



GALLERY  
NOTES®

*from*

JOHN MITCHELL  
FINE PAINTINGS

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**“William Hodges has been the most unjustly neglected  
British painter of the eighteenth century.”**

*Sir David Attenborough.*

These are the words used by David Attenborough in his ‘Foreword’ to the National Maritime Museum’s exhibition on Hodges in the summer of 2004, the first ever of its kind. Three years earlier I had discovered a rare, lost painting by him from the Cook voyage and sold it to the Captain Cook Memorial Museum in the town of his birth, Whitby, in North Yorkshire. Not least because of this, our firm was closely involved with the 2004 exhibition, both through financial support and by being granted the uncommon privilege of displaying in our own Bond Street gallery a preview of a selection of highlights from the show to be held at Greenwich the following month. Being able to study and appreciate Hodges’ extraordinary oil paintings of New Zealand, Polynesia and Easter Island in the privacy of one’s own premises was an unforgettable experience. It was also memorable for giving me the chance to discuss his work David Attenborough. He came in one day, unannounced and on his own, to study the pictures in advance of his official opening of the Greenwich exhibition a fortnight later. We both agreed that William Hodges was a remarkably deft and adaptable artist, and that, for such an open-minded and curious man, his life’s experience must have been almost unimaginable.

Hodges is best known as the official artist on James Cook’s second voyage to the Pacific from 1772 to 1775. Even before the expedition reached New Zealand *en route* to the Pacific Ocean, Hodges produced some of the most visually arresting images of the whole enterprise. In early 1773, Cook embarked on the first of three epic and hazardous cruises in the most extreme southerly latitudes. Thousands of miles from the nearest land, in overcast skies and in intense cold, Cook nosed his way in among icebergs and vast sheets of pack ice, searching for an imagined ‘Great Southern Continent’, enabling Hodges to produce the ‘first visual images of the Antarctic’, in the words of Nicholas Thomas, Professor of Anthropology at Cambridge University. Even though there were no models for the depiction of such scenery, his phenomenal black-and-white tonal drawings of icebergs, and the two ships among the ice floes, are timeless and, at the time of writing, enthral visitors to the major Captain Cook exhibition at the British Library in London, organised as part of the commemorations of his first voyage. It is astonishing to think that it would be more than sixty years before any ship ventured as far south as Cook did. Only in recent years has the true significance of his remarkable paintings of New Zealand and Polynesia begun to be appreciated, for not only was he the first professional European painter to visit these parts, but in his unprecedented concern for atmospheric and the play of light on his surroundings, he was forty years ahead of Turner and a century before the Impressionists. His record of Tahiti has been described by Professor Thomas as ‘remarkable for being both precisely empirical and diffused with sensuality.’ A version of his best-known Tahiti painting, *Matavai Bay* [fig. 1], was acquired at a Sotheby’s auction in 2001 by the Kelton

Foundation of southern California, a philanthropic collection of Oceanic and maritime art, and, being excessively scarce, few – if any – ‘voyage’ paintings have come to light since then, nor probably will. This month sees the opening of a permanent new gallery at the National Maritime Museum, entitled *Pacific Encounters* and is to include two of the great Hodges oil paintings of Tahitian war canoes.

William Hodges is also known for his innovative paintings of India, where he stayed for six years under the patronage of Warren Hastings. His interpretation of the Indian landscape differs from his reaction to the Pacific, for here, he felt, there had been an ancient civilization which had long since passed its zenith, and some of his pictures convey, in David Attenborough’s words, ‘an elegiac quality, a portrayal of glories long gone.’ In 1793 he published a book about his travels there, illustrated with his own views of landmarks such as the Taj Mahal. The original illustrations are at The Yale Center for British Art in Connecticut.

When Warren Hastings was impeached for corruption, Hodges’ Indian pictures lost their appeal to the general public. Upon his return to England in 1784, Hodges needed to continue working, but struggled to establish himself as landscape painter, incredible though this may sound to modern ears for a painter who had travelled and seen as much as he had. In 1794, after an unfortunate enterprise in which his outsize pair of moralizing landscapes, *The Effects of Peace* and *The Consequences of War*, were misinterpreted as unpatriotic, Hodges abandoned painting altogether and retired to Devon, dying only



**Fig 1.** *Matavai Bay in the Island of Otateite, now Tahiti*  
oil on canvas, 19 ¾ x 25 ¼ in. (50 x 64 cm.)  
Kelton Foundation, California



**William Hodges (1744-1797)**

*A capriccio landscape with travellers below a rocky outcrop*  
oil on plastered canvas, 45 ¼ x 68 ½ in. (115 x 174 cm.)

three years later. In her laudable attempt at a *catalogue raisonné* of 1979, the American art historian Isabel Combs Stuebe concluded that Hodges painted more than six hundred oils over the course of his lifetime, and of these only about a hundred and fifty are recorded and located today. There must exist, therefore, as many as several hundred landscapes yet to be identified from this later, more obscure phase of his career.

Into that category falls this extraordinary *capriccio* landscape. It has only just come to light, with no known history as yet, and is even more curious for the medium on which it is painted, evidently the only known *fresco* by Hodges. The general consensus among the few other connoisseurs of his art who have seen the painting and confirmed our attribution is that the canvas was almost certainly intended to fit into a specific space, inset into a wall or stairwell, and the fact that Hodges chose to paint into plaster is further proof of his curious and inventive mind. The fine passages of colour, with what Colonel Grant called 'their chromatic iridescence', mark the picture indelibly as Hodges' own, idiosyncratic work. By their slightly awkward handling do we recognise the figures as Hodges's, too, for, like his celebrated teacher Richard Wilson, he was a landscapist first and foremost, and human figures can appear as afterthoughts. The darker foreground with its gnarled trees and roots echoes two of his better-known works, *Jacques and the wounded Stag* [fig. 2] and *Waterspout off New Zealand* [fig. 3], while the luminous, roseate sky takes us back to his tranquil Pacific sunsets. The dilapidated architecture finds its prototype in his neglected Mughal



**Fig 2.** *Jacques and the Wounded Stag: 'As You Like It,' Act II, Scene I*  
oil on canvas, 36 ¼ x 48 ½ in. (92.1 x 123 cm.)  
Yale Centre for British Art, Connecticut



**Fig 3.** *A View of Cape Stephens in Cook's Straits with Waterspout*  
oil on canvas, 55 x 76 in. (140 x 193 cm.)  
National Maritime Museum, Greenwich

palaces and 'chatris'. The subject is, of course, entirely fictitious, and the ethnology of the figure groups charmingly vague, but in its physical scale and Salvator Rosa-like imagination this vista compares well with his famous pictures. The closest comparison we have been able to establish is to a work listed by Stuebe (see above) as no. 544, *A Grand Romantic view on the Rhine, a Banditti Chief Bargaining for Fish* (oil on canvas, 32 x 45 inches, D. Pleydell-Bouverie, Glen Ellen, California).

While there is no suggestion that this majestic and imposing *capriccio* landscape has any direct connection with the Cook voyage or with India, its content and creativity are nonetheless informed by Hodges's artistic training and unprecedented travels, and it is indisputably a major addition to the known work of a fascinating British artist who still awaits proper recognition.

JAMES MITCHELL  
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