SPHINX FINE ART



John Crome (Norwich 1768 - Norwich 1821)

A Wooded Landscape with an Oak

oil on panel
23.8 x 18.1 cm (9⅜ x 7⅛ in)

A Wooded Landscape with an Oak is as much a tree portrait as a landscape study, as the sensitivity and naturalism of the painting imbues the subject with a great deal of character. The oak, 'half giant and half sage',[1] is portrayed as the guardian of the landscape, towering over the shrubbery and foliage around it and cutting a magnificent figure against the blue sky. John Crome, along with John Constable (1776-1837), was one of the earliest English artists to represent identifiable species of trees, rather than generalised forms. His works, renowned for their originality and vision, were inspired by direct observation of the natural world combined with a comprehensive study of Old Masters.

A larger but essentially similar study of a tree by Crome is *The Poringland Oak* in the Tate, London. In this work, a group of bathers are depicted in the foreground; the subject of the painting, however, is undoubtedly the stately oak. Crome's later work reveals a growing interest in atmospheric effects, as indicated in the use of extensive shading in *The Poringland Oak*, which gives the impression of a slightly overcast afternoon, in contrast to the bright sunshine of *A Wooded Landscape with an Oak.* The differing tonalities have a marked impact on the overall mood of the paintings.

Crome was apprenticed to a coach and sign painter, Francis Whistler from the age of fifteen to twenty-two, after which he presumably continued to practise the trade as well as learning oil painting

techniques. His early influences were the local artists William Beechey (1753-1839), John Opie (1761-1807)and Thomas Harvey. Harvey was a collector, as well as an amateur painter and had in his possession works by Dutch seventeenth-century masters such as Aelbert Cuyp (1620-1691), Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/9-1682) and Miendert Hobbema (1638-1709) as well as English eighteenth-century artists Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) and Richard Wilson (1713-1782), all of whom influenced Crome's artistic development. Crome married in 1792 and soon afterwards established himself as a drawing teacher. He was one of the founders of the Norwich Society of Artists in 1803, and of the Norwich school of painters. Although during his lifetime his works were often criticised for their unfinished appearance, they became highly sought after following his death. In a letter written by the Rev. W. Gunn just weeks after Crome's death, he reports that people were 'crazy for his pictures'.[2] Crome was an art collector and etcher as well as a painter, and he is credited with having been at the forefront of the nineteenth-century etching revival in Britain. The large number of etchings that he produced help to establish a chronology for his paintings, none of which were signed. Crome's sons, the most talented of whom was John Berney Crome (1794-1842), painted in his father's manner and continued his teaching practice, although they did not achieve the same success as their father.

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[1] William Wordsworth, *The Oak and the Broom, a Pastoral.*
[2] Rev. W. Gunn to J. Flaxman, 4 May 1821; Cambridge, Trinity College Library.

Provenance:

C. A. Sparke, St. Andrew's Castle, Bury St. Edmunds;
sold St. Andrew's Castle sale, Lacy Scott, 7-9 July 1927, lot 671 for 21gns;
where bought by Vicar Bros;
by whom sold for £400, 30th November 1927 to Frederick John Nettleford;
by descent to his daughter, Mrs Balene;
from whom purchased by 'a Gentleman';
by whom Sotheby's, London, 20 November 1985, lot 81, £6,600.

Literature:

C. Reginald Grundy, *A Catalogue of the Pictures and Drawings in the Collection of Frederick John Nettleford* (London, 1933), vol. I, p. 186 (illustrated).

Artist description:

John Crome was an English painter, printmaker, collector and teacher, who was born in the English city of Norwich where he worked and died. John Crome is also known as Old Crome to distinguish him from his son, John Berney Crome, who was also a well-known artist. The son of a journeyman weaver, he was apprenticed to a coach and sign painter, Francis Whisler, from 1783 to 1790. He presumably continued in this trade and during the 1790s consolidated his artistic training. Early local influences upon Crome included William Beechey and John Opie, but the friendship of Thomas Harvey, a patron, collector and amateur artist, was the most significant. Harvey's collection included works by Dutch 17th-century masters such as Aelbert Cuyp, Jacob van Ruisdael and Meindert Hobbema, and also works by Gainsborough and Richard Wilson. The earliest record of Wilson's influence is provided by two oils entitled *Composition in the Style of Wilson* (untraced), dated 1796 and 1798 in Crome's Memorial Exhibition of 1821. The Dutch influence was also strong throughout Crome's career. Crome's early acquaintance with Harvey and his collection almost certainly encouraged him to become a collector, and the Yarmouth banker Dawson Turner recorded buying pictures from Crome, including Old Masters as well as the artist's own work. Like many of his contemporaries, Crome established a practice as a drawing-master. According to Dawson Turner, he became a teacher on marrying Phoebe Berney in 1792. Members of the Gurney family of Earlham Hall, Norwich, were among his earliest pupils, and in 1802 he accompanied them on a visit to the Lake District. In 1804 he visited Wales with Robert Ladbrooke, his brother-in-law and co-founder of the Norwich Society of Artists. His one trip abroad took place in 1814, when he visited the art collections brought to Paris by Napoleon.

The local press credited Crome early for his role as a founder of the Norwich Society of Artists in 1803 and the Norwich school of painters. Crome's monochromatic paintings, such as his magnificent *View of Carrow Abbey, near Norwich* (1805; Norwich, Castle Museum), did not find universal acceptance. Although he later lightened his palette his work was criticized for its 'unfinished' appearance even towards the end of his career. Within weeks of his death, however, people were reported to be 'crazy for his pictures' (Rev. W. Gunn to J. Flaxman, 4 May 1821; Cambridge, Trinity College Library). Crome's work was entirely original, exhibiting a fresh vision, clear colour and strong design, derived as much from the direct observation of nature as from the study of Old Masters. His subject-matter was invariably the local landscape, including buildings and intimate scenes on the rivers Yare and Wensum, such as *Back of the New Mills, Norwich* (c. 1814–17) and *New Mills: Men Wading* (c. 1812; see; both Norwich, Castle Museum).

Collections

John Crome is represented in the following collections: Courtauld Institute of Art, London; Tate Gallery, London; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Manchester City Art Gallery; Fitzwilliam Museum at the University of Cambridge, UK, amongst others.