

JOHN WHITE ABBOTT

1763–1851

CANONTEIGN



Pen and grey ink and grey washes on six conjoined sheets of paper on the original wash-line mount

19 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches; 500 x 650 mm

Signed and inscribed on the verso of the mount:

'Canonteign Devon. JWA. Sep^r. 5. 1804' and in another hand: 'Given to Frances Abbott March 1. 1832'

Collections:

John White Abbott;

Frances Abbott, daughter of the above;

By descent to 1997;

Sotheby's, 10 April 1997, lot 41 (£9,200 to Spink-Leger);

John and Jill Fairchild, New York, acquired from the above;

Fairchild sale, Stair Galleries, 17 May 2023, lot 43 (as English School);

Lowell Libson & Jonny Yarker Ltd.

Literature:

Paul Oppé, 'John White Abbott of Exeter', *The Walpole Society*, 1924-5, vol XIII, p.78

This grand monochrome study is one of John White Abbott's masterpieces. Meticulously drawn on seven pieces of conjoined paper, the drawing demonstrates Abbott's complete absorption in the landscape of his native Devon and the abiding influence of his neighbour and teacher Francis Towne. An inscription on the reverse of the original backing sheet identifies the view as having been made at Canonteign, about eight miles south-west of Exeter in September 1804. Intensely observed and painstakingly made, this grand drawing shows Abbott's relentless fascination with the landscape he found on his doorstep. Drawn at a moment when British artists were prevented from travelling to the Continent, Abbott invests his view of the Teign valley with an intensity learnt, in part, from Towne's great sequence of monochrome views of the Castelli Romani.

John White Abbott was an apothecary and surgeon in Exeter, the nephew, and heir of James White, Francis Towne's executor. Abbott submitted a sequence of landscapes in oil to the Royal Academy, exhibiting on and off between 1793 and 1822. He is consistently listed in the Academy catalogues as 'John White Abbott Esq.' and

designated an 'Honorary Exhibitor' underscoring his status as an amateur artist. Abbott corresponded with professional painters he had met in Exeter, including Ozias Humphry and John Downman, but the artist he was most closely associated with was Towne. The assumption is that Abbott received direct instruction from Towne, he certainly had access to a significant archive of Towne's work. Paul Oppé, who first published this drawing, observed amongst Abbott's work 'a large series of very elaborate copies from Towne's Swiss and Italian drawings.'¹

Towne seems to have influenced not only Abbott's drawing style, but the places he selected to draw. Canonteign, on the edge of Dartmoor, belonged to Edward Pellew, 1st Viscount Exmouth, in common with other picturesque locations close to Exeter, such as the Chudleigh and Peamore estates, it had been a favourite haunt of Towne, who made regular studies of views on the estate. But unlike Towne, whose British drawings tended to conform to established modes of composition, Abbott's studies focused relentlessly on rocks and vegetation, excluding all extraneous framing devices or staffage. An elaborate, multi-sheet watercolour view of a tree now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London is inscribed 'View near Canonteign' and dated by Abbott 1803. It gives an idea of Abbott's singular vision, silhouetting a single, gnarled tree against a bright, summer sky. The present work takes this intensity of vision a step further. Working in monochrome, Abbott meticulously records a myriad of plants growing on a rocky outcrop, as well as trees and vegetation cascading into the Teign valley.

Abbott's choice of monochrome is hugely suggestive. He would undoubtedly have been aware of the highly wrought monochrome studies Towne made in the last weeks of his Grand Tour in the Summer of 1781. Freed from urban Rome, Towne was working in the lush hills of the Castelli Romani, his complex studies focused not on the remains of antiquity, but on light falling through the ancient trees fringing the lakes of Nemi and Albano. In the present complex work Abbott has transposed Towne's delight in the landscape of Lazio to the woods of his native Devon. Plants and leaves are silhouetted against the dark wash of the rocks, light and shadow expertly articulate the composition, giving far greater depth, contrast and drama than a coloured view. Abbott may also have been aware of the singular monochrome landscape drawings made in Italy by his friend and correspondent John Downman. Preserved in beautiful condition and on its original mount, this monumental drawing is one of Abbott's grandest and most successful landscapes.

¹ A.P. Oppé, 'John White Abbott of Exeter', *The Walpole Society*, 1924-5, vol XIII, p.76.



John White Abbott

Peamore, Devon

Wash and watercolor with pen and black ink over graphite
on eight joined sheets of laid paper, on the artist's original mount
17 13/16 x 22 9/16 inches; 452 x 573 mm

1799

Paul Mellon Fund

Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington