



Joseph Wright of Derby (Derby 1734 - Derby 1797)

A Grotto in the Gulf of Salerno, with the Figure of Julia, Banished from Rome

oil on canvas, held in its original Wright of Derby Neo-Classical frame
48 3/4 by 67 3/4 inches; 124 by 172 cm.

A master of subtle chiaroscuro, Joseph Wright of Derby is one of the most important of the late eighteenth-century artists who define the British Romantic movement. Painted in 1780, and exhibited at the Royal Academy that year, this painting is one of a distinguished group of works inspired by the artist's travels in Italy, and demonstrates the profound impact which that experience had on his art.

Based on a detail drawing done on the spot in 1774, the painting depicts a cavern in the Gulf of Salerno, near Naples, and is as startling for the originality of its composition as it is for the exquisite treatment of light.

Despite beginning his career as a portraitist, working briefly in Liverpool before attempting to fill the void left by Gainsborough's exodus from Bath, many of Wright's best loved works are landscape and genre scenes, especially those which deal in particularly dramatic effects of light. Wright's earliest known pure landscape is a picture entitled *Rocks with Waterfall*, painted in circa 1772 (Private collection). It was not until he travelled to Italy however, that landscapes really start to feature prominently in his art, and it is this development that represents the most significant and lasting influence of Wright's experience on the continent. In Italy, away from the time constraints of portrait commissions, Wright was able to fully immerse himself in the study of topography and made more drawings than he had previously had time for. He sketched heavily throughout his travels, engrossed not only in the landscape of Italy, but the mythology of classical antiquity as well. The experience was a personal revelation, and following his return to England he seized every chance he had to paint landscapes; writing to a friend in 1792 'I know not how it is, tho' I am engaged in portraits... I find myself continually stealing off, and getting to Landscapes'.

In 1773 Wright had left England with his wife, his pupil Richard Hurlstone, and the artist John Downman, arriving in Nice in December, before travelling on to Genoa and Leghorn. Continuing overland they arrived in Rome in February 1774, where Wright stayed for seven months studying the splendours of classical antiquity. Writing on 22 May 1774 he noted 'I have not time to enter into a particular detail of the fine things this country abounds with; let it suffice to tell you, at present, that the artist finds here whatever may facilitate and improve his studies'.¹ In the autumn he travelled on to Naples and the area around the gulf of Salerno, a popular destination for the cognoscenti of his generation, and over the course of more than a month visited Pompeii, Herculaneum and the Museum at Naples, as well as Virgil's tomb and the coastal grottos for which that region is famed. This picture is evolved from a chalk drawing Wright made on the spot in the Gulf of Salerno, one of two studiously observed and minutely detailed sketches of particular caverns which clearly captured the artist's imagination. Whilst exceptionally highly finished, these two drawings simultaneously convey a sense of controlled excitement, as if the artist's mind, mesmerized with poetic visions, already teamed with the potential drama that might be portrayed within these seeming voids, and Wright would ultimately develop at least

six paintings from them. Whilst still in Italy he painted straight oil on canvas versions of the two chalk drawings (Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven & Smith College Museum of Art, Massachusetts respectively), and later, back in England, developed the compositions further into two large and intensely dramatic subjects; *A Grotto by the sea-side in the Kingdom of Naples, with Banditti: a Sun-set* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), exhibited at the Academy in 1778; and the present painting, which he exhibited in 1780. Two further grotto scenes, painted later in the 1780s for William Hardman of Manchester, replicate those he painted in Italy (now untraced), and a small number of other later grotto subjects are known. Though he returned to the subjects often, this picture and its companion with *Banditti* represent the apex of Wright's creative engagement with these Neapolitan caverns, and are among the most romantic of all his paintings. The dramatic play of light, glancing off rocks and shimmering upon water is characteristic of his very finest landscapes. Indeed, referring to these grotto scenes, the great Wright scholar Benedict Nicholson noted; 'it is not easy to imagine two more Wright-like visions than these. The pelvis-shaped arch held all that was most precious to him, appealing both to his scientific and to his romantic temperament (and as we know there was no contradiction between the two): on the one hand, the logic of a firm structure of rock, geological in its fissures; on the other, the marvel of iridescent light'.²

The two pictures were acquired from the artist by Joshua Cockshutt, of Chaddesden, in 1780 and hung together until the *Grotto... with Banditti* was sold in these rooms in 1986. Unlike Wright's other grotto views, which are empty save for light, air and sea, both pictures have a narrative element that heightens the drama of the cavernous voids. Three errant Julias were banished from Rome during classical antiquity, all for adultery, all within about a forty year period during the 1st century BC, and all to virtually inaccessible islands. Whilst the title given to this picture at the 1780 Royal Academy exhibition leaves it ambiguous as to which of these three she is meant to be, another version of the subject was exhibited by Wright at Robin's Rooms in 1785 (no. 7) under the somewhat loquacious title *Julia, the daughter of Augustus, and supposed mistress of Ovid, deploring her exile by moonlight, in a cavern of the island to which she was banished, thereby confirming her identity*. Much the best known of three possible candidates, Julia, the only child of Emperor Augustus and his wife Scribonia, was the wife of the great Roman general Agrippa, and following his death married Tiberius, who succeeded her father as Emperor. However her many blatant adulteries became so great a scandal that in the year 2 BC Julia was banished to the island of Pandateria, of the coast of Campania, near Naples – a coastline that Wright had explored, and it is possible that he would have heard the story of Julia's banishment whilst staying in Naples.

The subject of the Boston picture, one half of which is commanded by an ethereal light floating in over the soundless sea, the other dominated by the banditti of Wright's title, is at first seemingly unrelated and borrows heavily for its tone and figural content from the work of Salvator Rosa, as well as Wright's friend and contemporary painter John Hamilton Mortimer. Seen on their own the enigmatically grouped banditti have an elusive and mysterious imaginative force, though their purpose is not entirely clear. It was suggested by Nicholson that they 'are not of this world at all but belong to the classical stage, plotting, we would say, not a routine robbery but the murder of Hector'.³ Judy Egerton, however, has suggested that there is some connection between the subjects in these two companion pieces. With the story of Julia's banishment in mind, cast as she was onto an island in the Bay of Naples, can the banditti be a troop of mercenaries who took her there and are now deliberating as to the justice of her plight, stricken with remorse at their part in terrible fate. The hypothesis is conjectural, but seen together the subtle narrative, with its contrasting emotive themes, would have appealed to Wright's highly romantic imagination. The two pictures also work as a pair in terms of contrasting studies in light – the one a warm suffusion of dazzling golden sunlight as the sun sets upon the late afternoon torpor of the Tyrrhenian sea; the other a cool moonlight that meanders its way into the crevices of black rock, staving off the impenetrable darkness and illuminating the cave with a crisp evening glow.

Wright's choice of Ovid's mistress for his subject links these grotto paintings to the other great cavern views among his Italian landscapes: *Virgil's Tomb by Moonlight*. Like the grotto series there are six known versions of the composition by the artist, the most famous of which includes the equally forlorn figure of the Roman Consul Silius Italicus, declaiming the works of the long dead poet by the orange glow of candlelight (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). As with the artist's juxtaposition of differing lights in his pendant landscapes, so too in his choice of subject for his two great series of Italian landscapes he contrasts the opposing virtues of the two great Augustan poets, Virgil and Ovid. On the one hand Virgil, the embodiment of chaste piety, on the other Ovid who epitomised licentiousness and the fulfilment of personal pleasure – particularly the pleasures of the flesh. Comparison between the two provides an opportunity for epistemological reflection that speaks to the circle of Enlightenment thinkers

and intellectuals of which Wright was very much a part. It is therefore interesting, but perhaps not surprising that, together with A Grotto... with Banditti and A Grotto... with the figure of Julia, Joshua Cockshutt, who originally bought the pictures from the artist, also owned one of Wright's versions of Virgil's Tomb.

Cockshutt was a member of a celebrated family of ironmasters who built a flourishing ironworks at Wortley in South Yorkshire, and lived at Chaddesden, near Derby.⁴ He paid Wright a combined price of 250 guineas for his two grotto landscapes, and enormous sum which was only matched at the time by the two views of Vesuvius that Wright sold to Catherine the Great in 1779. This picture has never been on the market since, and only changed hands once when it was accepted in lieu of a debt, together with Cockshutt's other two Wright of Derby landscapes, owed by one of his descendants in 1840. It is an exceptional piece of painting, and an exquisite example of the artist's idiosyncratic depiction of light, for which he had rightly become famous in such earlier works as *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (National Gallery, London), of 1768, and *An Academy by Lamplight* (Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven), of 1769, and for which he was both celebrated by contemporaries and is famous for today.

1. J. Ingamells, *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy 1701–1800*, New Haven and London 1997, p. 1024.
2. B. Nicholson, *Joseph Wright of Derby. Painter of Light*, 2 vols., London and New York 1968, vol. I, p.82.
3. B. Nicholson, *Joseph Wright of Derby. Painter of Light*, 2 vols., London and New York 1968, vol. I, p. 83.
4. See C. Reginald Andrews, *The Story of Wortley Ironworks*, 1956, p. 45.

Provenance:

Purchased from the artist by Joshua Cockshutt Esq., of Chaddesden, Derbyshire, for £105;
By descent to Captain Cockshutt Twiselton Heathcote (1793–1885), until 1840, when the picture was given in lieu of payment for a debt;
Private collection, Derbyshire, 1840 to 2015;
From which donated to The United Society (Us), to raise funds for the relief of the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe.

Exhibitions

London, Royal Academy, 1780, no. 203 (as 'A cavern with the figure of Julia banished thither by her grandfather Augustus');
London, Tate Gallery, *Wright of Derby*, 7 February – 22 April 1990, no. 100;
Paris, Grand Palais, *Wright of Derby*, 17 May – 23 July 1990, no. 100;
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Wright of Derby*, 6 September – 2 December 1990, no. 100.

Literature:

W. Bemrose, *The Life and Works of Joseph Wright, A.R.A., commonly called 'Wright of Derby'*, London and Derby 1885, p. 121;
B. Nicholson, *Joseph Wright of Derby. Painter of Light*, 2 vols., London and New York 1968, vol. I, pp. 83, 158 and 256, no. 278, vol. II, p. 134, reproduced plate 215;
J. Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, exhibition catalogue, London, Tate Britain, 1990, pp. 164–65 and 285–86, cat no. 100, reproduced in colour.