

THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH

1727–1788

**WOODED LANDSCAPE WITH HERDSMAN,
COWS AND RUINED CASTLE**

Pencil and wash on paper

10 3/16 x 14 1/8 inches; 259 x 359 mm

Drawn c.1759



Collections:

Guy Bellingham-Smith (1915-1938);

P. & D. Colnaghi, London;

Eric Sexton (1902-1980), purchased from the above in 1937;

Lowell Libson Ltd., London 2003;

Private collection to 2025

Literature:

Mary Woodall, *Gainsborough's Landscape Drawings*, London, 1939, cat. no. 289;

John Hayes, *Drawings of Thomas Gainsborough*, New Haven and London, 1971, vol. I, cat. no. 227;

John Hayes and Lindsay Stainton, *Gainsborough Drawings*, exh. cat., Washington (National Gallery of Art), 1983, p.64

Exhibited:

Washington, Fort Worth and New Haven, *Gainsborough Drawings*, 1983, cat. no. 21;

London and New York, Lowell Libson Ltd., *Thomas Gainsborough: Themes and Variations, The Art of Landscape*, 2003, cat. no. 2

This incisive drawing was made towards the end of Gainsborough's period of residence in Ipswich. Highly structured and elaborately composed, the drawing belongs to a small group of finished works Gainsborough made as he began to experiment with printmaking for the first time. Gainsborough spent seven years living in Ipswich, a town in his native Suffolk, during this time he filled a series of sketchbooks with rapid observations from nature. This compendium of plein air drawings formed the bedrock for Gainsborough's later practice, allowing him to produce an extended series of landscapes composed of naturalistic trees, vegetation, buildings and animals, but arranged to form idealised visions which contemporaries understood as being charged with profound emotion.

Gainsborough was born in Suffolk and there is a long tradition that associates his earliest landscapes with the flat scenery of East Anglia. Gainsborough's friend and obituarist, the Reverend Sir Henry Bate Dudley wrote in 1788 that: 'Nature was his teacher and the woods of Suffolk his academy; here he would pass in solitude his moments in making a sketch of an antiquated tree, a marshy brook, a few cattle, a sheep herd and his flock, or any other

accidental objects that were present.¹ In fact, this drawing, like the majority of Gainsborough's earliest landscape compositions, was made towards the end of the 1750s, after he had spent a period working in London in the circle of the second St Martin's Lane Academy. We know he moved back to Sudbury in 1748/9 and is recorded living in Ipswich by 1752.

At this date, Gainsborough's landscapes were inflected by his interest in seventeenth-century Dutch art. Gainsborough had a relationship with a dealer, Panton Betew, who made a living selling modern imitations of Dutch seventeenth-century landscape paintings.² During his training Gainsborough took part in the associated practices of the dealer restoring and 'improving' Dutch paintings; the 1762 sale of John Oldfield's collection includes a 'Dutch Landscape, repaired by Mr Gainsborough' and a painting by 'Wijnants the figures by Mr Gainsborough'.³ The access to genuine Dutch landscapes of the seventeenth century offered a supplement to the young Gainsborough's formal training. This exposure evidently stimulated his activity as a painter producing landscape compositions heavily indebted to seventeenth-century models.⁴ These were the paintings that Gainsborough would later refer to as 'my first imitations of little Dutch Landskips'.⁵ The present drawing shows a wooded bank, with a partially concealed ruined castle, an open landscape traversed by a rutted, waterlogged track, cattle and a solitary herdsman. In its form and content this landscape recalls the work of Meindert Hobbema or Jan Wijnants.

Built up with soft, feathery pencil marks, this drawing demonstrates Gainsborough's mastery at creating a complex landscape composition. Gainsborough creates space around the central tree by leaving voids to suggest foliage, these areas of blank paper reading as volume against the densely worked pencil lines of the bank. The mark making shows that Gainsborough had already devised a system for communicating forms in an abbreviated, almost abstract way. The two cattle on the left, for example, are delineated with a few gestural lines and masses are indicated by a rapid system of hatching. For Gainsborough these graphic refinements represented the summation of his practice as a landscape draughtsman. In a letter addressed to the amateur artist Constantine Phipps, who Gainsborough was teaching to draw, he makes an explicit distinction between observing nature and making this type of drawing: 'You know, Sir, I set you to this [sketch of foliage] merely to free your hand, but you are not to understand that for Drawing – therefore remember that there must be truth of hand, as well as freedom of hand in Drawing'.⁶

¹ *The Morning Herald*, 8 August, 1788.

² J. T. Smith, *Nollekens and His Times*, London, 1828, vol. I, pp. 189–90.

³ A. Corri, 'Gainsborough's Early Career: New Documents and Two Portraits', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 125, 1983, pp. 212–16.

⁴ Susan Foister, *The Young Gainsborough*, exh. cat., London (National Gallery), 1997, pp. 3–12.

⁵ John Hayes, *The Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, New Haven and London, 2001, p. 174.

⁶ Thomas Gainsborough to the Hon Constantine Phipps, later 2nd Baron Mulgrave, in ed. John Hayes, *The Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, New Haven and London, 2001, p. 92.

John Hayes has suggested that this drawing relates to Gainsborough's interest in printmaking. Only one of Gainsborough's prints from the 1750s survives, his etching of a *Wooded Landscape with Church, Cow and Figures*. Gainsborough's fluent line, mastery of tone and depth all suggest that he was thinking about the potential of printmaking, but it also points to Gainsborough's developing practice as a landscape draughtsman. This sheet is one of the earliest complete expressions of Gainsborough's interest in an ideal pastoral scene, where the single, seated herdsman is shown contemplating the landscape and his animals. This was a motif that would preoccupy Gainsborough for the rest of his career.



Karel du Jardin
Figures in a landscape
Print
4 ¾ x 6 16 inches; 121 x 154 mm
Made in 1658
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam