

## EXHIBITION REVIEW: Thomas Jones 1742-1803

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This magnificent monographic show, curated by Ann Sumner, will do much to introduce gallery visitors to the work of Thomas Jones and restore him to his rightful place as an important figure in UK landscape painting, in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Jones was born in Radnorshire in 1742 and initially seemed destined for a career as a clergyman. However, a change of heart saw him train as an artist under Richard Wilson (1761-63), and then exhibit as a member of the Society of Artists from 1766 onwards. A decade later, Jones left the United Kingdom for some years in Italy, spent mainly in Rome and Naples. He came back in 1783 on the death of his father and returned to Radnorshire in 1787 to oversee the family estate near Llanfair-ym-Muallt, reverting to the role of amateur local water-colourist and country squire until his death in 1803. It was during these last years, where Jones all but abandoned art in favour of his responsibilities as a landowner, that his reputation all but disappeared.

Jones was 'rediscovered' in the middle of the twentieth century but his rehabilitation will only be completed by this exhibition. Many of his past works have been misattributed to the likes of Richard Wilson, or lacked attribution altogether.

The exhibition adopted a biographical approach to his output, outlining his deep

roots in rural mid Wales as well as his training under Wilson and the dramatic impact that Italy, and Naples in particular, was to have on his work. The culmination of his years in London and his membership of the Society of Artists was *The Bard* of 1774. Based on Thomas Gray's poem, published in 1757, the painting fuses Wilsonian landscape ideas with a dramatic staging of Edward I's massacre of the Welsh bards under an apocalyptic sky. The painting is a striking and arresting summary of the rapid and capable development of Jones' talent in the first years of his career.

Just over half the exhibits are devoted to Jones' years in Italy from 1776-83. Initially, like other UK artists, he had to scramble to secure the patronage of wealthy collectors. His monumental *Lake Nemi* of 1782 is a good example of some of the more traditional landscapes he produced in Italy, and was painted for the Fourth Earl of Bristol and Bishop of Derry.

Impressive as a painting like *Lake Nemi* is, the real 'X' factor in Jones' career is why he suddenly changed from producing such monumental landscapes and associated studies to small scale, near abstract paintings of walls and buildings in Naples. These tightly controlled, small jewels of images are amongst the most arresting images in the show. *A Wall in Naples* of 1778 is an exam-

ple of the near-abstract modernity of some of these works, which were quite unprecedented at the time that they were painted.

Sadly, events in Jones' personal life – the death of his father and elder brother – meant that the opportunity to take these developments forward was strangled. The last 15 years of his life were spent in the role of 'amateur local watercolourist', as he had much less time to devote to the business of art. On his death in 1803, it appeared that his substantial artistic legacy might be forgotten altogether.

This exhibition, which split in two in its

onward journey to the Whitworth Art Gallery and the National Gallery, is a fitting rehabilitation of an extraordinary and fascinating career.

*Thomas Jones 1742–1803 was on show at the National Museum and Gallery of Wales, Caerdydd, from 21 May – 10 August 2003. The Welsh part of the show opened at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, on 22 August and ran until 26 October 2003. Jones' Italian paintings will be exhibited at the National Gallery, London, from 12 November 2003 until 15 February 2004.*