Tom Conolly.
- <sup>6</sup> NLI, Leinster Papers, MS 619, Lady Sarah Lennox to Emily, Duchess of Leinster, regarding the purchase of paintings by William Smith of Chichester (1707-1764) for, and by Lady Louisa Conolly. c.1776-1777.
- <sup>7</sup> John Fowler and John Cornforth, *English Decoration in the Eighteenth Century* (Barrie & Jenkins, London, 1974) 233.
- <sup>8</sup> NLI, Thomas Conolly Papers, MS 4,341/9, Edmund Garvey, 7 Bow Street, London, to Thomas Conolly, 22nd May 1784.
- <sup>9</sup> NLI, Leinster Papers, MS 41,552/40, Richard Bull, Miniaturist, 101 Pall Mall, London, to William Robert, Duke of Leinster, 4 September 1795.
- <sup>10</sup> A copy of this engraving has been found in the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland (NGI 10,753, but the whereabouts of the original miniature is unknown.
- <sup>11</sup> John Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors* (Yale, 2004) 95. According to Cornforth, the fashion for hanging saloons and drawing rooms with fabric other than tapestry owed its origin to the rise in the number of art collections formed in the first half of the eighteenth century.
- <sup>12</sup> David Watkin, *The Royal Interiors of Regency England* (Vendome Press, New York, 1984) 122.
- <sup>13</sup> IAA, Castletown Papers, J/11, Inventory 1893-94 (amended in 1898) of Castletown.
- <sup>14</sup> Suzanne L. Stratton-Pruitt (ed.), *Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-1682), Paintings from American Collections* (Harry Abrams, New York, 2002) 160-61.
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> A.M. Stewart, *Irish Art Loan Exhibitions 1765-1927*, 3 vols (Manton, Dublin, 1990) II, 495.
- <sup>17</sup> IAA, Castletown Papers, J/11, Inventory 1893-94 (amended in 1898) of Castletown.
- <sup>18</sup> Various authors, *Citizens and Kings: portraits in the age of revolution, 1760-1830* (Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2007) 294, no. 61. Sotheby’s, London, Old Master Sculpture and Works of Art, lot 109, 3rd December 2014, [www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2014/ols-mastersculpture-works-art-114233lot.109.html](http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2014/ols-mastersculpture-works-art-114233lot.109.html).
- <sup>19</sup> Sotheby’s, *ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> Sotheby’s, European Sculpture and Works of Art, 9th July, 2004, lot 101. [www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2004/european-sculpture-works-of-art-9001900-104231/lot.101.html](http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2004/european-sculpture-works-of-art-9001900-104231/lot.101.html).