

**Richard Wilson:**  
**Landscape painting for a new Exhibition Culture**

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## ABSTRACT

Richard Wilson (1714 – 1782) was considered by his contemporaries ‘ingenious’<sup>1</sup> and by his followers as ‘the father of British landscape painting’.<sup>2</sup> Painting in Italy and afterwards in Britain, Wilson was arguably the foremost British landscape painter of the eighteenth century. He painted in a classical style shaped by the works of masters such as Claude Lorrain, Gaspard Dughet and Nicholas Poussin and gained inspiration from his travels and classical literature. His life spanned much of a century which saw an enormous shift in the British art world with the onset of the annual public exhibition. This dissertation will consider Wilson’s submissions to the Society of Artists’ annual exhibitions between 1760 and 1768. I will argue that Wilson pursued a highly deliberate strategy of self-advertisement when choosing pieces to submit to these public exhibitions and consider the extent to which Wilson used the venue of the public exhibition to change public perceptions of landscape painting as a genre.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Reynolds. *Fifteen Discourses*, ‘The Fourteenth Discourse’ (Reprinted London and New York, 1906) p. 236

<sup>2</sup> J. Farington, quoted from the *Morning Post* in the catalogue accompanying ‘Exhibition of Works by Richard Wilson, RA’ at the Ferens Art Galley, Kingston upon Hull which ran Nov – Dec 1936

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## **Introduction**

In 1760, the British landscape artist, Richard Wilson, displayed four paintings in the first ever public exhibition of contemporary British art. The first of these works, entitled *A large landskip with the Story of Niobe* (Fig. 1) was a huge historical painting. This was accompanied by two smaller pictures, the first of which was described in the exhibition catalogue as *A small landskip, the Monument of the Horatii on the Appian Way* (Fig. 2) and the second of which was entitled, *A small landskip, the Banks of the River Dee* (Fig. 3). Finally, Wilson also sent to the exhibition a small drawing entitled *A View near Rome*.<sup>3</sup> Given Wilson's position as a leading British artist who, like his peers, was finding his feet in a fast emerging exhibition culture, his submission to this first display raises a series of questions: why did Wilson choose to exhibit such a varied portfolio of landscapes? Further, why did Wilson think it so important to launch his public exhibition career with such a clear centrepiece in his submission? Moreover, what message did Wilson intend his contemporaries, connoisseurs and potential patrons, to take from his display?

In this dissertation I hope to decipher Wilson's aims and ambitions whilst exhibiting in the public sphere in London during the 1760s, and determine how he succeeded in so capturing the attention of the London press that he could be hailed by one journalist as 'the Greatest Landscape Painter ... ever seen'.<sup>4</sup> As we will see, Wilson's portfolio of 1760 provided a basic model of exhibition submission to which he would remain true until 1768. In exploring this model in some detail, I hope to provide a new understanding of Wilson and his works during this vital phase of his career.

## **Chapter One: 'A Public Exhibition of the works of Several Artists'**

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<sup>3</sup> See items 72, 73, 74 and 129 in *A Catalogue of the Pictures, Sculptures, Models, Drawings, Prints & c. Of the Present Artists Exhibited at the Great Room of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce on the 21<sup>st</sup> April 1760*. The whereabouts of the drawing is no longer known.

<sup>4</sup> *St James's Chronicle*, Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> May 1761 p.2

London's first exhibiting body for artists, which called itself the 'Present Artists', and which a year later would become the more organised Society of Artists of Great Britain (SAGB), was launched in 1760.<sup>5</sup> Wilson was a founding member of the SAGB, which sought to 'encourage Artists whose abilities and attainments may justly raise them to distinction' and to ensure that 'their Several Abilities be brought to public view.'<sup>6</sup> The committee of sixteen men who took the lead in this project included, alongside Wilson, the leading painters and architects Joshua Reynolds, Francis Hayman, Richard Dalton and William Chambers. This committee's primary aim was to provide a showcase so that painters, architects, sculptors and draughtsmen could have their work placed on public view at an annual exhibition. The first exhibition was patronised by, and held in the Great Room of, the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (SEAMC), which had been formed by William Shipley in 1754. SEAMC's aim was to raise funds by subscription in order to award cash prizes, or 'premiums' to artists, scientists and engineers of commendable talents and inventiveness.<sup>7</sup>

Before the establishment of the 'Present Artists' and then the SAGB, artists in Britain had often been frustrated by a lack of regular means of displaying their work, and had typically been confined in doing so to their own studios and showrooms.<sup>8</sup> In an attempt to combat this perceived restriction, William Hogarth (1697-1764) had offered The Foundling Hospital, a refuge for abandoned infants, a scheme to decorate their Boardroom and premises

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<sup>5</sup> For a full history of London's earliest exhibiting bodies see Matthew Hargreaves, 'Candidates for Fame: The Society of Artists of Great Britain 1760-1791 (New Haven and London, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> Walpole Society Vol. vi, 'The Papers of the Society of Artists of Great Britain' (London, 1918) p.116

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive history of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce see Sir H.T. Wood *The History of the Royal Society of Arts* (London, 1913) further, for an interesting discussion on the SEAMC's desire to become Incorporated see D.G.C Allan *The Society of Arts and Government 1754-1800: Public Engagement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce* in 'Eighteenth Century Studies' Vol. 7 No. 4 (Summer, 1974) pp.434-452

<sup>8</sup> For an interesting description of artist's studios see the exhibition catalogue from the 2009 exhibition at Compton Verney by Giles Waterfield, *The Artist's Studio*, (London, 2009)

free of charge. Hogarth arranged a committee for his project and in the years that followed several successful artists donated paintings to the Hospital, including Wilson himself, Hayman, Thomas Gainsborough and Allan Ramsay. Regularly visited by aristocratic governors and guardians of the Hospital, the Board Room proved a successful sphere of display. In 1746 Wilson donated two roundels, one of The Foundling Hospital (Fig.4) and the other of St George's Hospital (Fig.5). Through the Foundling Hospital project, Wilson had realised the importance of having his work on public display. Artists were becoming more commercial and realised they could not wholly rely on aristocratic patrons to promote their careers; they recognised the need for alternative kinds of self-promotion. It was thinking of this kind that would result in the creation of a London public exhibition culture in the second half of the eighteenth century. The same group of artists who were involved in the Foundling Hospital project would go on to establish the SAGB.<sup>9</sup> These ambitious practitioners were aware of the need for an artists' community which would work together to promote the arts and gain much needed public interest; they looked to the examples of the French academies and regular Salon exhibitions and recognised the need for an organised public body which would support the artists themselves. The SAGB was designed to promote British art to the public and to provide a venue where an audience could engage with contemporary art of the highest standard.<sup>10</sup>

The annual exhibitions of SAGB became an important platform for artists to present themselves and their works to a wider public. Each artist carefully planned his submissions to create a portfolio of objects that would best show off his talents, gain the attention of visitors, and secure patronage. Artists quickly realised the importance of the exhibition space as a

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<sup>9</sup> For further information on the formation of public exhibitions in the eighteenth century see K W Lockhurst *The Story of Exhibitions* (London, 1951)

<sup>10</sup> For an contemporary study on the state of the arts in Britain at this time see Jean André Rouquet *The Present State of the Arts in Britain* (London, 1755)

sphere of self-promotion and of advertisement. The annual exhibitions, for the first time, provided a venue where different artists' works would be together and be available for viewing by the public, the press, connoisseurs and potential patrons. However, these were early days in the public exhibiting sphere, and practitioners were not entirely sure what the public wanted to see in such displays. As a result of this, we see vast differences between each artist's submissions. As Mathew Hargreaves argues, 'these artists were painting for a market; and the variety of strategies used by the exhibitors demonstrates that they were as yet unsure of the exact nature of that market.'<sup>11</sup>

The first exhibition of the 'Present Artists' opened on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1760. Advertised in the London press for over a month beforehand, the display's organisers called for all artists to become involved:

The Committee appointed for the management of a Public Exhibition of the works of several artists... give notice that their General Meeting will be held at the Turk's Head Tavern in Gerard Street, at seven o'clock in the evening on Wednesday the 26<sup>th</sup> instant; at which meeting all Artists are desired to be present; the Exhibition being fixed for the 21<sup>st</sup> April next. F Newton, Secretary.<sup>12</sup>

Almost ninety artists sent works to the first exhibition, with the Great Room being full of one hundred and thirty items, ranging from small sketches to huge oils and detailed engravings to elaborate statues. Audiences were faced with an unprecedented spectacle; not even auction houses would have presented the viewer with such a vast array of objects, especially not in an environment designed to entertain rather than to sell. Thousands of intrigued visitors attended the first exhibition, only to be bettered by higher visitor numbers in the following year of

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<sup>11</sup> M. Hargreaves, 'Candidates for Fame: The Society of Artists of Great Britain 1760-1791 (New Haven and London, 2005) p.24

<sup>12</sup> Public Advertiser, Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> March 1760, Issue 7916

over 20,000, proving the public exhibiting space to be a popular sphere of urban sociability and entertainment.<sup>13</sup> With such a diverse and substantial audience, artists had to consider their exhibition pieces carefully. They faced the challenge of capturing the attention of connoisseurs and patrons on the one hand and a mass of less privileged spectators looking to be entertained in polite company on the other. Wilson was no exception; he too was faced with these new challenges. I will argue that Wilson very carefully considered his entries to the first public exhibition in order to attract as much positive attention as possible, with the aim of establishing himself as the foremost landscape artist in Britain. Furthermore, I will suggest that – in this first display, and in its successors, Wilson also intended to raise the status of landscape painting as a genre within the British art world.

The first exhibition was Wilson's chance to make an impact and to announce his skills to his new audience, and in this he seems to have been successful. *A large landskip with the Story of Niobe* quickly became one of Wilson's most famous works. This canvas, listed as his first entry to the show, was the largest and most impressive painting in his 1760 portfolio and one of the largest and most impressive works in the entire exhibition. The painting depicts the Greek myth of Niobe, the queen of Thebes, which is told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book VI.<sup>14</sup> According to the myth, Niobe boasted of her superiority over the goddess Latona, noting that the latter only had two children, the twins Apollo and Diana, while she herself had fourteen children - seven male and seven female. An angry Latona ordered Diana and Apollo to kill Niobe's children using poisoned arrows; famously the weeping Niobe was turned to stone. Complementing the reference to a figure being turned to stone, Wilson borrows his painted figure of Niobe from the most famous rendering of the goddess, a statue of Niobe

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<sup>13</sup> Iain Pears, *The Discovery of Painting: The Growth of Interest in the Arts in England 1680-1768* (New Haven and London, 1988) p.127

<sup>14</sup> See Melville, A.D. (Translated by) *Ovid Metamorphoses* (Oxford, 1986) pp.125-130

shielding her daughter, which could be seen by Grand Tourists in the grounds of the Villa Medici in Rome (Fig.6). The sculpture of *Niobe and her youngest daughter* was part of a celebrated group of antiquity, which represented the distracted mother and her children fleeing from the deadly arrows.<sup>15</sup> Wilson had sketched the statue whilst in Italy (Fig.7). The antique statue would be known by connoisseurs, and therefore Wilson's representation of Niobe would have been familiar to at least some of those attending the exhibition. Through referring to such a venerated artistic model, we can argue, Wilson raises his landscape painting to the status of an intellectual art form and demonstrates to the viewer that he was not only educated in the classics but further, that he was educated in the art treasures of Europe. Through the use of this statue, Wilson presents himself as a gentleman-artist who, like the sons of the English aristocracy, had been on the Grand Tour.<sup>16</sup>

Wilson's Ovidian imagery would not only have been accessible to aristocratic visitors. Ovid's poetic tales were well known to wider, educated audiences and were often reproduced and commented upon in the press. One such reference reads;

Niobe was an example of woman's arrogance and misery; for having lost those children which caus'd her pride, she pin'd away with grief, which is signify'd by her being converted into a stone.<sup>17</sup>

We can therefore assume that many of the literate viewers seeing Wilson's painting at the annual show would have recognised the story he was depicting. Not only this, but we can further suggest that such stories were extremely popular and fashionable within this community of viewers – something that Wilson himself would no doubt have been aware of,

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<sup>15</sup> The most complete Niobe group is in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence; bought by Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo from the Medician Palace in 1775.

<sup>16</sup> For a complete biography on Wilson see W.G. Constable, *Richard Wilson* (London, 1953)

<sup>17</sup> An article entitled 'From the Birth of Moses' in *British Mercury*, Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> February 1713, Issue 399

and which would have increased the likelihood of people approving of his painting. Indeed, from the middle ages, Ovid's writings were accepted as the foremost source for classical stories, and as British poets translated these works in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the reputation of the master grew.<sup>18</sup> Those conducting Grand Tours would read Ovid as a companion to their visits; plays were developed from the poems as a form of polite entertainment; and anecdotes from Ovid would even lever their way into descriptive conversation: 'I remained for a moment as it were petrified, and stood like Niobe, turned into a stone.'<sup>19</sup>

In the painting Wilson portrays drama and distress but also the tragedy of Ovid's tale. In doing so, Wilson aligns himself, not only with the great traditions of classical sculpture, but with European masters of the landscape tradition such as Gaspard Dughet and Claude Lorrain.<sup>20</sup> Similarities between Wilson and Gaspard can be seen if we compare *Niobe* to Gaspard's celebrated *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* (Fig.8). Like Wilson, Dughet depicted a tragic tale from Ovid's 'Metamorphoses'. The painting shows Thisbe discovering the body of her lover Pyramus, surrounded by an imposing landscape. Pyramus is seen lying beside Thisbe's bloodied cloak. Ovid tells the story of Thisbe dropping her cloak after being frightened by a lion and then, when Pyramus discovers the cloak, he assumes his lover is dead which prompts him to commit suicide. Tragically, once Thisbe discovers her dead lover, which we see in this scene, she too then commits suicide. Comparing Wilson's picture with that of Gaspard, we notice that both landscapes centre on a distressed heroine standing over a dead figure. Wilson's composition almost parallels Gaspard's painting, with imposing dark

<sup>18</sup> The most popular translation was 'Ovid's Art of Love, In three books, together with his Amours and Remedy of Love' Translated into English Verse by Several Eminent Hands (London, 1719)

<sup>19</sup> *Old Maid*, Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> July 1756, Issue XXXVI (London)

<sup>20</sup> Solkin highlights the Gaspardian tone of *Niobe* but also suggests that it owes something to Poussin's storm paintings. For further discussion see David Solkin, *Richard Wilson: the Landscape of Reaction* (London, 1982) p.201

foliage dominating the left-hand foreground balanced by rock faces on the right side. The central section, which depicts the story, is illuminated by a dramatic sky in both cases.

The artistic template utilised by Wilson must have been obvious to the cultured Englishmen visiting the exhibition, since it represents a Gaspardian formula which was particularly well known.<sup>21</sup> By making an obvious allusion to Gaspard in this way, Wilson was raising his status in the eyes of the British audience. Gaspard was one of the best known painters of seventeenth century Rome, and was an inspiration to many eighteenth century artists, particularly those in Britain; moreover he was one of the most important sources for the English eighteenth century audience's vision of Italy. William Beechey recalled that Wilson admired 'Claude for air and Gaspard for composition and sentiment'.<sup>22</sup> This thesis will consider, in depth, the influence of Claude and Gaspard on Wilson's work and how Wilson used references to such artists to gain popularity at the annual shows. Interestingly, William Woollett entered an engraving entitled *A View from Claude Lorraine* in the same 1760 show.<sup>23</sup>

*Niobe* highlights Wilson's technical abilities and, through its classical references, elevates the genre of English landscape painting, leaving behind this genre's more conventional preoccupation with topographical depictions of the English landscape. It is through using a classical narrative that Wilson makes prominent the genre of historical landscape painting in Britain, which had been popular on the continent a century earlier.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ann French has written, 'Gaspard meant to the English above all that formula of a lake, architecture and framing trees'. For further discussion on Gaspard's reputation in England see Ann French, 'The influence of Gaspard Dughet in the British Isles' unpub M.A. report. (The Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 1975) p.1

<sup>22</sup> William Beechey quoted in William T. Whitey, *Artists and their friends in England 1700-1799* (London, 1928) p.380

<sup>23</sup> Although it cannot be confirmed it is likely that this engraving was *The Temple of Apollo* since it is the only engraving by Woollett of Claude executed in 1760.

<sup>24</sup> Ann Bermingham argues that historical painting 'had come to Britain largely thanks to the agency of Richard Wilson whose *Destruction of the Children of Niobe* had initiated a competition between history painting and

Although *Niobe* itself was later dismissed by Reynolds, the inclusion of classical figures and narratives in painting was very popular with connoisseurs and patrons at this time. Reynolds himself was a huge promoter of history painting but later suggested ‘[his] late ingenious academician, Wilson, [he] fear[ed had] been guilty, like many of his predecessors, of introducing gods and goddesses, ideal beings, into scenes which were by no means prepared to receive such personages. His landscapes were in reality too near common nature to admit supernatural objects’.<sup>25</sup> The success of this painting would be particularly important to Wilson and other British landscape artists because, up until this point, there had been a general bias against British artists painting classical themes or landscapes in preference for topographical ones.

There is, of course, an exception to this: George Lambert (1700-1765) was arguably the first British landscape artist to make a successful living from his work, painting mainly decorative scenes for country houses and portraits of country houses. Lambert did paint some landscapes in a classical style, particularly inspired by Gaspard and Claude (Fig.9).<sup>26</sup> His works in this genre were either entirely fictional or copied directly from locally displayed examples of these painters’ works, since he had never visited the continent. Wilson spent significant time in Italy and, this seems to have given his exercises in this genre more credibility. Lambert did not enter paintings into the 1760 exhibition, and so it is impossible to compare the artists directly here. Lambert, however, would go on to exhibit some of his more traditional English view paintings and one Italian view in the 1761-4 shows and further,

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landscape which continued well into the nineteenth century’, see Ann Bermingham in David Solkin’s *Art on the Line*, (New Haven and London, 2001) p.136

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds, J. *Fifteen Discourses*, ‘The Fourteenth Discourse’ 1748 (Reprinted London and New York, 1906) p.236

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed catalogue raisonné of Lambert’s works see Elizabeth Einberg, ‘Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of George Lambert in *Walpole Society Vol. LXIII*, (London, 2001)

enjoyed some success – one newspaper declared that ‘Mr Lambert is a most pleasing Landscape painter, always equal and sometimes superior to Gaspard Poussin’.<sup>27</sup>

*Niobe* was a great success, and enjoyed significant critical acclaim. Whilst it was on view, the same writer who complimented Lambert’s work declared that Wilson was ‘the greatest landscape painter,’ and this painting would be the only one which would secure him a royal patron; HRH the Duke of Cumberland.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, Wilson was the only artist to submit a historical landscape to the show of the ‘Present Artists’ in 1760 and further, the only artist to depict a story from Ovid. In fact, of the one hundred and thirty entries to the exhibition only fifteen were landscapes, four of which were Wilson’s.<sup>29</sup> This fact alone confirms that the genre of British landscape painting was not a very popular one and we can be assured that Wilson was being especially confident when he entered four landscapes, all with classical references. The display of *Niobe* provided a keystone of Wilson’s exhibition strategy in 1760. Displayed alongside three other smaller, far more modest works, here Wilson presents himself as an elevated artist with a range of talents. By entering *Niobe* as the centrepiece of his portfolio he emphasised his interest in the classical and in the fallen empire of Rome, as well as indicating his own classically grounded education and his knowledge of the works of the most esteemed landscape artists of the past. There is no doubt that Wilson would have savoured the enormous success that his painting seems to have enjoyed in this display, and if he had not already planned to include further historical landscapes in his future portfolios, then this was proof enough that he should.

As well as *Niobe*, Wilson entered two other paintings, both of eighteenth century views, one of Italy, the other of Britain. The Italian view, *The Monument of the Horatii on the*

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<sup>27</sup> *St James’s Chronicle*, Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> May 1761, p.2

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that as large pieces the fifteen landscapes would have taken up a reasonable amount of wall space in the Great Room compared to smaller portraits and still-life paintings.

*Appian Way* is a topographical landscape of a site often visited by Grand Tourists. Almost a decade earlier, Wilson had conducted his own Grand Tour. In 1751 he travelled to Rome with William Lock of Norbury Park. Presumably his ‘excellent classical education’ and his knowledge of the Italian language meant that Wilson was a good companion for the British aristocrats of the Grand Tour.<sup>30</sup> Wilson was no doubt aware that these wealthy young men would make him a good living both whilst in Italy and once at home, and indeed many of them commissioned work by the artist. The *Public Advertiser* was later to tell the story of Wilson’s relationship with Lock:

At Venice he had the good fortune to meet with William Lock Esq, an English gentleman, with whom he travelled to Rome and through a great part of Italy. By this gentleman he was employed in taking sketches of the country through which they passed, and in painting some landscapes for him. A better patron than Mr Lock Mr Wilson could not have found, as he was very candid though accurate appreciator of the merit of art, and a very liberal rewarder of its efforts. During the rest of his life Mr Wilson maintained a most intimate friendship with this gentleman.<sup>31</sup>

In Italy, Wilson had painted on a commission basis and his clients were mainly British travellers on the Grand Tour. Travelling to Italy had become an inviting idea for artists as many saw the benefits of gaining the patronage of grand tourists eager to acquire pictorial memoirs of their travels. Wilson was clearly aware of the benefits he would accrue through visiting Italy himself. The trip gave him the chance to study Italian painting and the remains of antiquity at first hand, and also to meet with other artists, and even more importantly, with potential patrons. And it was in Italy, significantly enough, that Wilson turned in earnest to

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<sup>30</sup> *Public Advertiser*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1790, Issue 17473

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*

landscape painting.<sup>32</sup> Farington summarized Wilson's trip to Italy, which came to an end in 1757, by declaring that his works showed 'how he had profited in that time in respect of improvement' and that he 'took from England eighty pounds and brought back one hundred'.<sup>33</sup> Whilst in Rome, Wilson was exposed to the works of artists such as Poussin, Gaspard and Claude and moreover, was able to establish how popular these works were. It could be argued that it was this recognition of landscape painting's potential – one which was finding contemporary expression in the popular work of the Rome-based French landscape artist Claude Vernet - that contributed to Wilson's decision to pursue landscape painting over portraiture. As he had hoped, Wilson enjoyed success in this respect and received several commissions whilst in Italy. In fact, by the time he had returned to Britain, and certainly before the SAGB was established, Wilson had secured a good reputation for souvenir paintings of memorable sites in Italy.<sup>34</sup>

In Wilson's second entry to the exhibition, *The Monument of the Horatii on the Appian Way*, he once again makes a strong link to classical Rome by depicting a surviving relic of the fallen empire. According to Livy, the Horatii were male triplets from Rome. During a war between Rome and Alba Longa, it was agreed that settlement of the conflict would depend on the outcome of a battle between the Horatii and the Curiatii. The Curiatii were male triplets from Alba Longa and of the same age as the Horatii. In the battle, the three Curiatii were wounded, but two of the Horatii were killed. The last of the Horatii tactically turned as if to flee, the Curiatii chased him but, as a result of their wounds, they became separated from each other. This meant the last of the Horatii was able to kill them one after

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<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting that before Wilson travelled to Rome in 1750 he had started a promising portraiture career in London. For discussion on the influences of artists and patrons, including Zuccarrelli and Vernet, on Wilson's decision to move from portraiture to landscape painting see W.G. Constable, *Richard Wilson*, (London, 1953) pp.24-28

<sup>33</sup> J. Farington, *Biographical Note* reproduced from the *Morning Post* in the Catalogue accompanying 'Exhibition of Works by Richard Wilson, RA' at Ferens Art Gallery, Kingston upon Hull which ran Nov-Dec 1936. p.13

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed account of Wilson's time in Italy see Constable (London, 1953) pp.21-37

the other. By picturing the tombs of the two families Wilson is able to allude to this story without actually depicting the historical narrative itself. The fall of the Roman Empire is emphasised by the depiction of ruins; once celebrated monuments, Wilson's architectural subjects are now overgrown, their stones crumbling to the ground: this reminded viewers that no great empire had risen since the Roman times. Since this is a contemporary view by Wilson he is able to show viewers that he has travelled; he links himself with those who could afford exotic travel and encourages them to buy views of structures which they may have seen in person on their own Grand Tour. The story of the Horatii and the Curiatii is one which exaggerates the prominence of patriotism and heroism in the Roman Empire. It promotes men fighting for their country and the glory of death for a noble cause.

Significantly, whilst this painting was on view at the SAGB exhibition, Britain was involved in a major conflict with France and its allies. The Seven Year War (1756-1763) involved various colonies and was important for Britain in terms of enlarging its empire. The creation and expansion of the British Empire, was therefore, a popular and thought provoking topic at this time. Wilson is able to draw parallels between the Curiatii and the Horatii, fighting for the honour of their country, and the British men fighting abroad at this time. Aristocrats enjoyed the prospect of Britain becoming as significant as the now disbanded Roman Empire, and so Wilson was able to attract attention to his paintings by encouraging such comparisons.

In the first exhibition only one other artist entered a painting of an Italian view. Alexander Cozens' *A View on the Tiber* provides Wilson with at least some competition in his field of painting at this show.<sup>35</sup> Born in Russia, Cozens (1717-1786), travelled to England in 1746 after having travelled around Italy, and remained here until his death. Like Wilson,

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<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately this landscape no longer exists.

Cozens picked a recognisable site in Italy with deep meanings. The River Tiber has antique origins; the legendary King Thebris was said to have drowned in the Albula River, which was subsequently renamed in his honour. Those who had visited Italy on a Grand Tour could not have failed to have had some experience of the River Tiber. Cozens was a topographical artist whose main media were drawing and watercolour; he enjoyed some success in Britain and had been appointed ‘Drawing master’ to Christ’s Hospital in 1750.<sup>36</sup> Partly due to his chosen medium and partly to do with his unassuming, none-too-elaborate style, Cozens’ works are very different to those by Wilson. One imagines that they offered little direct competition on the walls of the exhibition in the Great Room.

Wilson’s inclusion of a third landscape, *The Banks of the River Dee* (Fig. 3) is perhaps the most obvious choice of painting for him to have included in this exhibition of contemporary British art. Indeed, it is the piece which is most comparable to the exhibits submitted by his English contemporaries to the same show, if only in terms of its title. This painting confirms Wilson’s ability as a view painter, particularly of English views, and encourages English patrons to employ Wilson to paint their country house or a view of their land.<sup>37</sup> The painting is the first landscape by Wilson of a public landmark in Britain which allows us to draw comparisons with his Italian views. It is worth noting here, however, the classical connotations of the River Dee. The River Dee flows through Chester, a city which has always been linked to the Roman invasion of Britain. A contemporary tour guide described Chester as:

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<sup>36</sup> *Whitehall Evening Post* (London), Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> January 1750; Issue 615

<sup>37</sup> Possibly commissioned by Sir Richard Grosvenor, the view is close to his family seat at Eaton Hall.

the capital of the county of Cheshire, situate near the mouth of the river Dee, it is a very ancient city, and in the time of the Romans, the twentieth legion, called Valeria Victix, was quartered here.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, as Wilson had reminded the viewer of ancient Rome in his topographical Italian view, he is able, also, to do so with a view of English countryside.<sup>39</sup>

This medium sized painting may not appear to the viewer to be entirely or typically British. Although the title confirms that it is indeed an English landscape, the viewer is aware of a European air. The basic composition of a river meandering into a sunset was considered by critics as typical of Claude. *The Banks of the River Dee* follows a typically Claudian composition of a river flowing to the centre of the horizon, flanked by trees on either side. Claude's *Landscape with Dancing Figures* (Fig.10), provides a good example of this format. We can usefully compare Wilson's painting to Claude's, particularly if we concentrate on the middle-ground and the background. Both paintings are centered on water and Wilson successfully achieves the soft and subtle lighting effects so revered in Claude's painting. Wilson chose Claude's classical model to depict an English view, and by so doing, he subtly reminded the viewer of his celebration of Europe and the antique. Instead of returning to a typically English style, Wilson seeks to elevate his work in the European manner. Furthermore, Wilson was aware that it was paintings in this style that were more saleable to patrons due to the fashions of the time. By referring to the example of Claude and choosing a place with antique references, Wilson had found a way to marry British landscape painting with his grand style.

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<sup>38</sup> S. Bladon, *An account of the several cities and market towns in England and Wales: describing the antiquities, curiosities and manufacture carried on each place, the days the markets were kept on, the number of Parliament-men sent from each city, &c. And the computed and measured miles from London.* (London, 1750) p.20

<sup>39</sup> For further discussion of this see Section III of this thesis and Solkin (London, 1982) pp.197-198

Aside from Wilson and Lambert, there were some less well known landscape artists exhibiting at this first exhibition. It is worth noting that whilst the ‘Present Artists’ held their exhibition, the SEAMC also displayed paintings in the Great Room. SEAMC held annual competitions for artists with prizes for landscapes and history painting.<sup>40</sup> The brothers George and John Smith were awarded first and second prizes respectively in the landscape category. A critic in the *London Chronicle* described George Smith’s landscape as ‘the most pleasing beautiful landscape [he] ever saw’.<sup>41</sup> The landscape is more classical than one might assume, with framing trees and a river flowing to the distance; however, it is not as classically charged as Wilson’s entries to the 1760 show.<sup>42</sup> The figures are in contemporary dress and would probably be better situated in a genre painting. Interestingly, the figure sketching could easily be imagined as having strolled in from a Claudian landscape. Although Wilson and the other ‘Present Artists’ had not entered this competition, their work was displayed alongside the competition winners; in fact works were intermingled on the same walls in the Great Room. It is probable that some felt disgruntled since the prize tickets on some works implied that they were superior to those without. Despite Wilson’s entries of 1760 being critically acclaimed, some visitors may have assumed that his work was perceived to be of a lesser standard than those who had won the annual prizes.<sup>43</sup> It is worth recognising that the newspaper review of Smith’s work is proof enough that there was a market for British landscapes. Wilson offered a very different version of such works.

In all three of his paintings Wilson makes significant classical references and in doing so sets himself apart from all other artists exhibiting at the show. He presents a complete

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<sup>40</sup> 1760 was the first year that SEAMC offered premiums for landscape painting

<sup>41</sup> *London Chronicle*, 17<sup>th</sup> April 1760.

<sup>42</sup> An etching of Smith’s painting by William Woollett entitled *The First Premium Picture* can be seen in the British Museum; unfortunately no image of either the oil or etching is available.

<sup>43</sup> For information on SEAMC’s system of awarding premiums to eligible artists see: Martin Myrone, *Bodybuilding Reforming Masculinities in British Art 1750-1810* (New Haven and London, 2005) pp.34-36

painted portfolio, consisting of one centrepiece and two supporting works, all in the classical European tradition. Wilson's fourth entry could be considered an uncharacteristic move by a British painter and one that does not necessarily fit in with the rest of his selection; one would not expect to see a small drawing entered in such an exhibition from an established oil-painter. By submitting his drawing *A View from Rome* (unlocated) Wilson extended the display of his talents, presumably to attract further public attention. By displaying a second medium Wilson was able to advertise that apart from his established and detailed oil paintings, patrons were able to buy more simple drawings or sketches of Rome and other parts of Italy. These would form small memorabilia of people's travels and Grand Tours; calling cards, as it were, confirming that a gentleman had indeed been to the continent. Cozens had made a significant business out of selling pen and pencil drawings of European landmarks during his time in Italy and on his return to England. On the other hand, Wilson's drawing may have been a sketch for a painting, suggesting to the audience that as a master craftsman, Wilson followed certain practices whilst executing his work. Most importantly of all, perhaps, this sketch confirmed to the viewer that Wilson had indeed been to Italy and that his exhibited paintings were based on his actual experience; the sketch was evidence that Wilson, unlike some of his forbears, was not merely copying old masters but had visited these classical sites himself.

Wilson's four entries to the 1760 exhibition form a quartet, showing off his talents to the public, to connoisseurs and to potential patrons. Although each of his entries is very different, they all referred in some way to an antique world. Wilson's exhibition strategy was to use the popularity and prestige of the classical to attract attention and to present himself as a diverse artist able to paint any landscape. At a time when gentlemen were most keen to travel to the continent to explore the lost world of the Roman Empire, Wilson employs his

paintings to allude to this time, and he uses various techniques to do so. As such he stood out as distinctive and different from any of the other artists exhibiting in the Great Room. He set himself apart.

This thesis will aim to assess the ways in which Wilson developed and maintained the exhibition strategy that he had launched at the 1760 exhibition of the ‘Present Artists’ in the annual displays of the SAGB, to which he submitted at least one work every year until 1768. First, I will consider the classical and mythological images he sent to these displays; then, Wilson’s Italian and British topographical scenes will be interpreted as a group of landscapes designed to enhance each of Wilson’s SAGB portfolios, and as individual landscapes available on the open market. My thesis will also consider in further detail how Wilson’s work related to those of other artists exhibiting at this time, as well as to those of a past era.

## Chapter Two: ‘Noble’ Landscapes

André Félibien, theoretician of French Classicism, developed in 1667 his hierarchy of the genres in art, at the top of which was he placed history painting.<sup>44</sup> Félibien’s publication *Conférences de l’académie royale de peinture et de grande sculpture pendant l’année 1667* was intended to advise young French Academicians of the different qualities evident within the genres of art. A translation of Félibien’s text was available from 1740 in Britain and so

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<sup>44</sup> André Félibien was the official court historian to Louis XIV and a published authority on the arts in France. He is most famous for his works exploring the hierarchies within artistic genres, and believed that history painting was the most important genre followed by portraiture, landscapes and the still lives. He encouraged artists to partake in history painting, particularly that of a biblical or mythical nature. His best known work in Britain was André Félibien, *Sieur des Avaux et de Javericy, Seven conferences held in the King of France’s cabinet of paintings, between Mr Le Brun, Mr Bourdon, Mr De Champagne, Mr Perrault &c. On some of the most celebrated pictures of Raphael, Titian, Paulo Veronese, Poussin &c. In Which the Method of forming a Judgement on Paintings, is laid down with the greatest Elegance and Perspicuity.* ‘Translated from the French of Félibien. With a curious Preface’. (London, 1740)

his influential rankings would have been familiar to the SAGB exhibitors in the eighteenth century.<sup>45</sup> Félibien wrote that:

he who paints fine Landskips, is above him who only paints Fruits, Flowers, or Shells: He who paints after life is more to be regarded than he who only represents still-life; and as the Figure of a man is the most perfect Work of God upon Earth, it is also certain he who imitates God in painting human figures, is by far more excellent than all others. Moreover though it be no small matter to make the Picture of a Man appear as if it was alive, and to give the Appearance of Motion to that which has none; one who can draw Portraits, has not yet attained to his high perfection of Art, and cannot pretend to the Same Honour with abler Painters. He Must for that end advance from Painting one single Figure to draw several together; he must paint History and Fable; he must represent great actions like an Historian, or agreeable ones as the Poets. And soaring yet higher, he must by allegorical Compositions, know how to hide under the Vale of a Fable the Virtues of great Men, and the most sublime Mysteries. He is esteemed a great Painter who acquits himself well in Enterprizes of this Kind. 'Tis in this that the force, the Sublime and Grandeur of the Art consists. And it is this particularly that ought early to be learned to young Students.<sup>46</sup>

Such arguments were to become prevalent in British art criticism during Wilson's career. In his *Discourses*, delivered during the 1770s and 1780s, Reynolds reiterated many of Félibien's points, affirming that history painting was indeed the most important pictorial genre.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Joshua Reynolds would go on to write his *Discourses* during the 1770s, in which he emphasised many of the same arguments as Félibien and campaigned for British artists to add historical elements to their paintings.

<sup>46</sup> Félibien, loc. cit. pp. xxvii-xxviii

<sup>47</sup> For Reynolds' *Discourses* see Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Fifteen Discourses*, (Reprinted London and New York, 1906)

Wilson's landscapes, therefore, would have been considered relatively low in ranking by connoisseurs; in fact, his decision to change from portraits to landscapes might, in this light, be seen as a backwards step. However, it is clear that he saw his historical landscapes – pictures such as *Niobe*, as a way of raising the status of landscape painting; through such landscapes, he was meeting Félibien's highest challenge - that of producing 'allegorical compositions'.<sup>48</sup> Wilson's historical landscapes competed with history paintings proper by using their classical subject matter but also by being grand and large scale pieces of art. Some critics consider Wilson to be the founder of historical landscape painting in Britain.<sup>49</sup> During his years exhibiting at the SAGB he displayed a number of historical landscapes as centrepieces, alongside his Italian and British views, and in doing so met with considerable acclaim. Artists such as Poussin and Claude promoted the use of the classical in landscapes, working to elevate the status of landscape painting; undoubtedly Wilson was influenced by these artists and attempted to gain the same success in Britain as they had enjoyed in France a century earlier.

During the years 1760 to 1768 Wilson exhibited at least four large historical landscapes at the annual SAGB exhibitions. These pictures included *Niobe* which he exhibited twice, in 1760 and 1761.<sup>50</sup> Wilson obviously recognised that the painting had been a success, given that he decided to exhibit it again just one year later, and he did receive a number of commissions for versions of the painting after the first two annual exhibitions. Shortly after the exhibition opened in 1761, a newspaper writer reported that, 'Mr Wilson is without question the greatest landscape painter I have ever seen and possesses the greatest

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<sup>48</sup> Félibien, loc. cit. pp. xxvii

<sup>49</sup> For example Ann Bermingham argues that historical landscape painting 'had come to Britain largely thanks to the agency of Richard Wilson'. See Ann Bermingham in David Solkin, *Art on the Line* (New Haven and London, 2001) p.136

<sup>50</sup> Solkin argues a case that Wilson actually exhibited *Niobe* a third time in 1767, see Solkin, (London, 1982) p.138. Footnote 52

powers of Thought, Judgement, and Execution'.<sup>51</sup> It is worth noting that, from the language used by the writer, one might assume Wilson's picture was a history painting, as it implies a highly intellectual element to the work. The same writer described the composition of *Niobe* as 'great and beautiful' and considered the figures 'admirably elegant'. In another article, two weeks later, 'an admirer' wrote of the same painting that it was 'A noble landscape that – Bless me, what colouring! What colouring! What taste!'.<sup>52</sup> Those who had visited the exhibition were clearly impressed by Wilson's version of historical landscape. Interestingly, for two consecutive years the newspaper critics had singled out *Niobe* above any other of the painter's entries, suggesting that Wilson had read his audience well.

By October 1761 William Woollett '[had] finished his engraving' after Wilson's *Niobe*.<sup>53</sup> Mentions of this engraving for sale at a cost of 10s 6d can be found in the London press from October 1761 to March 1763.<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting that Wilson might have submitted *Niobe* to the SAGB exhibition for a second time in order to advertise the newly produced engraving of his work. In 1761, John Lockman wrote a poem dedicated to the engraving:

To Mr Woollett, the engraver, on his Print of NIOBE from the painting of Mr  
RICHARD WILSON.

The scene by Wilson's noble skill display'd

In all the force of magic light and shade.

A fiery Tempest darting from the Sky,

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<sup>51</sup> *St James Chronicle*, Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> May, 1761

<sup>52</sup> *St James Chronicle*, Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 1761

<sup>53</sup> *Public Advertiser*, Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1762, Issue 8623

<sup>54</sup> *Public Advertiser*, Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1763, Issue 8839

In Peals proclaiming sure Destruction nigh:

Dire vengeance by Latona's offspring shed

On hapless Niobe's devoted Head:

Her sons and daughters sharing the like fate,

Transfix'd! Pale Objects of immortal Hate:

Strongly thy master Strokes these woes impart,

Far as can reach thy imitative Art.

Oft had our Youth, their Progress to advance

In elegance of Graving, pass'd to France

With Genius, and a willing mind endured,

Their darling studies closely they pursued

Taste they thro' all her varying Rounds did trace

And found the secret Source of every Grace:

Then rich in skill, quitted the Banks of Seine,

And, to our blissful Land, return'd again,

Here they new Lights held forth, disclos'd each Rule;

Here, emulous, they form'd an English School,

Which, animated by the Royal Smile

Must flourish and do honour to our Isle.

In fame it now with that of Paris vies,

And may, in time, still more resplendent rise.

Woollett proceed: on thy lov'd Art refine:

Proceed; and just eulogiums will be thine.<sup>55</sup>

Lockman was a regular contributor to London newspapers at this time.<sup>56</sup> Significantly, it is known that he was willing to take payment to write positive articles as an 'unbiased' bystander about SAGB painters and other artists.<sup>57</sup> John Boydell, who contracted Woollett to engrave Wilson's painting, may well have commissioned or at least orchestrated this 'puff' as an extra advertisement to sell Woollett's engraving of *Niobe*.

Lockman creates excitement and tension in his poetic description of Woollett's engraving of *Niobe*, and he establishes the picture in the minds of those who may not have seen the engraving or the original painting. As a result the painting is made even more accessible; not only is the painting now available as an engraving but it is described in detail in a national newspaper. The use of words such as 'magic' and 'noble' is intriguing to the reader and nothing but complimentary to Wilson. Lockman's lines replicate the Ovidian

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<sup>55</sup> *Public Advertiser*, Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> November, 1761, Issue 8426

<sup>56</sup> There are numerous entries in the London newspapers by Lockman, some poems, some notes, celebrating various public events in the mid-eighteenth century, such as a poem to mark the birthday of HRH George, Prince of Wales (*Public Advertiser*, Monday 30<sup>th</sup> June, 1760) and an ode to the Lord Viscount Townshend (*Public Advertiser*, Monday 16<sup>th</sup> January 1769). Lockman also wrote books and repeatedly advertised them in the press: *The History of England* (*Public Advertiser*, Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1766), *The Entertaining Instructor* (*Public Advertiser*, Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1767), *Business, Pleasure and Prudence; a fable* (*Public Advertiser*, Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1769) and to mention but a few. One must assume that Lockman was very skilled in dealing with the eighteenth century media.

<sup>57</sup> Andrew McCredie describes Lockman: 'John Lockman was one of those curious eighteenth century gentlemen scholars who managed to combine several activities. In addition to being secretary of the British Herring Industry he was also poet, translator, pamphleteer and amateur aesthete' in Andrew D. McCredie 'John Christopher Smith as a Dramatic Composer' in *Music and Letters* Vol. 45, Issue 1 (Oxford, 1964) p.29

story, building speed and then stopping abruptly with short sentences as the tale climaxes in tragedy. The second half of the poem is devoted to Woollett's skill as an engraver and the quality of this work; Woollett is described as being an artist who is deserving of European acclaim. Lockman emphasises the fact that the French have traditionally held the best reputation for engraving. Interestingly, Boydell had become a successful importer of French prints during the 1750s but was reported to have been frustrated by the European market and the difficulties he endured to get European buyers and dealers to purchase British works. It is thought that he commissioned Woollett's engraving of *The Story of Niobe* partly in order to spark reciprocal trade, as he imagined it would appeal to a European audience. It is too much of a coincidence, one might suggest, that Lockman emphasised this very fact without being encouraged. Those who were not cynical and believed the poem to be genuine would have been undoubtedly impressed by the work before even seeing it. Woollett and Wilson would both appreciate this form of advertisement. It is likely that Wilson received some financial reward from the sale of Woollett's engravings, at least when they were first commissioned; even if he did not, the engraver's work could be considered a free form of advertisement for his paintings. Solkin notes that Woollett's engraving brought the publisher 'a profit reported to be somewhere in the neighborhood of £2000' – a sum far beyond that ever earned by any previous engraving of a landscape by a British artist.<sup>58</sup>

Wilson was the only artist to exhibit a historical landscape, and further, no other artist referenced the classical writings of Ovid in their selected pieces for the first annual show. In 1761 Wilson's *Niobe* was displayed alongside other classically inspired paintings. John Seaton jun. displayed a portrait of *Venus as large as life*; like Niobe, stories of Venus have inspired many artists throughout history. Presumably artists saw the excellent press reviews

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<sup>58</sup> Solkin (London, 1982) p.200

which Wilson had received for his *Niobe* which must have encouraged them to present classical pictures to the 1761 exhibition. Interestingly, however, no other artist lists a historical landscape. Wilson remained the only British artist working in this field and in turn received no direct competition. Considering his positive reviews in the press it is a little surprising to see no work of this specific genre by Wilson in the 1762 show. Wilson did however, enter a painting that had the proportions of a history painting, entitled *Landscape with Hermits*, and later renamed *Solitude* by Woollett. A grand and elaborate landscape, it seems likely that Wilson intended this piece to be the centrepiece for the 1762 show; it is certainly the largest of his six-picture submission.<sup>59</sup> Woollett would not engrave the work until 1788 but when he did he accompanied it with a passage from James Thomson's

*Seasons:*

...And all is awful, silent gloom around.

These are the haunts of Meditation, these

The scenes where ancient Bards th'inspiring breath,

Extatic, felt; and, from this world retir'd...<sup>60</sup>

It is impossible to know whether this was the intention of Wilson when he painted the work but it does allow the viewer to wonder whether this was indeed Wilson's literary centrepiece following the success of *Niobe*. This thesis will go on to consider Wilson's use of Thomson and the comparisons which can be drawn between Ovid and Thomson's works as sources of pictorial narrative. However, presumably building on the success of *Niobe*, Wilson exhibited two more historical landscapes inspired by Ovid at later SAGB annual exhibitions. The first was in 1763 and the second was one of his last entries, to the show in 1768. Both of these

<sup>59</sup> For a detailed discussion of this painting see Solkin (London, 1982) pp.69-70

<sup>60</sup> Thomson quoted on William Woollett's engraving of *Solitude* by Richard Wilson, 1788.

works took inspiration from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, further increasing the status of Wilson's landscapes by depicting different scenes from the famous writer's mythological poetry.

The inspiration that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has provided for artists is well documented, not least for the Renaissance masters.<sup>61</sup> Ovid's descriptive pictorial writings lent themselves to artists as vivid stories which they could paint or sculpt. Ovid was popular and widely read among the educated set in Britain, and his stories would certainly be recognisable to a sizeable part of the London exhibition-going public. Ovid's works were considered a polite topic for conversation; translations of the poems were produced throughout the eighteenth century, together with guides designed to help readers understand their meanings:

This day was publish'd, In a Pocket Volume... The Gentleman and Lady's Key to Polite Literature; or A Compendious Dictionary of Fabulous History, Containing the Characters, and principal Actions, ascribed to the Heathen Gods, Goddesses, Heroes & c. And the manner in which the Ancients represented the Deities and Heroes, Virtues and Vices, in their Printings, Statues and Gems. Together with some account of their Poets and references to the principal Places mentioned in their Works.<sup>62</sup>

Such adverts and the publications they promote, emphasise the point that poems of antiquity were seen as suitable conversation topics for polite ladies and gentlemen. Works such as *The Key to Polite Literature* offered the reader an accessible form of high culture, a beginner's guide to subjects discussed regularly in polite society. One might argue that in a sense Wilson offers his audience an analogous form of translation. Wilson's works put classical, complicated stories into accessible pictorial form and allowed those who were not entirely

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<sup>61</sup> For a basic discussion on Ovid as an inspiration to artists see Christopher Allen, 'Ovid and art.' *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*. Ed. Philip Hardie. (Cambridge University Press, 2002) pp.334-367. Paul Barolsky, 'As in Ovid, so in Renaissance Art', *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol 51, Issue 2 (Summer 1998) pp.451-474 also makes for interesting reading.

<sup>62</sup> *London Evening Post*, Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> February 1763, Issue 5511.

familiar with Ovidian texts to begin to understand them. Moreover, Wilson, in his pictures, makes the pictorial language of such European masters as Claude and Gaspard accessible. Many of those visiting the exhibition, although middle to upper class, would not have had the opportunity to view the Old Masters in the flesh – Wilson brings their rhetoric to the London public sphere.

In 1763 Wilson chose to enter *A large landskip with Phaeton's petition to Apollo* [Fig 11] to the annual exhibition. Recited in Book II of the *Metamorphoses*, the Greek myth tells the story of Phaeton and his father Apollo, the Sun God. Ovid describes how Phaeton petitions his unwilling father to allow him to drive his chariot of fire across the skies for one day:

...Phaeton would not yield

And held his purpose, burning with desire

To drive the chariot...<sup>63</sup>

The wish, which his father reluctantly grants, leads to tragedy. After watching the chariot veer out of control and parts of the earth catch fire, Jupiter releases a thunderbolt which destroys Phaeton's chariot and sends him careering down in flames towards the Earth and into the River Eridanus.

Wilson's portrayal of the story does not seem as immediately dramatic to the viewer as other artists' depiction of this story, nor is it as action-filled as Wilson's other historical landscapes. His painting shows Phaeton petitioning his father in front of a rather sombre yet grand landscape; the lull before the storm, as it were. Wilson's figures are tiny in a huge landscape which has great depth of foliage. Typical of a Wilson landscape, the artist frames

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<sup>63</sup> Translated by A.D. Melville, *Ovid Metamorphoses* (Oxford, 1986) p.28

his picture with tall, Mediterranean trees which remind the English viewer that this is not a British scene. Further, Wilson refers to the classical through his drapery, the statue-like poses of his figures and the use of classical architectural forms. Fascinatingly, this calm and subtle grandeur gives no hint of the tragic story that is about to unfold. Wilson's imposing sky lights up the figures, though, more importantly, its orange hues remind the viewer of Apollo, the Sun God; it suggests that the Chariot of the Sun has just passed through the skies of Wilson's landscape. Those viewers who knew the tale of Phaeton would no doubt see this as a reference to the rest of the story. Many visitors to the SAGB annual exhibition would be classically educated and familiar with Ovid's texts. In turn they would know the tragic end that Phaeton was to meet; this gives the painting a further dimension. A traditional Italian landscape with figures thus assumes a weight of sadness and further, the narrative becomes tense, as the viewer recognises that all is not as it seems. By positioning the narrative at sunset, Wilson uses the concept of pathetic fallacy to influence the viewer's mood – the foreboding darkness that envelops the scene offers a direct parallel to the tragic end which will overpower the story. In reality Wilson is able to build emotional intensity within the painting without depicting the tragic events that are to follow.

Interestingly, one year earlier, George Stubbs had entered a painting depicting the same Ovidian story – *Phaeton and the Horses of the Sun* (Fig. 12); he was also to exhibit a different painting of the same title in 1764. Stubbs' version of the story shows a later scene than Wilson's; in fact, he shows Phaeton when the chariot is veering out of control and struggling to avert disaster. Primarily because of this, Stubbs' painting is much more dramatic for the viewer than Wilson's. The *British Evening Post* gave a detailed description of the painting;

The excellence of this artist consists in drawing horses. The horses are the capital part of this picture, and are indeed excellent. The reining in of one, the confusion of the two others, and the other pouring down the Steep, are well imagined and naturally executed. I do not much admire the figure of Phaeton, nor the colour of the Sky.<sup>64</sup>

In the same way that Wilson wanted to improve the status of landscape painting by linking it with history painting, Stubbs uses Ovid to demonstrate his abilities as far more than just a horse painter. Interestingly, the reviewer in the newspaper notices that Stubbs' 'horses are the capital part' just as, in Wilson's depiction of Ovid's tales, the landscape is far more prominent than the figures. Though these artists were trying to gain respect from patrons and fellow artists by elevating their works through the use of historical references, neither changed their style or subject matter completely. Both, in essence, stay true to their traditional genre – respectively landscape painting and sporting art.

Reynolds was one of the most prominent artists at the SAGB at this time and a significant promoter of the use of the classical style, particularly in portraiture. During his Grand Tour, Reynolds had recognised that the great Italian masters such as Titian and Michelangelo were unrivalled in their fields.<sup>65</sup> He further recognised that it was pertinent for British artists to take inspiration from the masters. On his return from Rome, Reynolds encouraged his fellow artists to promote a classicised art to British audiences who, he felt, were too concerned with commissioning portraits and decorative landscapes for their country houses. Reynolds wanted to compete with the French Salons and encourage British patrons to buy British art. Wilson was in Rome with Reynolds in the 1750s, and it is probable that Reynolds and Wilson discussed attempts to raise the profile of painting in Britain. Accounts

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<sup>64</sup> *British Evening Post*, 25<sup>th</sup> May 1762, Issue 189, London

<sup>65</sup> Reynolds was in Italy from 1749-1753 spending two years in Rome before travelling to Florence, Bologna, Parma and Venice. For more on the Grand Tour see: Andrew Wilton, *Grand Tour: Lure of Italy in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1996)

suggest that the two artists actually took trips together whilst in Italy; apparently Reynolds recalled Wilson admiring the Falls of Terni and exclaiming, ‘Well done, Water, by God’.<sup>66</sup> It seems very probable that Wilson and Reynolds shared an agenda for contemporary British art. Both artists believed that British artists should attempt to elevate their status through the use of historical, allegorical and classical references. Notably, this is very reminiscent of what Félibien had been promoting to the French Academy less than a century before.

Reynolds would not begin painting history paintings proper until much later; instead, when he exhibited alongside Wilson at SAGB exhibitions, he presented the viewers with portraits. Reynolds was a practical business man, he knew that his British patrons wanted portraits above anything else and, if buying a grand history painting, they would buy from the continent; therefore he painted to demand. However, the portraits he presented were often in the grand style and, therefore, reminiscent of history paintings. By adopting this style he hoped to prove to British patrons that native artists were as capable as continental artists at creating masterpieces. Furthermore, he hoped that his success would demonstrate to his fellow artists that they should adopt a grand style. Reynolds would go on to campaign about this to fellow artists in his *Discourses* once he became President of the Royal Academy. A good example of Reynolds’ referencing the classical past is one of his entries to the 1762 SAGB annual exhibition [Fig. 13]. The portrait is of Lady Elizabeth Keppel decorating a statue of Hymen, the god of marriage, with garlands of flowers. Reynolds shows Lady Keppel looking almost like a classical statue herself; something that is further suggested by the servant behind her who, though mirroring her mistress’s pose, seems mesmerised by her Lady. The servant looks up to her Lady as if she too were an ancient goddess. We are able to draw parallels between Reynolds’ and Wilson’s techniques when elevating their paintings to

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<sup>66</sup> Frank Rutter, *Wilson and Farington* (London, 1923) pp.19-20

the ‘grand style’. Both artists use classical architecture as props to set the scene, and Wilson, like Reynolds, uses statue-like poses for his subjects and covers them in classical drapery, adding to the suggestion that they are from a previous age. Both artists were able successfully to use classical imagery to enhance both the status of painting in Britain and their own careers.

Like *Niobe*, *Phaeton’s petition to Apollo* proved successful for Wilson, gathering patrons who ordered versions of the painting and receiving considerable publicity in the press, particularly for the engraving after picture, which was again executed by Woollett. Henry Blundell of Ince Hall commissioned an even larger version of the picture, at 96x96 inches.<sup>67</sup> We have noted that John Boydell commissioned Woollett to engrave Wilson’s *Niobe*; in fact, it seems as if he at the same time commissioned Woollett to engrave four other paintings, making up a set of five: Andrea Casali’s history painting *Gunhilda*, the two prize-winning landscapes by the Smith brothers that had been displayed at the 1760 SEAMC annual competition and, finally, Wilson’s *Phaeton*.<sup>68</sup> Casali’s painting had also been a prize-winning painting in the 1760 show. As previously noted, the SAGB artists had been offended during the first exhibition by the inclusion of the SEAMC Premium Pictures since they considered themselves superior to the competition winners. However, by this point it seems Wilson had accepted that association with Premium winners could further his reputation. It is also significant that Boydell favoured Wilson’s historical landscapes; as a trader Boydell had selected *Niobe* and *Phaeton* as Wilson’s most lucrative works for reproduction – this was both a compliment to Wilson and a signal of the kinds of work he could expect to attract attention in future. The advert for the engravings reads:

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<sup>67</sup> Constable (London, 1953) plate 22a

<sup>68</sup> Timothy Clayton describes the publishing of these prints in *The English Print 1688-1802*, (New Haven and London, 1997). *The London Chronicle* of Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1760 reported ‘John Boydell, Engraver in Cheapside, Proposes to publish by subscription, Five Prints, Three from Premium Pictures, and Two from Landscapes, painted by Mr Wilson...’

John Boydell, engraver in Cheapside, Proposes to publish by Subscription, Five Prints, Three from Premium Pictures and Two from landscapes, painted by Mr Richard Wilson, viz.

The Historical Picture Gunhilda by Chevalier Casali, engraving by Mr Ravenet, 20 inches high, and 15 inches broad.

A landstorm by Mr Richard Wilson

A Setting Sun by ditto

Two landscapes by Messers J and G Smith of Chichester.

These four are now engraving by Mr Woollett 23 ½ inches long and 19 deep.

The Subscription will be 11 5s half to be paid at the time of subscribing, and the other half on the Delivery of the Prints which will be finished in the highest manner and delivered to the subscribers as soon as the Elegance with which they are intended to be engraved will admit of. After the subscription is closed the price will be 11 11s 6d.<sup>69</sup>

Boydell clearly imagines that the landscapes by Wilson will sell as a pair. Interestingly, this advertisement suggests that Wilson had created *Phaeton* before the 1763 show, and that he preceded Stubbs in identifying this Ovidian tale as a source of inspiration for his painting. By 1763 the same group of engravings would be advertised as:

1. Niobe, a much admired print, after Mr R Wilson...
2. Phaeton requesting the Chariot of the Sun

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<sup>69</sup> *London Chronicle*, Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1760. Issue 550

3. First Premium Picture by Mr G Smith...
4. Second Premium Picture by Mr J Smith...
5. Gunhilda's Premium by the Chevalier Cazali...<sup>70</sup>

Wilson's final Ovidian inspired landscape to be submitted to the SAGB was *A Storm at day break with the Story of Ceyx and Alcyone* [Fig 14]. In Book XI of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells the tragic tale of a devoted husband and wife, Ceyx and Alcyone. The couple were reputed never to be apart until Ceyx had to go on a sea voyage, leaving his love on her own. Ceyx's ship experienced difficulty in a storm and, unbeknown to his wife, he tragically drowned. Ovid recounts how the gods took pity on Alcyone, who naively awaited her husband's return, sending Morpheus disguised as Ceyx to Alcyone in a dream to tell her of his fate. On waking, Alcyone ran to the sea-shore to find her husband's pale corpse washing up on the shore. In distress, she ran into the sea where she, too, drowned. The gods turned the couple into sea birds so that they could be together once gain.

Wilson's tense and stormy landscape encapsulates more than one of the scenes described by Ovid. According to the poet, considerable time had passed between the shipwreck and Alcyone's knowledge of her husband's fate;

Meanwhile the Wind-god's daughter, unaware

Of these disasters, counts the passing nights...<sup>71</sup>

However, in Wilson's painting, we can see the stormy skies and the sea with the shipwreck tumbling towards the rocks whilst Ceyx's body is pulled from the water as if it all happened in a short time frame. Despite this, Wilson represents Ovid's description of the wreck quite

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<sup>70</sup> *Public Advertiser*, Wednesday 2 March 1763, Issue 8839

<sup>71</sup> Translated by A.D. Melville, *Ovid Metamorphoses* (Oxford, 1986) p.266

accurately; Wilson's ship tumbles just as Ovid suggested it should. Alcyone is held back by onlookers preventing her from running into the sea, where she is to meet her sad fate.

Once again Wilson uses statue-like poses and flowing drapery in depicting the two central characters of the story. This reminds the viewer that they are classical figures, although, interestingly, the onlookers and other characters in the scene are in more contemporary dress, perhaps acknowledging that they are not part of the original story. Wilson portrays the narrative in an engaging way, immediately engrossing the viewer: he chooses the most dramatic part of the tale. Solkin suggests that the picture, 'featuring both love and maritime tragedy' would have exerted 'a broad market appeal' in the immediate aftermath of the maritime conflicts of the Seven Years War.<sup>72</sup> More to the point, perhaps, Wilson's portrayal of this tragic story would have been attractive because of its highly theatrical nature. Onlookers would have been engrossed in the story and excited by the unfolding drama. Wilson cleverly creates excitement and dramatic tension to engage an audience that, in the exhibition room, extended beyond a small constituency of connoisseurs. Such strategies, married with the fascination that the exhibition-going public evidently felt for an accessible classicism, allowed non-elite viewers to enjoy such works.

The composition of this historical landscape is quite different from those we have previously discussed. Most striking, initially, is the unbalanced nature of the composition; unlike his earlier works of this kind, here Wilson has destroyed the tree which would normally frame the left of the painting. This amplifies the state of turmoil that the characters are experiencing, and makes obvious a sense that the wider world they inhabit is also unbalanced. Furthermore the stark landscape indicates that the storm has caused death. The figures in the painting capture the viewer's attention first and their gestures lead one's gaze

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<sup>72</sup> Solkin (London, 1982) p.235

through the whole painting. The intense blue of the dress worn by the woman in the foreground first commands attention before her gesticulating encourages the spectator to look to the body being pulled from the water; meanwhile, those carrying the body signal towards the distressed Alcyone. Alcyone's stretched arm then directs the audience to consider the large seascape behind, as if to explain the cause of her lover's death. The huge waves crashing against the rocks, and the shipwreck being thrown against them, remind the viewer that Ceyx had no chance of survival. Arguably, in his seascape Wilson was drawing upon the works of the contemporary French artist, Claude-Joseph Vernet with whom Wilson was reputed to have spent time in Rome.<sup>73</sup> Vernet's works were very popular in Britain at this time, particularly as reproduction prints. Thus, a press report noted that:

Mr Strange received from Paris four views of the sea port views of France, painted by Vernet, and engraved by Cochin and Le Bas: They are the best composed and most beautifully executed Prints of that kind ever published; and are to be sold at Mr Strange's House, Henrietta Street, Covent Garden; and nowhere else.<sup>74</sup>

Perhaps this gave Wilson the confidence to risk alluding to a contemporary European artist rather than the masters to whom he had looked before.

The historical landscapes were by far the largest and grandest of the pictures submitted by Wilson to annual exhibitions; they confronted the viewer with a learned and often melodramatic form of spectacle. Such paintings can be considered a form of pictorial theatre. Given that the exhibition room was being increasingly recognised as a space of urban entertainment, this comparison with the theatre becomes all the more compelling.

Interestingly, newspaper adverts inviting artists to submit works to the exhibitions often

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<sup>73</sup> For more information on Wilson's use of Vernet and Vernet's popularity at this time see Solkin's catalogue entry for *Ceyx and Alcyone* (London, 1982) pp.234-235

<sup>74</sup> *Public Advertiser*, Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> January 1761, Issue 8170

referred to their works as ‘performances’ - as in ‘artists are desired to send in their several performances on Tuesday twenty-sixth.’<sup>75</sup> This suggests that artists were expected to be providing a source of entertainment for their audiences. Significantly, Ovidian stories were also being transformed into theatrical works during this period. A contemporary newspaper advertises a guide which could accompany one of these plays:

This Day is publish’d, Beautifully printed in Twelves, Price Three Shillings, Being a necessary Companion to the Theatre: In which are the Stories of Orpheus and Eurydice, Fall of Phaeton, Apollo and Daphne, Perseus and Andromeds & c. The Temple of the Muses; or the principal Histories of Fabulous Antiquity. With Explications and Remarks, which discover the true Meaning of the several fables, and their Foundation in History. Containing... 8. Phaeton’s Fall.... 35. Ceyx and Alcyone turned into Halcyons...46. Niobe changed into a Rock.<sup>76</sup>

This proves again that Ovid’s poems were understood to be suitably engaging and prominent subjects for eighteenth century audiences and, further, that they could entertain.<sup>77</sup> This guide would have proved very useful when attending the SAGB exhibitions each year!

As perhaps Wilson expected or certainly hoped, it was this group of literary landscapes which received most press attention and positioned him at the forefront of the genre of British landscape painting. It can be argued that Wilson was exploiting his knowledge that Ovid, and all things classical and mythical, were popular and fashionable among an audience beyond the aristocratic elite, and that by submitting pictures on these themes to the annual exhibitions he was hoping to take on a certain fashionability himself.

<sup>75</sup> *Public Advertiser*, Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> April 1768, Issue 10441

<sup>76</sup> *General Advertiser*, Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> May 1749, Issue 4542

<sup>77</sup> It is worth noting that theatre going was popular at this time, several SAGB artists, most famously Lambert, were engaged in screen painting for the backdrops of plays demonstrating further that paintings could be seen as a form of theatre.

The fact that it was these historical landscapes that were chosen for reproduction by print publishers is proof enough, perhaps, that sending Ovidian pictures to the SAGB displays was a successful strategy in itself. Furthermore, Wilson was also aware that Ovidian subjects were at this time considered to be of high intellectual worth; by using these subject matters he gives a weighty undertone to his paintings which again elevates him to an artistic and social status above that of a topographical landscape painter. The final painting, by Wilson I discuss in this chapter, though it offers a variant on the category of historical or literary landscape painting, shares the same visual character as the pictures already discussed. In 1765 Wilson submitted a painting inspired by a contemporary poem: *A Summer Storm, with the Story of two lovers, from Thomson* [Fig 15].<sup>78</sup> Thomson's *The Seasons*, was published in four sections; the first was available in 1726 and the whole set was available by 1730. Written in blank verse, Thomson explored and celebrated nature.

Indeed, it is often suggested by critics that Thomson was a landscape painter with words; it was this that made his works appeal to Wilson and other artists and allowed them to paint the pictures created by his verse. Thomson's poems have provoked discussion about the relationship between the visual and the literary arts, particularly since many editions of his famous poem were illustrated. Furthermore, some critics have even gone so far as to describe his poems as Ovidian in tone.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, one can believe that Wilson recognised such a parallel and emphasised it for his advantage; if he was to be labelled as the British Claude, or Poussin, or Gaspard, he should then picture the writings of an English Ovid - that is, Thomson. Such a parallel allowed Wilson to remain linked to the classical and his past

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<sup>78</sup> The current whereabouts of this picture is unknown, Constable (London, 1953) was unsure as to where the painting was, possibly in a private collection in London, but described it as being originally owned by Lock. I have reproduced the engraving by Woollett published in 1765.

<sup>79</sup> Ian Donaldson quotes Ralph Cohen's *The Art of Discrimination* (Routledge, 1964) in his book review in the *Oxford Journal*. Essay in Criticism. Vol XV. 1965 No 1 pp111-118 – 'much of the poem is intended to be playful, almost Ovidian in tone'.

masters but at the same time to draw upon poetry that enjoyed a contemporary appeal and that could be related to, by a modern audience. Wilson proved that he could be innovative and original by reviving and renewing a successful formula.

Wilson's picture tells the story of Celadon and Amelia from Thomson's *Summer*. Like the poems Wilson chose from Ovid, this is another tragic tale. On a romantic walk in a rural landscape Amelia is struck by lightning from a storm and killed:

Tis safety to be near thee sure, and thus  
 "To clasp perfection!" From his void embrace,  
 Mysterious Heaven! that moment, to the ground,  
 A blackened Corse, was struck the beauteous maid.  
 But who can paint the lover, as he stood  
 Pierc'd by severe amazement, hating life,  
 Speechless, and fix'd in all the death of woe?  
 So, faint resemblance, on the marble-tomb,  
 The well-dissembled mourner stooping stands,  
 For ever silent and, for ever sad.<sup>80</sup>

Wilson's painting portrays the moments after the lightning has struck, with the storm moving away from the figures, and Celadon being left to mourn. In fact, I would suggest Wilson paints exactly what Thomson described when he asked 'who can paint the lover, as he stood, Pierc'd by severe amazement, hating life, Speechless, and fixed all in the death of woe?'<sup>81</sup> Once again using pathetic fallacy to tell a tragic tale, his depiction of an angry storm helps us appreciate the distress felt by the subject. The broken tree tells us the narrative of the lightning strike as does the jagged break in the clouds. Unlike Wilson's Ovidian pictures, this

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<sup>80</sup> James Thomson, *The Seasons*, (London, 1758) pp. 91-92

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid* p.92

one is obviously British; the trees are no longer Mediterranean in appearance and the architecture is typically British rather than classical. Despite being primarily a landscape painter, Wilson successfully uses the position of his figures to manage the way in which the spectator approaches his painting. The viewer is immediately drawn to the central figure draped on the ground and then to her lover who stands above. Celadon's gesture encourages the eye through the middle-ground to the church on the far right, at which point our gaze follows the horizon to the left of the painting. Wilson's composition commands the viewer's eye and in turn maintains control of the audience's responses, keeping the focus on the tragic narrative.

Thomson's *The Seasons* enjoyed great critical acclaim and became one of the most popular poems to be published in this era. Newspapers advertised a new edition in 1758, just seven years previous to Wilson's painting. An advert for this edition reads, 'This day was published a new and beautiful edition adorned with cuts, in one volume, Twelves, Price 3s bound, The Seasons by James Thomson. Printed for A Miller in the Strand'.<sup>82</sup> The cuts which the advert mentions were useful to artists and popular with readers; such book illustrations often provided a starting-point for later, more elaborate representations of their subject-matter.

Here, however, it is clear that Wilson looked primarily to the Old Masters for inspiration. Earlier I discussed the echoes of Gaspard's *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* in Wilson's *Niobe*; in the case of Wilson's *Summer Storm*, it seems as if the British artist was drawing upon Poussin's depiction of the same Ovidian narrative [Fig 16]. It is understandable that Wilson looked to this image since the stories of Pyramus and Thisbe and Celadon and Amelia share certain parallels; the most obvious being that they both involve a scene in

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<sup>82</sup> *Whitehall Evening Post*, Sat 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 1758. Issue 1904

which a male character reacts with horror to his lover's death. Though turned ninety degrees, Wilson's *Amelia* mirrors Poussin's *Thisbe* in pose. Both corpses lie with left arm stretched and left knee raised; each of the two women's heads hang lifelessly to the side, and both bodies are covered with drapery. Similarly, Wilson looks to Poussin's painting when positioning *Celadon*; once again he almost exactly echoes, at ninety degrees, Poussin's equivalent figure. *Celadon*, like *Pyramus*, stands over his dead lover, arms out-stretched and mid-stride as he nears the body. It is the figures which provide the most striking comparisons between these two paintings but Wilson may well have borrowed other components from Poussin's picture. Like Poussin, Wilson posts a castle on top of his hill, furthermore; both paintings share an imposing large broken tree in the foreground. Dramatic lightning strikes cut through both skies; Wilson's almost repeating the exact form of the lightning bolt that breaks through the clouds on the left of Poussin's composition. Although at first glance the pictures appear formally quite different, similarities can thus be found throughout their contents.<sup>83</sup>

By alluding to Poussin in his composition, Wilson is once again able to place his work beyond the conventional boundaries of British landscape painting. Wilson associates himself with an artist, who, at this time, was considered an especially celebrated Old Master; indeed, in the same year that Wilson's painting went on show at the SAGB exhibition, Horace Walpole wrote, 'Poussin is the miracle of genius' in his *Anecdotes of Painting in England*.<sup>84</sup> Poussin would also feature regularly in Reynolds' *Discourses* as an artist to admire and aspire to. Thus, in his second *Discourse* Reynolds declared that 'The favourite subjects of Poussin

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<sup>83</sup> Solkin (London, 1982) confirms 'the design recalls Gaspard's land-storms and Salvator Rosa's mountain views' but does not discuss the unavoidable obvious shared traits between Wilson's *Celadon and Amelia* and Poussin's *Pyramus and Thisbe*.

<sup>84</sup> Walpole, Horace, *Anecdotes of painting in England; with some account of the principal artists; and incidental notes on other arts; collected by the late Mr George Vertue* (London, 1765) p.vi

were Ancient fables; and no painter ever better qualified to paint such subjects'.<sup>85</sup> Through his references to Poussin we can see that Wilson shared Reynolds' opinion. Wilson was not simply copying his successful forbears; rather, he was choosing their best parts and collating these to form a perfect landscape. The elements which he borrowed would be recognisable to several types of visitor to the SAGB annual exhibition of 1765, in particular to connoisseurs familiar with Poussin's canvases. However, thanks to the fast growing print trade, knowledge about the arts was no longer restricted to the elite; art was becoming more accessible to a 'middling' community. And, significantly, in the early 1750s Boydell had published a print of Poussin's *Pyramus and Thisbe*, executed by Francis Vivares. Perhaps Wilson or Woollett recognised the potential for the two similar pictures to sit as a pair, for Woollett produced an engraving of *Celadon and Amelia* by 1766, the advert for his print stating that:

This day is published, Price half a Guinea, A print of a Landstorm, with the story of Celadon and Amelia from Thomson's Seasons engraved by Mr William Woollett, from the original picture of Mr Richard Wilson in the possession of William Lock Esq. Sold by William Woollett in Lyon's Court, Leicester Fields; and Ryland and Bryer at the King's Arms in Cornhill.<sup>86</sup>

It is important to note that Wilson was not the only British artist at this time to use Thomson's *Seasons* as inspiration and, further, that Wilson's success may have been inspirational to his fellow artists. In 1767, two years after Wilson's entry, Mr Thomas Smith of Derby sent to the exhibition a painting entitled *A landscape, with the Story of Palemon and Lavinia from Thompson's Seasons*.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps Wilson's success was encouraging artists to follow in his footsteps. Both Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Thomson's *The Seasons* are

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<sup>85</sup> Reynolds, Joshua, *A discourse delivered to the students of the Royal Academy, on the distribution of the Prizes December 10<sup>th</sup> 1772, By the President* (London, 1772) p.22

<sup>86</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> June. Issue 11060

<sup>87</sup> Unfortunately I am unable to find this painting so it is difficult to compare the two artists and further to establish whether Smith had actually been inspired by Wilson.

descriptive poems, and copies of both were readily available to artists. Both poets provided inspiration and detail which made it easy for artists to paint their words. Further, both poems were particularly popular at this time; many visitors to the annual exhibition would recognise the scenes from the poems, and artists could hope to make their paintings successful through association with these already popular texts.

Wilson's historical landscapes, so very different to the history paintings proper being entered into the SAGB exhibitions, became a genre in their own right. At this point, this was a genre in which Wilson did not face a huge amount of competition, but nonetheless, during these nine years, there were a few entries that encroached into the territory that Wilson was claiming as his own, that is - historical landscape painting. In 1764 and 1766 a Mr John Sanger entered historical landscapes: first of all, *A landskip with Mercury, Argus and Io* and secondly *A landscape, the story of Arcas going to kill Callisto, who Juno had turned into a bear*.<sup>88</sup> Both paintings took inspiration from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Meanwhile, a Mr Atwood entered a *Landskip with Historical figures* in 1763. Atwood up to this point had submitted only floral still-lives; perhaps such pictures had not achieved the attention he had desired. Thus, we can conclude that Wilson did not face any major competition in this field whilst exhibiting at the SAGB. In terms of the paintings that hung on the walls of the SAGB's Great Room, Wilson's historical landscapes stood pretty much alone. Although the four historical paintings discussed here were exhibited over a period of nine years, and never together, it is nevertheless intriguing to consider them forming a kind of set - not least because Woollett engraved all four paintings. They could thus, in theory, have been displayed together on a print patron's walls or in a collector's folio. Furthermore, we have seen that that Boydell and Woollett had intended *Niobe* and *Phaeton* to be sold as a pair. Though not

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<sup>88</sup> Neither of these paintings exist today so regretfully little comparison can be drawn other than that of the subject matter.

exactly the same size as the aforementioned prints, the later historical landscape engravings are similar to *Niobe* and *Phaeton* and would certainly fit into a set. *Celadon and Amelia* and *Ceyx and Alcyone* are alike in form and size, and under both images, Woollett reproduces the poetic lines depicted in each image. It thus seems probable that Woollett understood the four pictures as relating to each other, however loosely.

The four paintings share the same visual character, and when the engravings are placed alongside each other, remarkable comparisons can be made. In terms of subject matter and style the pictures sit well together; all depict stories of crisis, each of which has a tragic end. One looks at the set of engravings and sees tension, horror and grief; each picture evokes an emotional response and draws the viewer in to a realm of drama and sadness, something that must have formed a significant part of the appeal of these prints. I have argued that visitors to the SAGB annual exhibitions would have experienced such emotions; as a set, these emotions would have been amplified and extended. Formally the pictures are quite similar: each landscape follows a formula of a flattened foreground with figures, framed by trees, tall land masses and a spectacular sky. Furthermore, Wilson consistently uses certain pictorial details or strategies: note the statuesque poses of his figures, their classicised drapery and the artist's use of pathetic fallacy to guide the mood of the viewer. The publishers of the prints after Wilson obviously recognised and exploited the artist's complex variations on a theme.

In 1923, the art critic Frank Rutter wrote that:

With the exception of a few direct commissions like 'the Villa of Maecenas, Tivoli' and 'the Destruction of Niobe's Children' – which no future historian will dream of

including among his most important paintings – Richard Wilson escaped the perilous pretension of attempting ‘the grand style.’<sup>89</sup>

On the contrary, it can be argued that *Niobe* and its ‘grand style’ successors were the most important paintings of the artist’s career. After all, it was with these paintings that Wilson announced his talents and skill at the first exhibitions of contemporary art in Britain. In fact, Wilson succeeded in using the grand style to his own benefit; one might go so far as to say that Wilson, like Reynolds, developed such a style to further not only his own status, but the status of artists in Britain more generally.

### Chapter Three: ‘Very fine’ Landscapes

During the years 1760-1768 Wilson exhibited between one and six landscapes of a very different kind to those I have just been discussing. These were mainly topographical views of the Italian and British countryside. I will argue that although his historical landscapes formed the centrepiece of his annual portfolio of pictures, his other paintings were important accompaniments, and were included because of their appeal to individual clients. It was with these scenes, moreover, that Wilson faced most competition from his fellow artists. As we have established, Wilson did not only exhibit grand scale historical landscapes at the annual exhibitions. Apart from the simple fact that it took the artist a great deal of time to execute such paintings, it was undoubtedly part of his exhibiting strategy to appeal to present a varied and interesting portfolio of works.<sup>90</sup> These smaller view paintings, often a combination of Italian and British landscapes, were more saleable than larger grand historical pieces. Like most successful artists of the period, Wilson was also a successful businessman;

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<sup>89</sup> Rutter, Frank. *Wilson and Farington*, (London, 1923) p57

<sup>90</sup> Even the smallest of Wilson’s historical landscapes, *Ceyx and Alcyone* is 101.6x127cm, the incredible detail and complexities must have taken considerable execution.

he can be seen to have presented these paintings as examples of what gentlemen could commission themselves. In the same way that Wilson used familiar literary references to engage the viewer in his historical works, in these more topographical scenes, he selects famous areas of Britain as well as famous tourist sites in Italy.<sup>91</sup> Although Wilson still continues to elevate such works through the use of classical imagery, they were smaller, more approachable, and more affordable. On his return from Italy, Wilson was the only British artist who was able to offer British buyers topographical views of Italy, until the artist William Marlow returned from his travels in 1767. Moreover, he was able to offer these views with personal knowledge of the sites. Wilson's Italian landscapes are nostalgic and learned. They offer an understanding of, and a link to, a world that had passed, but that was renowned and accepted as the greatest civilization in history. It is worth noting that Wilson, painting these works for the domestic market, often executed several versions of the same landscape and it is thus sometimes difficult to identify the exact paintings which he displayed at the SAGB exhibitions.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, we can make some informed judgements, allowing us to continue the argument of this thesis.

During the years Wilson exhibited with the SAGB, he submitted at least fifteen paintings which were Italian views; at least one for every annual display.<sup>93</sup> Varying in size and composition, these views formed an important strand of Wilson's exhibition strategy. In consistently displaying Italian scenes, Wilson presented himself as the premier Italian scene painter in Britain. There is no doubt that the historical landscapes were perceived as his grand centrepieces for the exhibition portfolios, however; in number it was his Italian topographical scenes which dominated Wilson's annual selection.

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<sup>91</sup> J Payne's *The Beauties of nature and art displayed in a tour through the world* (London, 1763) offers an interesting overview of popular tourist spots for an eighteenth century audience.

<sup>92</sup> The popularity of Wilson's views can also be determined by how many duplicates there are of each view since this often correlates with how many patrons had purchased said view.

<sup>93</sup> There may be more of Wilson's submissions that are based on Italian views yet do not refer to the place in the title, for example *A landskip and figures* exhibited in 1764.

Each Italian view by Wilson pictured a specific site; often one which was popular with Grand Tourists. A repeated subject of Wilson's was certainly a popular tourist site in the eighteenth century – Lake Nemi. Joseph Addison, in his eighteenth century travel guide, describes Lake Nemi as follows:

The lake of Nemi lies in a very deep bottom, so surrounded on all sides with mountains and groves, that the surface of it is never ruffled with the least breath of wind, which, perhaps, together with the clearness of its waters, gave it formerly the name of Diana's Looking – glass. – Speculumque Dianae.<sup>94</sup>

In 1761 Wilson submitted *The Lake of Nemi* (Fig. 17) to the SAGB second annual exhibition, as one of four Italian landscapes; more in this year than any other. *The Lake of Nemi* (or certainly a version of it) was painted in Italy in the early 1750s and was undoubtedly based on a painting by Gaspard entitled *Ideal Landscape* (Fig. 18).<sup>95</sup> Wilson's relatively large landscape shows Lake Nemi in the centre of the composition, framed by trees and mountains; the outline of a town is visible in the background. The striking resemblance to the Gaspard painting would have been obvious to the educated spectator; one can suppose that such viewers would recognise Wilson's self-conscious quotation of the seventeenth century master. Here, we can suggest that Wilson has been able to elevate his landscape paintings to the 'grand manner' without depiction of the narrative of Ovidian stories.

His Italian landscapes have depth and meaning not only because of their artistic references, but because of the rich associations of the places he chose to depict. Tivoli features continually as a favourite subject throughout his submissions; four paintings describing Tivoli sites were exhibited by Wilson in this period, though he painted many more throughout his career. A popular stop on a British aristocrat's Grand Tour, Tivoli was

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<sup>94</sup> Joseph Addison, *Remarks on several parts of Italy & c. In the years 1701, 1702, 1703 ...* (London, 1761) p.218

<sup>95</sup> For a detailed comparison of the two paintings see David Solkin's 'Richard Wilson's variations on a theme by Gaspard Dughet' in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 123, no.940 pp.410-141

classically known as Tibur.<sup>96</sup> The area was famed in the Roman period for its beauty, its clear water and its clean air. Consequently, many villas were built here, the ruins of which survived when Wilson conducted his own Grand Tour. A guide book described those who retreated to Tivoli during the time of the Empire:

The ancient Romans were wont to seek shelter from the scorching heats of the summer, among the woods and lakes of those hills; and the Cardinals and Roman Princes, at the same season, retire to their villas; while many of the wealthier sort of citizens take lodgings in the villages, during the season of the gathering vines.<sup>97</sup>

These reminders of antiquity and its scenic landscape made Tivoli a popular destination for aristocratic gentlemen on the Grand Tour. Guide books described it as one of the ‘chief cities’ to visit during a trip to Italy.<sup>98</sup> Another guide book describes the town:

Tivoli is famous for its waterworks. In the Villa d’Este belonging to the duke of Modena, there is another water-organ. The variety of cascades here is amazing; and at the end of a long row of them there is a representation of some antique temple. ‘Tis in marble, and must have been expensive. There is a good statue of a fighter with the ancient cestus; he has a Phrygian cap, and the thongs of his cestus reach up to his elbows...

Tivoli is the ancient Tibur. The name of Gallius stands on the architrave: he is supposed to have restored it from its former ruins...<sup>99</sup>

Contemporary newspapers and the literate urban public they served seemed to have been fascinated by the foreignness and magic of Italy. Even those unable to conduct a Grand Tour desired knowledge of the sites. Newspapers told stories of those who had travelled to such

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<sup>96</sup> For a general description of the Grand Tour in the eighteenth century see Jeremy Black, *The British Abroad: The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century* (Gloucestershire, 1992)

<sup>97</sup> John Moore, *A View of Society and Manners in Italy* (London, 1796) p.290

<sup>98</sup> J. Payne, *The Beauties of Nature and Art Displayed, in a Tour Through the World* (London, 1763) p.139

<sup>99</sup> Thomas Broderick, *Letters from Several Parts of Europe and the East Written in the Years 1750 & c.* (London, 1754) p.145

places as Tivoli; Wilson, in his exhibited depictions of these ancient environments, can be seen to have been catering to a similar need.

Wilson's 1763 entry to the SAGB exhibition, *A View from Tivoli towards Rome* was a sunlit, tranquil landscape. The landscape is unassuming and rural yet includes numerous antique references, just as guide books suggested:

The town of Tivoli is now wretchedly poor; it boasts however greater antiquity than Rome itself.<sup>100</sup>

Wilson's quiet landscape seems to suggest that he agreed with the advice of the following contemporary writer:

If you ever come to Tivoli, let it not be with a numerous party; come alone, or with a single friend, and be sure to put Horace in your pocket.<sup>101</sup>

Further, one could easily be led to believe that Wilson did indeed think of Horace's description of the town and surrounding area where he wrote many of his famous poems.

John Moore translates:

May Tibur to my latest hours,  
Afford a kind and calm retreat;  
Tibur, beneath whose lofty towers,  
The Grecians fix'd their blissful seat.<sup>102</sup>

Many members of the London exhibition-going public would have been familiar with the writings of Horace, or with accessible versions of these writings; for, as in the case of Ovid, his works were very much in vogue, shaping fantasies of classical reflection and retreat that perfectly fitted the imagery of Wilson's Italian landscapes.

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<sup>100</sup> John Moore, *A View of Society and Manners in Italy* (London, 1796) p.293

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid* p.298

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid* p.294

In 1764 Wilson entered a pair of Italian landscapes: *View in the Ruins of Hadrian's Villa near Tivoli* (Fig.19) and *View in the Ruins of Maecenas' Villa at Tivoli* (Fig.20) which are the same size and explore similar themes. Small when compared to many of Wilson's works, these are far from grand style paintings. Both are dominated by ruins. In both, Wilson conjures up thoughts of an antique age filtered through a melancholy prism. The ruins are so overgrown and damaged that they lose the sense of grandeur that they presumably once had; instead they provoke a sense of loss and sadness, once again reminding the viewer of the decline of a once-great empire.<sup>103</sup> Both landscapes were painted from drawings which Wilson had undertaken whilst in Italy - the drawing of Hadrian's Villa (Fig. 21) almost exactly prefigures the painting in terms of its composition whereas the drawing of Maecenas' Villa (Fig. 22) is quite different to its painted successor. Wilson appears to have altered the latter view to allow these paintings to form a pair; he has moved his vantage point so that the viewer is the same distance from each landmark; the shape of an arch is repeated in both pictures. Wilson introduces drama to the paintings by adding light and shadow and, in both scenes, he develops the landscape behind the ruins to add to his story. The figures in each picture invite the viewer to take their place and explore the scene. In exhibiting such scenes, Wilson makes visually accessible a site which once would have been entirely exclusive.

It is important to recognise that Maecenas was a fascinating figure for educated eighteenth century viewers; he was the most famous Roman patron of the arts and further, a personification of luxury. The importance of Maecenas can be determined in eighteenth century guide books where his villa is always acknowledged:

The cascade of Tivoli is nothing so deep as that of Terni...after its fall, it divides itself into two parts; one of which fetches a compass about the town; the other is soon lost

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<sup>103</sup> Solkin provides a convincing argument to state that Wilson used ruins to emphasise the collapse of the Roman Empire (London, 1982) pp.217-218

in a Gulph and runs in several channels under a great part of the Town, and then rising again, comes to the Palazzo d'Este, whence a branch runs to Maecenas's Villa, the remains of which still appear.<sup>104</sup>

Several advertisements for published books about the legendary figure appeared in the press throughout the mid-eighteenth century; these often emphasised the relationship between Horace and Maecenas, poet and patron:

This day is publish'd, (Two Volumes) ... The first Volume adorn'd with the Head of Horace; the second with that of Maecenas and a curious plate of the Dining-Room of Nafidienus; containing in it the Heads of several great men of Rome, representing their manner of Dining.<sup>105</sup>

The audience is confronted with the destruction and decay of a once luxurious place.

If such works helped confirm Wilson's status as a 'classical' British landscape painter, he was soon to face an artistic challenge of sorts. On William Marlow's return to England in 1767, Wilson was faced, for the first time, with some direct competition at the SAGB annual exhibitions. Marlow specialised in souvenirs of the Grand Tour and views of country houses; he presented himself as a commercial artist with a clear product for sale. Marlow's entries followed a pattern – they declared his status as a topographical landscape painter. Marlow's first submission to the SAGB exhibition, in the year of his return, consisted of four paintings, described in the catalogue as: *The Temple of Concord at Rome*, *View of Tivoli*, *Ditto near Naples*, and *Ditto with an ancient ruin at Tivoli*. Reading Marlow's list, one could easily believe it to be part of a set of paintings by Wilson. Marlow depicts similar scenes to Wilson, and Marlow similarly uses Italian place names to evoke thoughts of exotic travel. He similarly evokes the classical through the mention of an 'ancient villa'. However,

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<sup>104</sup> Edward Wright, *Some observations made in Travelling through France, Italy & c. In the years 1720, 1721 and 1722* (London, 1730) p.367

<sup>105</sup> *London Evening Post*, Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> September 1749

Marlow's landscapes were appreciated as topographically accurate records of sites seen by those on the Grand Tour, unlike Wilson's embellished Italian landscapes, which more ambiguously evoke memories or imagery of times past. *View near Naples* (Fig. 23) is the only picture of the set with a current known whereabouts. Immediately the difference in style is noticeable; Marlow's view is detailed and descriptive. His figures wear contemporary dress and in turn date the painting, as do the boats on the shore and in the sea. Marlow paints the typical everyday life of a fishing town. His view is not reminiscent of the classical European landscape style and is very different from Wilson's. Marlow reports contemporary Italy to a contemporary British audience.<sup>106</sup> Interestingly, an article in the *Public Advertiser* compared the two landscape artists in 1767: 'Mr Marlow is a rising Genius, at present much inferior to Mr Wilson in landskip painting, properly so called, but superior in building and water.'<sup>107</sup> Wilson is accepted as the master in his genre after a number of years exhibiting at the SAGB exhibitions and gaining considerable reputation; however Marlow obviously held some appeal to the contemporary audience and enjoyed significant success in selling his works.

It is worth noting that, on one occasion, the veteran Lambert submitted an Italian landscape to the SAGB exhibitions. In 1761, Lambert displayed a grand-scale painting: *Italian River Scene* (Fig. 24). Since Lambert had not travelled to Italy, it can be determined that the painting was either entirely imagined or derived from a painting by Claude or Gaspard. This was the first year that Lambert would enter works to the annual exhibition and the year in which he would become Chairman of the SAGB. Respected in artistic circles, and successful in terms of commissions, it is likely that Wilson viewed Lambert, fourteen years his senior, as his main competition. As Wilson had done, one year earlier, Lambert announced his artistic abilities to the SAGB with a portfolio of one grand-scale painting and a

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<sup>106</sup> For general information on William Marlow see Gilbert Redgrave, *A History of Water-Colour Painting in England* (London, 1892)

<sup>107</sup> *Public Advertiser*, Friday 1<sup>st</sup> May 1767, Issue 10140

collection of smaller topographical scenes. The large Italian landscape would have appeared inherently Claudian to the educated exhibition-going audience. Connoisseurs may even have pointed to its echoes of Claude's *Rest in the Flight to Egypt* (Fig. 25). The juxtaposition of this work with his English topographical landscapes would have been particularly striking. However, this was a juxtaposition that he decided not to repeat – as we have seen, it was Wilson who continued to exhibit Italian scenes.

In 1765 Wilson entered *A View from villa Madama, three miles from Rome* (Fig. 26). Villa Madama was built in the sixteenth century, and was consciously designed to rival the villas of antiquity. The artist James Russel described its history in 1750:

I took a walk through the Porta Angelica, from which a strait and pleasant road leads to Villa Madama, so named from Margarita of Austria, first wife of Alexander Medici. It stands up on a hill called Monte Mario...Cardinal Julius de Medici who was afterwards Clement VII built this villa, Raphael being the architect: but it has been strangely neglected for some time, and tho' a charming place, suffered to run to ruin...This villa has most delightful walks and shady groves...<sup>108</sup>

Since the Villa had been designed by Raphael, artists continued to have close associations with the site; Claude famously spent many hours studying trees in the gardens. To an eighteenth century audience this would be most fascinating; an Italian site that not only resonated with antiquity, but that was associated with Renaissance and seventeenth century masters. Those who had experienced a Grand Tour would have been aware of this layering of associations and would, in turn, have recognised that Wilson was thereby aligning himself with the great masters of art history.

*A View from villa Madama* is a relatively large landscape; one approaches the view and is drawn to the statue in the centre foreground which leans towards the figures at the left

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<sup>108</sup> James Russel, *Letters from a young painter abroad to his friends in England* (London, 1750) pp.362-4

of the canvas. As we have previously seen, Wilson often uses such figures to indicate how the viewer should look at the painting. Here we are pointed towards the right of the composition, towards the villa where we pick up the line of foliage to the river, which leads the eye through to the background. Typical of his Gaspardian style, Wilson frames the piece with trees, adds height with buildings and mountains and leaves the river to the flat middle-ground. Interestingly, the British Museum has a drawing by Claude of a very similar view; *View from the Monte Mario* (Fig. 27). Claude's view starts from Wilson's middle-ground and focuses on the river meandering to the mountain. Wilson's foliage on the river bank is quite similar to that found in the ink drawing by Claude, as is the sculpting of the landscape below the mountain. Significantly, whilst displaying a famous topographical site Wilson is also able to assert pictorial links to the European masters of both the Renaissance and the seventeenth century. Even as he can be understood as an artist catering to a wide exhibition audience, such strategies confirm that Wilson remained keen to satisfy the desires of the most stringent connoisseurs and the most learned grand tourists.

Wilson had found, in his Italian landscapes, a niche market: he was, for a period, the only British artist to paint Italian topographical scenes. Wilson painted for a Grand Tourist market and was able to advertise his skills and ability to such patrons through the SAGB annual exhibitions. Unlike his historical landscapes, these Italian views did not capture the attention of press critics or of print publishers; Wilson would have known, instead, that they would prove attractive to individual, well-travelled clients and gain him further commissions from their peers.

Wilson was also aware of the already established school of British countryside views and country house portraits. Such landscapes were expected from British artists, and were highly popular amongst aristocratic patrons. Even as he explored new genres of landscape painting, Wilson did not ignore a genre which he knew enjoyed a lucrative market. That is

not to say, of course, that Wilson duplicated the methods of established native artists such as Lambert; instead, he often assigned his English scenes a distinctively Italian air. Wilson, we can suggest, entered these landscapes into his SAGB portfolios to advertise his range of talents and to gain commissions on his home turf. During his years exhibiting with the SAGB, Wilson displayed at least nine British landscapes.<sup>109</sup> This set of paintings included both public and private landmarks, and Welsh and English views; he displayed a range of landscapes which could be commissioned to decorate the country house or to picture it.<sup>110</sup>

After he had exhibited an English landscape at the SAGB annual exhibition in 1767, the *Public Advertiser* declared that:

Mr Wilson ho'ds the first rank among the landscape painters. His view from Moor-Park is in Point of Execution, capital, and may convince the World that the simple Grandeur of an extensive, richly cultivated, wooden plain, and the Verdure, almost peculiar to our Island, so much admired in Nature, and so much decried in Imitation, may have extraordinary Beauties in a Picture.<sup>111</sup>

This commentary is the only discussion of Wilson's SAGB entries not to be primarily concerned with a historical landscape in a public newspaper in the 1760s; this English view clearly stood out (Fig. 28). The writer focuses on the natural beauty pictured in the landscape, suggesting pride in a distinctively British scene. The writer emphasises that it is only Britain which could provide a view such as this. It appears that Wilson provoked patriotism and pride in his home country by entering this view alongside his Italian landscapes. Furthermore, it was this landscape which led an accompanying publication to the exhibition to proclaim that 'This is a very fine landscape, executed in a most masterly manner, and well understood. The

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<sup>109</sup> There may be more of Wilson's submissions that are based on British views yet do not contain a landmark in the title for confirmation.

<sup>110</sup> For a detailed study of Wilson's patrons during this period see Constable (London, 1953) Chapter 4, pp.120-131

<sup>111</sup> *Public Advertiser*, Friday 1<sup>st</sup> May 1767, Issue 10140

flat is admirably represented, and the keeping excellent. But the foreground is rather heavy, and the figures of the woman and child very bad.’<sup>112</sup> In 1767, Wilson entered fewer paintings than in any other year, with only *Landscape and figures* accompanying *View from Moor Park*. It is interesting that despite only entering two paintings, Wilson was still able to attract attention. The other painting, it seems, may have been a version of *Niobe*; the two paintings would be considerably different when hung at the SAGB exhibition, showing the vast contrast between Wilson’s genres in just two paintings<sup>113</sup>. Wilson’s entries to the 1767 exhibition also received a poetic response that suggests a far more negative reaction to his work than had typically been displayed earlier in the decade:

Lo! Wilson’s pictures to the sight appear,  
 Like hoary Phantoms when you first draw near;  
 The ghosts of Genius on the surface seen,  
 Thin, sharp, emaciate with a meagre mien.  
 Those mouldy masks have frequent dup’d the eyes,  
 Like ancient Gibeonites in grey disguise;  
 Or like a morning in the month of May,  
 When frugal frosts the laughing fields array,  
 Those sight fore-runners of a splendid day.<sup>114</sup>

The poem emphasises the ghostly remnants in Wilson’s work of the old masters - ‘hoary phantoms’ – and the status of his works as ‘mouldy masks’ suggests that his art is merely a poor, miserable copy of his illustrious, but long-dead forebears. Evidently, not all of his eighteenth century audience enjoyed Wilson’s works.

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<sup>112</sup> *A Critical Examination of the Pictures, Sculptures, Designs in Architecture, Models, Drawings, Prints & c. Exhibited at the Great Room in Spring Gardens, Charing Cross*, (London, 1767) Interestingly the sub-heading to this pamphlet was ‘Intended for the Use of those who would understand what they see’.

<sup>113</sup> Solkin (London, 1982) pp.201-202 Footnote 3.

<sup>114</sup> *Le pour et le Contre being a Poetical Display of the Merit and Demerit of the Capital Paintings Exhibited at Spring Gardens* (London, 1767) p.16

*View from Moor Park* was commissioned by Sir Lawrence Dundas, who had only a few years earlier bought the estate. Dundas was well known for being a social climber and for having reaped the benefits of ‘new money’. Furthermore, he allowed publishers to create engravings of his art collection, publicising his activities as a patron and collector. Newspaper reports also include items describing new paintings that he had acquired from Italy.<sup>115</sup> Unlike traditional estate portraiture, here Wilson actually paints the view from the estate rather than the view of the estate. This sets out Dundas’ ambitions as a landowner, and suggests that that he aimed to own more of the surrounding area. The view includes the familiar detail of an artist sitting beneath a tree with an admiring onlooker. Although praised as a quintessentially British view, we can suggest that Wilson’s does not deviate that dramatically from the conventions of the Claudian and Gaspardian landscape. The viewer is faced with the familiar details of Wilson’s framing trees and the distinctive pathway for the eye that is opened up through the painting.<sup>116</sup>

On four occasions between 1761 and 1768, Wilson exhibits views of public landscapes in Britain; *A View near Chester*, 1761 (Fig. 29), *A View of the Thames, near Richmond*, 1762 (Fig. 30), *A View of Holt Bridge on the River Dee*, 1762 (Fig. 31) and *A North-West View of Snowdon and its environs*, 1766 (Fig. 32). When looking at these paintings as a group, it is striking that, despite their uniformly British subject-matter, Wilson does not falter from his loyalty to the European classical landscape tradition. Interestingly, this dependency is probably even more obvious here than some of his Italian topographical views. The first three of these pictures, in particular, combine to form a set. All three are flat,

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<sup>115</sup> Mentions such as Dundas buying ‘several pictures from Italy’ (*Public Advertiser*, Monday 5<sup>th</sup> September 1763) suggest that he enjoyed being seen as a patron of the arts as it helped raise his social standing.

<sup>116</sup> For further discussion of Wilson’s relationship with Dundas, and Dundas’ rise to wealth see Solkin (London, 1982) pp.127-129

tranquil landscapes reminiscent of Claudian Italianate views.<sup>117</sup> Each is based around a river and contains the Claudian formula of framing trees on either side of the canvas to build a balanced landscape. In fact by using such components one recognises again that Wilson himself sticks to a relatively rigid pictorial formula: a balanced landscape with trees and high-ground typically frames a flat middle-ground which often contains a river or lake, with figures to indicate the way in which the viewer should negotiate the painting. These sites would be recognisable to many of the educated visitors to the SAGB exhibitions as popular relaxation places when retreating from the city. Interestingly, Wilson is able to draw parallels with Italian landmarks such as Tivoli and Lake Nemi, which, as we have seen, were famous retreats of Emperors and associates during the Roman Empire. Wilson allows the British audience to consider themselves in this way associated with antiquity.

Furthermore, Wilson's public views were of significant landmarks, all with some link to the continent and antiquity; Wilson emphasised Britain's link to the Roman Empire and any architecture inspired by it. In both 1761 and 1762 Wilson exhibits views of the River Dee to the SAGB exhibition. The River Dee runs through Chester, famous as a Roman headquarters; by using Chester and the River Dee Wilson immediately makes reference to Italy and the classical.<sup>118</sup> *Holt Bridge on the River Dee* is a balanced landscape of the classical tradition, particularly reminiscent of the works of Claude. Using a similar composition to Claude's *Landscape with Argus guarding Io* (Fig. 33), Wilson deploys a cliff edge to balance his foreground tree in the very same way as Lorrain. Both artists use the form of the river to guide the viewer's eye through the detailed background and both place an arched bridge in the middle of the snaking river. Even such details as the piping shepherd

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<sup>117</sup> Solkin provides an interesting discussion of the meanings behind structured, calm landscapes and how they reflected the morals and ambitions of eighteenth century society. See Solkin, (London, 1982) 'The Rule of Nature' pp.113-134

<sup>118</sup> For detailed discussion of the meanings and the use of Chester and the River Dee in Wilson's paintings see Solkin, (London, 1982) pp.207-8

could be considered distinctly Claudian. Claude's *Pastoral landscape: The Roman Campagna*, which includes a shepherd tending his flock, may have guided Wilson's foreground (Fig.34). The paintings are similar in form and composition and further, details such as the bridge and its reflection in the river appear in both pictures. One could read many dimensions into Wilson's works if the viewer had knowledge of geography, history and art history. Wilson experimented with the boundaries of the conventions of landscape painting in Britain, and it would be this that made his work seem distinctive to his artistic contemporaries, to his elite patrons, and to the audiences of the SAGB exhibition. English patrons were used to established landscape artists such as Lambert who painted familiar rural scenes of Britain as decorative pieces for country houses. Alongside Wilson's depiction of the River Dee, the audience of the 1761 SAGB exhibition, for instance, would have seen Lambert's *The Great Falls of the River Tees, Durham* (Fig. 35). These paintings are of similar size and both have a river as the main focus; however, the similarities end there. Lambert's landscape is entirely topographically accurate and life-like, he shows tourists at the site who can be dated through contemporary dress and in general the scene has a distinctly British feel. Wilson's, on the other hand, could easily be a view of the Roman Campagna. Wilson focuses on creating an atmospheric landscape rather than a detailed one. Interestingly, Wilson provides a consistent style throughout his body of works whereas a stark contrast can be marked between Lambert's Italian and British views; one would imagine that they were painted by completely different artists.

Wilson's final British public view, entered in the 1766 annual exhibition, was *North West View of Snowdon and its environs*. This landscape is remarkably like Wilson's views of Lake Nemi; he obviously identified similarities between the two natural landmarks. This large landscape has a rough quality, more typical of Wilson's Italian views than the formulaic, perfect British views mentioned above. The jagged harsh line of the mountains

seems far from the flat tranquil scenes of the River Dee. The dramatic mountainous ranges balance the midpoints of the painting and reflect on the undisturbed water below. The painting echoes the view of Lake Nemi which Wilson had entered into the exhibition five years earlier, which in turn, as we have seen, quoted from Dughet's *Ideal Landscape*.

Through such pictorial allusions, Wilson is able to compare contemporary Britain to antique and contemporary Italy, and promote his homeland of Wales as an equivalent a famous Italian tourist site. This was not a completely outrageous suggestion, since the landscape of Snowdon had often been described as having European qualities:

The County of Caernarvon in Wales is remarkable for vast mountains, rocks, and precipices, which towards the middle of the country, swell one above another, so as to have acquired the name of the British Alps.<sup>119</sup>

Arguably, the most fascinating British paintings exhibited during this period were those submitted in 1762: *A View of a ruin, in her royal highness the princess dowager of Wales' garden at Kew* (Fig. 36) and *Its companion* (Fig. 37). From the title alone, one assumes the former painting will be innately British, particularly since it references the royal family. However, when one looks at the painting one could easily assume that the painting is of an Italian ruin. The crumbling arch which is pictured is a folly built in 1759, to remind visitors of classical antiquity. Its designer, William Chambers, noted that 'my intention was to imitate a Roman antiquity, built of brick, with incrustations of stone'.<sup>120</sup> The erection of this arch confirms how fashionable the classical era was at this time, and helps explain why Wilson's historical landscapes and Italian landscapes were so popular when exhibited at the SAGB exhibitions. Wilson joins in the pretence, exaggerating his trees so that they appear even more Italian and amplifying his colours so that they seem be warmer and more

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<sup>119</sup> J Payne, *The beauties of nature and art displayed in a tour through the world* (London, 1763) p.49

<sup>120</sup> William Chambers, *A description of the Palace and Gardens at Kew in A Companion for a leisure hour; being a collection of fugitive pieces in prose and verse by several gentlemen* (London, 1769) p.80

Mediterranean. Wilson blurs reality and even includes an imaginary artist sketching the fake ruin. The eighteenth century public were quite fascinated by the creation of Kew Gardens, partly due to Chambers' interesting designs and also because of its royal patronage.

Newspaper reports follow the progress of the creation of the garden from 1755; 'Great Alterations are making in the Gardens at Kew, particularly in the piece of water',<sup>121</sup> through to a programme of ambitious expansion in 1761: 'Some great alterations are ordered to be made in Kew-gardens, and they are to be enlarged; the houses that stand between said Gardens and those of Richmond being ordered to be pulled down for that purpose'.<sup>122</sup> The entry of Wilson's picture perhaps did not promote his skill for painting British views, but it shows that Wilson was very aware of what was fashionable in the mid 1700s – classical antiquity.

The companion painting is also of Kew gardens; specifically it is of the Pagoda and the Palladian Bridge, also 'fake' features added to the garden in 1761. The news of this addition was met with some excitement; 'We hear there is a fine Pagoda Temple, of a prodigious Height, building in her Royal Highness the Princess Dowager's Garden at Kew';<sup>123</sup> 'On Saturday a great number of persons of distinction were at Kew-Gardens, to view a curious Chinese summer-house, 12 stories high.'<sup>124</sup> This painting is much more British in composition than the previous one; for example the cattle at the side of the water would be a familiar pictorial element in British landscapes. However, Wilson, once again surprises his audience – the inclusion of a Chinese Pagoda is an obvious contrast in an English view, even if the large tree to the right has an oriental air. Wilson successfully conveys the surprise that the architect had intended for visitors when he placed a Pagoda near a Palladian bridge. Wilson's works are infused with intriguing features designed to capture

<sup>121</sup> *Public Advertiser*, Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1755

<sup>122</sup> *General Evening Post*, Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1761

<sup>123</sup> *Whitehall Evening Post*, Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> May 1761

<sup>124</sup> *British Chronicle*, Friday 24<sup>th</sup> July, 1761

the viewer's attention, just as Chambers had intended his garden. Interestingly, Marlow painted a similar view to Wilson's depiction of the Pagoda: *View of the Lake and Island at Kew* (Fig. 38). Marlow's watercolour depicts the boat in the same position as Wilson's, accompanied by much of the same foliage. Marlow painted his view in 1763; one year after Wilson displayed his painting at the SAGB exhibition. It is quite viable to presume that the young artist looked up to his successful contemporary, and in turn painted a version of his painting. Marlow was only twenty-two at this point and was yet to travel to Italy. Interestingly, after his trip to Italy, Marlow did not exhibit any British views in the SAGB exhibitions; he presented himself solely as an Italian view painter.

Wilson's historical, grand manner paintings stood out in the Great Room and gained him significant recognition. However, his accompanying works which he submitted as part of his SAGB portfolio each year were by no means unimportant to the artist. This large group of Italian and British views may appear at first glance to be topographical view paintings which were approachable and affordable to patrons, but actually they show significant artistic and intellectual depth when studied more closely. Wilson carefully chose his sites to add meaning to his works; was conscious of the fashions of the eighteenth century; and painted in the style of the European masters. These paintings were often repeated in several versions, confirming their saleability and success at the SAGB annual exhibitions, despite the fact that they did not gain the same amount of attention from the press and connoisseurs as his historical works. It can be concluded that Wilson was exhibiting these paintings as prompts to potential patrons; he was stimulating demand for copies through the display of specific works, and the copies he produced are proof enough of his success in this respect.

#### Chapter Four: ‘An Academy is opened by Royal Munificence’

In December 1768, King George III founded the Royal Academy (RA) with the aim of promoting the arts through education and exhibitions.<sup>125</sup> Based very much on the French Royal Academy, the RA was set apart from the SAGB in two ways – firstly, because of the plan for a training arm for the organisation; and secondly, and perhaps more obviously, because of the fact of its royal status. Thirty-four founding members, including Wilson, took the lead in this project. The RA developed its own version of the established summer exhibition, the first being held between 25<sup>th</sup> April and the 27<sup>th</sup> May 1769 at Pall Mall. 136 works were shown, three of which were by Wilson. Unfortunately, their anonymous titles in the catalogue make it impossible to decipher which of his works he sent to this inaugural show. A royally chartered and more developed version of the SAGB, the RA immediately became popular and received significant attention, particularly in the press. Reynolds was elected President and launched the institution by declaring that:

An Academy, in which Polite Arts may be regularly cultivated, is at last opened among us by Royal Munificence. This must appear an event in the highest degree interesting, not only to the Artists, but to the whole nation.<sup>126</sup>

It is important to consider the first years of the RA annual exhibitions to determine whether or not Wilson carried his exhibition strategy over from one exhibiting body to the other. Apart from one entry entitled *A historical landscape with figures*, each painting in Wilson’s 1770 portfolio can be identified. The three remaining entries were *Cicero and his two friends, Atticus and Quintus, at his villa at Arpinum* (Fig.39); *A View three miles from Rome* (Fig.40), and *Hounslow Heath* (Fig.41). This submission confirms the extent to which, a decade after

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<sup>125</sup> For a detailed history of the Royal Academy see Sidney Hutchinson, *The History of the Royal Academy 1768-1968* (New York, 1968)

<sup>126</sup> Edmond Malone, *The works of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London, 1797) Vol. 1, p.5

his first entries to the SAGB, Wilson remained faithful to his old exhibition strategy of submitting a historical/literary landscape, an Italian view painting, and a topographical British landscape, even though he had now changed artistic institutions.

One can only speculate which painting by Wilson was the one described in the exhibition catalogue as *Historical landscape with figures*; however, it is interesting that in this year, he submits two historical works, one, as we have seen, is *Cicero and his friends*. This is a large work which follows the composition of the classical tradition. Cicero was a Roman philosopher, translator and lawyer who established himself as a scholarly figure in the ancient world; his writings are some of the most important sources on the antique age. Translations of his work were available in Britain from 1750. This complicated composition shows Cicero, Atticus and Quintus in discussion surrounded by a classical landscape with Cicero's impressive villa in the background – a landscape that Cicero himself describes in his *De Legibus*.<sup>127</sup> The philosopher describes the picturesque area in which he lived, where he and his friends conversed and discussed the philosophies of justice and law. By including descriptions of the landscape, the antique source not only guides Wilson in his pictorial representation of the scene, but also allows the reader to assume that the famous writer valued the landscape around him. Using Claudian imagery, Wilson frames his painting with trees, allows a river and bridge to guide the viewer's eye through the middle-ground, before adding depth with a mountainous range in the background. The landscape is entirely imaginary and designed to represent antiquity. The educated viewer would recognise the importance of Wilson's choice of main character, Cicero, as an especially eminent classical philosopher.<sup>128</sup> Although differing from Wilson's more theatrical depictions of classical myth, the artist here

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<sup>127</sup> Cicero, *De Legibus*, book II, iii, translated by C.W. Keynes (London, 1948)

<sup>128</sup> For further information see Solkin, (London, 1982) pp.235-6

remains true to his strategy of providing the exhibition audience with an antique, literary centrepiece.

The two accompanying works were, as might be expected, much smaller than the intellectually charged centrepiece. The first, *A View three miles from Rome* is a topographically accurate Italian view. The title of this work, when encountered in the Academy catalogue, would have evoked in every exhibition visitor's mind thoughts of travel, antiquity and an empire. Even those who were not able to travel would have imagined visiting this cultural resonant site; Wilson makes accessible a renowned place. He executed his *View three miles from Rome* in the language of the classical tradition; framed by trees, two figures in contemporary dress stand close to what appears to be the base of a classical statue. As with the historical landscape, the educated viewer would have recognised the Claudian elements within the painting, allowing Wilson to elevate the painting into a work of art that transcended accurate topography. This painting appeals to the audience on more than one level: as a topographical record to those who wished to visit Italy, and to those who had travelled and wanted a depiction of a certain view, and as a work of art that flaunted its debts to a tradition of Old Master landscape painting.

Wilson's British view in his 1770 portfolio is much less classicized than one might have expected. *View on Hounslow Heath* is a topographically accurate landscape of relatively modest proportions; it was certainly the smallest of Wilson's portfolio that year. In composition, the viewer is reminded of his 1762 entry, *View on the Thames*, for the commanding proportions of the river; however, this view is much more typically British. The classical language which his audience had become accustomed to is no longer present and instead, Wilson presents an arguably, pastoral British landscape. The figure picnicking, the cows by the river and the windmill in the background all evoke the traditional imagery of the British rural scene rather than the Italianised scenes the SAGB audience had been witness to.

Nevertheless, this view, like his earlier British views, was small, approachable and saleable to British patrons; it was a painting which could be easily duplicated and that was easily accessible to viewers.

Throughout his career with the SAGB Wilson was able to portray himself as a diverse and talented artist, someone who was quite different to the other artists exhibiting at the annual shows. Not only this, but Wilson went on to use his successful strategy once the more prestigious RA had been established. Wilson was the only landscape artist to enter a painting in every SAGB exhibition between 1760 and 1768 and therefore we may conclude that he was one of the only landscape artists to continue to make a successful living from his trade. Wilson was aware that British contemporary landscape artists were not having astounding success or gaining particular respect in this field, so he took guidance from those who had succeeded in the genre in Europe and tried to follow their lead. Like the European masters Wilson did not stop at historical landscapes; he used the classical tradition to elevate topographical views and to establish a position in the market as a view-painter, one who could provide paintings of views that gentlemen had seen on their Grand Tour, and further, of views of their own estates and of landmarks in Britain. Wilson was a businessman who successfully attempted to appeal to a range of patrons across the diverse audiences that were attracted to the SAGB annual exhibitions. Wilson's historical landscapes put him on the cultural and commercial map, as it were, and launched his career as the foremost landscape artist in Britain.

Though Wilson competed with a number of different artists when presenting his three types of landscape painting, he was very much set apart from his contemporaries. No other artist consistently presented such a wide portfolio of works as Wilson did during his years exhibiting at the SAGB. Not only was he self-aware in painting his landscapes, but he was also very aware of the careful planning necessary to generate a submission of canvases that

would attract as much attention from his patrons, the public and press as possible. Wilson appreciated the value of the exhibition as a space of advertisement and self-promotion.

Wilson can also be understood to have used the exhibition to try and change public opinions towards British landscape painting – he hoped to see it being understood not as a purely decorative genre but as one that, as in the case of the works produced by his distinguished European forebears, sustained serious critical examination and interpretation. In this, Wilson succeeded. He proved to his contemporaries that landscape painting was not restricted to topographical or decorative depiction, but could be infused with classical elements and narratives on a grand scale, and executed in the style of the Old Masters. After his death the signs of this changing public perception towards the genre – one that Wilson can be seen to have taken the lead in encouraging - became ever more evident:

It is with a different view we now consider it [landscape painting]. It is not for imitation we look, but for character. It is not the art, but the genius of the painter, which now gives value to his compositions; and the language he employs is found not only to speak to the eye, but to affect the imagination and the heart. It is not now a simple copy which we see, nor is our emotion limited to the cold pleasure which arises from the perception of accurate imitation. It is a creation of Fancy with which the artist presents us, in which only the greater expressions of Nature are retained, and where more interesting emotions are awakened, than those we experience from the usual tameness of common scenery.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Rev'd Archibald Alison, *Essays on the nature and principals of taste*, (London, 1790) pp.79-80

Appendix 1

Richard Wilson's paintings exhibited at SAGB annual exhibitions 1760 – 1768

<u>Year</u>	<u>Cat.</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Figure</u>
1760	72	<i>A large landskip with the Story of Niobe</i>	Fig.1
	73	<i>A small ditto, the Monument of the Horatii on the Appian Way</i>	Fig.2
	74	<i>Ditto, the Banks of the River Dee</i>	Fig.3
	129	<i>A View near Rome (drawing)</i>	
1761	135	<i>The bridge at Rimini, with the republic of San Marino</i>	
	136	<i>Temple of Clitumnus, its companion</i>	
	137	<i>The Lake of Nemi</i>	Fig.17
	138	<i>Its Companion</i>	
	139	<i>Large landskip with historical figures (Niobe)</i>	
	140	<i>View near Chester</i>	Fig.29
1762	130	<i>A view of a ruin, in her royal highness the princess dowager of Wales' garden at Kew</i>	Fig.36
	131	<i>Its Companion</i>	Fig.37
	132	<i>A landskip with hermits (Solitude)</i>	
	133	<i>A View of the Thames, near Richmond</i>	Fig.30
	134	<i>A ruin at Tivoli</i>	
	135	<i>A View of Holt Bridge, on the River Dee</i>	Fig.31
1763	133	<i>A large landskip, with Phaeton's petition to Apollo</i>	Fig.11
	134	<i>A View from Rome towards Tivoli</i>	
1764	135	<i>A small landscape, with a ruin</i>	Fig.19
	136	<i>Ditto, its companion</i>	Fig.20
	137	<i>The convent on the island call'd L'Anconetta, near Venice</i>	
	138	<i>A landskip with figures</i>	

- 1765 156 *A View from the villa Madama, three miles from Rome* Fig.26
- 157 *A Summer Storm, with the story of the two lovers, from Thomson* Fig.15  
(Celadon and Amelia)
- 158 *A landskip and figures*
- 1766 189 *North-west view of Snowden and its environs* Fig.32
- 190 *Carnarvon Castle*
- 191 *Banks of the Tiber*
- 192 *A landskip and figures*
- 1767 184 *View from Moor Park, toward Cashiobury, Watford and St. Albans* Fig.28
- 185 *Landskip and figures*
- 1768 189 *A storm at day-break, with the story of Ceyx and Alcyone* Fig.14
- 190 *A View of the Lake of Nemi from Gensano*
- 1768 (Special) 128 *View of L'Anconetta, an island near Venice*
- 129 *View in the Villa Madama, near Rome*
- 130 *A landscape and figures*

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