

JAMES MACKINNON

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John Robert COZENS

London 1752-1797 London

William Tell's Chapel on Lake Lucerne

Watercolour

24 x 34.4 cm 9 7/16 x 13 9/16 inches

Watermark: lower part of mark with GR upright in upper centre

The appearance of an unrecorded watercolour by John Robert Cozens is a notable event, the more so as it has remained in near pristine condition with no colour loss. This view of Lake Lucerne with William Tell's Chapel visible on the far shore depicts the scene with clearing skies after rain, a calm settled on the surface of the water and a limpid atmosphere. It is brilliant and poetic interpretation of the landscape in such weather, known to all who may have experienced it.

The importance of Cozens in the history of English watercolour cannot be overstated, given the influence his works exercised over both Girtin and Turner who later copied his them as young men at the home of Dr. Munro. As the son of Alexander Cozens, known for his innovative use of the 'blot' technique and for his interpretation of historical or biblical scenes in imagined landscapes, John Robert developed his own landscape art. The impact of his trip through Switzerland to Italy in 1776 in the company of Richard Payne-Knight (1750-1824) of Downton Castle and his subsequent stay and travels there until 1779 were an essential element in the development of his highly personal style.

Kim Sloan, past Curator of British Drawings at the British Museum, has written '*This brief tour of the Alps seen through the words of his contemporaries and the eyes of John Robert Cozens should have made clear that his views are characterised by their effect on emotions, senses, or passions, as stated by Alexander Cozens and Edmund Burke, as well as on memory in the form of historical or literary associations as stated by Payne Knight.*'¹

C.F. Bell and T. Girtin listed fifty-one Swiss subjects in their catalogue raisonné published by the Walpole Society in their annual volume for 1922-3 and in the supplement of 1934-5. The evolution of Cozens' Swiss drawings makes a fascinating history, some parts of which are clear, others for which there can be only conjecture. Cozens left England in the summer of 1776 with Richard Payne-Knight, for whom he completed a set of some fifty almost monochromatic watercolours depicting views taken at points on their travels through Switzerland. They arrived in Geneva in August when Cozens made the first of his numbered drawings, a distant view of the city. Bell and Girtin based their chronology in part on the numbers to be found on the verso of some, but not all, of the Payne-Knight drawings, a significant collection of these now in the British Museum, others known elsewhere, some still missing.

Subsequent research by Sloan has shed more light on Cozens' Swiss drawings. She has suggested on the basis of his procedure on his earlier and later travels that he made on the spot pencil drawings, now lost, and that he worked up the Payne-Knight series from these.

While Sloan considers that the Payne-Knight drawings were made not long after Cozens' arrival in Rome, he then made an unknown number of watercolours of closely similar dimensions to the Payne-Knight series, to which the present drawing may be added, and of which only nine had been previously recorded.

The Payne-Knight drawing for the view on Lake Lucerne of William Tell's Chapel is now in the British Museum (no. 1900.0411.25), catalogued by Bell and Girtin under no. 37, '*Schwyz, Lake of Lucerne - view from the lake looking northwards, Tell's Chapel on the right with the Frohnalpstock rising behind it*'. No other version of the drawing is known, except for a copy by Girtin and Turner.

Cozens' watercolours of the Swiss subjects demonstrate best his poetic approach in those of lakes and mountains, as in this work. It is not simply the vastness and sublimity of the landscape that has captured his attention, it is the inherent poetry of the scene before him combined with the mood, a completely fresh departure in painting.

1. Kim Sloan, *Alexander and John Robert Cozens, The Poetry of Landscape*, New Haven and London, 1986, p. 125.