

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



John Robert COZENS (London 1752 - London 1797)

A View near Sallanches, Savoy

Watercolour and pencil on paper, laid down on the artist's original mount.

Signed and dated John Cozens 1778 at the lower left of the mount and inscribed nr. Salanches in Savoy at the lower right of the original mount.

Inscribed Near Salanche in Savoy on the verso.

Further inscribed This drawing lent to GH by Dr. Richardson / of the Times paper(?) on the verso.

369 x 539 mm. (14 1/2 x 21 1/4 in.) [sheet]

This very large and impressive watercolour of a view near Sallanches, in the Haute-Savoie region of France and Switzerland, is likely based on a smaller drawing in pen and ink wash by John Robert Cozens, now in the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, which the artist made during a trip to Switzerland and Italy in 1776 with his young patron Richard Payne Knight. The two men left London in the late summer of that year and arrived in Geneva in August. They reached Sallanches on the 26th of August and Chamonix four days later, before continuing through Switzerland to Italy, where Cozens was to remain until 1779. During the journey, the artist produced fifty-seven almost monochromatic Swiss views that were once owned by Payne Knight but are now scattered in various collections, with a large group in the British Museum. Once in Rome, Cozens used the Payne Knight drawings as the basis for a number of larger, more coloured versions in watercolour, some presumably done for Richard Payne Knight but most sold to other patrons. As the Cozens scholar C. F. Bell has noted, 'The Swiss period (August-September 1776) of this first tour was in some respect the most inspiring of all Cozens' life to the spiritual side of his art. Moreover, the sketches that he then made were, like those which he produced in Italy, studied and copied by Turner, Girtin and their companions and contributed greatly towards opening the minds of English artists to the impressiveness of mountain scenery.'

Only a year older than Cozens, Richard Payne Knight (1751-1824) had made his first Grand Tour in 1772-1773, and was a noted connoisseur of art. His taste and interest in landscape painting tended towards the picturesque, and in particular the 'sublime' in nature, and Cozens's depictions of the grandeur and majesty of the Alps would no doubt have greatly appealed to him. As Kim Sloan has written of the artist's Swiss watercolours, 'his views are characterized by their effect on emotions, senses, or passions...as well as on memory in the form of historical or literary associations...They are the first visual interpretation of the Alps to display these characteristics which were already well-established in English poetry and prose...John Robert Cozens had finally lifted watercolour painting out

of the topographical recording of nature, to a new level where it was capable of fulfilling the serious intentions of art as oil painting.'

Worked up from the smaller, monochromatic Payne Knight drawing in the Whitworth Art Gallery, this large watercolour was drawn in 1778, during Cozens's first stay in Rome. While the composition of both drawings is identical, the artist has added the shepherd and his flock at the lower left of the present sheet, while at the same time stripping the trees at the right of the foliage that appears in the earlier preparatory sketch. The mountain in the distance is likely to be the peak known as Tête de Colonney, above Sallanches to the northeast. Other views of the same area by Cozens include Bank of the Arve near Sallanches in Savoy and Between Sallanches and Servoz, Mont Blanc in the Distance, both recorded in pen and wash drawings in the collection of the British Museum.

Drawn in subtle washes of pale blue, green and gray, View near Sallanches is part of a group of large-scale finished watercolours of Swiss views produced in Rome by Cozens between 1777 and 1779. Comparable examples include Between Chamonix and Martigny and Ober Hasli Valley from the South East, both in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London⁶, as well as other watercolours in the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin, the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven and a number of private collections. As Paul Oppé has aptly written of these early watercolours, 'when in 1778 Cozens was signing and dating a number of large water-colours either from the Alpine sketches or from drawings made in Rome and the neighbourhood, he was already exhibiting, almost in its perfection, the refined scheme of colour and the consummate technical skill which were recognized from the first, and are still felt to be, the characteristic note of his art. Apart from any reference to nature, the harmonies and subtleties of his blues and greens are an immediate and permanent joy to the eye, and, without attempting to reproduce in full the manifold varieties of the natural scene, they provide an admirable medium for representing certain atmospheric effects of light, mist and distance...In the finished water-colours of the Alpine series something of the cool freshness of the Payne Knight drawings has been lost and the scene changed from an apparently literal transcript to a vision, almost a dream. The tonality in light blue-greens is exquisitely modulated to suggest the forms of mountain-sides, the texture of their surfaces, and the clear or misty character of the intervening atmosphere. The unity of tone produces the pervading harmony of a reflection in water.'

A later watercolour version of this composition, of similar dimensions and dated 1779, was sold as part of the collection of Norman D. Newall at auction in London in 1979. A smaller and previously unrecorded watercolour variant of this view appeared at auction in London in 1989.

The present sheet was once in the collection of the art historian A. J. Finberg (1866-1939), who was best known for his scholarship on J. M. W. Turner.

Exhibitions

London, Leggatt Brothers, Exhibition of English Painters 1700-1850, 1951, no.37 (lent by M. G. M. Bevan).

Literature:

C. F. Bell and Thomas Girtin, 'The Drawings and Sketches of John Robert Cozens', The Walpole

Society, Vol.23, 1934-1935, p.28, no.6 [II] (not illustrated); London, Sotheby's, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century British Drawings and Watercolours, 13 July 1989, p.82, under lot 114; Emma Crichton-Miller, 'Collectors' Focus: British watercolours', Apollo, March 2020, p.169, fig.2.

Artist description:

'All poetry...the greatest genius that ever touched landscape.' The painter John Constable's opinion of the work of John Robert Cozens reflects something of the esteem in which his watercolour landscapes were held long after his death. The only son and pupil of the drawing master Alexander Cozens, John Robert Cozens first exhibited at the Society of Artists in 1767 and continued to do so until 1771. In 1776 he made his first trip to Italy, thirty years after that of his father. In the company of the scholar, antiquarian and collector Richard Payne Knight, the younger Cozens travelled through Switzerland and the Alps before arriving in Rome in November 1776. He was to stay in Rome for almost two and half years, until April 1779, making sketching tours of the Roman countryside, often working alongside the Welsh artist Thomas Jones. It was also in Rome that Cozens worked up his Swiss alpine sketches into larger, atmospheric watercolours for Payne Knight and other patrons.

A second trip to Italy in 1782-1783, in the retinue of the wealthy collector William Beckford, resulted in Cozens spending several months in Naples, and then in Rome, and producing a series of almost a hundred finished watercolours of Italian views for Beckford that can be counted among his finest works. Cozens' health deteriorated in the 1790s, however, and in 1794 he suffered a severe nervous breakdown. He was admitted to the Bethlem Royal Hospital asylum and there placed under the care of the physician and collector Dr. Thomas Monro, who had many of Cozens's Continental sketches copied by younger artists such as J. M. W. Turner and Thomas Girtin. Cozens died in London in December 1797, at the age of just forty-five.

Cozens seems to have worked exclusively as a draughtsman, and almost no oil paintings by his hand are known. (A now-lost painting of Hannibal Crossing the Alps was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1776; the only occasion that he showed his work there.) Although his reputation was based solely on his work as a watercolourist, none of Cozens's works were engraved, with the result that there was no wider dissemination of his compositions through the medium of reproductive prints. Nevertheless, his watercolours were to be enormously influential among the succeeding generation of English landscape draughtsmen.

For most of his relatively brief career of some twenty years, Cozens worked in a limited palette of light blues, greens and greys, avoiding vivid effects and contrasts in favour of a tonal, atmospheric approach to landscape. As Timothy Wilcox has remarked, 'the near monochrome watercolours of Cozens... opened up unforeseen possibilities - not only to Turner, but to an entire generation of painters exposed to his work at the London house of Dr Thomas Monro. Monro employed Turner, Girtin and other young artists, including John Varley and John Sell Cotman, to make copies of compositions by Cozens. It was less the subjects themselves, scenes in the Roman Campagna or the Bay of Naples, than the subtlety of Cozens's wash technique which made the greatest impression; through the extreme refinement of his graduated colour, Cozens evoked the fabled clarity of the Italian atmosphere, and an almost infinite spatial recession.'