The Vatican from the Road to Ponte Mola – A Drawing by the Amateur Artist and Patron of the Arts Sir George Howland Beaumont

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Among the acquisitions made by the Nationalmuseum in 2019 was quite a detailed 18th-century landscape drawing attributed to an anonymous French artist.\(^1\) On arrival at the Museum, however, it could confidently be attributed to Sir George Howland Beaumont (1753–1827), one of the most prominent British amateur artists and important arts patrons of his time (Fig. 1).

The quality of the work was quite apparent, perhaps especially as a representative example of a certain kind of landscape drawing typical of the time, in which either Rome, its immediate environs or the wider Roman campagna are depicted. Considering its characteristics and its former attribution, it is perhaps surprising that it would eventually be attributed to an amateur such as Beaumont, but at the same time, and viewed as part of a larger context, this is to a certain extent also symptomatic of drawings of this type.

George Howland Beaumont was born in 1753 at Dunmow in Essex. On the death of his father in 1762 he became the 7th Baronet Beaumont. He received the customary education of a British gentleman, which at the time included the study of drawing. At Eton, Beaumont was taught by the landscape painter and influential drawing master Alexander Cozens (1717–1786), and later at New College, Oxford, he was a pupil of John Malchair (c. 1730–1812).\(^2\)

At the nearby home of his friend Oldfield Bowles (1739–1810) in North Aston, he became more involved not only in amateur painting, but also in amateur theatre. Through the circle of friendships and acquaintances he struck up as a result of this, he met his wife, Margaret, and also came into contact with the pioneering work of the Welsh landscape artist Thomas Jones (1742–1803), as well as that of Richard Wilson (1714–1822). In addition,
his tutor, Charles Davy, had introduced him to the engraver William Woollett (1735–1785) and the landscape painter Thomas Hearne (1744–1817) in London, and he spent a summer with them practising landscape drawing at Davy’s Suffolk rectory.9 Otherwise, a large proportion of Beaumont’s drawings from these years consist of landscapes made during trips to the Lake District.4

In May 1782, Beaumont and his wife embarked on a Grand Tour, visiting Brussels, Lausanne, Turin and Perugia before reaching Rome in October the same year.5 Tourists, whether artists or laymen, would typically document their travels in drawings. This was also true of Beaumont, whose drawing style developed – perhaps naturally – as he adjusted to and was increasingly influenced by what he saw. There is a pronounced difference between the drawings Beaumont produced in Italy and those he had made in England, a difference further highlighted by the fact that he reverted to something much more like his earlier style when he returned home.6 Paradoxically, some of the connections and influences he had earlier found in England became more important for his artistic development on Italian soil. The foremost inspiration was probably that of John Robert Cozens (1752–1797), whom he met in Rome; he was the son of Beaumont’s drawing master at Eton, a master draughtsman in his own right, and a travelling companion to the famous author and patron of the arts William Thomas Beckford (1760–1844).7 As a result, there is more of a Romantic strain to Beaumont’s Italian drawings, somewhat reminiscent of the idiosyncratic and proto-Romantic watercolours of Cozens, as well as of the earlier works of Richard Wilson.8 Maybe he was struck in particular by the dramatic majesty of the Italian landscape, which he perhaps thought lent itself especially to interpretations like those of Cozens and Wilson, or possibly this adjustment in style happened on a subconscious level.

On the verso of the present drawing there is an interesting inscription, probably written by Beaumont himself: “The Vatican from the road to Ponte Mola, under this outward was killed the Connetable Bourbon by a masquet [musket] shot from the Vatican at the siege of Rome, Benvenuto Cellini says he was the man who killed him.” This of course is a reference to the sack of Rome in 1527, and especially to Benvenuto Cellini’s account of it.9 Through the mutiny of his unpaid army, the Connetable Bourbon, the “Constable of France”, Duke Charles III (1490–1527), had been forced to take part in the sack of the city, and according to Cellini, who was involved in the defence of the papal state, he was in fact shot by the artist himself at the location that Beaumont depicted. Clearly, Cellini’s description of the event fired Beaumont’s imagination, and he decided to record this view twice (Fig. 2). As such, the work is also quite revealing as to the factors that could prompt Beaumont’s choices of scene when he sketched his landscapes.

On his return to England, a political career awaited Beaumont, but more importantly in this context he also became a prominent personage in the British art world, primarily as one of the most important patrons and, by extension, an influential arbiter of artistic taste. Most significantly, he was one of the founders of the British Institution and later also laid the groundwork for the founding of the National Gallery. He was instrumental in forming the original collection of the new museum, and his preferences, hinted at in his own artistic output, were also very much reflected in this endeavour.

Beaumont’s dominant influence on British taste in art was criticised, for example, by John Ruskin (1819–1900). Ruskin of course championed the innovations of J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), whose art Beaumont never liked. This is perhaps especially paradoxical since some of Beaumont’s own influences, such as John Robert Cozens, were also Turner’s. The difference here is that Beaumont seems to have been much more comfortable in the equilibrium of his own artistic milieu, which perhaps is to be expected of an amateur. Viewing an amateur’s artistic output, one must of course consider its relationship to other parallel involvements, perhaps especially if they were in closely related areas such as the collecting of art. Beaumont’s practical ability to further develop his artistic skills was always going to be affected by this relationship; in fact, this can be said to have been implied. Perhaps the “framework” of this relationship may also have influenced his ability to further develop his theoretical views of art and thereby his taste. Although there is a Romantic touch to his Italian drawings, his preferences seem to have been squarely classical and thus very typical of his time.

Today Beaumont’s drawings form part of the collections of several important museums, among them the Yale Center for British Art. They are examples of the work of an amateur artist-connoisseur who was naturally – and purposefully – steeped in the dominant artistic taste of his time. As such, they can also be viewed as an obvious, as well as an academic and representative standard of this taste. Although amateur artists in positions of power are to be found to this day, still with the potential to be influential arbiters of taste, one would be hard pressed to find one whose art so perfectly reflects both their position in society and their artistic connoisseurship as Beaumont’s.

Notes:
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.