

ATTRIBUTED TO
RICHARD WILSON, R.A.

(*Penegoes 1713 - Colomendy 1782*)

A River Landscape with Figures Dancing in the Foreground, Mountains Beyond

oil on canvas
 35.9 x 43.3 cm (14 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 17 $\frac{1}{8}$ in)

Provenance: with J. W. Vokins, London.

Literature: Possibly 1851 Inventory, Dessert Room, *22 Paintings and 3 Prints* - £35.0.0.

IN THIS JOVIAL SCENE TWO PEASANTS DANCE TOGETHER, whilst a companion provides musical accompaniment. Two other figures sit on the ground watching this revelry. Beyond the wooded clearing is an old stone bridge fording a river and nearby a figure sits fishing. In the background a wide lake is flanked by mountains. The whole scene is bathed in a soft, hazy light.

A River Landscape with Figures Dancing in the Foreground, Mountains Beyond is attributed to Richard Wilson, and the compositional structure is one that Wilson used on several occasions, generally titled as *River Mouth with Peasants Dancing*. Examples of this are in the Neue Pinakothek in Munich and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (fig. 1). Several similarities between the version in the Victoria and Albert Museum and this painting are notable. The eye is led from a similar group of foreground figures, along the river, to the lake and mountains in the background. The dancers are relaxing at the end of the day in the same dusky light. The major compositional difference between the works is in the use of the river. In the present work, the river veers quite sharply off, under the bridge and out of sight, while it holds a far more dominant position in figure 1. Here, the river plunges straight back through the centre of the composition to the distant lake and Wilson clearly focuses on the reflection of the sky in the still water, contrasting it to the dark, shadowed waters on the left-hand side. The other significant difference is that the precision evident in *Landscape Composition; River Mouth with Peasants* has not been applied to the present picture where the brushwork seems much looser and more relaxed.

A River Landscape with Figures Dancing in the Foreground, Mountains Beyond shares qualities with much a number of Wilson's output, for instance *Holt Bridge on the River Dee* (The National Gallery, London). This painting also depicts figures relaxing whilst a companion plays a musical instrument. Below their elevated position, a river stretches away, towards a background made up of distant mountains. In *Holt Bridge on the River Dee*, Wilson has painted a landscape that exists: Holt Bridge joins Holt in Denbighshire to Farndon in Cheshire, although this is not a topographically accurate view. Instead, he has focused on depicting a unified landscape in the tradition of Claude Lorraine's (?1604/5-1682) paintings of the Roman *campagna*, which appear to have also informed the present work.

Having studied under Thomas Wright, Wilson began his career as a portrait painter in the 1740s. By 1750 he was travelling to Venice, and by 1752, he was in Rome, where he executed many drawings of the city and



Richard Wilson, *Landscape Composition: River Mouth with Peasants Dancing*, The Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Figure 1)

the *campagna*, and where he studied the works of painters such as Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665). It was in Rome that Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714-1789) (see inventory), on seeing Wilson's work, expressed surprise that a landscape painter as talented as Wilson spent his time painting portraits. On his return to London Wilson established a successful studio with many pupils. His popularity lay in his ability to synthesise actual and idealised landscapes since the latter, firmly rooted in the Arcadian tradition, held a particular appeal for Wilson's classically educated clientele. From 1760, his work included historical landscapes in the grand style, along with Claudean depictions of English views. Wilson was a founder-member of the Royal Academy and enjoyed considerable success until the early 1770s but his last years were spent in poverty. With his reputation in decline and he retired to Wales in 1781. However, after his death his work began to be appreciated again and was a significant influence on the generation of J. M. W. Turner's. His significance is such that he 'fills much the same place in the development of a tradition of landscape painting in Britain that Reynolds does in the development of portraiture'.¹

¹ L Ellis Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain, 1530-1790*, Penguin Books, London, 1953 p. 172.

