

The Educators of Trees: Alexander and John Robert Cozens

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In 1785 Alexander Cozens (1717-1786) explained that 'Composing landscapes by invention, is not the art of imitating individual nature ... it is forming artificial representation of landscape on the general principles of nature'. By focusing on individual elements, the 'practice of observing ... single parts', 'such as trees ... from drawing or prints, and especially from nature, is very much to be recommended to beginners', as using these different sources will build something similar in your own sketch.¹ This principle summarised the focus of the artists' career and that of his son, John Robert Cozens (1752-1797). Both Alexander and John Robert were influential watercolour painters of the 18th century, the former using his skills to educate, and the latter revolutionising landscapes by using watercolour to create mystery and emotion. Drawing on works from the Whitworth collection, this essay will explore how both father and son used their passion for trees to educate.²

Alexander was born in Russia, where his father was master shipbuilder to Peter the Great. Although he was educated in England, the young artist returned to Russia to improve his topographical drawing and engraving skills.³ In the spring of 1746 he travelled to Rome where he became associated with Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714-1789), a French decorative and landscape painter. Alexander's sketches from this visit, known as the *Roman Sketchbook*, are predominantly detailed outlines of real locations with light watercolour washes.⁴ Several are made with a brush and ink, rapid sketches in the manner of many 17th-century artists, such as Claude Lorraine. Using ink *en plein air* continued into the next century by artists such as Vernet, who inspired Alexander to use brown and grey washes. The influence is visible in a simple landscape by Vernet (18th century, V&A) where the right hand side of the composition is framed by a tree, the style of which echoes Alexander's – a thin ink line with tones of faded wash as visible in figure 8.⁵ The similarities between their works show no doubt that they spent a great deal of time together, but it is not clear whether Alexander was a pupil or a colleague. Their contemporary Joseph Holdon Pott certainly admired Alexander's drawings which 'have a peculiar excellence, in which they resemble painting; for the effect is not, as is usually the case, produced from outlines fitted up, but is worked into light, shade ... by a more artful process ... and afford a very harmonious effect...'⁶ Later in life Alexander explained that blocking out colour allowed greater emphasis on light and shade, and with it, mass and weight.⁷ Vernet's use of brush and ink with light wash would go on to define Alexander's formulation of a tree.

In 1749 Alexander became a drawing master at Christ's Hospital, and later Eton, where students were taught how to create topographical drawings (the mapping of an area). To encourage pupils to use their imaginations, Alexander devised the radical 'blot' technique 'to make accidental forms without lines'.

*'Take a camel's hair brush ... dip it in a mixture of drawing ink and water ... and with the swiftest hand make all possible variety of shapes and strokes upon your paper, confining the disposition of the whole to the general subject in your mind.'*⁸

From the patterns, forms were then selected to build a composition that could be traced and painted. Alexander soon discovered that Leonardo da Vinci had described a similar technique to 'service in opening the mind'.

*'If you look upon an old wall covered with dirt, or the odd appearance of some streaked stones, you may discover several things like landscapes, battles, clouds, uncommon attitudes, humorous faces, draperies ... Out of this confused mass of objects, the mind will be furnished with abundance of designs and subjects perfectly new.'*⁹

Two studies in the Whitworth collection are examples of the 'blot' method in practice from a folio of five pairs (Figs 1 and 2). They may have been illustrations for *A Treatise on Perspective and Rules for Shading by Invention* (1765) that is now lost. It was Alexander's belief that 'in nature, forms are not distinguished by lines, but by shade and colour. To sketch, is to delineate ideas; blotting suggests them.'¹⁰ Topographical sketches were formed of harsh lines, whilst the blot technique drew attention to the mass and composition of a scene. Alexander did not limit this technique to trees, using it for entire landscapes (Fig 3), from flowing waters to craggy cliff tops. The artist was concerned with his students creating moral landscapes that could create an emotive response to better the human experience, rather than the topographical training he was obliged to provide.¹¹



Figures 1 and 2: Alexander Cozens, *Study of a tree (blot drawing)* [D.1936.7] and *Study of a tree (finished drawing)* [D.1936.8], date unknown. Watercolour on paper.

Figure 3: Alexander Cozens, *Blot Landscape: A Hill, Lake and Trees*, date unknown. Watercolour on paper. [D.1999.14]

As a drawing master, Alexander's career was dedicated to teaching young men and the aristocracy how to create landscapes without undergoing formal training at the Royal Academy. This resulted in the publication of multiple guides demonstrating how to create the ideal landscape from a catalogue of features, such as clouds, mountains and trees. In 1771 he published *The Shape Skeleton and Foliage of Thirty Two Species of Trees*, providing anyone with ability to draw their own fictional foliage.¹² Sir George Beaumont (1753-1827) was a pupil of Alexander's at Eton, an amateur artist, collector and patron of the arts. Beaumont's surviving sketchbooks do not make direct reference to Cozens, however the style of his trees certainly do (Fig 4). Beaumont's trees dominate the composition, directing the viewers' eye to follow. Although each branch is not defined it does not matter as the mass and weight of the tree is delineated by washes and highlights. Beaumont's album in the Whitworth collection is full of drawings where the student is still clearly heeding his teacher's words decades after the fact. Also in the collection is *Classical Landscape: A bearded man seated under a tree* (Fig 5). Although by Alexander, an inscription on the back suggests that the artist developed this composition from a blot created by a student, Arthur Singleton. This work, with its unique acknowledgement of Singleton, is evidence of Alexander's priorities – of using features of nature, such as trees, to educate his students in how to create a rounded composition.

Figure 4: Sir George Beaumont, *Yew Tree at Foxley, Herefordshire*, 1802. Chalk and watercolour on blue paper. [D.1974.38]



Figure 5: Alexander Cozens, *Classical Landscape: A bearded man seated under a tree*, 1764. Watercolour on paper [D.1927.110]



Nonetheless, one drawback of the 'blot' method was that Alexander's landscapes were typically works of fiction. His mountain peaks, for example, were inspired by the drama of Flemish artists, whilst the composition was often influenced by a classical style from his studies in Italy. Consequently Alexander's trees vary greatly in quality, often not being of identifiable species. In *Study of two trees* (Fig 6), Alexander has awkwardly placed poplar and a larch-fir on a basic landscape (if we are using his publication as a guide for identification). This study is likely to have derived from an initial blot, which Alexander has then built into a composition, perhaps as an educational example. There is a certain irony as he published *Thirty Two Species of Trees* so that his pupils could create convincing, identifiable species.

Although there are some poor impressions, there is no doubt, in Alexander's overall skill to articulate trees. Figures 7 and 8 are amongst Alexander's most beautiful examples, where the form and mass of the tree has been prized over its surrounding landscape, each delicately penned with great care. It is Alexander's diverse training that accounts for his mature style. His knowledge of etching created an eye for subtle tones, a benefit when working in monochrome watercolours and ink, whilst his topographical training ensured accurate perspective in his fictional landscapes. Furthermore, Alexander's etching knowledge allowed him to translate the various species of trees from pencil, ink and watercolour to a metal plate for *Thirty Two Species of Trees*. In turn, Alexander was able to disseminate his knowledge and methods to a far greater audience than those in academia. Trees were a single factor in a multitude of elements that Alexander studied, formulated and published. They are, however, the single most common factor in his landscapes, projecting the emotion of the scene through composition, weight and movement.



Figures 6,7 and 8: Alexander Cozens, *Study of two trees* [D.1922.7], *Study of a birch tree* [D.1999.15], *Study of a tree* [D.1931.19]. Dates unknown. Watercolour on paper.

Visually John Robert (1752-1797) inherited the skill of his father, but by contrast his career was led by commissions and capturing emotive accounts of his travels. The young artist spent his early career in London and travelling around Britain, mastering the depiction of his own country before attempting more advanced scenery abroad. In 1776 he ventured on his first Grand Tour with Richard Payne Knight, followed almost a decade later by a second tour with William Beckford, one of his father's former students. John Robert was commissioned to create watercolours of Swiss, Austrian and Italian subjects that were based on his sketchbook observations and were often created years after the original sketch. Very little is known about John Robert in his later life. His last dated watercolour was in 1792. The following year he was reported to be ill, suffering from a 'decay of the nervous system' and spent his last years in an asylum, Bethlem Royal Hospital.¹³

Like his father, John Robert rarely used oils. He learnt methods of drawing from his father's teaching and essays.¹⁴ He even copied his father's works, which means many watercolours have been wrongly attributed to Alexander in the past. Painting a landscape with watercolours was traditionally for topography. Watercolour was ideal as it was portable and could be used to 'tint' or 'stain' a map within the lines without distorting it. From the age of 25, John Robert started to use more colour in his drawings, yet his palette was restricted to blue, green and grey, only adding warmer colours once his technique matured. He held the same opinion as his father that tone, which could create atmosphere, was more important than colour. John Robert revolutionized landscapes by *painting* with watercolour to create mystery and emotion, rather than just filling the spaces between lines (see figures 11 and 12 for example). Although John Robert is not a household name today, his skill made a great impact on the students of the late 18th century. The Romantic painter John Constable (1776-1837) declared that John Robert 'was the greatest genius that ever touched landscape' as his work 'was all poetry'.¹⁵

Throughout 1782-3 John Robert travelled through Europe with Beckford. Their adventures are chronicled in John Robert's sketchbooks, which are annotated and dated allowing us to trace their journey. The seven volumes, part of the Whitworth collection, contain almost two hundred sketches in pencil, many with Indian ink wash. From his first sketch *Entrance to the Tyrol* they progress through Austria to Brixen, Bolzano, Verona, Padua, Ferrara, Rome, Terracina to

Naples and Salerno. The sketchbooks are an invaluable resource as they provide a more honest account of what is John Robert's observations, and what it artistic licence once he had returned to his studio.

*It is evident from his sketchbooks that John Robert predominantly studied trees from life, in contrast to the imaginative 'blot' method encouraged by his father. In *View of a Convent at Vietri* (Fig 9), John Robert has strategically placed himself, so the tree not only frames the convent, but also convinces us we are on the approach to the building through the woodland. The portrait composition and upward movement of the trees provides the viewer with a sense of the mountain to his right and the dominant convent ahead. The artist has drawn on gridded paper to ensure that he can later increase the composition whilst retaining the proportions. Similarly in *The Villa d'Este* and *St Peter's from the Villa Borghese* (Figs 10 and 11), John Robert has used the uprights of trees to frame the building in question. The date is not known of either of these works and neither of the sketchbooks for these periods of travel survive, so we are not able to make comparison. We can be reassured, however, by the numerous trees in the surviving sketchbooks that wherever possible, John Robert would place himself in locations that form natural compositions.*



Figure 9: John Robert Cozens, *View of a Convent at Vietri*, vol. III, 24 September 1782. Pencil and watercolour on paper. [D.1975.6.13]

Figure 10: John Robert Cozens, *The Villa d'Este, Tivoli, Italy*, date unknown. Watercolour on paper. [D.1974.10]

Figure 11: John Robert Cozens, *St Peter's from the Villa Borghese, Rome*, date unknown. Pencil and watercolour on paper. [D.1984.5]

Figure 12: John Robert Cozens, *The Lake of Albano and Castel Gandolfo, Italy*, date unknown. Pencil and watercolour on paper [D.1950.18]



*John Robert did, however, often manipulate or fictionalise trees to frame his chosen landscape. In *The Lake of Albano and the Castel Gandolfo* (Fig 12) is dominated by an overhanging tree. Although it is entirely possible that tree can grow in such a shape from exposure to high winds, this particular composition seems staged compared to previous three mentioned. The Castel Gandolfo, which can be seen off to the distance in the right, is aligned with the tip of the branch, presenting the illusion that one more gust of wind could make the tree bend and eradicate the castle. The tree hangs precariously and dominates the picture, suggesting it fascinated John Robert. I would suggest John Robert has taken two separate studies, perhaps from the same journey, to create a more engaging view of the castle. The artist also intended to humanize the scene by adding small figures, including shepherds and their flock, as seen in the bottom left hand corner. With each application of wash John Robert has built up a variety of tones, adding detail with tiny flicks of the brush to apply the darkest washes.*

*At first glance the careers of father and son seem to contrast, Alexander focusing on education and methodology, whilst John Robert was driven by patronage (a necessity to survive as an 18th-century artist). Yet John Robert did in fact follow in his father's footsteps by publishing 14 aquatint prints, *The General Character, Delineation and Foliage of**

Tree (1789).¹⁶ There is no known reason for the prints as they come without commentary or title page, much in the same that his father's *Thirty Two Species of Trees* were unaccompanied. It is unlikely that he was trying to conclude his life's work as he was only 37 years old at the time, rather it is more likely he was considering different ways to raise funds or perhaps at the request of patron. Either way, they are considerably more skilled than that of his father's. In a quick, effortless motion, John Robert glided his pencil across the paper in volume I of his sketchbook (Fig 13) to create Fir trees. These wavy strokes are highly effective, capturing the delicacy of the needles hanging from the branches. This delicacy does not translate to the print (Fig 14). It is most probable that John Robert used soft ground etching to establish the outlines of his landscape, then used an aquatint technique. Aquatint was popular for its ability to mimic watercolour, so John Robert was reliant on these tones to capture the contours of the pines. Although the print is not quite as delicate as the drawing, it is clear evidence of John Robert's ability to move between mediums. The low cost production of aquatint meant John Robert would have been able to produce these himself without the expense of hiring a professional.



Left to right:

Figure 13: John Robert Cozens, *Timber Chalets among Fir Trees in the Tyrol*, vol. I, 5 June 1782. Pencil and watercolour on paper [D.1975.4.3]

Figure 14: John Robert Cozens, *The General Character, Delineation and Foliage of Trees: Fir*, 1789. Aquatint [P.20013]

Figure 15: John Constable, *View of Derwent Dale, Derbyshire*, 1801. Pencil and watercolour on paper [D.1949.10]

Figure 16: John Robert Cozens, *View of the Valley of the Isarco, near Brixen*, 7 June 1782. Pencil and watercolour on paper [D.1975.4.12]



Alexander and John Robert Cozens have both fallen into obscurity, yet their legacy remains alive by those who learnt from them. JMW Turner (1775-1851) and Thomas Girtin (1775-1802), for example, meticulously copied John Robert's sketchbooks in the 1790s. It is believed that John Robert only exhibited one oil painting at the Royal Academy in his lifetime, *A Landscape, with Hannibal in his March over the Alps, Showing to his Army the Fertile Plains of Italy* (exhibited 1776, now lost). This painting however had a great effect on Turner, being the one work 'from which he had learned more than anything he had then seen' and contributed to his own painting *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* (c. 1812, Tate).¹⁷

Constable created the greatest volume of surviving material that shows Alexander and John Robert's influence. Constable extensively copied Alexander's systems, such as his twenty varieties of sky, which offered the artist with a selection that they could adapt for their own purposes (*The Courtauld*).¹⁸ Furthermore, Constable imitated Alexander's sixteen etchings *The Various Species of Composition of Landscape in Nature* (c.1770-75) as well as the accompanying notes (private collection; Fogg Museum, Harvard).¹⁹ The impact of Alexander's teachings on Constable's technique is certainly evident in his sketches, such as *View of Derwent Dale, Derbyshire* (Fig 15), created in a monochrome palette, reliant entirely on tone. Constable had such an appreciation of John Robert's work, that he owned a completed watercolour of *View of the Valley of the Isarco* (Fig 16).²⁰ More than anything Constable appreciated that father and son promoted the emotive element that landscapes were intended provoke, to such extent that John Robert's work was 'all poetry'.²¹

Alexander and John Robert Cozens were remarkable individuals; their passion for teaching and their use of trees made them a combined force in the creation of the British watercolour landscape. Although their landscapes are often fictional, their methodology and techniques create seasons of universal emotion that any viewer could relate to. As the gallery in the park, it is fitting that the Whitworth possesses over 50 works and seven sketchbooks by father and son. The significance of trees runs through the collection from the historic works on paper, through to the recent commission of Anya Gallaccio's ghost tree (2015). In 2017, *Cozens and Cozens* will showcase works exclusively from the Whitworth collection, including John Robert's sketchbooks that have been digitised for audiences to peruse for the first time.

¹ Alexander Cozens, *A New Method of Landscape*, 1785 (UK: Paddington Press, 1977) – NB. No page numbers

² All works are from the Whitworth collection unless otherwise stated.

³ Kim Sloan, *Alexander and John Robert Cozens: The Poetry of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 2-7. Sloan's book is the most comprehensive review of the lives and careers of both father and son, to date.

⁴ British Museum: 1867.1012.1-52

⁵ Claude Joseph Vernet, *Drawing*, 18th century. Pen and ink. V&A. DYCE.601

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O246930/drawing-vernet-claude-joseph/> Compare BM 1867.1021.12 and V&A DYCE.601.

⁶ *An Essay on Landscape Painting* (1782), pp. 76-7. Attributed to Reverend Joseph Holden Pott. Available at

https://archive.org/stream/gri_000033125011074602#page/n25/mode/2up/search/cozens

⁷ Sloan (1986), 9-12

⁸ Cozens, *A New Method of Landscape*, 1785

⁹ Leonardo da Vinci, *A Treatise on Painting* in Cozens, *A New Method of Landscape*, 1785

¹⁰ Cozens, *A New Method of Landscape*, 1785

¹¹ Alexander planned to produce a work called *Morality*, outlining the 'the Vertues [*sic*] and Vices of Human Nature thru Epic Poetry and historical painting'. The plan is noted by Ozias Humphry (1742-1810), British Library Add. MS 22 949, vol. I, f.14V-17. See Sloan (1986), 60

¹² Accessible on archive.org <https://archive.org/stream/shapeskeletonfoooCoze#page/2/mode/2up>

¹³ James Greig (ed), *The Farington Diary*, vol I (London: Hutchinson, 1922), 57. Available at <https://archive.org/details/faringtondiaryofariuoft>

¹⁴ Sloan (1986), 89

¹⁵ R.B. Beckett, *John Constable's Correspondences* (London: Phaidon, 1951), vol. vi, 299; vol. iv, 82

¹⁶ The Whitworth P.20009 - 22

¹⁷ C.R. Leslie, *A Handbook for Young Painters* (London: John Murray, 1887), 264. Available at

<https://archive.org/details/handbookforyoungoolesl>; Tate N00490

¹⁸ The Courtauld D.1932.LF.29 - 48

¹⁹ See Sloan (1986), 53. Copies of Alexander's etchings are at the British Museum 1928.0214.41 - 48

²⁰ Seven completed version are known to exist. The version owned by Constable is *The Valley of the Eisak in the Tyrol, near Brixen* (1791), National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

²¹ R.B. Becke tt, *John Constable's Correspondences* (London: Phaidon, 1951), vol. iv, 82