A Holiday of a Lifetime

The Grand Tour of Sir Watkin Williams Wynn
1768 - 1769

Wrexham County Borough Museum
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Exhibition Guide – Reference Copy
Sir Watkin Williams Wynn. 1749 - 1789

Probably the greatest patron of the arts and connoisseur Wales ever produced.

He was born six months before his father’s death in 1749. Initially raised in Wales by his mother, Frances Shakerley, his father’s second wife, he was, upon the advice of his trustees, sent to Westminster School and thence to Oriel College, Oxford. Although well meaning, the appointment of Thomas Apperley as informal guardian may have been unwise. Apperley was only ten years his senior but was something of a scholar and linguist. His father, a Wrexham doctor, was a close friend of Sir Watkin’s father and it was perhaps felt that he would become a moderating influence upon the young baronet. Apperley joined Sir Watkin at Oxford and remained close to him for several years afterwards. Unfortunately he made a total disaster of bringing up his own son. A gifted sports writer under the pseudonym Nimrod, he seems to have been utterly devoid of self-discipline – something we can note from Sir Watkin’s later years.

Even as a teenager Sir Watkin developed distinctive artistic tastes and was on familiar terms with the most fashionable painters and musicians and must have been familiar with Richard Wilson’s Italian landscapes which seem, in some way, to have dictated the itinerary of his forthcoming journey. Wilson had an unusual background for a painter in that he was an educated gentleman and was related to most of the grand families of north Wales - the Williams Wynns included.

Sir Watkin left Oxford before he graduated in order to complete that necessary part of a gentleman’s education, the Grand Tour. Although the tour held great prospects of seeing the finest art and hearing the finest music, Sir Watkin seems to have been slightly reluctant to make the journey. He had just become engaged to Lady Henrietta Somerset and had precociously commissioned Robert Adam to design a new mansion at Wynnstay and it seems that this would be an inconvenient moment to depart from England. But as the tour was generally undertaken in the bachelor state and as marriage was imminent, a truncated version was arranged, and accompanied by Thomas Apperley, a Captain Hamilton, Samuel Sidebotham, Sam Stephens, a Mr Morris, Antonio Carrara and several other servants, Sir Watkin set off at the beginning of June 1768.

Undoubtedly Sir Watkin travelled in style. His retinue was quite large by the normal standards of the grand tour. Thomas Apperley seemed to act as a tutor and guardian. Captain Hamilton was, as a military man, a necessity in some of the parts they were to pass through. Antonio Carrara, who had been recommended by David Garrick, acted as valet and sometimes translator. Samuel Sidebotham, Mr Morris and Sam Stephens were already in the employ of Wynnstay and in Paris, Louis Mark Comte and Christo Bremmer were added to the party as French-speaking servants. Other gentlemen made do with a much smaller staff. Sir Watkin also felt it necessary to take a collection of silver plate with him so as to avoid the indignity of eating from hotel crockery. If the young man intended to make a ‘splash’ he certainly went the right way about it.

London society reckoned Sir Watkin to be a very rich man indeed and the style of his tour and his lavish spending upon his return did nothing to dispel the stories which circulated about the immensity of his income. As usual in such cases, the legend and the truth were at much variance and even Sir Watkin seems to have developed false expectations as to the lifestyle he could adopt. As was inevitable, financial disaster eventually overtook him. But, for the moment, he could depart on his grand tour of France and Italy with the confidence of a man who could afford to indulge himself whenever he chose to.

The Grand Tour

The first extended stop was in Paris where a veneer of courtly behaviour was imparted through fencing lessons and dancing lessons with Durberville the famous choreographer. A month was spent in the city and whilst Sir Watkin was being ‘improved’ the servants seem to have been very much left to their own devices. Much sightseeing and visits to the theatre and opera followed and all at Sir Watkin’s expense. Those of the servants who did not speak French were enrolled in language classes and ‘improvement’ seems to have been general. Versailles, St Cloud, Marly and
the monuments of the French capital were visited but the death of the Queen and the consequent closure of the theatres sent them on their way.

Journeying through Dijon and Besançon they continued on to Lausanne, Geneva (from where they made an excursion to the Chamonix glaciers), Lyons (where a considerable sum was expended on rich fabrics and tailors for the young baronet) to Grenoble and thence over the Alps by the Mt. Cenis pass and into Italy.

Turin was the first of the Italian Courts visited and the accounts suggest that he was presented to the King at Veneria Reale, a palace outside the city. Turin had a famous Academy where gentlemen could gain some courtly polish and it would seem that after three weeks attendance, Sir Watkin was ready to be introduced into Society. The audience with the King, Carlo Emanuelle III, was the final imprimatur and Sir Watkin’s social credentials were established. Much the same pattern was followed in Genoa and Milan. In one of his few surviving letters home Sir Watkin expresses his frustration with the eternal bowing and scraping which had to be endured as part of the cost of the journey. After Bologna they went to Florence where Horace Mann was the British Envoy. Sir Watkin seems to have thrown himself enthusiastically into the social life there. He must have been aware of the scandalous reputations of some of the expats living in the city – Earl Tylney, Earl Cowper, Thomas Patch and even Sir Horace himself – were gentlemen generally described as ‘amphibious’ but he began to stretch his wings as a patron and connoisseur; buying artworks and books, commissioning furniture and contributing towards the cost of a performance of Handel’s ‘Alexander’s Feast’ which he shared with the enormously rich Earl Cowper. It was in Florence that he met William Cavendish, the fifth Duke of Devonshire, and although they were as different as chalk and cheese, they decided to continue the journey together as far as Rome. Costs were shared on a basis of equality and it seems not to have dawned upon Sir Watkin that the Duke had an annual income approximately five times greater than his own.

In the productive first six weeks spent in Rome Sir Watkin did his fair share of sightseeing in the City and at Frascati, Tivoli and Albano but, more importantly, collected antiquities from James Byres and Thomas Jenkins, commissioned James Byres to design a palace to be built at Wynnstay, commissioned works from Pompeo Batoni (including the famous triple portrait), Raphael Mengs and Gavin Hamilton. He had his bust sculpted by Christopher Hewetson and, as a result of prodigious buying of books of prints, had an engraving dedicated to him by the great Piranesi. He had drawing lessons from James Forrester, the painter; music lessons from the Maestro di Capella of St Peter’s (he was a very keen cellist) and promoted several concerts through a Mr Wise man who seems to have been one of the music ‘fixers’ of the city.

Exhausted, they went to Naples. The usual tourist sites were visited and, as usual, all of the servants were taken along to enjoy the experience. With great perception, Sir Watkin bought the copy of Sir William Hamilton’s ‘Antiquities’ from that gentleman himself and which he subsequently loaned to Josiah Wedgwood upon his return to London. Christmas was spent at Naples and mince pies and gingerbread bought so that the servants could celebrate the occasion.

In the New Year they returned, briefly, to Rome and paid off bills and commissions and began the homeward journey via Venice. They reached Venice on the 14th of January after a week struggling over the snow-bound Apennines. The winter of 1768 - 69 was a particularly severe one and the weather seems to have been against them. Venice in January can be notoriously cold and they left after four days. After a brief stop at Padua to buy some Titians they made their way back over the Alps to Paris via Augsburg and Strassburg.

This final visit to Paris erupted into a spectacular shopping spree. A Sèvres dinner service was bought for his future mother-in-law, the Duchess of Beaufort; diamond buckles for his future wife; more lace ruffles; a mantelpiece clock in the form of a vase; a gold snuff box and hats in the latest fashion.

Sir Watkin’s Grand Tour, however short it may have been, gave him the tastes, which were to totally deplete his fortune. Art is not only collectable but is also re-sellable, but his taste for music was ruinous. Musicians are not cheap and their outpourings leave not a jot behind. Sir Watkin needed the income of an Italian King to satisfy his tastes in that respect, but he only had the income of the richest man in Wales.
1. Silk Velvet Coat (St Fagans: National History Museum. NMW F96.75.1)

This is one of two embroidered coats which belonged to Sir Watkin and have survived. It is richly embroidered and could be thought of as a 'court suit'. It is cut for a relatively slim figure and unfortunately Sir Watkin did not retain his youthful shape for very long which may account for the fine state of preservation of the coat. When he was in Lyon in August 1768, 552 livres were spent upon an embroidered velvet suit and some waistcoat pieces. Upon the return journey, in Paris, Mr Pernon of Lyon was paid a further £84 for the delivery of the suit, described in the account book as 'Sir Watkin's best'. Pernon was one of the best and most important manufacturers of silk velvet in the late-eighteenth century. The present suit is thought to have been made of velvet pieces bought in France, their purchase being mentioned in the accounts. Sir Watkin seems to have been a generally neat man and was described as such by Thomas Apperley's son. The account books for the early 1770s record many payments to tailors and in 1769 as his first marriage approached, he paid Hinchcliffe & Co £18 for velvet for a suit. His tailor, a Mr Morse, presumably made the velvet up and would be another candidate for the manufacture of the present coat. By 1771, when good eating was beginning to take its inevitable toll, this coat would not have fitted the young baronet.

Hugh Douglas Hamilton.

Hugh Douglas Hamilton (c.1740 - 1808) was born in Dublin the son of a peruke (wig) maker. Nothing much is known about his early life other than through his crayon drawings with which he had some early success. He moved to London in 1764 and gained a reputation for his pastel portraits and his ability to capture a likeness. His list of clients was enormous and he learned to work at great speed in order to keep up with his waiting list, which included the Royal Family and most of the House of Lords. He went to Rome in 1778 and stayed for thirteen years where his small oval portraits achieved great success with British visitors. There is hardly a personality of late eighteenth century Rome who did not sit for him. He charged a relatively modest fee of six guineas for a portrait but produced them with great rapidity. The freshness of his drawing may, in some ways, be attributed to the speed with which he worked. He returned to Dublin in 1791 and died there in 1808.
2. Sir Watkin Williams Wynn. 1772 (National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. NMW A 29451)

This pastel portrait of Sir Watkin and that of his second wife are still in their original frames. There are earlier versions in the British Museum and it may be that the present two portraits were commissioned to celebrate his marriage to Lady Charlotte Grenville in 1772. Of all the portraits of Sir Watkin made at around this time, this one shows us the believable features of a young man. The triple portrait by Batoni painted in Rome, the portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds of Sir Watkin and his mother and the terracotta bust by Christopher Hewetson (Rome 1768) all show a slightly middle-aged man of an almost senatorial attitude. This is more believable a portrait of a twenty two year old man and would seem to support Hamilton’s reputation for capturing a good likeness.

3. Lady Charlotte Williams Wynn. 1772 (National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. NMW A 29452)

Sir Watkin’s first marriage was to Lady Henrietta Somerset in April 1769. Unfortunately, after some six months she succumbed to illness and died (she is commemorated by a splendid monument by Nollekens in Ruabon church). Although criticised in some quarters for unseemly haste, Sir Watkin took Lady Charlotte Grenville (1754 - 1830), the daughter of his close neighbours in Grosvenor Square, as his second wife. The marriage seemed a happy one and Lady Charlotte bore six children. She was an undoubtedly kind-hearted woman and some of her surviving letters express immense concern about the conditions of the poor in Ruabon. Upon Sir Watkin’s premature death she took over the management of the estates and through astute and capable administration she managed to discharge the considerable debt her late husband had accumulated and pass the unencumbered estates to her son, the fifth baronet.

Josiah Wedgwood

When Sir Watkin was in Naples during the Christmas of 1768 he met Sir William Hamilton, the British Envoy to the court of King Ferdinand. The two had much in common and their shared love of antiquities and music proved a pleasing bond. Not only had Hamilton achieved European fame through his observations upon volcanic activity in the area but also his collection of Greek vases (then thought to be Etruscan) was equally celebrated. In collaboration with Hugues D’Hancarville he began publication of an illustrated catalogue of the collection. The publication is lavish and almost ruined him. Sir Watkin paid for a copy and Sir William arranged for it to be
collected from Cordell’s bookshop in Covent Garden upon Sir Watkin’s return to London. Possibly upon Sir William’s recommendation, Sir Watkin met with Wedgwood and Bentley, his business partner, and made the book available to them as a pattern book for future products.

Wedgwood and Bentley, about to open their works at Barlaston, the famed ‘Etruria’, openly expressed their gratitude for the loan of Sir William Hamilton’s ‘Antiquities’. Although Sir William’s cousin Lord Cathcart had previously supplied them with separate plates, this was the first complete copy they were able to inspect and it had a profound effect upon the manufactory’s output. The ‘First Day Vase’ thrown in June 1769 was directly copied from plate 29 of volume 1. Wedgwood himself threw the six copies and he acknowledged his debt to Sir Watkin by naming him as a ‘legislator of taste’ Sir Watkin responded by spending £98 on creamware for his coming of age celebrations the next year and later having tiles for his new dairy supplied by the firm. The intaglios and cameos he had bought from Jenkins and Byers, in Rome, were likewise loaned to the pottery works to be remade as jasper ware medallions. Wedgwood and Bentley described Sir Watkin as having a ‘truly liberal spirit’ in their 1779 catalogue but perhaps Bentley’s remark of 1770 ‘Sir Watkin Williams Wynn must have anything and anyhow so let us know what we must provide’ gives us a clue as to the direction of his liberality. The Wedgwood firm kept, closely at hand, volumes of the British and Irish Peerage and knew exactly where their principal market was. A little flattery could make sound commercial sense.

4. Portrait Medallion (Trustees of the Wedgwood Museum, Barlaston. 2820)

This is a block mould for a portrait medallion depicting Captain Edward Hamilton although why this otherwise obscure military gentleman should have been so honoured is a mystery. A faint pencil note on the back suggests that he was the son of Sir William Hamilton but this is hardly possible given their respective ages. It may be that Sir Watkin had suggested that the medallion be made. The general design bears a resemblance to the Batoni portrait which was hung in his new house at 20 St James’ Square.

Later Wedgwood made Jasperware medallions of the members of the Royal Society and, as such, Sir Watkin was to be included although whether the medallion was actually produced is uncertain. No proposal seems to have been made to have Mr Apperley immortalised in clay. In producing his small medallions, Wedgwood not only exploited a commercial opportunity allowing people to have ‘souvenirs’ of notable people but he also exploited the opportunity to have medallions made with political intent. An early proponent for the abolition of slavery, he risked alienating some of his more distinguished clients by having anti-slavery medallions cast in black basalt ware. He never allowed his instinct for commerce to overcome his principled stance against the mistreatment of other human beings.

The medallions, made in a variety of sizes, could be inset in fireplaces, worn as jewellery, framed or simply propped up on the mantelpiece. As a means of propaganda they were undoubtedly efficient.
Our knowledge about the course of Sir Watkin’s grand tour comes from three sources. Many of the Wynnstay papers must have been destroyed when the house burned down in 1858. Surviving are three documents with direct relevance to the tour. There are two letters which Sir Watkin wrote to Francis Chambre, an Oswestry solicitor and agent for Wynnstay. The first was from Milan and the second from Rome and they both express the young man’s impatience to return home. The most complete source is the account book which Samuel Sidebotham, the London steward and eventually to become the Wynnstay one, kept throughout the journey. Journals kept by other people who met Sir Watkin in Italy or who followed in his footsteps allow us to flesh out the story.

5. Account Book
(The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. Wynnstay 115/1)

This is the account book kept by Samuel Sidebotham. It is not concerned with a narrative of the journey but merely records expenditure incurred upon it. On page 7 he heads it Expenses & Disbursements in Sr Watkins Expedition into foreign Parts by Saml Sidebotham. Glued inside the front cover is a trade leaflet for an artist’s suppliers in Paris and it may be that Sidebotham bought the notebook whilst on the tour. Altogether ten such account books survive and cover expenses until 1781 when Sidebotham was appointed as Steward to Wynnstay. Throughout the pages of this dry financial account, Sidebotham emerges as a most engaging figure. His mastery of French and Italian improves, his appreciation of theatre, and especially opera, becomes a regular expenditure, his slight irritation with cheating postillions and his intense irritation when he could not reconcile the accounts is evident, but most of all, his devotion to Sir Watkin are endearing features of the notebook. Read carefully, this slight book, gives us a fascinating insight into what must have been a great adventure for them all.
Richard Wilson

Wilson was born in 1712/13 at Penegoes in Montgomeryshire. His mother, Alice, was a daughter of George Wynne of Leeswood in Flintshire and was related to the Williams Wynns as well as other notable north Wales families. His was a well-connected family and after his father's death, his cousin another George Wynne, paid for his early training in London. His first recorded commission was a drawing of Robert Myddleton of Chirk Castle. Through another cousin, Charles Pratt who became Lord Chancellor, Wilson's career as a portraitist began to prosper.

He went to Italy in 1750 and after some time in Venice began to change his style and manner and began to concentrate upon landscape painting. In Rome he began to receive commissions from visiting British aristocracy for large-scale views of the city and notable sites around it. He had returned to London by 1757 where he established a grand studio on the Piazza in Covent Garden from where he played a prominent part in the London art world. Unrivalled as a painter of the Italian landscape he also began, in the 1760s, to turn his attention to north Wales – hitherto almost unheard of – and the great paintings of Snowdon and Cadair Idris were produced. The Welsh landscape seen through a distinctly Mediterranean light!

Two notable views of the countryside around Wynnstay were commissioned from him by Sir Watkin in 1770 and were exhibited at the Royal Academy, of which Wilson was a founding member, in the following year.

Thereafter his fortunes began to decline. Drink appears to have been the cause of his ailing fortunes. In 1781 Ozias Humphry wrote to Francis Towne that 'poor Wilson is utterly incapable; indeed he moves about the streets an awful lesson to every intemperate artist'

He was rescued from total degradation by his relatives and taken to live at Colomendy Hall near Llanferres in Denbighshire where he died in 1782 and he was buried in the parish church in Mold.

He had been by any reckoning a great landscape artist and his Italian works almost defined the genre and he was certainly the first Welsh artist to achieve international celebrity.

Wilson's waning popularity and growing reputation for intemperance were recorded in a satiric verse by Peter Pindar which was prophetic in some respects.

"But red-nosed Wilson, never mind;
Immortal praises thou shalt find,
And for a dinner have no cause to fear.
Thou start'st at my prophetic rhymes,
Don't be impatient for these times,
Wait till thou hast been dead a hundred year"
6. View of Rome from the Ponte Molle. 1754. (National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. NMW A 70)

The view of Rome from near the Ponte Molle would have been the British tourist's first sight of the ancient capital before entering through its gates at the Porto dell' Popolo. The Ponte Molle itself was the successor to the Milvian Bridge where Constantine the Great had defeated Maxentius and started the process of instituting Christianity as the official state religion and the site had enormous symbolic significance. In spite of the literary importance of the Seven Hills of Rome they are not particularly high and, as here, the city seems quite flat from a distance. Dominating the horizon, to the right, is the dome of St Peter's Basilica - a dominance which it still holds today. The hills to the right of the view are where the Villa Madama was and many other compositions by Wilson take the higher viewpoint.

This is very much the kind of painting which would have found a ready market amongst the tourists and collectors who thronged the city and Wilson, who had become an important figure amongst the artistic colony, was happy to satisfy the demand. He generally kept a highly finished sample piece of a noteworthy view in his studio, which was near the Spanish Steps, and would produce copies from it for interested clients.
The heat of Rome can sometimes become unbearable and two favourite excursions away from the city were to Frascati and Tivoli. Sir Watkin, in the company of the Duke of Devonshire, visited them both. Tivoli, a town of great antiquity, lies some twenty miles away in the Tiburtine Hills. Mostly celebrated now for the gardens of the Villa d’Este; it was, in the eighteenth century, perhaps more famous for the two temples which cling to the cliff edge over the enormous ravine at the edge of the town. Known, not entirely accurately, as the temples of Vesta and the Sibyl they provided points of interest in a most satisfyingly romantic landscape.

Richard Wilson produced innumerable versions of the view and upon his return to London continued producing Italian scenes assisted by Thomas Jones, Joseph Farringdon and other assistants. He reportedly called his views of Tivoli ‘good breeders’ and would produce copies for clients who perhaps had not been to Rome or had demurred at the high cost of souvenir paintings whilst in the city.
When Wilson returned to London in 1757 he brought back with him both unsold finished paintings and some which had not been completed. The present canvas appears to be one of the unfinished works. Although, in its present guise, it is a view of Castell Dinas Bran, in fact it began life as a view of Tivoli. X-Ray photography has established that the underpainting shows a view not dissimilar to that of No 7. The valley of the Dee is quite closed in by Dinas Bran but here Wilson shows an expansive plain in the distance - the view towards Rome from Tivoli. The profile of the hill upon which the castle stands is much steeper than it actually is and the ruins are a great deal more substantial than was the fact. Welsh subjects were becoming fashionable and in the 1760s Wilson had been amongst the very first to travel through his own country painting mountains and castles. In this case it would seem that he converted a classic Italian landscape into a, slightly more fashionable, romantic, British one. Perhaps he had a Welsh client in mind. It seems likely that the sketches he made whilst on his Wynnstay visit were utilised in the conversion of this canvas.


As we have seen, Wilson spent the summer of 1770 at Wynnstay painting the two large views of the Vale of Llangollen, which are now in the collection of the Yale Centre for British Art (New Haven, Connecticut). This is his autograph receipt for his fee, which was delivered to him by Samuel Sidebotham. The two receipts, which he gave to Sidebotham, are amongst the very few examples of his signature which survive.

Thomas Jones

Thomas Jones was born into the squirearchy at Trefonnen in Radnorshire in 1742. A landowner’s son he was brought up at Pencerrig near Builth Wells and educated at Christ College, Brecon and Jesus College, Oxford. The death of a wealthy uncle who had been financing his education forced him to choose a career and he persuaded his family to allow him to train as an artist and in 1763 began a two-year pupilage with Richard Wilson. Whilst at Wilson’s studio he spent much of his time copying his master’s Italian landscapes and became enamoured of the idea of Italy. In 1775 he returned home to Pencerrig and whilst there painted a stock of pictures with which he hoped to finance an Italian expedition. Parental opposition was eventually overcome and in 1776 he left for Rome.

He spent six years in Italy travelling between Rome and Naples and mixing in with the vibrant social life of the colony of painters gathered around the Spanish Steps. He received commissions from Byres and Jenkins although he managed to alienate both of them by receiving money directly from clients and not through them. At some point he acquired a ‘wife’ and settled into a comfortable domesticity with her and the two daughters they had. Gradually the commissions began to dry up and Jones became increasingly homesick.

The death of his father in 1782 made his return to Wales a necessity. He settled his wife and daughters in London and in 1784 returned to Pencerrig for summer. He made efforts to revive his career in London but his father had left him an annuity of £300 and his financial security removed the absolute need to sell his work. In 1787 his elder brother died and Jones inherited all of the family estates and in 1789 after finally marrying his ‘wife’ (at his mother’s earnest request) he returned permanently to Wales to administer his estates.

In 1791 he became High Sheriff of Radnorshire and took up painting again after a long break. He now painted solely for his own pleasure and in effect became an amateur. Maria, his wife, died in 1799 and Jones, deeply affected by her death, died himself several years later in 1803. His daughters not only inherited a considerable settlement but they also inherited a collection of work which he had brought from Italy. After his death Jones’ reputation as an artist began to diminish and the legacy of paintings was handed down through his descendants still largely unseen by the outside world.
A gradual re-evaluation of his status began in the early 1900s largely through interest in his vivid diaries, which were eventually published in 1951. Three years later, fifty of his watercolours and oils of views came upon the market and most of them passed into public collections. The oil sketches, particularly those of Naples, began to cause a stir and the extraordinary modernity of his outlook was recognised.

The end of the twentieth century witnessed the re-acceptance of Wilson as a major artist and the recognition of Jones as a pupil worthy of his master and in some respects his superior.

10. View of Naples *(National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. NMW A 87)*

This was painted in 1782 shortly before Jones' return to London. It and a companion piece he painted in 1786 remained in the artist's possession until his death.

The view is taken from near the Royal Palace at Capodimonte, a popular vantage point over the city. Crowning a hill, to the right of the painting, is the Castle of Sant' Elmo. This was a notorious prison where opponents of the Bourbon regime were frequently imprisoned without trial. In the distance the bulk of the Royal Palace in the city can be seen silhouetted against the sea. In the far distance is the Sorrentine peninsula and to the left is Vesuvius itself. The volcano was still conical in the eighteenth century and it was not until the eruption of 1906 that it acquired its present shape.

The composition is very much in the manner of Richard Wilson and also shows the influence of Claude. Claude Lorraine, 1600 - 1684 was one of the most influential painters of his time. Wilson, Jones and later J.M.W. Turner were indebted to him 'the most perfect landscape painter the world has ever seen'. Normally this type of landscape painting would have been of interest to collectors and tourists as a souvenir of their grand tour but after his father's death, Jones had become financially more secure and obviously preferred to keep the painting himself as a souvenir of his own time in Naples.

James Byres

James Byres was a fixture in the life of the British colony in Rome. Dealer in the antique, indispensable guide to the ruins, sometime architect and one of the chief wheeler-dealers and fixers in the city, he lived in a curious ménage with his parents, his sister and brother-in-law and his long-time partner Christopher Norton, the engraver. His family were staunch Jacobites and their long sojourn in Rome was as much a political necessity as a lifestyle choice. He was undoubtedly the guide of choice for gentleman wishing to profit from their time in the city and his other activities as a dealer in antiquities meant that few British tourists did not encounter him at some time.
Sir Watkin spent a large amount of money buying intaglios, drawings, small antiquities and other objects of virtu (desirable antiquities) from him and it was probably Byres who engineered the commission of the famous triple portrait by Pompeo Batoni. From which, he presumably received a small fee from the artist. He had had some training as an architect but was not celebrated as such but, for some unfathomable reason, Sir Watkin commissioned a set of designs for a new mansion at Wynnstay from him. There is no mention in the accounts of any payment for the drawings but it would seem that Byres assembled a team of very talented artists to work on the scheme. The result was a set of over fifty architectural designs, which must be amongst the most exquisite ever produced in the eighteenth century. Byres was the guide to both Sir Watkin and the Duke of Devonshire in their perambulation through ancient Rome, Frascati and Tivoli and it may be presumed that he lost no time in selling his virtues as an architect to the young men. An architect who had never built anything, a painter who had produced no known works and an antiquarian whose published works were a financial disaster, Byres seemed to possess the power of persuasion to an inordinate degree.

Of course the mansion was never built; not even Sir Watkin had the funds to realise such an impossible project. For their time, the designs are old-fashioned and relate to a late Roman baroque style which was becoming outmoded. It is interesting, however, to examine the designs and see that the house was designed for display. The young Sir Watkin knew what he wanted and it seems that what he wanted was a house with a vast concert hall at its centre. Nothing on that scale had ever been built in Britain and until the early nineteenth century with the building of Stafford House (now Lancaster House) on the Mall, close to Buckingham Palace, by the fabulously wealthy Sutherland family, nothing would equal its ambition.

No.7 Ceiling for the Dining Room, Wynnstay, James Byres, 1770 (The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. PY 1709)
11. Principal elevation of the house and of the offices and stables *(National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. PY 1686)*

This is the west-facing front of the extraordinary palace, which Sir Watkin thought to have built at Wynnstay. Somehow he must have conveyed to Byres a drawing of the existing stable block which his father had built and which he was reluctant to lose. That block comprises the left hand wing of the design and is replicated by an echoing block on the right. The Egyptian Hall mostly occupies the massive central block with the domestic apartments wrapped around three sides of it. On the right hand side of the block, at ground level, a two-storied chapel was proposed and, at a level with the hall but facing east, a large library was in the plan. Had this mansion ever been built it would have been one of the most spectacular houses in Britain.

12. Sectional elevation of the Egyptian Hall *(National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. PY 1702)*

Here we come to the heart of Sir Watkin’s unattainable fantasy. The Egyptian Hall (so called because of its columned aisles with windows above) is quite simply a concert hall. One hundred feet long, fifty-five feet wide and sixty feet high, as a domestic space it is not only unworkable but is also unheatable. Wynnstay is upon an elevated ridge which is blasted by westerly winds in the
winter and it might seem that this vast space was intended for the summer 'Jubilees' for which Wynnstay later became famous. Music and musicians were certainly a vice which cost Sir Watkin an inordinate amount of money and here we seem to be looking at a room which was intended to be a summer concert hall for Wynnstay and its guests.

The walls were to be decorated with pictures illustrating the life of Alexander the Great and the miniatures, which are inlaid into the design, give an idea of the desired sequence of paintings. Byres and his team must have put hours of work into these drawings. Did they ever realise that the gentleman who had commissioned them could never have had sufficient funds to translate the drawings into reality?

Robert Adam

Robert Adam was probably the most fashionable architect of his day. He was also a very hardheaded businessman and his fees could be very high indeed. After his stay in Rome from 1754 until 1758 he had equipped himself with a repertoire of classical ornament, which earned him the sobriquet 'Roman Bob', and which he was to put to full use in his development of the new neo-classical style. In the early 1770s, he and his brother James almost ruined themselves with a speculative development at the Adelphi, on the Thames Embankment and his financial recovery may have been helped by what we might understand as slightly 'sharp practice'. He would design not only a house for the wealthy client but also all of the fittings and subcontracted everything to manufacturers under his control.

Before setting off on his grand tour, Sir Watkin, as a very assured nineteen year old, had commissioned Adam to prepare designs for a new house at Wynnstay. One of his surviving letters from Rome (Nov. 5th 1768) expresses his eagerness to see the designs. But, as we have seen, he also commissioned James Byres to do the same for him whilst he was in that city. Whatever his intentions towards a new Wynnstay were, he seems to have changed his mind when he returned and asked Adam to design a new town house to occupy a site in St James' Square. Sir Watkin was a demanding and discerning client and Adam rose to the challenge. Unfortunately Sir Watkin seems not to have been particularly specific about the budget and the house largely caused his later debts to spiral to over £100,000. Nothing, it seemed, was too good and Adam was called upon to design all of the fittings as well. He fulfilled his brief and produced designs for everything from doorknobs to Lady Williams Wynn's sedan chair. The dining room in particular was lavished with attention and Adam designed the carpet, the sideboard, wine coolers, urns to contain cutlery, candle sconces and most of the paraphernalia associated with fine dining and a lavish lifestyle.

What was exceptional was that Sir Watkin also asked the architect to design a silver dinner service for him. Adam was not a silversmith but he agreed and produced the required designs, many of which survive in Sir John Soane's Museum, London. The resultant pieces probably constitute the largest architect-designed dinner service of the eighteenth century. The service seems to have been added to piecemeal and various silversmiths were employed in its manufacture and, even by princely standards, the result was magnificent beyond imagination.

Sir Joshua Reynolds had become Sir Watkin's preferred painter and it would seem that Robert and James Adam were the preferred architects. Other commissions, which they undertook, were for a monument to Garrick to be built in the park at Wynnstay and as they charged quite highly for finished drawings, they seemed happy to indulge him in his unrealisable projects. At Wynnstay itself, Sir Watkin, with rare self-restraint, employed Capability Brown, James Wyatt, Thomas Farnolls Pritchard and James Gandon to design projects, which actually were realised and perhaps wisely, he never involved the costly Adam brothers in north Wales after the aborted plans for a new mansion.

The building of 20 St James' Square and the superlative fitting out of its rooms was a project upon which, in retrospect, Sir Watkin should never have embarked. It left him in debt for the rest of his life and prevented him from achieving some of his ambitions for Wynnstay.
North Wales was, however, not completely neglected in his metropolitan extravaganzas and a new font and set of altar plate for Ruabon church were also added to Adam’s list of required designs.

The princely dinner service is now dispersed throughout museums and galleries in both Britain and North America. The church plate still belongs to the church it was designed for, although it is now in the care of the National Museum of Wales.

13. Silver gilt flagon and pattens (Trustees of Ruabon Parochial Church Council. NMW A (L) 691-693)
In 1776 Sir Watkin was churchwarden at St Mary’s in Ruabon and at his instigation the church plate was remade. Charles Aldridge and Henry Green of Aldersgate Street and St Martin-le-Grand were the silversmiths responsible for the re-working and it seems probable, if not exactly proven, that Robert Adam was the designer of the new set. It is certainly in his style and the flagon, in particular, is related to some designs of his for a coffee pot which he supplied to Sir Watkin at about the same time. An elegant piece, in the best neo-classical taste, it and the simpler pattens are almost immodestly grand for a small country parish church. It would seem that after Sir Watkin had provided for his own table he felt it incumbent upon him to provide for the Lord’s in equal style.

14. Silver dessert dishes from a dinner service (National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. NMW A 50659, 50663, 50667 & 50671)
These silver-gilt dessert plates were made by John Carter in 1774/75 and have the Williams Wynn armorials impaled with those of the Grenvilles (Sir Watkin’s second wife). The designs by Robert Adam still exist in the Sir John Soane Museum and their fanciful shape was probably judged most appropriate in the context of serving dessert. Grouped together they allow us a glimpse of the effect which the entire service must have had. It was most unusual to serve dessert upon silver-gilt plate; porcelain would have been more normal. Sir Watkin’s demand that the entire service should be of silver is a frightening indication of his extravagance and his determination to turn 20 St James’ Square into a temple of modern art.

It may be noted here that when Sir Watkin went on his grand tour he took his own plate with him packed into two black trunks. The contents included candlesticks, a stewpan, a saucepan, plates, dishes, sauceboats, a cruet, cutlery, tumblers, decanters and tea wares. All of this was loaded onto a boat when they went for a jaunt on the lake at Lausanne.
15. Silver sauceboat. (National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. NMW A 51646)

This very elegant sauceboat was made by John Carter in 1773/74 and is one of several which were part of the great dinner service. Another two are in the Victoria and Albert Museum. In 1753 and 1757, John Wood had published the results of his surveys of Baalbek and Palmyra. He was followed in 1762 by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett who published their, equally influential, survey of the monuments of Athens. With sound commercial instinct, Robert Adam and his brother James surveyed the remains of Diocletian’s palace at Spalatro in Dalmatia (modern Split in Croatia) and published the results in 1764. From these volumes, an entire repertoire of neo-classical ornament was extracted. The motifs, which Adam exploited in his architectural designs, were largely derived from these various publications. Adam showed his genius by adapting architect motifs and applying then equally to buildings, furniture, silverware and anything else which was required by his expanding list of clients. His very original contribution to interior design was the concept of a unified design. Sit Watkin’s dining room at St James’s Square, where every aspect of the design had been supervised by the architect, was one of the most complete examples of Adam’s superlative (and expensive) attention to detail.

16. Leather covered flagon with silver mounts. (National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. NMW A 50645)

In 1770, during the gargantuan party, which was given to celebrate Sir Watkin’s coming of age, an ox was roasted in the park at Wynnstay. A song was sung to the tune of the Roast Beef of Old England two lines of which are of particular interest.
The Hide of this ox we to leather will turn
Of his leather make jacks and cups of his horn.

The leather was stored for several years until, in 1775/76, it was made into the promised jacks (normally a simple leather vessel for beer drinking) with appropriately tasteful modifications. This example, one of two in the National Museum, was one of the twelve to which the hide stretched. Its body is of pewter and the foot is turned oak. The painting on the body of the flagon is by a Mr Trokes who was paid 14 guineas for painting ten of the flagons and japanning four of them. A Mr Dobson was paid £34. 9s for making the set and Joseph Creswell, a silversmith of the Adelphi and an associate of Robert Adam provided the silver mounts. It is gratifying to note that the following year Thomas Hemming, the King’s silversmith, turned the ox’s horns into six drinking cups although their exact whereabouts today is unknown.