

JOHN CROME

(Norwich 1768 - Norwich 1821)

A Wooded Landscape with an Oak

oil on panel
23.8 x 18.1 cm (9³/₈ x 7¹/₈ in)

Provenance: Sotheby's, 20 November, 1985, lot 81.

A *WOODED LANDSCAPE WITH AN OAK* IS AS MUCH A tree portrait as a landscape study, as the sensitivity and naturalism of the painting imbues the subject with a great deal of character. The oak, 'half giant and half sage',¹ is portrayed as the guardian of the landscape, towering over the shrubbery and foliage around it and cutting a magnificent figure against the blue sky. John Crome, along with John Constable (1776-1837) (see catalogue no. 82), was one of the earliest English artists to represent identifiable species of trees, rather than generalised forms. His works, renowned for their originality and vision, were inspired by direct observation of the natural world combined with a comprehensive study of Old Masters.

A larger but essentially similar study of a tree by Crome is *The Poringland Oak* in the Tate, London (fig. 1). In this work, a group of bathers are depicted in the foreground; the subject of the painting, however, is undoubtedly the stately oak. Crome's later work reveals a growing interest in atmospheric effects, as indicated in the use of extensive shading in *The Poringland Oak*, which gives the impression of a slightly overcast afternoon, in contrast to the bright sunshine of *A Wooded Landscape with an Oak*. The differing tonalities have a marked impact on the overall mood of the paintings.

Crome was apprenticed to a coach and sign painter, Francis Whistler from the age of fifteen to twenty-two, after which he presumably continued to practise the trade as well as learning oil painting techniques. His early influences were the local artists William Beechey (1753-1839), John Opie (1761-1807) and Thomas Harvey. Harvey was a collector, as well as an amateur painter and had in his possession works by Dutch seventeenth-century masters such as Aelbert Cuyp (1620-1691), Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/9-1682) and Miendert Hobbema (1638-1709) as well as English eighteenth-century artists Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) and Richard Wilson (1713-1782) (see catalogue no. 78), all of whom influenced Crome's artistic development. Crome married in 1792 and soon afterwards established himself as a drawing teacher. He was one of the founders of the Norwich Society of Artists in 1803, and of the Norwich school of painters. Although during his lifetime his works were often criticised for their unfinished appearance, they became highly sought after following his death. In a letter written by the Rev. W. Gunn just weeks after Crome's death, he reports that people were 'crazy for his pictures'.² Crome was an art collector and etcher as well as a painter, and he is credited with having been at the forefront of the nineteenth-century etching revival in Britain. The large number of etchings that he produced help to establish a chronology for



John Crome, *The Poringland Oak*, c.1818-1820, Tate Gallery, London (Figure 1)

his paintings, none of which were signed. Crome's sons, the most talented of whom was John Berney Crome (1794-1842), painted in his father's and continued his teaching practice, although they did not achieve the same success as their father.

¹ William Wordsworth, *The Oak and the Broom, a Pastoral*.

² Rev. W. Gunn to J. Flaxman, 4 May 1821; Cambridge, Trinity College Library.

