

## George Barret Article for Gorry Gallery

Between 1760 and 1770, Thomas Taylour (1747-95), 1st Lord Headfort and afterwards 1st Earl of Bective, commissioned the Irish architect George Semple to build Headfort, Kells, Co. Meath. Much of the interior of this austere house, especially the classically inspired principal rooms, was designed by Robert Adam, with the work being carried out from 1771.

In keeping with, and in anticipation of, the classical style of his home, Lord Bective commissioned the Irish-born artist, George Barret, R.A. (1732-84), to paint a landscape with classical ruins. The scene can be identified as the "Tempietto del Clitunno" (the small temple on the river Clitunno) near Spoleto (in the Latin Spoletium), in central Umbria, approximately 100 km north of Rome. This river (in the Latin Clitumno) was famous in classical antiquity, springing from a beautiful rock in a grove of cypress-trees, where there was a sanctuary to the god Clitumnus, and falls into the Tinea, a tributary of the Tiber. According to the Roman poets Virgil, Propertius and Juvenal, the valley of Clitumnus was famed for a breed of white cattle. While the Tempietto, with its stunning Corinthian portico and other classical features was considered by sixteenth-century humanists as being of ancient Roman Imperial origin later converted to Christian use, modern art historians have tended to see it as a product of an Early Christian and medieval classical revival, built between the late 7th and the end of the 9th century AD.

Since there is no record of George Barret (or indeed Lord Headfort) ever having visited Italy, it is likely that he based his painting on the engraving of the temple by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-78). This engraving (reproduced below) appears in the latter's series of prints entitled *Antichita romane de' tempi della Repubblica, e de' primi imperatori* (1748) and later republished under the title, *Alcune vedute di archi trionfali ed altri monumenti* (1765).

Barret's detail of the temple itself is almost identical to that of Piranesi's original, down to the location of the fallen column in the foreground, the extent of overgrown vegetation, particularly on the roof and along the tops of the wall and lower platform, and even the location of his figures - a man about to ascend the steps (Piranesi's old woman is depicted in a similar position except in front of the stairway) and a couple almost outside the doorway at the top of the steps (Piranesi's stooped figures appear to be carrying sticks or poles). However, the settings are very different. The original engraving depicts two arches of a sunken bridge in the foreground, located in marshy land between the fallen column and the archway below the Corinthian portico; and adjoined to this, in the left-hand corner of the print, can be seen the edge of another ruined building equally covered in shrubbery. In Barret's work, this position is occupied by a striking group of three large trees protruding from a slightly raised area of dry land, while the monument itself is submerged in the clear water. Instead of a bridge is a small section of a subsided wooden fence.

Where Barret's work differs most from the original, though, is in his addition of a distant view of a bridge with a group of antiquities, including a mausoleum-like structure, a complete rectangular building and a number of ruins. A possible explanation for this interpolation (since there is no evidence that such a group existed in reality) is that in order to fill a gap between the trees and the Tempietto, the artist inserted here another view with which he was familiar. The scene bears a strong resemblance to the Ponte Lucano, with early prints and recent photographs still showing the rectangular building with roof intact, and the tomb (dedicated to the Consul, Tiberius Plautius Silvanus Aelianus) directly behind it. It should be said, however, that although Barret's version depicts these four architectural elements, they do not bear the same spatial relationship to one another as they do in reality.

The actual bridge with attendant monuments is nowhere near Clitunno, however, but is a short distance from Tivoli, on the outskirts of Rome - a popular excursion with Grand Tourists. It is

situated at the point where the Via Tibertina crosses the River Aniene, at Tibur. Famous for its historical associations with Plautius (in whose honour the tomb was built), as well as for its beauty, the bridge was the subject of a number of engravings by Piranesi, including the above print, entitled *Veduta del Ponte Lugano su l'Aniene*, published in *Vedute di Roma* (1748). The publication date of this particular engraving is not clear, since the vast work, *Vedute*, took years to complete, and in fact occupied the artist for the rest of his life.

A similar oil on canvas was exhibited by the Cynthia O'Connor Gallery, at the RDS (September to October 1995). Described in the catalogue as “A landscape, with classical ruins and shepherds in the foreground”, it is clear that the inspiration for this painting, which came from Abbotstown House, Castleknock, Co. Dublin, came from the same series of prints by Piranesi, the original title being, *Rovescio del tempio di Pola in Istria, e di altro Tempio*. Again, Barret has taken a detail from the Piranesi original (in this case about one-third of the ruins depicted) and placed it in a more picturesque setting with characteristic trees.

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See Mark Bence-Jones, *A Guide to Irish Country Houses* (London 1978, second revised edition 1996) 150

Neither appears in John Ingamells, *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy, 1701-1800* (New Haven and London 1997)