

Land Lovers: The Rise of English Topographical Art in the 17th century

*“Topophilia”: the love of or emotional connections
with place or physical environment*

- Colins English Dictionary

When viewing a picture of one’s home, feelings of nostalgia often arise eliciting a sense of familiarity and belonging. This experience is very different from the one produced when gazing upon a beautiful but unknown scene. While landscape art and topographical art are terms used interchangeably, this element of *belonging* separates the two. Topographical art of the 17th century, even more so than landscape art, aimed to reflect the intimate link between self and place – between the artist/viewer and an environment to which they felt connected.

In the city of York, topographical art was developed and capitalised upon by the members of a group known as the *York Virtuosi*. These learned, talented men aimed to showcase their surrounding natural and urban environments whilst highlighting their city’s rich heritage and cultural significance. Works in the York Art Gallery’s on-paper collection by *Virtuosi* members reveals these efforts and interests, shedding light on this transformative moment in the history of English art. Yet, prior to these endeavours, other artists and individuals were labouring to bring British landscapes to the forefront of societal and artistic appreciation. Their achievements also have been safeguarded within the Gallery’s stores.

One man engaged in the early movement towards topographical art was Cheshire-born artist, Daniel King (d. 1656). His depiction of the York Minster¹ was one of many prints featured in the *Monasticon Anglicanum*, a multi-editioned history of England’s ecclesiastical houses. Due to the destruction caused to historic and religious monuments most recently by the Civil War, the antiquarian authors of the *Monasticon* – Sir William Dugdale and Roger Dodsworth – endeavoured to reclaim English heritage. The book’s illustrations underscored this effort and moreover, played into a growing trend of ‘virtual tourism’.

A different view of the Minster by another *Monasticon* artist, Bohemian-born Wenceslaus Hollar (d. 1677),² also arguably demonstrates this theme. The work’s slightly more realistic portrayal encourages the viewer to situate his- or herself in the foreground of the picture plane. The popularity of travel diaries and countryside surveys had grown in the 16th century and continued to increase in later years. King himself produced *The Vale-Royall of England* in 1656 and *The Cathedrall and Conventuall Churches of England and Wales orthographically delineated by D.K.* in 1656. An advertisement dating from c. 1670 further promoted this trend, acclaiming pictorial collections allowed all English countrymen to “turne from leafe to leafe & soe have a sight of as many houses in few minutes, as would cost many dayes & weeks to travaile to them [sic].”³ Thomas Gent’s later 18th-century survey of York⁴ highlights the enduring success of these illustrated compendiums.

¹ D. King, *The West Prospect of the Church of St Peter of Yorke and The South Prospect of ye Cathedral of St Peter in Yorke*, etching, c. 1655-80, YORAG: R1850.

² W. Hollar, *Ecclesis Cathedralis Eboracensis ab Occidente prospectus [West Prospect of York Cathedral]*, etching, c. 1660, YORAG: R1791.

³ See British Museum Online Collection, Number 1852,0214.369, Henry Winstanley, *Advertisement with a view of Winstanley’s house at Littlebury in Essex. 1670s Etching and engraving*, print, 1670-1680.

⁴ T. Gent, printer (d. 1778), John Haynes, engraver/etcher (d. 1750), *The Ruins of St Mary’s Abbey, York*, etching, c. 1730, YORAG : R2498.

Such appreciation for English landscape was also articulated in a number of art treatises, including Henry Peacham's, *The Art of Drawing with the Pen and Limning in Water Colours*, which offered an unprecedented examination of landscape depictions. In 1634 Peacham also produced *The Compleat Gentleman*, a commentary on conduct which firmly touted artistic skill as a gentlemanly trait. The book further advocated antiquarian knowledge and an understanding of the natural world. Together, these three attributes comprised a highly admirable individual Peacham termed a *virtuoso*.

One notable adherent to this idea was John Evelyn (ancestor to William Arthur Evelyn, the founder of the York Art Gallery's Evelyn collection), whose travels, courtly adventures, and antiquarian activities exemplify the *virtuoso* ideal.⁵ Other subscribers included a diverse set of figures who regularly met in York at the Micklegate house of glass painter, Henry Gyles.⁶ Established around the 1670s, the *York Virtuosi* discussed topics ranging from philosophy to biology, its prominent members including zoologist Martin Lister, artists William Lodge, Francis Place, Pierce Tempest, Hollar himself, antiquarian Ralph Thoresby, architect John Etty, and many others of varying professions.⁷ King had died in 1661, thus preceding the formation of the *York Virtuosi*, but had he lived he undoubtedly would have joined their popular circle.

Through their communal experiments the *Virtuosi* "distilled formic acid from ants, attempted to recreate Chinese porcelain, did some of the first mezzotints, and reported their results to the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*" alongside findings by a certain 'Mr. Isaac Newton'.⁸ Another collaborative effort was a new edition of Jan Goedart's *History of Insects* which was translated by Lister, edited by mathematician and fellow member Thomas Kirke, and featured over a dozen copperplate engravings by Place.⁹ Indeed, art – particularly of a topographical nature – was one way in which the *Virtuosi* encapsulated burgeoning thoughts bandied about the group; ideas on heritage versus progress, craftsmanship, nature, architecture, and antiquity. Although the term encompasses more than the aims of the *Virtuosi* and was less defined in the 17th century than so today, topography was a predominant outlet for the antiquarian and naturalist interests of the group.

A desire to catalogue, investigate, and record appears to have driven much of the early topographical studies made by *Virtuosi* members. A work in the Gallery's collection by John Sell Cotman (d. 1842) of an artist sketching before the ruins of St Mary's Abbey¹⁰ reflects the activities many *Virtuosi* members must have engaged in on a regular basis; observing natural and historical environs to better appreciate their multivalent significance. The antiquarian-esque appeal of possessing remnants of the ancient world also found fulfilment in topographical art as the creative practice ensured even crumbling monuments were

⁵ See John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. Guy de la Bédoyère (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995).

⁶ J. T. Brighton, "Henry Gyles: Virtuoso and Glasspainter of York, 1645-1709," *York Historian* 4 (1984): 8-9.

⁷ Anna Marie Roos, *Web of Nature: Martin Lister (1639-1712), the First Arachnologist* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 139-141.

⁸ Craig Ashley Hanson, *The English Virtuoso* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 7; see the article by Lister, "A Letter of Mr. Martyn Lister, Written to the Publisher from York, Januar. 10. 1671/2, Containing an Ingenious Account of Veins by Him Observ'd in Plants, Analogous to Human Veins," *Philosophical Transactions: Giving Some Account of the Present Undertakings, Studies and Labours of the Ingenious in Many Considerable Parts of the World* 6 (1671, repr. New York: The Royal Society of London, 1963): 3052-55 which appeared alongside Isaac Newton, "A Letter of Mr. Isaac Newton, Professor of the Mathematicks in the University of Cambridge; Containing His New Theory about Light and Colors: Sent by the Author to the Publisher from Cambridge, Febr. 6. 1671/72; In Order to be Communicated to the R. Society," 3075-87.

⁹ Roos, *Web of Nature*, 141.

¹⁰ J. S. Cotman, *Saint Mary's Abbey York*, etching, 1811, YORAG : 2002.42.

documented, their presence safeguarded for future generations. Another view of St Mary's Abbey in York by *Virtuosi* member William Lodge exemplifies this idea.¹¹ The medieval structure is captured in its naturally-decaying state, yet is accorded historical honour underscored by the floating cherub whose plump arms hold a commemorative ribbon.

Conversely, one glimpses in a different work by Lodge, a view *From the Old Waterhouse in York*,¹² an alternative kind of affection for the archaic character of the city. Here a group of fishermen carry out their tasks in the shadow of overgrown ruins. There is an imprinting of current life on a well-loved, if rather wearied landscape. The scene is an insightful juxtaposition, not idealised, yet capturing an idyllic experience characterised by the symbiosis of past and present. The fishermen accept their surroundings and operate within them instead of endeavouring to tear down or replace these tokens of an illustrious history.

Indeed, the pleasant tranquillity of the image is echoed in two later works by *York Virtuoso*, Francis Place. In his view of Clifford's Tower,¹³ soldiers mill about at ease amidst the landscape which is at once urbanised yet perceptibly lush thanks to the verdant hill, crystal-blue ribbon of water, and expansive clear sky. Once again, a merging of present and past, modernity with antiquity, is embodied in the image. In Place's, *York from St Mary's Tower*,¹⁴ colour again accentuates his harmonious depiction of water, land, and stone tower, reflecting the growing trend towards picturesque landscape art, yet still capturing the topographical spirit of detailed articulations of the city skyline.

In essence, the *York Virtuosi* became virtual keepers of England's historical and environmental heritage through their artistic efforts. This was a poignant position to be in, particularly since the era of the *Virtuosi* extended through the various crises of Charles II's reign including the execution-ridden Popish Plot, the Monmouth Rebellion in 1685, the Glorious Rebellion of joint-consorts William and Mary, and resulting Jacobite uprisings. The underlying religious tensions throughout England no doubt impacted the *Virtuosi*; their antiquarian and topographical activities. As noted, the Civil War had seen the destruction of numerous monuments, buildings, and objects causing one Thomas Brockbank to lament, "What most monuments there were formerly I know not, but they all suffer'd in Oliver's time"¹⁵

However, according to 18th-century topographical historian, Richard Gough, without the various crack-downs on religious institutions and monuments men like those of the *Virtuosi* may never have been granted the intellectual freedoms which allowed them to observe and record the world around them as they had. He asserted, "The rays that dispelled the gloom of religion illuminated every branch of science. It was not till the monks were turned adrift, and the invention of printing had given circulation to every improvement the mind enlarged could make, that we began to be acquainted with the face of our own country."¹⁶

¹¹ W. Lodge, *St Mary's Abbey neare Yorke*, ink on paper, date unknown (likely c. 1670-89), YORAG : R2496.

¹² W. Lodge, *From the Old Waterhouse in York*, ink on paper, date unknown (likely c. 1670-89), YORAG : R4148.

¹³ F. Place, *Clifford's Tower in York as it stood fortified before it was blown up. An. 1684*, etching, 1684, YORAG : R2643.

¹⁴ F. Place, *York from St Mary's Tower*, pencil, watercolour, and ink on paper, 1700-10, YORAG : R1858.

¹⁵ R. Trappes-Lomax, *The Diary and Letter Book of the Rev. Thomas Brockbank 1671-1709*, Chetham Soc., NS 89 (1930) 54.

¹⁶ Richard Gough, *British topography. Or, an historical account of what has been done for illustrating the topographical antiquities of Great Britain and Ireland* (1780, repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), iii.

Not only does an examination of these works, their contexts, and the following developments upon their underlying themes illuminate the genesis of topographical art, but also ideas of renewed English nationhood and local pride previously crippled by political turmoil. Additionally, this interrogation provides greater understanding of the perceived relationship between an early-modern man and the world around him. The *York Virtuosi* and their efforts to engage with nature and history reflect a growing interest in promotion of selfdom based on individual observations, acuity, knowledge, and creative talent. Indeed, it is only through knowledge of self that a ‘topophilic’ connection to the land, to one’s personal heritage and traditions, can be made. As William Pestell, 17th-century rector of Cole Orton, Leicestershire stated, “I have no pedigree nor coate of armes [...] nor am I ambitious to be blazond for any things but honesty & loyalty [...] I am a Master of Artes & that makes me a gentleman [sic].”¹⁷

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¹⁷ P. Styles, ‘The Heralds’ Visitation of Warwickshire 1682-3’, in his *Studies in Seventeenth-Century West Midlands History* (Kineton: Roundwood Press, 1978), 145, quoted in Woolf, *Social Circulation*, 112.