John Crome and the London art world

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Writing of the hours John Crome had whiled away in the West End painting room of William Beechey, Dawson Turner was to recall how 'the condescension and hospitality of the Royal Academician' notwithstanding, the young aspiring artist had met with little other encouragement during his short-lived attempt to establish himself in the capital. No doubt anxious to protect their own small patch in the city's already overcrowded and fiercely competitive marketplace, Beechey's fellow artists had indeed, if anything, been distinctly unhelpful, such that 'poor Crome' encountered 'many a difficulty [. . .] in his efforts to obtain information in London'.[1] Access to such opportunities were essential if an artist from the regions was to enter and remain in the capital. With the demand that artists display a degree of social refinement and create an impression of apparent indifference to financial concerns, for all the considerable cost of living in London, it is hardly surprising that the city's pool of would-be practitioners was being increasingly drawn from the genteel and professional classes.[2] '[T]he poor son of a Norwich weaver' was bound to struggle. Lacking the appropriate cultural capital and metropolitan connections, Crome was forced into 'circumstances at once humiliating and galling', reduced to 'painting articles on sugar for confectioners' and making do with whatever materials came to hand. In Turner's telling, the painter's bruising experience of the metropolitan art world was just one of a series of obstacles that Crome was obliged to overcome that began with his lowly birth. Despite (or perhaps because of) these impediments and this early setback, the Crome of Turner's biographical sketch is '[f]rank, honourable', of 'a cheerful and social temper', whose hand in establishing a Society of Artists in his native Norwich demonstrates a collegiality and generosity of spirit never extended to him in London. He finds favour among the local gentry and nobility with his untutored, 'winning naiveté of manners' and strongly 'moral character'. He exhibits a natural, distinctly provincial virtue that the reader of Turner's memoir might be expected to contrast with the artifice widely associated with metropolitan manners and society.

Biographies of non-metropolitan based figures would typically present their commitment to the provinces as a high-minded rejection of the materialism of the London scene, the self-interestedness of which had also led it to rebuff or else fail to recognise their talents in any case.[3] Such local patriotism was of obvious appeal to the growing audience for the visual arts in regional centres such as Norwich. Yet, much as Crome's career was beholden to a network of local collectors and patrons, his art was not so detached from mainstream, metropolitan developments as Turner and other later nineteenth-century commentators made out. While aware of examples of the work of Old and Modern Masters, such as Hobbema and Gainsborough, he saw in local collections, Crome was keenly alert to the latest currents in modern art.

Historians of landscape art have tended to view it primarily through a rural lens, but in a series of ground-breaking studies of Crome and his contemporaries, Andrew Hemingway has persuasively argued the case for paying greater attention to the urban and more specifically metropolitan contexts for the display and reception of such imagery.[4] What has been called 'the business of landscapery' was centred in London.[5] With members of the aristocracy and gentry, as well as the increasingly affluent merchant and professional classes, eager to enjoy the myriad diversions of the London social season, the capital was the hub for the production and retail of a range of luxury goods. A high concentration of artists based themselves in the city with the hope of attracting some small part of this market.[6] Their efforts were greatly encouraged by the organisation of new exhibitions and societies. Indeed, the early years of the nineteenth century

saw the monopoly previously enjoyed by the Royal Academy challenged by a series of schemes designed to showcase the talents and wares of younger figures or else specialists in the 'lesser' genre of landscape painting and 'lesser' medium of watercolour. Bodies professionally led and connoisseur-backed respectively, the Society of Painters in Water-Colours, established in 1804, and the British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts, founded the very next year, were at the forefront of a struggle for control over the proper direction of modern art, not least as their promotion of the genre helped ensure the growing prominence and prestige of landscape. News of these developments could not have failed to reach Crome or his local supporters.[7] Better transportation links meant that Londoners or overseas visitors were not the only ones to visit the capital's exhibition rooms. Local newspapers carried articles and reviews originally printed in the London press. Paradoxical as it may seem, in some ways, even the establishment of exhibiting societies in Norwich as well as Leeds and Liverpool were not so much a sign of self-confidence and independence, as exemplary of how regional culture took its lead from the capital, mimicking its characteristic entertainments and products.[8]

That all being said, and without wanting to deny the centralizing power and pull of the metropole or its more particular role in shaping early nineteenth-century landscape taste, such a 'London-centric' focus can arguably run the risk of downplaying what was distinct about early nineteenth-century regional culture.[9] What kinds of meaning Crome's views of the Norfolk countryside may have had for local audiences and patrons has tended to be marginalised perhaps by recent scholars of his art, for instance. With this caveat in mind, this essay will thus attempt to review Crome's fitful, on/off relationship with the London art world with an eye to its local significance (and, in turn, the place of the local or regional on the national stage).

Given the relatively small number of paintings Crome sent to exhibition in London, he would not appear to have harboured any great ambition of making a mark in that arena. He exhibited at the Royal Academy on eight occasions, showing thirteen paintings in all. He sent work to the British Institution on just three occasions, showing a total of five paintings overall. Yet, if this irregular and relatively modest showing does imply that Crome was not especially concerned to cultivate a metropolitan profile it begs the question why the painter thought it necessary to submit works to London venues at all. Strange as it may seem, it is possible that Crome was playing to his local supporters; the display of his work in such prestigious venues being a necessary sign of its merit. Men such as Thomas Harvey and Dawson Turner had extensive London connections, the latter's correspondence with the artist John Sell Cotman including various references to the capital's exhibition culture.[10] In this, it may not have necessarily mattered that Crome's work failed to attract critical attention. *Old buildings in Norwich*, a picture shown at the Academy in 1809, was praised for its 'pleasing effect of partial sunshine' by one writer, but otherwise Crome's exhibits appear to have gone all but unnoticed by the London press until the very end of his career.[11] It may be that Crome's work was just too small and understated to have made much of an impact. But what the rather anodyne nature of the critic's brief comment on Crome's *Old buildings in Norwich* shows is that reviewers had relatively little to say about the landscape painting of the day in any case. While this means that it is otherwise difficult to gauge how the painter's work was seen by his London contemporaries, the everyday chatter of the city's art world chronicled by the Academician Joseph Farington's diary does provide one brief but telling insight.

On his Royal Academy debut in 1806 Crome showed two now unidentified works, both titled *A landscape*. Though probably modest in scale and subject, their execution was arresting enough to prompt two newspaper critics – John Taylor of *The Sun* and James Boaden of *The Oracle* – attending the exhibition opening to pass comment, a nearby Farington recording:

> The latter after looking round the room sd. He had never seen so many bad pictures. On looking at Turner's Waterfall at Schaffhausen He sd. 'That is Madness' - 'He is a Madman' in which Taylor joined. - In the anti-room, looking at an Upright landscape by Croom, Boaden said, 'There is another in the new manner', 'it is the scribbling of painting. - So much of the trowel - so mortary - surely a little more finishing might be born?[12]

Questions of 'finish' and 'manner' were matters of some concern to critics at the time. Broad handling was acceptable in preparatory sketches, but not in exhibited works. Artists were expected to display greater refinement in pictures they placed before the public. But those attempts to capture the complexity of the visible world in paint that had become such a hallmark of British landscape art at the cutting-edge had led painters to develop surface effects that breached acceptability. For their critics, Turner and his contemporaries' efforts to render fleeting natural phenomena with ever greater immediacy came at the expense of coherence. It was as if the subject was a mere afterthought, secondary to a bravura, showy display of technique. Old Masters of certain schools had handled paint loosely, but never in such an exaggerated way. Some critics were sympathetic to the striving for effect evident in pictures such as the view of a mountainous Swiss waterfall Turner submitted to the Royal Academy in 1806, but for others the artist's attempt to portray the ferocious torrent of cascading water at its centre in great slabs of thick paint applied with a knife were signs of 'madness', mere folly (Fig. 1).

Throwaway and offhand as it may now appear, Boaden's summary verdict on Crome's and Turner's art points up a larger dilemma facing painters of their generation. On one hand, the pressure on artists to both proclaim the liberal status of their practice and stand out in an overcrowded marketplace had fostered a need to cultivate a distinctive sensibility, a singular handling of paint that distinguished their work from that of their competitors in exhibition rooms where scores of pictures were hung cheek by jowl. On the other hand, the loose brushwork, high keyed colour, and eye-catching surface effects that this situation had encouraged were routinely dismissed by critics as little more than showmanship, meretricious and vulgar. Their criticisms – as Boaden's remarks on Crome's and Turner's art illustrates – were indeed often framed in such moralizing terms. Boaden's jibe likening the sketchy brushwork of this 'new manner' to mere 'scribbling' implied that there was something careless, even lazy about the work's execution. Such slovenliness was beneath the dignity of a liberal, gentlemanly practitioner. With so 'much of the trowel' about it, the paint surface was like masonry, the work of a bricklayer, so that of an artisan, not an artist.[13]

What form a modern British landscape art should take was – as this incident illustrates - a matter of intense debate, a field of contention and conflicting claims, and so anything but the smooth progression that some chroniclers were concerned to present. Local scenes of the kind that appealed to Crome's patrons were at the heart of this contest, as the reception of his final London exhibits demonstrates.

With the pictures he submitted to that year's British Institution exhibition attracting a level of critical attention that had previously eluded him, at the time of his death in 1821 Crome was finally developing a metropolitan profile. In a display heavy with landscape paintings, Crome's submissions were striking enough for the *Sun* to express the hope that he would soon feel emboldened enough to show works of a more ambitious nature, the paper's critic thinking that 'this artist's style is calculated to produce very powerful effects in a larger scale than we have yet seen him attempt'.[14] Several critics singled out Crome's *Heath scene near Norwich* for particular praise; James Elmes's *Magazine of the Fine Arts* declaring it a picture of 'first-rate merit', while for the *Examiner*'s Robert Hunt it brought the most elevated of comparisons to mind: 'The reader who has not seen Mr. J. CROME's *Heath Scene*, No. 40, will form no adequate idea of it, if,

recollecting the solemn chiaroscuro of REMBRANDT, he conceives the stinted vegetation of a flat and extensive heath, painted with smart touches to such an effect'.[15] The degree of seriousness Crome brought such a humdrum, nondescript stretch of land also impressed Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, writing in the *London Magazine*, who was to argue:

> Mr. J. Crome has an enviable *"Heath Scene near Norwich"*, in which the student may see how much a subtle observation of the elements, in their wild moods, does for a most uninteresting flat. *This view* is not at all like a mere topographical delineation. It assumes a much higher station.[16]

In declaring the painter's *Heath Scene* something beyond 'mere topographical delineation', the critic was enlisting Crome's local scene in a wider argument about the state of British landscape art. Earlier, Wainewright had complained that 'a few worthy exceptions' apart, the art on display at the Institution was not 'the landscape of Tiziano, of Mola, Salvator, of the Poussins, Claude, Rubens, Elsheimer, Rembrandt, Wilson, and Turner', but rather:

> . . . that kind of landscape which is entirely occupied by the tame delineation of a given spot; an enumeration of hill and dale, clumps of trees, shrubs, water, meadows, cottages, and houses: what is commonly called a *View*, little more than topography, a kind of pictorial map-work; in which rainbows, showers, mists, halos, large beams shooting through rifted clouds, storms, starlight, all the most valued materials of the real painter, are not.[17]

Here, Wainewright was repeating, almost word for word, an argument put forward by Henry Fuseli who, when speaking on matters of invention, had railed against portraiture of a landscape-painting as well as face-painting kind as exemplifying the commercial imperatives that had made art 'a mere article of fashionable furniture'. For Fuseli, 'Views' of 'a given spot' prompted only a certain 'sentimental enthusiasm'.[18] Such local scenes were reliant solely on an element of recognition or self-recognition in the viewer for their meaning. This was mere 'map-work', so not art as such.

Satirists as well as critics commented on how artists were beholden to the marketplace, portraying the exhibitions of the day as a shop window for their wares not that different from other places of fashionable consumption and amusement, where it was about people watching, being seen, and seen to be there, as much as anything (Fig. 2).[19] Accusations that artists were merely playing to the crowd with their displays of technical wizardry were inextricable from these concerns that the exhibitions of the period were little more than superficial spectacle. Their response was to raise the cultural register of their art, bringing a degree of moral grandeur to their portrayal of the everyday, customary world 'of a given spot' through reference to literary as well as Old Master tradition, of the kind that suffuses Crome's Dutch-inspired framing of local scenes. Brought together by a painterly feel or sense of touch, such a form of landscape art marked out its practitioners as distinct from the reliance on mechanical devices and learnt formulas characteristic of amateur practice or the work of less culturally ambitious fellow professionals that Wainewright targeted. In capturing the 'wild moods' of nature, or what the critic understood as 'the materials of the real painter', Crome ensured that his *Heath Scene near Norwich* rose above 'mere topographical delineation', becoming something 'higher'. It enlarged the meaning of this local scene 'near Norwich'.

Looking across the landscapes on display at the British Institution in 1821, Crome was not alone is showing such ambition. Having expressed his admiration for Crome's *Heath Scene*, Robert Hunt went on to praise the performance of the painter's former apprentice James Stark. 'To this Artist and the Messrs. CROME the Gallery is much indebted, and from their talents the painters

of Norwich have obtained a very increased eclat', the critic observed. Much of the attention Crome was now suddenly receiving resulted in part from the success of his now London-based former pupils George Vincent and Stark, whose work had of late been attracting flattering critical comment at exhibition. Judging by the pictures shown by these three artists at the British Institution in 1821, they may well indeed have been quite conscious as to the benefits of presenting themselves as a group or 'School'. They all showed Norfolk scenes, Vincent's exhibits including a Yarmouth beach scene and Stark's a view on the banks of the River Yare (Fig.3 & (probably) 4). Coastal and river scenery were popular subjects, allowing the painter to view modern subjects through the lens of pastoral or Georgic tradition.[20] These are pictures which celebrate the progress of a country connected by its river system and maritime investments, where specific locales are made part of a wider physical and imaginative geography, mobilized as part of a far larger regional, indeed national enterprise. In Crome's art and that of his contemporaries, to be 'British' was to be placed, rooted, locally identified, as much as it was to be nationally minded, even if those commitments were sometimes at odds. Seen on the walls of the London exhibition rooms of the period, Crome's local scenes staked out what was distinctive about his native region and its contribution to the nation.

Notes

[1] Dawson Turner, 'Memoir of Crome', in John Wodderspoon, *John Crome and His Works*, 2nd ed. (Norwich: private printing, 1876), unpaginated.

[2] Martin Myrone, *Making the Modern Artist: Culture, Class and Art-Educational Opportunity in Romantic Britain* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2020), 78-105. Crome's biographer was well aware of the difficulties of an artist maintaining a presence in the capital: in a letter to Turner, dated 8 September 1834, John Sell Cotman was to write of the 'folly' of his trying to live in London', when '[t]he income is not sufficient' (Norfolk Record Office, Norwich, MC 2487/70, 977X3).

[3] See also the life of Crome in Allan Cunningham, *The Cabinet Gallery of Pictures by the First Masters of the English and Foreign Schools*, 2 vols. (London: George & William Nicol, 1834), II, 23-28.

[4] Andrew Hemingway, *Landscape Imagery and Urban Culture in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[5] Conal Shields, 'Introduction', in *Landscape in Britain, c. 1750-1850*, exh. cat., Tate, London, 1973, 9-13, 9.

[6] William Vaughan, '"The pit of modern art": practice and ambition in the London art world', in Andrew Hemingway & Alan Wallach (eds.), *Transatlantic Romanticism: British and American Art and Literature, 1790-1860* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 29-48, 37-38.

[7] Peter Funnell, 'The London art world and its institutions', in Celina Fox (ed.), *London – World City 1800-1840* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 155-166.

[8] Trevor Fawcett, *The Rise of English Provincial Art: Artists, Patrons, and Institutions Outside London, 1800-1830* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Vaughan, '"The pit of modern art"', 39.

[9] R.A. Butlin, 'Regions in England and Wales c. 1600-1914', in R.A. Dodgshon & R.A. Butlin (eds.), *An Historical Geography of England and Wales*, 2nd ed. (London: Academic Press, 1990), 223-54.

[10] See, for example, John Sell Cotman, letter to Dawson Turner, 15 July 1826, Norfolk Record Office, Norwich, MC 2487/24, 977X3.

[11] 'The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, Somerset House', *Le Beau Monde, and Monthly Register*, I, 2 (May 1809), 103-22, 114. On Crome's critical reception more generally, see Andrew Hemingway, 'Subject-matter in the paintings of John Crome', *Landscape Research*, 9, 3 (Winter 1984), 30–40.

[12] Joseph Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, Kathryn Cave, Kenneth Garlick & Angus Macintyre (eds.) (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1982), VII, 2748. One of the pictures Crome submitted was attributed in the exhibition catalogue to 'Croom', hence the critic's confusion here. The error possibly arose from the way the artist pronounced his own name.

[13] Sam Smiles, ""Splashers", "Scrawlers", and "Plasterers": British landscape and the language of criticism, 1800–1840', *Turner Studies*, 10, 1 (Summer 1990), 5–11; Kay Dian Kriz, *The Idea of the English Landscape Painter: Genius as Alibi in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1997), 60.

[14] 'British Institution IV', *Sun*, 31 January 1821.

[15] 'The British Institution', *The Magazine of the Fine Arts; and Monthly Review of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, and Engraving*, I (1821), 45-52, 51; Robert Hunt, 'Fine Arts: The British Institution Exhibition', *The Examiner*, 18 March 1821.

[16] [Thomas Griffiths Wainewright], 'The British Institution', *The London Magazine*, 3, 16 (April 1821), 437-444, 440.

[17] [Wainewright], 'The British Institution', 437-438.

[18] Henry Fuseli, 'Fourth Lecture. Invention, Part II', in John Knowles (ed.), *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli, Esq*., 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn & Richard Bentley, 1831), II, 187-235, 217.

[19] Andrew Hemingway, "Art exhibitions as leisure-class rituals in early nineteenth-century London", in Brian Allen (ed.), *Towards a Modern Art World* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995), 95-108; C.S. Matheson, "'A Shilling Well Laid Out": the Royal Academy's early public', in David H. Solkin (ed.), *Art on The Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780–1836* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001), 39-54; Catherine Roach, 'The ecosystem of exhibitions: venues, artists, and audiences in early nineteenth-century London', *British Art Studies*, 14 (November 2019), https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-14/croach.

[20] Hemingway, *Landscape Imagery*, 216-91.