

‘Until the heats of Italy are over’: Charles Jervas writes from Paris in 1698

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NEW INFORMATION ABOUT CHARLES JERVAS, THE KING’S PAINTER, HAS COME TO light in the form of letters written in Paris and Rome by the painter during the years 1698 to 1700. These were addressed to John Ellis, Under-Secretary of State in London.¹ While researching the background to these letters, some new facts emerged relating to minor discrepancies about the painter’s movements, financial backing for his travels, and, most importantly, his views on French art.

CHARLES JERVAS AND HIS LETTER FROM PARIS

Charles Jervas (c.1675-1739), although appointed King’s Painter following the death of his talented teacher Sir Godfrey Kneller in 1723, should not be considered in the front rank of painters. He was, in many ways, typical of the type of portraitist who was successful in these islands during the early years of the eighteenth century. Jervas’s output was large and he was responsible for many adequate portraits and for a few fine examples of that genre. His best work is probably the double portrait of Martha and Teresa Blount, but perhaps a more typical example would be a portrait of Lady Jane Seymour Conway, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland. Jervas is probably best known in Ireland for his portraits of Jonathan Swift, although he did paint many other Irish sitters. He was an assiduous copyist, and several portraits by him were after the work of more famous artists. One of the better examples of a Jervas copy is after a portrait by Titian, said to be of that artist’s sister Lavinia; a more mundane example would be the copy of a van Dyck portrait of Queen Henrietta Maria in the collection at Petworth House.²

Secondary sources, particularly Strickland, provide biographical information about Jervas and his work. Briefly, Jervas was born about 1675 in Cloniske in the parish of Shinrone in Offaly, and died in London in 1739.³ Sources agree that Jervas went to London when aged about twenty, and while there he worked in Sir Godfrey

Kneller's studio, from about 1694/5 until 1698/9. Strickland tells us that the painter copied the Raphael cartoons then at Hampton Court and that he sold those copies to Dr Clarke of All Souls College at Oxford. The same Reverend Doctor has been credited with having financed Jervas's travels to Italy, which sources say began in 1699. According to Strickland, it was Dr Clarke and other friends 'who enabled Jervas to go to Italy'; however, this may not have been the full story. Although the same source provides the first clue to new information by citing the date of Jervas's father's will, Strickland does not seem to have known when the painter actually started his journey to Italy, and therefore fails to make the connection. Surely £10, the sum of money said to have been given to Jervas by Dr Clarke, was an insufficient sum for the painter to have set off on his travels which were to last for ten years. This is where the letter to John Ellis provides new information. It was written from Paris on 26 May 1698, some three months after the date that the Prerogative Court of Dublin granted letters of administration for Jervas's father's will.⁴ A coincidence hardly, it would seem more likely that Jervas inherited money from his father and that this provided his main source of funding, supplemented by the monies he had obtained from Dr Clarke and his friends.

The date of the earliest and only letter that need concern us from the series written to John Ellis corrects the generally accepted view that 1699 was the year the painter commenced his travels. It also contains substantial art-historical material. In the letter (transcribed below), Jervas writes to Ellis about the purchase of prints on his behalf, and also goes on to make some amusingly critical remarks about French painting. He also mentions a Mr Pooley and Mr Greville, who we may presume were his travelling companions. Robert Pooley was the brother of Thomas Pooley, the Dublin painter.⁵ Members of the Pooley, Jervas and Swift families were interrelated, and they formed a close-knit group within the oligarchy of those new English families in the city of Dublin. This group was also prominent in their support of the arts, and several had their portraits painted by both Thomas Pooley and Jervas.

May 26th 1698.

Sr

I shall not trouble you with an impertinent account of Paris which you know infinitely better than I can pretend to. Mr Pooley showed me your letter; I went with him to choose the prints, and went to several other shops before hand, that I might find the best impressions and the easier rates. I have bought some from Mr George Clarke and some for Pereyra and a great many for our english gentlemen now in Town.

I design to continue here until the heats of Italy are over. I am already at Rome for I have the privilege of the Academy at the Louvre where the

antique statues are very well cast in plaster of Paris which will do my business for the present as well as the originals.

The French design very well as is evident by their prints, but their painting is like themselves very poor!’

Today Jervas’s remarks about copying from plaster casts ‘as good as the originals’ would be regarded as revealing a less than discriminating approach, although this was a practice that was widespread in many ateliers all over Europe at that time. His amusing, if dismissive comments on French painting would seem to exclude any serious influence on his work from that quarter. One further point worth noting is his reference to the purchase of French prints for John Ellis. We know from another series of the painter’s letters sent from Rome that Jervas was also involved in purchasing Italian art works.⁶ It was not at all uncommon at that time for artists to act as agents for the purchase of works of art.⁷ Some of the prints purchased in Paris by Jervas may have made their way into the possession of the Duke of Ormonde, with whom Ellis had close links.⁸

On his return to London in 1708 Jervas enjoyed the patronage of members of the literary circle of Swift, Addison and Pope.⁹ A year later he was described in *The Tatler* as ‘the last great painter Italy has sent us’.¹⁰ It was during this early period that he first painted Sir Robert Walpole, the man who was to become a major patron of his work and who was instrumental in securing for Jervas his appointment as King’s Painter.¹¹ Edward Bottoms discusses the relationship between the two men and the circle of influential Whigs in that county, while also providing valuable additional layers of information concerning the life of the painter.¹²

Following his death, Jervas’s reputation as a painter waned, and until recently his work has been dismissed as that of ‘a dull painter’.¹³ In truth, his popularity probably had more to do with his connections than with his talent, and being appointed King’s Painter would have set the seal on his social acceptability.

Though many of his portraits seem vapid and uninspiring to modern eyes, Jervas cannot be ignored in the field of grand tour studies or, indeed, Irish art history. He was the earliest known painter from this country to go to Rome to study, and he was an avid collector of works of art.¹⁴ Jervas’s dismissive comments on French painting, contained in the letter quoted above, would seem to confirm the following pithy summation of the painter’s career by Ellis Waterhouse: ‘Yet the light of Italian genius which was to transform the style of the generation of Reynolds and Wilson, seems to have shone in vain on Kneller and Jervas, perhaps because they approached the great works of the past with imperfect humility.’¹⁵

ENDNOTES

- ¹ British Museum, London (BM) Add. Mss 28,882, ff.292, 333; 28,885 f.121.
- ² The portrait of Lavinia was with Historical Portraits, Bond Street in London some years ago.
- ³ For more biographical details and further information about Jervas and his work see W.G. Strickland, *Dictionary of Irish Artists*, 2 vols (Dublin 1913) i, 545; Anne Crookshank and the Knight of Glin, *Painters of Ireland* (London 1978) 34; Ellis Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain* (New Haven & London) 149. More recent information on the painter may be found in Nicola Figgis and Brendan Rooney, *Catalogue of the Irish Collection in the National Gallery of Ireland* (Dublin 2001) and Edward Bottoms, 'Charles Jervas, Sir Robert Walpole and the Norfolk Whigs', *Apollo* (February 1997) 44-8.
- ⁴ Strickland, *Dictionary*, 545.
- ⁵ BM Add. Mss 28,900, ff.376, 422. Letters from Robert Pooley to John Ellis from Paris 1698/99.
- ⁶ Bottoms, 'Charles Jervas, Sir Robert Walpole and the Norfolk Whigs', footnote 13.
- ⁷ See Crookshank and Glin, *Painters of Ireland*, 21, where some comments in Caspar Smitz's letter to a member of the Percival family regarding picture restoration would suggest that he was also involved in dealing. It is probable that the Dutch painter Abraham van Uylenburgh (d.1668) was buying paintings for the Duchess of Ormond in the late 1660s; see Jane Fenlon, *The Ormonde Picture Collection* (Dublin 2001) 13-14.
- ⁸ Ellis had served as secretary to Thomas, Earl of Ossory, and to his son James, 2nd Duke of Ormonde. By 1705 the Ormondes had large numbers of prints in their various residences, including the viceroy's apartments at Dublin Castle; see J Fenlon, 'Episodes of Magnificence' in Toby Barnard and Jane Fenlon (eds), *The Dukes of Ormonde, 1610-1745* (Woodbridge, 2000) 148.
- ⁹ Bottoms, 'Charles Jervas, Sir Robert Walpole and the Norfolk Whigs', 44.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, footnote, 18.
- ¹¹ *ibid.*, 45.
- ¹² *ibid.*
- ¹³ Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain*, 150.
- ¹⁴ Strickland, *Dictionary*, i, 545; Bottoms, *Apollo*, 48.
- ¹⁵ Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain*, 150.