

THOMAS JONES

1742 Trevenen, Wales - Pencerrig, Wales 1803

*On the Road to Santa Maria dei Monti, near Naples*

Watercolour over pencil, on laid paper.

Inscribed in pencil, upper centre: *In the Road to Sa Ma de Monte by Naples / 10th May 1781*;

annotated in pencil, upper left and upper right: *morning / walnut tree.*

214 by 275 mm

PROVENANCE: Walter Brandt, London

Thomas Jones came from a landowning family in Radnorshire, Wales. He studied in London from 1763 to 1765 under Richard Wilson, a fellow Welshman and the most advanced British landscape painter of the day. Wilson encouraged his students to draw from nature. Jones records in his 'memoirs' that he was making open-air oil studies from the early 1770s. He travelled to Italy in 1776, where he continued to paint oil sketches. He also executed larger, more highly finished views of Rome, Naples and the surrounding countryside. His landscapes found a ready market among international grand tourists seeking souvenirs of their Italian visit. Jones's Italian oil sketches were never intended for public view but for later studio reference, and for a long time they were forgotten. Today, these intimate works are recognized as among the most audacious oil sketches of their time, remarkable for their close observation, freshness and immediacy. They are considered key documents in the history of the *plein-air* oil sketch.<sup>1</sup>

On his arrival in Italy, Jones lived in Rome. He visited Naples between September 1778 and January 1779 and lived there from May 1780 to August 1783. Unusually, he found his motifs in views of the famous ruins of antiquity and in unprepossessing sights such as ancient stone walls and shuttered windows seen from his studio rooftop. One example is the oil sketch *Buildings in Naples* of 1782 [fig. 1].

The present drawing was executed *sur le motif* on the morning of 10 May 1781. It shows the road leading towards Santa Maria dei Monti, a monastery to the east of Naples on a ridge between Capodimonte and Capodichino. He executed a second drawing on the same day depicting a different view of the road. The drawing is now in a private collection.<sup>2</sup> Jones was fascinated by the rugged scenery of the area and made perhaps as many as sixteen drawings there. They are now held at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester; Tate Britain, London; the Metropolitan Museum, New York; the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence and in other public and private collections.<sup>3</sup> A view

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Riopelle and Xavier Bray, *A Brush with nature, The Gere Collection of Landscape Oil Sketches*, (new edition) London 2003, p.118.

<sup>2</sup> Pencil and watercolour, titled: *near ye Sa Ma de' Monti by Naples / 10th May 1781*, 208 x 278 mm. See Ann Sumner and Greg Smith, Thomas Jones (1742-1803). *An artist rediscovered*, exhib. cat., Cardiff, National Museum & Gallery; Manchester, Whitworth Art Gallery; and London, National Gallery, 2003-4, p.242, no. 134, repr.

<sup>3</sup> Francis W. Hawcroft, *Travels in Italy 1776-1783. Based on the "Memoirs" of Thomas Jones*, exhib. cat., Manchester, Whitworth Art Gallery, 1988, pp.103-5; nos. 119-22. The catalogue describes four and refers to twelve drawings belonging to the series. – Ann Sumner and Greg Smith, op. cit., pp.239-42, nos. 131-4, all repr. This catalogue includes four drawings and quotes *perhaps as many as 16 drawings* belonging to the series.

comparable to the subject of the present drawing, executed on 2 April 1781, is now in a private collection [fig. 2].



Fig. 1: *Buildings in Naples*, 1782, oil on paper, 14.2 x 21.6 cm.  
National Museum & Galleries of Wales [inv. NMW A 89]

In spring 1781, Jones took his fellow artists Francis Towne (1739-1816) and William Pars (1742-82) to see *this romantic place* on the road to Santa Maria dei Monti. He records under 8 March 1781: *I was able to conduct him [Towne] to many picturesque Scenes of my Own discovery, entirely out of the common road of occasional Visitors, either Cavaliers or Artists.* His entry for 2 June 1781 reads: *I proceeded to meet Pars [...] at an Osteria in the Road to S'a M'a de Monti - this hollow Way is a most beautiful Series of picturesque Objects, which I discovered by Accident in one of my perambulations.* Jones was conditioned in his response to the location by his knowledge of the artist Salvator Rosa (1615-73), whose paintings of bandits in rugged, gloomy landscapes were much admired in the eighteenth century. A further entry reads: *Here may visibly be traced the scenery that Salvador Rosa formed himself upon – Only taking away the Pinetrees, which were, perhaps, planted since this time, and which indicate a State of Cultivation not suited to his gloomy mind, with the addition of Water & a few Banditti – And every hundred yards presents you with a new and perfect Composition of that Master.<sup>4</sup>*



Fig. 2: *On the Road to Santa Maria dei Monti, near Naples*, 2 April 1871, pencil and watercolour, 291 x 430 mm.  
Private collection

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<sup>4</sup> A. P. Oppé, *The Memoirs of Thomas Jones, The Walpole Society*, XXXII, London 1951, p.102. Cited after Francis W. Hawcroft, op. cit., p.103 f.