

At first glance, *Foundry at Canon, Herefordshire* is just another painting. It's small in size, rather dark in its colors, and depicts the blurry silhouette of a factory-looking building with its fires alit in the background. Despite its appearances, this small painting tells a story that is not often told. John Baptist Malchair painted *Foundry at Canon, Herefordshire* in 1792. Malchair was a renowned drawing master, folk song collector, and violinist in Oxford, England in the 18th century. He traveled to Canon Bridge, Herefordshire in July of 1792 to make an atmospheric study of the working foundry¹. Before he died in 1812, he was losing his eyesight rapidly. The blurry quality of the image he painted for *Foundry at Canon* could be explain by the fact that five years after its completion, Malchair was almost completely blind². Seemingly, *Foundry at Canon* can be internalized as a gloomy study of the darkening effects in both spirit and eye of the people of the Oxford countryside. In reality, Malchair was simply losing his eyesight, and he was painting a reflection of what he saw with his fading eyes³. Though it may not have been his original intention, Malchair creates a stark parallel in the obscurity of pollution in the late 18th century England air with the emotive feedback that artists have in landscape painting. What is most interesting about this painting is not just its subject matter, but the fact that this is the only known work that depicts such a dreary industrial scene out of the whole of Malchair's oeuvre. This essay will delve into Malchair's possible intentions in omitting the overpowering presence of industry and budding modernization from his body of work, and how this act reflected the attitude of his contemporaries regarding industrialization. An intimate look at Malchair's life as a

¹ "John Baptist Malchair: Foundry at Canon, Herefordshire." The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/337874?pkgids=886>.

² Oppé, Paul. "John Baptist Malchair of Oxford." *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 83, no. 485 (1943): 191–190. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/868783>.

³ Oppé, Paul

teacher, musician, and artist is worth close examination in order to arrive at a concrete explanation for this. Was *Foundry at Canon* a moment of experimentation, or a complete omission of the obvious in favor of the nostalgia of the countryside?

As previously mentioned, *Foundry at Canon, Herefordshire* is small in size, approximately 18cm by 23cm.⁴ Watercolor is applied boldly over graphite lines, resulting in the vivid feel of smoke and fire pouring from a furnace at night. Malchair uses the harsh outlines of the foundry itself coupled with the soft edges of the billowing smoke and bright fires to create a balanced and complete composition. The horizontal of the shadowed foundry is softened by the curve of the shoreline, as well as the smokestack in the right blowing smoke diagonally to the left. Additionally, regarding composition, Malchair uses perspective subtly yet effectively in his construction of the piece. The rounding of the semicircular structure of the shoreline starts near the edge of the lower right of the piece and brings the eye to the middle ground, where the main foundry building stands. The outline of the foundry is the darkest part of the piece, solidifying it as the focal point. The traveling smoke in the middle right leads the eye back to the center, where additional smokestacks stand alight in the background. Malchair blurs the foundation of these structures with the lighter colored smoke, suggesting its distance from his vantage point.

Charcoal diagonal lines are drawn over watercolor on the upper portion of the composition, darkening the skies in places, subsequently bringing more attention to the slightly lighter areas where the fires are depicted. Similar charcoal lines can be seen in a much thicker quality on the lower left of the painting, where they fade out to give way to the river. The varying textures of the charcoal on the shore of the river create a convincing shoreline, leading to

⁴ The Metropolitan Museum of Art

the smoothness of the reflecting water. The reflection of the foundry in the water makes the building itself seem more solidified in its placement, as if it has become part of the landscape itself. Furthermore, aside from the varying shades of white, black, and gray, there is very little use of other colors. In doing so, Malchair does not take away from the bleakness of what the foundry may have looked like in the dark sky. The lonely echo of the flames alit in both the foreground and background burn brightly in the darkness of the surrounding smoke, creating a stark contrast that makes the piece almost come to life.

Canon Bridge, the location of *Foundry at Canon*, is about ninety miles west of Oxford. Malchair traveled there in the summer of 1792 to do an atmospheric study of the foundry and its surroundings⁵. Malchair's general style consists of a hazy sky and gray overtones, so it comes at no surprise, given the tone of his other works, that he would want to study the way a working foundry influences its surroundings. Other than the visual of the foundry and its accouterments, there is no other sign of life in *Foundry at Canon*. It may have been Malchair's intention to simply study the atmosphere and surrounding landscape, without any intention of including the life that may have surrounded it. This seems to be a common theme amongst Malchair's other work. There is a characteristic haziness to the skies and scenes he painted and drew. This is evident in another work titled *Broad Street, Oxford by Moonlight* (Fig. 2). *Broad Street* is the most similar to *Foundry at Canon* in terms of colors, shadows, and light source. The dark hazy quality seen here is not the obvious result of pollution like in *Foundry at Canon*, but rather the dark night sky illuminated by moonlight. Malchair seemed to use the same technique of graphite, concentrating the color in one place and lightening it in others to give the gradient of radiant light from the moon. There is a lack of both human life and definition of the architecture, where

⁵ The Metropolitan Museum of Art

the only real identification for where the viewer stands are the chimney stacks, spires, and rooftops of the buildings.

We can further see Malchair's interest in atmosphere and light in *Canterbury Building, Christ Church* (Fig. 3), drawn in 1783. This drawing is similar to most of Malchair's other works in terms of the architectural detail and simple use of gray wash over graphite. The buildings of Canterbury College were demolished in 1783, and Malchair, perhaps knowing this, recorded the demolition of part of the quad. In *Canterbury Building, Christ Church*, Malchair depicts a decrepit-looking church, complete with broken windows and walls that are falling apart. Bricks and wood in a pile near the entrance, and the silhouette of workers are seen both inside and outside of the building, working carefully to demolish the building. The figures are drawn with very little detail compared to the main subject of the work. While the purpose of the drawing was for the sake of topographical recording, the drawing is embodied in Malchair's depiction of the sun shining through the dust and ruins. The light seems to have manifested from the workers themselves, as if they have a divine blessing from working on a sacred building.⁶

Malchair's earliest depiction of industry is in the drawing titled *Fire Engine at Bedminster Bodywell* (Fig. 4). Interestingly enough, Malchair reportedly only made one trip to study industry, this includes his trip to Canon Bridge. The machine Malchair drew here is a Newcomen engine, the original form of the steam engine, used to pump water out of mines. This drawing is one of the earliest found in Malchair's sketchbooks, and shows areas in Bristol, where Malchair first settled when he moved to England from Germany⁷. This drawing is much more

⁶ Harrison, Colin, Susan Wollenberg, and Julian Munby. "John Malchair of Oxford: Artist and Musician". Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1998.

⁷ Harrison, et al.

light handed and airy than many of his later drawings, and especially that of *Foundry at Canon*. Malchair creates an almost charming and unsophisticated representation of this industrial machine. It is unimposing, unintimidating, and blends in with the surrounding foliage. It is assimilated into the landscape itself in an almost curious fashion, half hidden in behind the greenery.

That being said, it is interesting to think about *Foundry at Canon* in the same context as the rest of Malchair's drawings. One cannot help but wonder how the inclusion of a shadowy, dim-lit industrial building may change the general consensus about Malchair's intentions in his later drawings. There is much more discontent that can be seen in the lines of *Foundry at Canon* when compared to his earlier work. These lines are not those of a man who is satisfied with what his deteriorating eyes see. *Foundry at Canon* adheres to many of Malchair's maxims, with his use of coarse-looking paper, simple yet reliable materials, and careful lines drawn from a hand familiar with form. Yet there is an ominous undertone. Perhaps, as we may come to find out, this is why Malchair started drawing more things from his recollection later on in his life, to prove to himself that he did not have to physically see forever in order to experience beauty. Looking at these two pieces side by side, one cannot help but to ponder: What was his view on industrialism? There were many artists, like the well-known J.M.W Turner, who were adamant on portraying the horrors of industry. Was Malchair simply content with the rolling hills of Oxford, with her soft grasses, ancient colleges, and peaceful town? This becomes more apparent after a closer look on who Malchair was as a person, a teacher, a musician and an artist. We must compare all of these things before drawing any conclusions about what Malchair may have intended for his atmospheric studies of Canon.

The general tone of Malchair's other works do not tell the story of an artist who tries to tell the sad story of industrial factories taking over the rural countryside, as *Foundry at Canon* seems to do at first glance. Instead, Malchair's works tread more on the almost idyllic side, with precise fine lines and opaque watercolors. Generally, Malchair used pencil mixed with gray wash. He mixed the two rather unconventionally, making only faint exploratory outlines in pencil, and combining them with different washes to create complex and tonal works. A deeper understanding for his style and subject matters comes from an examination of Malchair himself, as well as his techniques as both an artist and drawing master.

Although he only exhibited one of his works in his lifetime at the Royal Academy, Malchair was a well-respected drawing master and teacher in Oxford, England. He is cited as one of the most influential drawing masters active in Britain in the last two decades of the eighteenth century⁸. Born in 1731 in Cologne, Germany and the son of a watchmaker, Malchair relocated to London in 1754. Through some mutual contacts, Malchair was introduced to Robert Price of Foxley (the father of the famous Uvedale Price), through whom he visited Hereford and settled in Bristol for some time before moving permanently to Oxford.⁹

Malchair was an active violinist, composer, arranger, and collector of folk tunes. Along with all the artistic inspiration Oxford offered him, he was also interested in the city's musical heritage, especially in the music collections in the Library at Christ Church. He transcribed numerous manuscripts, and even was able to listen to live music and jot down the notes in real time, keeping his own archive of tunes. A quote from his biography by Susan Wollenberg reads: "Malchair combined an eclectic attitude towards a wide range of musical experience with an

⁸ "'Barmouth', John Baptist Malchair, 1795." Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/malchair-barmouth-t08210>

⁹ Oppé, Paul

intense dedication to particular fiends of interest. [He had qualities] of humor, industry, a lively enquiring mind, and a flair for discovering curiosities, are shown in his work as a musician; and his engaging personality, as well as his musical and artistic knowledge, must have contributed to the depth of his friendship with William Crotch.” Crotch, as it will be revealed, was an invaluable friend to Malchair, especially in his later life.¹⁰

In Oxford, Malchair was a part of (and eventually became a leader of) the Holywell Music Room, which was a novel feature of Oxford’s cultural life. Members of this band typically supplemented their income by writing or teaching, which is agreed to be the main reason Malchair started to teach. Many of Malchair’s compositions are in the style of folk tunes, and many more were composed by Malchair himself, which included new tunes and his own variation of existing tunes. Much of the music Malchair studied and re-created were from sheet music that was from the early 16th century. Malchair undertook the task of transmitting the tunes in a more easily readable form using modern notations, bringing to life old tunes that probably were not heard for hundreds of years at that point.¹¹

Given his attitude and dedication to the collection and replication of these older tunes, it's interesting to think of how this may have translated into Malchair’s passion for drawing and teaching. This also could have contributed to Malchair’s attitude of the ever changing world he was living in. Industry was rearing its head around the corner, yet Malchair essentially kept his head down and focused on what was in front of him, and also behind him. He seemed to value history and its less complex lifestyle. He was interested in bringing back to life what was old,

¹⁰ Harrison, et al.

¹¹ Harrison, et al.

and teaching the young to not forget their artistic roots. This becomes more evident the closer we look at Malchair and his work.

Gradually, Malchair stopped drawing from nature, when his eyesight deteriorated to the point where he could no longer make out minute details, and preferred drawing scenes from memory. These types of scenes depended less on the details and more on the general atmospheric effects, like *Foundry at Canon*. Malchair's last drawing, titled *Malchair's Last Efforts* was made in 1799 (Fig. 5), when he was almost completely blind, and depended almost entirely on his muscle memory and fluency with a pencil. He completely handed over his practice to another drawing master by the name of William Delamotte in 1797.¹² That being said, one can postulate that *Foundry at Canon* may have been a general impression in the form of a composition that Malchair was extremely familiar with. This is depicted in his work *Crist Church Walk from the Meadows* (Fig. 6) 1772, made twenty years prior to *Foundry at Canon*. The compositional similarities between the two paintings are obvious, with the same winding shoreline and horizontal structures that bisect the piece. Another example, dated fourteen years before *Foundry at Canon* is titled *Folly Bridge from the River*, 1778 (Fig. 7), again, has an almost identical compositional structure to *Foundry at Canon*.

Malchair began to take pupils under his wing in order to supplement his income following his appointment as orchestra leader. Most well-documented amongst his pupils was Dr. William Crotch, a musical child prodigy and professor of music at Oxford University, where he became acquainted with Malchair. Crotch was one of Malchair's closest companions in his later life, especially when he eventually became fully blind, and a wheelbarrow accident left him

¹² Harrison, et al.

unable to venture out of doors. Other notable pupils include Sir George Beaumont, who played a crucial part in the creation of London's National Gallery, Heneage Finch, Earl of Aylesford, and James Austin, brother of famed author Jane Austin.¹³

Malchair encouraged his students to sketch and draw from outdoors, taking in the rural surroundings of Oxford, the medieval architecture, and rolling hills. By the 17th century in England, the inclusion of drawing into regular educational curriculum was the norm. In naval and military academies, drawing was a necessary skill, even serving as the foundation of notable artists Paul Sandby, Alexander Cozens, and William Gilpin.¹⁴ However, in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, it was not until Malchair's reputation began to precede him that drawing lessons could only be taught from less accomplished artists in the town of Oxford. Malchair's pupils spent only the minimum time in copying the work of Old Masters and other suitable models, and quickly learned that sketching from nature was an end in itself, not merely a step on the road to making historical landscapes or compositions elaborated in the studio or at home. He did not encourage a specific style in his students, but trusted that with the proper foundation, they would develop their own. He called this foundation "the alphabet" and once the student has learned the alphabet, he is ready to learn from nature.¹⁵

Although Malchair did not teach him directly, it is said by several scholars that famed English artist John Constable was influenced by Malchair. Ian Fleming-Williams, a reputable Constable scholar, speculated that William Crotch had shown Malchair's large drawings that he had drawn during his few tours of the Welsh countryside. This encounter supposedly prepared

¹³ Oppé, Paul

¹⁴ Harrison, et al.

¹⁵ Harrison, et al.

Constable for what he found during his own tours in Wales. In his drawing done around 1801 titled *Glaramara from Borrowdale* (Fig 8), Constable broadly sketched an impression of an otherwise unimportant pathway that leads to a gathering of hills. Constable's broad and uniform pencil strokes and lack of precise detail can be compared to Malchair's depiction of Wales, one of which is titled *Moel y ffrydd*, created in around 1795. As opposed to Constable's usual strict attention to detail, color, and form, his rather blunt sketch here is strikingly similar to Malchair's. Unfortunately, there is no record of the two meeting directly, but the directional lines of pencil and the attention to the sublimity of the landscape as a whole in both drawings are unquestionably similar.

It's important to note the significance of Malchair's drawings of Wales during his travels later on in life. Because of his failing eyesight, he was no longer able to concentrate on smaller details, and only able to see the larger essentials. He used darker ink, broader pencil and brush strokes, and had a much more forceful expression. This is yet another clue that hints at Malchair's intentions in his depiction of *Foundry at Canon*.

Malchair was not an artist of opulence. He believed the best tools any artist could have was an ordinary black pencil, which in skillful hands, can be made to produce effects unlike many others. He created a manual-like manifesto that details his methods to teach drawing to students, much of which has not survived to the present day. The manual gave great details about the basics of techniques, materials, and landscape painting as a whole. He was extremely meticulous in his descriptions, but frugal in his listings. "Paper should be chosen carefully," Malchair wrote, "but should not be one for the refined varieties manufactured for capricious artists who are fussy about their materials but not about their drawing. The best paper is yellowish and granulated." In the same manual, Malchair digresses that the duty of the drawing

master is not to discourage his pupil either by pretending to have knowledge he does not have and thus misleading him, or by showing him work far beyond his level and therefore discouraging him. Malchair emphasizes his point by saying, “One who would teach a child must draw like a child to conceal his skill as much as possible, his style must gradually improve as the pupil advances; he must even seem to learn the art rather than to teach it.”¹⁶

Malchair recommended that his pupils take advantage of the different shades of light at different times of the day, and to not merely concentrate on the conventionally beautiful or picturesque. He is quoted saying in his manual, “Nature can paint at all seasons and hours, for she has an innumerable variety of extraordinary ways to produce effects for painting, many of which are fully sublime and awful as the rising or setting sun.” It is obvious that he took a deep interest in the transient phenomena of nature and her atmospheric wonders. Once again, this uncovers yet another clue as to what Malchair’s objectives were in creating the industrious scene of *Foundry at Canon*.

Between the mid 18th and 19th centuries, Britain saw extraordinary changes in its landscape on the account of the development of industry. The country had to cease importing goods from outside its borders and start developing and exporting its own goods in order to strengthen her economy, and to uphold its title as a great trading and maritime power. This ushered in a period where factories, foundries, ports, roadways, canals, and train routes were rapidly popping up in different corners of Britain's countryside. In the midst of all of this modernization, large sections of the middle and upper classes lost their appreciation of design in the face of industry. Appalled by the industrial landscape, and at the same time, enriched by the

¹⁶ Harrison, et al.

squalor it engendered, they retreated into parlors and drawing rooms. In the face of such manifestations of industry, some artists turned their backs on the contemporary scene altogether and looked for comfort in an arcadian past, or went into a kind of melancholy retreat.¹⁷

It can be said that reasons like this is why Malchair decided to not take part in the trend of his contemporaries depicting industry. He was very much so settled into the nest of the simplicity that Oxford granted him, surrounded by nature and those who were like minded in enjoying its beauty.

Oxford itself is situated at approximately the same distance from the ports of London, Bristol, Southampton, and Birmingham, making it in a central position for the South of England. Home to the prestigious Oxford University and Cambridge University, the city was one of the first several towns that had, by as early as the 12th century, been established on one of the tributaries of the Thames. In fact, the population of the city increased by almost five fold from the years 1801 to 1901¹⁸. Despite all of this, Oxford remained rather untouched by the heavy hand of industrialization. The city didn't have much to offer in terms of technological advancements; there were no raw materials for industry and no local source of power. It wasn't until the early 20th century that a booming motor company, Morris Motors, established their presence and began turning out about twenty five percent of the cars annually made in Great Britain. Nonetheless, given its central location, Oxford did possess a significant advantage for ease of accessibility. Subsequently, in 1865, the Great Western Railway proposed to build a carriage and wagons factory. However, there was major pushback from the highly influential

¹⁷ Klingender, Francis D. *Art and the Industrial Revolution*. St. Albans: Paladin, 1975.

¹⁸ Gilbert, E. W. "The Industrialization of Oxford." *The Geographical Journal* 109, no. 1/3 (1947): 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1789896>.

Oxford University. The University, the colleges, and the teaching profession itself was and continues to be a primary source of revenue for the city, which accounted for its great influence in the workings of the city. Outside of the University, many citizens of the city supported the building of the factory, citing lack of work. Eventually, the proposal by the Great Western Railway was dismissed, and the factory was built instead in Swindon.¹⁹ It is easy to see here how, during Malchair's lifetime, Oxford remained a beacon on rural idealism.

With the passing of the Mileways Act of 1771, medieval Oxford was threatened with eradication. The Act enabled the city authorities to make new roads approaching Oxford on each side of Magdalen Bridge, destroying part of St Clement's churchyard in the process; to, in essence, create new markets, widen main roads, and remove obstructions. To the younger population, this was a great improvement on the ancient city, but not to Malchair. He perhaps thought that these changes would destroy the fabric of the city he loved, and immediately set about recording them. He did this sporadically, and by the end of the 1780s, he had drawn most of the casualties and many of the more picturesque parts of the city. Many of these drawings were made for himself, and others were made for public records.²⁰ In Oxford specifically, images of the city and colleges were made both to record the buildings, possessions and territory of individual institutions, and generally to celebrate the Universities.²¹

The Mileways Act got rid of much of the ancient charm that the city possessed. Malchair worked in light of the long tradition of creating a detailed pictorial representation of Oxford. Malchair recorded buildings as they were being demolished, reconstructed, or in their various

¹⁹ Gilbert

²⁰ Harrison, et al.

²¹ Gilbert

states of decay. Much of the records Oxford has of her older buildings are thanks to Malchair's topographical studies. Malchair saw the importance of keeping up with these records, and created many drawings of seemingly banal places of the city. Yet upon closer inspection, there is a general fondness in his depictions. It can also be said that Malchair used these records as a teaching tool for his students, in order for them to learn about their ever changing surroundings.²²

The attitude that Malchair seemed to possess for industrialization was not the same as many of his other contemporaries. J.M.W Turner is said to have considered the rise of industry as “against a crucial aspect of contemporary romanticism: a deeply felt relationship with nature.”²³ Working in the heart of provincial life, Malchair could afford to ignore contemporary aesthetic debates. He quietly continued to develop his own responses to landscape in a way that was unconventional yet profound. Much of Malchair's works were only seen by a few individuals; friends he showed his sketchbooks to, his students, and those who accompanied him on expeditions²⁴. That being said, it is safe to say that Malchair did not have the intention of creating any sort of prolific narrative about industry and creating the image of the changing relationship between artists and landscape.

Malchair's depiction of *Foundry at Canon* was created during a time where he was still insisting on creating and appreciating both art and his natural surroundings. It seemed that Malchair did not share the same mindset of his contemporaries when it came to industrialization and modernization. Instead, given all the clues that have been uncovered thus far, it is safe to say that Malchair represents those who wish to see what is in front of them in the moment, and

²² Harrison, et al.

²³ Rodner, W. S., & Turner, J. M. W. (Joseph M. W. (1997). *J.M.W. Turner : romantic painter of the industrial revolution*. University of California Press.

²⁴ Harrison, et al.

preserve nature and history through drawing. Although Oxford has continued to change and morph since Malchair's lifetime, her past lives carry on through the drawings of John Baptist Malchair.

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Image List



(Fig 1) Malchair, John Baptist, *Foundry at Canon Bridge, Herefordshire*, 1792. Watercolor over graphite. 18.4 x 22.5 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



(Fig 2) Malchair, John Baptist, *Broad Street, Oxford, by Moonlight*, late 18th century. Watercolor. 29.7 x 44.6 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum..



(Fig 3) Malchair, John Baptist, *Canterbury Building, Christ Church*, 1783. Grey wash over graphite. 30 x 47.9cm. Ashmolean Museum.



(Fig 4) Malchair, John Baptist, *Fire Engine at Bedminster Bodywell*, 1757. Pencil and gray and green washes. Ashmolean Museum.



(Fig 5) Malchair, John Baptist. *Malchair's Last Efforts*, 1799. Pencil on paper. Ashmolean Museum.



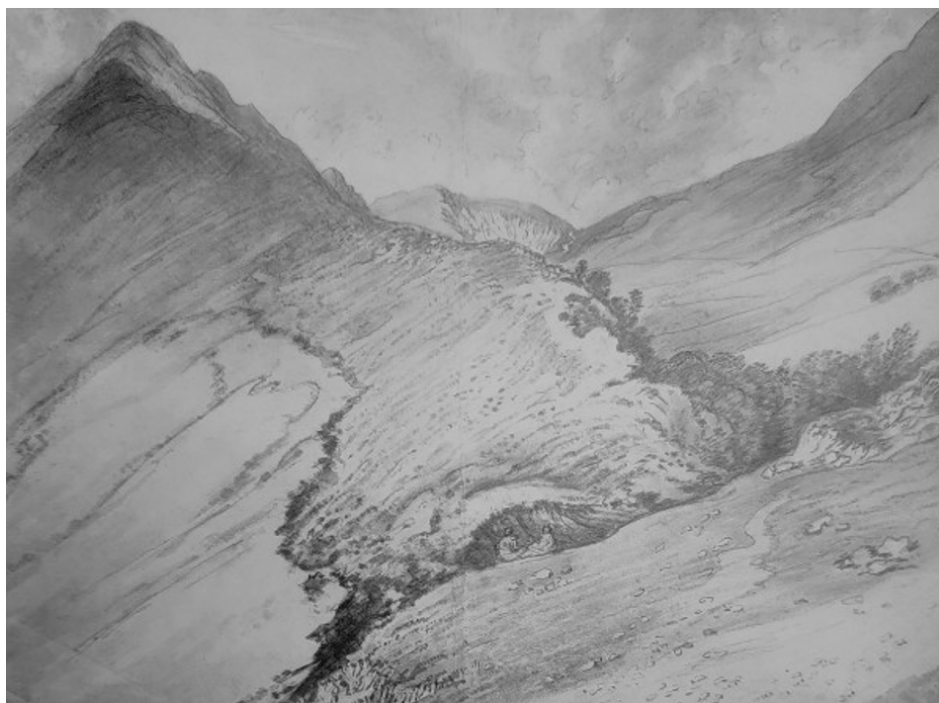
(Fig 6) Malchair, John Baptist, *Christ Church Walk from the Meadows*, 1772. Pencil, gray and colored washes. Ashmolean Museum.



(Fig 7) Malchair, John Baptist, *Folly Bridge from the River*, 1778. Pencil, and gray wash. Ashmolean Museum.



(Fig 8) Constable, John, *Glaramara from Borrowdale*, 1801. Pencil on wove paper.



(Fig 9) Malchair, John Baptist, *Moel y ffrydd*, 1795. Pencil and Indian ink.