

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

WEST, Robert

Waterford c.1710 – Dublin 1770

Of Robert West's origins hitherto we only have Pasquin's statement (1796c) that his father was an alderman of Waterford. He was a younger son of Robert West, sheriff and (in 1740) mayor of Waterford, and Ann, daughter of Alderman Thomas Smith; another son, the goldsmith William West (apprenticed in 1726 to a Dublin goldsmith), inherited a substantial fortune from their maternal grandfather.

A group portrait of Thomas Smith of Hadley and his family (not his maternal relations), painted in oils, signed and dated "R West fecit 1733", is at Upton House (National Trust, inv. 446713); the date indicates that Robert must have been born earlier than hitherto thought, and had travelled to England. The chronological difficulties are sufficient to raise some uncertainty in the attribution to the Irish artist.

Robert West was in Paris by .XII.1733 as we learn from a letter from Florence by Richard Pococke to his mother (19.XII.1733: British Library Add. 22978): encountering the pastellist Charles Martin (*q.v.*), he noted that "West's son of Waterford" was staying with Martin's sister, a "Mrs Andrews the painter's wife", in Paris. (Pococke had connections with Waterford.) West is said to have trained in Paris, and to have been a pupil of Van Loo and Boucher. Pasquin is the source of both names, although the latter connection is reinforced by the much later report by O'Keeffe (*q.v.*). Carey claimed that he won first prize at the Académie under Carle Van Loo: in fact an examination of the prix de quartier results indicates that he took the 3^{ème} médaille in .IV.1739. Nevertheless it is hard to detect any stylistic influence of this six-year training in the handful of surviving pictures or in the work of his pupils.

At some stage he converted to Catholicism: Robert West and his wife Maria, family name and marriage details unknown, had four children baptised at St Andrew's, Dublin (Roman Catholic) between 1749 and 1756; the eldest, Francis Robert West (*q.v.*), in 1749, the date hitherto inferred for him. The sponsor of one of these children (Thomas William, in 1751) was Augustin Berville, inventor of a "pasteboard stuccoe" the "most enthusiastic Frenchman, full of professional ardour" recorded by O'Keeffe as a pupil at the school in the 1750s. A Maria Hanbury also appears several times in this role; she was probably the wife of the engraver Michael Hanbury of George's Lane, later Skinner's Row; she continued his business after his death in 1762.

Robert West "principally excelled in his drawing of the human figure in chalk and crayons", according to Pasquin; but he devotes most of his short article to criticising West's lack of the imagination required for history painting. Few of his works survive; it is however as the leading light in the Dublin Society school of drawing that West's importance lies: even Pasquin called him the "foster-father of the Arts in Ireland". The drawing school was first established in George's Lane, Dublin in the early 1740s along the model of the Académie royale, with the students progressing from

copying set drawings to models and life studies. Later, ornamental design, sculpture and architecture were added. The best picture of the training it offered is given by O'Keeffe. West taught drawing from 1744, and was appointed director when, in 1757, the school became more formally organised and relocated to Shaw's Court off Dame Street. In 1763 he was suspended on account of mental illness, and although reinstated in 1770, he died soon after.

Among the Irish pastellists he trained or influenced were his son Francis Robert West, Hugh Douglas Hamilton, Thomas Hickey, the Healys, Watson, Pope, Lawrence and Forrest (*qq.v.*). It is likely that he is responsible for some of the common themes that run through his pupils' work: a light, airy technique, using chalk as much as pastel (many of these "pastellists" worked in monochrome, grisaille chalks which may or may not involve pastel in the strict sense), and in some cases working at a larger than life scale.

West is often confused with his homonym Robert West (–1790), whose origins are obscure; he became a builder in Dublin, decorating his houses with elaborate rococo stucco work. Fine examples include Florence Court, Enniskillen, Newbridge House and his own home at 20 Lower Dominick Street, which has ceilings derived from Boucher (thus perhaps fuelling the claims about the draughtsman's training).

Bibliography

Bénézit; William Carey, *Some memoirs of the patronage and progress of the fine arts*, London, 1824, pp. 187ff; Cahen 1993; Crookshank 1969; Crookshank & Glin 1994; Crookshank & Glin 2002; Cullen 1984; *Dictionary of Irish biography*, Dublin 1969; Figgis 2014; Finnegan 2011, I, p. 119; Hamilton 2008; Joseph McDonnell, *Irish eighteenth-century stuccowork and its European sources*, Dublin, 1991; Conor O'Brien, "The goldsmiths of Waterford", *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, CXXXIII, 2004, pp. 111–29; O'Keeffe 1826; Oxford DNB; Pasquin 1796c; Stewart & Cutten 1997; Strickland 1913; Waterhouse 1981; Wright 2006

Pastels

1.7902.101 Mrs James ABINGTON, née Frances Barton (1737–1815), actress, bl., white chlk/br. ppr, 24x20 ov., s. "R. West delt" (London, Garrick Club. Charles Mathews). Lit.: Ashton & al. 1997, no. 2 φ

1.7902.103 The Rt Hon. Henry Boyle, Earl of SHANNON (1682–1764), speaker of the Irish House of Commons, ?grisaille pstl or chlk/ppr, 62x40.5 (London, Christie's, 17.V.2001, Lot 58 repr., attr., est. £6–8000, £6000) φ

