

**RCEWA – Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo by Joseph Wright of Derby**

**Applicant’s statement**

*III Statement in relation to the Waverley criteria*

*The Committee’s function is to consider whether an item referred to it is of national importance under any of the following criteria.*

- a) Is it so closely connected with our history and national life that its departure would be a misfortune?*
- b) Is it of outstanding aesthetic importance?*
- c) Is it of outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art, learning or history?*

*To assist the Committee, you may submit a written statement in support of your application, with particular reference to the three criteria set out above. You may use the space below (box 21) or attach a separate document for these purposes*

**Further information**

The ‘Expert Adviser’s statement’ and the ‘Note of Case History’ are available on the Arts Council Website: [www.artscouncil.org.uk/reviewing-committee-case-hearings](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/reviewing-committee-case-hearings)

Please note that images and appendices referenced are not reproduced.

It may be argued that this painting meets the Waverley criteria, however, the application should be seen in the context of there being multiple treatments of the subject by Wright of Derby extant in British collections, including two works listed below, which are both larger and arguably more dramatic:

Joseph Wright of Derby, *Vesuvius in Eruption*, Tate Britain, London (122 x 176 cm.);  
Joseph Wright of Derby, *Vesuvius in Eruption*, Private Collection, UK, on long-term loan to the Barber Institute, Birmingham (124.4 x 180.3 cm.).

**RCEWA – *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo* by Joseph Wright of Derby**

**Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the painting meets Waverley criteria two and three.**

**Further Information**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 1. Brief Description of object(s)

Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797)  
*Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo*, 1789  
Oil on canvas, 1038 x 1284 mm  
Signed and dated, lower right

A nocturnal landscape showing Mount Vesuvius erupting in the distance. The view is from across the Bay of Naples, from Posillipo on the northern coast. Two buildings can be seen by the moonlight along the coastline, while in the foreground two boats sail in the bay.

#### Condition

The picture was viewed at Christie's at the time of the license application, in May 2022. The work is unglazed and appears to be in good and sound condition.

### 2. Context

#### Provenance

Bought from the artist by Edward Mundy (1750-1822), circa 1789, for £84 (changed from £103); by descent to Major Peter Miller Mundy; Christie's London, 12 July 1990 (bought in); sold to the Earl of Portsmouth through Agnew's, London, 1992; sold to present owner through Christie's, London, 8 July 2021.

#### Select Bibliography

*Wright's Account Book*, c.1760-97, unpublished manuscript, National Portrait Gallery (JWD MS 111), as 'A distant view of Vesuvius from the shore of posillipo [sic] bigger than ½ length to M.r Edward Mundy' among pictures of the late 1780s.

William Bemrose, *The Life and Works of Joseph Wright A.R.A., commonly called 'Wright of Derby'*, London 1885, p.123.

Benedict Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby: Painter of Light*, London & New York 1968, Vol. 1, pp.78-9 (fig.99), 97, 254 (no.267) & 283 (no.30); Vol. 2, plate 291.

Elizabeth E. Barker, 'Documents relating to Joseph Wright 'of Derby' (1734-97)', *The Volume of the Walpole Society*, Vol. 71 (2009), p.39.

#### Exhibition history

*Pictures from Hampshire Houses*, Winchester College & Southampton Art Gallery, 2 July – 17 August 1955, no.80.

*Joseph Wright of Derby, 1734-1797, An exhibition of Paintings and Drawings*, The Arts Council of Great Britain, Tate Liverpool & the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, 1958, no.20.

*The Romantic Movement*, Tate Gallery, London, 10 July – 27 September 1959, no.379.

### **3. Waverley criteria**

#### Waverley 2

*Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo* is an outstanding example of Wright's representation of this volcano; it exemplifies the brilliant light effects on which he built his reputation and highlights the ongoing evolution of this subject in his oeuvre. Painted in the 1780s, it showcases Wright's highly individualistic and expressive handling of paint in capturing the surface textures and play of light across the landscape.

#### Waverley 3

This painting is of outstanding significance to the study of art history and the history of eighteenth-century provincial culture. Wright of Derby's sustained interest in Vesuvius is unique in eighteenth-century British art; his specialism in views of the volcano was widely recognised and celebrated by contemporaries. As such the picture represents a significant and highly lucrative branch of his art. A late version, it demonstrates the continued development of his Vesuvius imagery, moving towards a more tranquil and romantic vision of the volcano. It also speaks to the profound impression Italy made upon the artist and his development as a landscape painter following this trip. Edward Mundy's patronage of Wright and purchase of both Italian and Derbyshire views is a striking example of local ambition as Derbyshire landowners turned to Wright to draw parallels between the two landscapes. This early ownership history illuminates the artistic opportunities available in the provinces, notably the local networks shaped by familial, friendship, literary and intellectual connections that Wright belonged to and benefitted from.

## **DETAILED CASE**

**1. Detailed description of object(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.**

As the title of the work indicates, this landscape painting depicts Vesuvius from across the bay of Naples, from Posillipo on the northern coast. Viewed at night from a distance, the red glow of the erupting volcano illuminates the right-hand side of the canvas as clouds of smoke form a halo around it and a stream of lava flows down the mountainside. Wright creates a striking contrast with this by painting the rest of the sky in cool, pale tones as the full moon appears from behind billowing clouds. The moonlight is beautifully reflected upon the gently rippling water through Wright's deft incision into the soft paint. Adding to the tranquillity of the scene, a small rowing boat and a larger vessel with its sails unfurled are silhouetted as they float in the bay. On both boats, small figures can be made out, highlighting the scale of the landscape around them. The shore of Posillipo is deserted and cast into shadow, though the textures of the rocks, shrubs and trees are brought out through the handling of paint. Beyond this, the coastline curves round to the left and along the promontory two buildings can be seen by the light of the moon.

Although painted in 1789, almost fifteen years after Wright travelled to Naples, the painting attests to the continued cultural capital of the Grand Tour in eighteenth century Britain. For British artists, visiting Italy (usually taking in the cities of Rome, Florence, Naples and Venice) became an important rite of passage, providing the opportunity to study venerated classical antiquities and renaissance art, to sketch the Italian landscape, and to network with other artists and potential patrons. It is telling that Wright's visit to Rome overlapped with those of George Romney, Jacob More and Henry Fuseli, among others, while he travelled with the portraitist John Downman, the sculptor James Paine, and his pupil Richard Hurlston. Thus, undertaking a Grand Tour and referencing it in one's art, signalled an artist's superior education and experience; it became an important means of distinguishing oneself within the highly competitive environment of the London art world and of attracting new clients keen to buy into the prestige attached to it.

Wright's depiction of Vesuvius also speaks to the particular cachet of the Italian scenery at a moment when landscape painting was gaining new status and popularity in England. Vesuvius was one of the most popular sights to visit, prompting a flood of literary, artistic and scientific interest in the volcano. Artists were quick to capitalise on this market, not least the French painter Pierre-Jacques Volaire who became known for his views of the volcano and who Wright was being compared with as early as 1775. Turning seriously to landscape painting for the first time after visiting Italy, Wright's painting – depicting the distant eruption by moonlight, its force offset by the tranquillity of the bay – highlights the powerful ways in which Wright's exploration of this subject was a response to the growing ambition and scope of landscape painting at the end of the eighteenth century. Painted in Derby, it also demonstrates the provincial market for these more adventurous subjects, the success and independence artists could achieve outside London, and the quality of the art being produced in the provinces at this time.

Number of comparable objects by Wright of Derby already in the UK

Wright is known to have made some thirty versions of Vesuvius erupting, reflecting the importance and popularity of this subject throughout his career. Many of these remain unidentified and it is notable that Nicolson's 1968 catalogue raisonné only lists eight known versions (the attribution of one of these at Derby Museum and Art Gallery has since been disputed). The different versions in UK public and private collections, as currently understood, have been included as an Appendix.

Significantly, there are only two examples in public collections in the UK. These represent different stages of Wright's artistic process and are entirely distinct from the present painting. Tate's *Vesuvius in Eruption* (fig.1) is slightly larger and represents Wright's early exploration of the volcanic landscape. Crucially, Tate's version offers a very different vision of the volcano, emphasising the violence of the eruption and the ferocious power of nature, underscored by the fleeing figures in the foreground. The second *Vesuvius* is at Derby Museum and Art Gallery (fig. 2). This is in gouache and a swiftly executed sketch on paper, presumably painted soon after his experience of the volcano. Additionally, a work in a private collection is currently on long loan to the Barber Institute of Fine Arts. This is a large version of *Vesuvius in Eruption* (fig.3), offering yet another view of the volcano – seen from the Mole at night. All three versions evoke the spectacle and force of the eruption, in contrast to the tranquillity of *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo*. The work most closely resembling *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo* is now in the Yale Center for British Art's collection in New Haven, USA (fig.20). This is a smaller oil painting on panel, also dating from the late 1780s; the key point of difference is the boats and rock formation in the bay in the foreground.

There have been a number of Vesuvius paintings on the market in recent years. Primarily relying on Artnet and the Witt picture library as resources to identify these, it should be noted that their location, quality, and the certainty of their attribution to Wright cannot be verified. There have been ten versions showing Vesuvius from Posillipo, but these are all approximately half the size and therefore lack the ambition and monumentality of *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo*. It is also noteworthy that few of these versions have such a comprehensive provenance; they do not appear in Nicolson nor can they currently be connected to Wright through his account book or other primary sources. The other versions to appear on the market have been distinct representations of the volcano, notably three small oval compositions, one version very similar to the private collection work on loan to the Barber Institute but smaller, and one larger violent eruption framed by the bay.

As one of Wright's most popular subjects of enduring appeal, his volcano subjects are also among his most copied. Of particular note are those in Derby Museum and Art Gallery's collection, including an early copy of *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo* (fig.21) which does well at imitating the luminosity of Wright's painting but is more orange than pink in tone. Dating from the late 1790s, this attests to the continuing demand for Wright's Vesuvius subjects after his death. The other three copies, all at Derby too, can be understood in this light as well, though they are poorer quality and show violent eruptions from a closer vantage point.

Viewed collectively, Wright's volcano landscapes attest to the huge popularity of this branch of his art. In particular, the multiple variations of *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo*

demonstrate that this specific view was a lucrative and important subject for Wright, that arguably deserves better representation in UK public collections.

## 2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the object.

### Place in Wright's career

Joseph Wright of Derby is widely recognised as a leading figure in eighteenth-century British art. In his own lifetime, as today, he was best known for his striking light effects – as one contemporary remarked, 'Mr. Wright, of Derby, has very deservedly been long esteemed one of the finest artists in the kingdom. His *forte* is peculiar to himself, and is not more singular than excellent.'<sup>1</sup> Wright made his name through exhibiting a series of pioneering pictures, all characterised by strong chiaroscuro, notably *The Air Pump*, *The Orrery* and his series of forge pictures. Their treatment of modern science and industry as serious history painting is unique in eighteenth century British art, and they remain integral to Wright's standing today. Rather than residing in London, Wright is remarkable as one of the first painters to forge a successful career outside the metropolis. As his long-standing soubriquet 'of Derby' indicates, this became an important branding tool for the artist, distinguishing him from his contemporaries and the competition of the London art world. His career, therefore, offers a crucial insight into provincial culture during this period; the remarkable variety of his work represents both his wide-ranging skill and interests, but also the rich cultural milieu he participated in whilst residing in Derby.

Painted in 1789, towards the end of Wright's career, *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo* speaks to the lasting impression Italy made upon the artist. Wright visited Italy relatively late in his career when he had already established a high reputation. He arrived in Rome in February 1774 and, spending longer in Italy than anticipated, did not return to England until late September 1775. This included visiting Naples for a month in October 1774, where he encountered Vesuvius, describing it as 'the most wonderful sight in nature'.<sup>2</sup> While he had only tentatively ventured into landscape painting prior to this, the Italian scenery he encountered inspired him and the trip marks a crucial turning point – thereafter landscape painting became an important branch of his art. This was arguably the most significant legacy of the visit and – as *Vesuvius in Eruption* clearly evidences – he continued to draw upon his Italian experiences as he refashioned his career as a landscape painter.

### Specialism in views of Vesuvius

Wright was in Naples in Autumn 1774, and while he did not witness a significant eruption, Vesuvius was smoking, intermittently throwing up scoriae and emitting lava flows throughout this period. The volcano made an indelible impression on him – while a number of eighteenth-century British artists depicted the volcano, Wright is unique in his sustained engagement with the subject, in successfully building a national reputation as a volcano painter, and in capitalising upon the commercial appeal of the volcano in England.

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<sup>1</sup> 'For the Morning Chronicle', *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, London, 1 May 1778, issue 2791.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth E. Barker, 'Documents relating to Joseph Wright 'of Derby' (1734-97)', *The Volume of the Walpole Society*, Vol. 71 (2009), p.84.



Alone among his British contemporaries, Wright turned views of Vesuvius into a lucrative specialism, producing some 30 versions in the twenty years following his Italian tour. That it was an important part of his repertoire is indicated by his decision to launch himself at the Royal Academy with a picture of Vesuvius in 1778 (now in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Russia). His views of the volcano announced his ambition as a landscape painter, while also reinforcing his reputation for dazzling light effects. Wright's work was frequently reproduced in high quality prints that disseminated key compositions for a wider audience; the importance of Vesuvius to him, as well as its marketability, is further evidenced by William Byrne's 1788 engraving after a similar version of *Vesuvius in Eruption, Viewed from Posillipo*. That Vesuvius became a defining feature of his art and of his artistic persona is perhaps most evocatively shown in the poetic dedications to the artist. His friend the polymath Erasmus Darwin referenced 'Wright's bold pencil from Vesuvio's height, Hurls his red lavas to the troubled night' in *The Botanic Garden*,<sup>3</sup> while the poet William Hayley (another of the painter's close friends and confidantes) wrote more extensively:

'But see far off the modest Wright retire!

Alone he rules his Elements of Fire:

Like Meteors darting through the gloom of Night,

His sparkles flash upon the dazzled sight;

Our eyes with momentary anguish smart,

And Nature trembles at the power of Art.

May thy bold colours, claiming endless praise,

For ages shine with undiminish'd blaze,

And when the fierce Vesuvio burns no more,

May his red deluge down thy canvas pour!<sup>4</sup>

Crucially, *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo* represents the ongoing development of this subject over the course of Wright's career; it is an outstanding example in scale and ambition of his late vision of the volcano. In Wright's earlier versions of the subject the violence of the eruption is foregrounded, as if his experiences of Vesuvius were still fresh in his mind, and the predominant effect is the power of nature (compared to the insignificance of man in some versions). These views, focusing upon the cone and eruption, have also been widely understood to reveal his scientific interests and the ongoing importance of enlightenment culture within his work. His wish for the company of his friend the geologist John Whitehurst at Vesuvius, because 'his thoughts would have centr'd in the bowels of the mountain, mine

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<sup>3</sup> Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden, A Poem, in Two Parts; containing the Economy of Vegetation and the Loves of the Plants*, London 1825, Canto I, lines 175-6.

<sup>4</sup> William Hayley, *A Poetical Epistle to an Eminent Painter*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn., London 1779, Part II, lines 211-220.

skimmed over the surface only', is often cited.<sup>5</sup> Art Historian Matthew Craske has also noted that the word 'sublime' only began to be employed by London critics when Wright started to exhibit eruptions, emphasising the terror and scale of the subject.<sup>6</sup> *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo* is a considerable departure from this; however, it is therefore significant in demonstrating the evolution in the understanding of the 'sublime' landscape to admit less overtly terrifying and more contemplative subjects, and as the culmination of Wright's fascination with the volcano. Indeed, the more contemplative mood of this version, its increased idealisation, and the more distant view onto the volcano, are frequently equated with the distance of Wright's own recollections of Vesuvius at the end of his career. This later composition then became a distinct and highly popular branch of Wright's Vesuvius imagery.

Moreover, the painting demonstrates his continued engagement with contemporary aesthetic theory: the striking contrast of the cool, pale moonlight and still bay against the fiery eruption self-consciously combines elements of both the sublime *and* beautiful. Its mood and atmosphere – balancing calm and danger, tranquillity and turbulence – reveals Wright's desire to provoke a powerful emotional response in his viewers. The more subdued tone of this picture deliberately situated it in the realm of 'feeling', chiming with Wright's late reputation as an artist of 'sensibility' retiring from the world.

As the landscape scholar Professor Stephen Daniels puts it, 'Volcanoes, Wright shows, are many things – primordial events, firework displays, historical landmarks, foci of religious ritual – complex cultural landscapes with many layers of meanings.'<sup>7</sup> Wright was therefore a pioneer, paving the way for the next generation of artists, such as JMW Turner and John Martin, to develop these themes and represent the volcano according to their own preoccupations and vision. With its emphasis upon feeling and its close association with Wright's own sensibility, *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo*, anticipates the emotional engagement with nature and the landscape of the Romantic movement.

#### Wright's technique and approach to light effects

*Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo* is a particularly fine painting technically, and highlights how integral Wright's visit to Italy was for his art. As the paintings conservator Rica Jones has noted, 'Italy changed his mood, broadened his outlook and his style of brushwork'.<sup>8</sup> While he had painted some landscapes prior to visiting the continent, it was only after Italy that this became an important and distinct branch of his art. Having made numerous sketches and studies while on this trip, these then formed the basis for the Italian landscapes he painted throughout the rest of his career.

*Vesuvius in Eruption* exemplifies Wright's mastery of light effects and the sophisticated way in which he adapted his painting technique to achieve his desired effect. His handling of paint is highly personal and flexible, depending on the lighting, mood, or topography he sought to evoke. This is perhaps most apparent in his treatment of the sky, water and foreground. To achieve the greatest luminosity, Wright exploited the reflective ground layer in the sky by

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<sup>5</sup> Letter to Richard Wright, 11 November 1774, Rome, transcribed in Barker 2009, p.84.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Craske, *Joseph Wright of Derby: Painter of Darkness*, New Haven & London 2020, p.43.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, London 1999, p.65.

<sup>8</sup> Rica Jones, 'Wright of Derby's Techniques of Painting', in *Wright of Derby* by Judy Egerton, London 1990, p.263.

painting directly on top of the priming. The sky also typifies Wright's ability to balance warm and cool tones, expertly contrasting the silvery white moonlight with the fiery reds of the eruption – an effect that was widely admired in his lifetime. As one commentator remarked, 'Fire proof, or a true Salamander, he paints with Fire and Light'.<sup>9</sup> The treatment of the water is also highly distinctive to Wright: the ripple lines are achieved by incising the soft paint with his brush handle to reveal the reflective ground or dead-colouring underneath. This 'sgraffito' can be dated back to Italy and was a device he used extensively in his work thereafter.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, the foreground demonstrates Wright's 'finishing', building up the landscape through applying the paint expressively in dabs, dashes and low relief to describe the texture and variety of the landscape.<sup>11</sup>

### Provincial networks and patronage

Except for his time in London, the short periods he worked in Liverpool and Bath, and his trip to Italy, Wright spent his entire life in Derby. His ability to maintain a thriving painting practice in the Midlands is testament to the artistic opportunities and networks available outside the metropolis but also his astute decision to use his distance from London as a branding tool. As his close friend and patron John Leigh Philips noted, Wright was not reliant on the London art world as so many of his pictures found buyers 'even before finished', straight off the easel.<sup>12</sup> Wright's success constitutes a significant counter-narrative to the London-centric view of eighteenth-century British art.

*Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo* is a striking example of the familial, friendship, literary and intellectual networks that Wright both belonged to and benefited from in the provinces. It was bought directly from Wright by Edward Mundy in the 1780s and the artist recorded the purchase (for £84, reduced from £103) in his account book.<sup>13</sup> The Mundys were a prominent Derbyshire family, with considerable property in the area – notably the family seat, Markeaton Hall. Edward Mundy (1706-1767) came from a younger branch of this family and had inherited Shipley Hall, also in Derbyshire, through his marriage in 1729. Edward's introduction to the painter may have come from his relative, Francis Noel Clarke Mundy (1739-1815), who was an important early patron and shared friends in common with Wright. Francis had commissioned portraits of himself and five fellow members of the Markeaton Hunt from Wright soon after inheriting Markeaton Hall in 1762.<sup>14</sup> The group became the basis of Wright's first public exhibition: displayed at Derby Town Hall they introduced the young artist to a wider audience. Wright also painted Francis's sister, Millicent Mundy, at around this time and later, c.1781-2, a double portrait of Francis's two eldest sons as archers. Though his patronage only extended to portraits, Francis was also literary and became a member of the Lichfield circle centring around the poet Anna Seward (Wright painted her father's portrait) and Erasmus Darwin (Wright's friend and physician). With Darwin and Seward's encouragement, Francis

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<sup>9</sup> 'For the St. James Chronicle: Royal Academy Exhibition', *St James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, London, 5 May 1778 – 7 May 1778, issue 2665.

<sup>10</sup> Jones 1990, p.270.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Hackney, Rica Jones & Joyce Townsend (eds.), *Paint and Purpose: A study of technique in British Art*, London 1999, p.59.

<sup>12</sup> John Leigh Philips, 'Memoirs of the Life and Principal Works of the Late Joseph Wright, Esq. of Derby', *Monthly Magazine, and British Register* 4, no.23 (1797), p.291.

<sup>13</sup> *Wright's Account Book*, c.1760-97, unpublished manuscript, National Portrait Gallery (JWD MS 111).

<sup>14</sup> Benedict Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby: Painter of Light*, London & New York 1968, p.97-8.

published his poem *Needwood Forest* in 1776, a draft of which art historian Matthew Craske has recently argued was the basis for Wright's 1773 painting, *The Earthstopper*.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the early ownership of *Vesuvius in Eruption* offers a rare insight into the various, interconnected relationships available to Wright in Derby.

In addition to this *Vesuvius* Edward Mundy also bought three further paintings from Wright in the 1780s: a large version of *Cicero's Villa in the Bay of Naples* and two Dovedale landscapes by sunlight and by moonlight.<sup>16</sup> While this may speak to Edward's personal taste, opting for evocative, poetic landscapes, it is notable as a pattern among several of Wright's later clients. Not only were his local patrons a key avenue for the landscape paintings of his late career, but the majority of these paintings were either views of Derbyshire or Italian scenery. For example, Wright's close friend Thomas Gisborne purchased both a small version of *Vesuvius from the shore of Posillipo* (c.1788), as well as a pair of pictures in 1786, depicting the Convent of San Cosimato and a view of Dovedale.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Sir Robert Wilmot, another Derbyshire landowner, bought a Dovedale landscape in 1786 and a small view of Vesuvius from Posillipo on panel two years later.<sup>18</sup> As Nicolson noted, these views were a 'reminder that the sublimity of nature was to be found equally in the English and Italian countryside'.<sup>19</sup> Such purchases speak to the local ambition of the Derbyshire elite therefore; wealthy landowners like Mundy, Gisborne or Wilmot were supporting a highly esteemed local painter (whose standing was nationally recognised) to draw an ambitious parallel between the Derbyshire and Italian landscape, predicated upon the emotional resonance this might prompt.

#### Summary of related objects in public or private ownership

Wright of Derby is an internationally renowned artist, and as such his work is held in collections worldwide. Both the Derbyshire and Italian landscapes of his later career are well represented in UK public collections. While there are notable examples of Italian subjects by moonlight, including *A Moonlight with a Lighthouse, Coast of Tuscany* (possibly exhibited 1789, Tate) and *Grotto in the Gulf of Salerno, Italy, Moonlight* (1780-90, Derby Museum and Art Gallery), or of light effects (notably two versions of *The Annual Girandola at the Castel Sant'Angelo, Rome* from the 1770s at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, and Birmingham Museums Trust), and of volcanoes, including *A View of Catania with Mount Etna in the Distance* (c.1775, Tate), *The Indian Widow* (1785, Derby Museum and Art Gallery) and those discussed above, these are all distinct in their subject matter, mood and atmosphere.

As an example of eighteenth-century representations of Vesuvius, it is most comparable with the work of the French painter, Pierre-Jacques Volaire, who made Naples his home and repeatedly painted Vesuvius. There are two fine paintings by Volaire at Compton Verney, both of which emphasise the force of the eruption: *Vesuvius Erupting at Night* and *An Eruption of Vesuvius by Moonlight*, 1774. The Wellcome Collection, London, also represents the Italian artist Pietro Fabris's observational studies of the volcano for Sir William Hamilton's *Campi Phlegraei* (published 1776) very well, though these are smaller works on paper. As a popular subject among eighteenth-century grand tourists there are also several Vesuvius paintings by

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<sup>15</sup> Craske 2020, p.171-3.

<sup>16</sup> All three pictures are recorded in Wright's account book; for further details see Nicolson 1968, p.256 & 265 (no.316 & 317).

<sup>17</sup> Nicolson 1968, p.134.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p.125.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p.134.

British artists in public collections. Notable examples include William Marlow's *View of Vesuvius* (Government Art Collection) and *View of the Bay of Naples with Vesuvius in the Distance* (c.1776, Leicester Museum and Art Gallery), both showing the smoking volcano from a distance, and Jacob More's *Mount Vesuvius in Eruption* (1780, National Galleries of Scotland), which emphasises the power and violence of the volcano.

**Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, note of case hearing on 13 July 2022: *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo* by Joseph Wright of Derby (Case 26, 2021-22)**

**Application**

1. The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest (the Committee) met on 13 July 2022 to consider an application to export *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo* by Joseph Wright of Derby. The value shown on the export licence application was £1,222,500 which represented the hammer price at auction (£1,000,000) plus the buyer's premium (£222,500). The expert adviser had objected to the export of the painting under the second and third Waverley criteria on the grounds that its departure from the UK would be a misfortune because it was of outstanding aesthetic importance and of outstanding significance to the study of art history and the history of eighteenth-century provincial culture.
2. Six of the regular eight RCEWA members were present in person and able to inspect the painting. One Committee member attended virtually. They were joined by three independent assessors, acting as temporary members of the Reviewing Committee. Two independent assessors attended in person, and one attended virtually. The Chairman explained that the binding offers mechanism was applicable for this case.
3. The applicant was consulted about the hybrid digital/in person process and confirmed they were content to proceed in this manner. The applicant confirmed that the value was not inclusive of VAT and that VAT on the Buyer's Premium (£44,500) would be payable in the event of a UK sale but that a sale could be structured so that an eligible UK institution could reclaim the VAT.
4. The applicant also confirmed that the owner understood the circumstances under which an export licence might be refused.

**Expert's submission**

5. The expert stated that *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo* was an outstanding example of Wright's representation of this volcano; it exemplified the brilliant light effects on which he built his reputation and highlighted the ongoing evolution of this subject in his oeuvre. Painted in the late 1780s, it showcased Wright's highly individualistic and expressive handling of paint in capturing the surface textures and play of light across the landscape.
6. Wright of Derby's sustained interest in Vesuvius was unique in 18th century British art; his specialism in views of the volcano was widely recognised and celebrated by contemporaries. As such the picture represented a significant and highly lucrative branch of his art. A late version,

the painting demonstrated the continued development of his Vesuvius imagery, moving towards a more tranquil and romantic vision of the volcano. *Vesuvius in Eruption, viewed from Posillipo* also highlighted the profound impression Italy made upon the artist and, notably, the growing importance of landscape painting within his oeuvre following this trip. Edward Mundy's patronage of Wright and purchase of both Italian and Derbyshire views was a striking example of local ambition as Derbyshire landowners turned to Wright to draw parallels between the two landscapes. This early ownership history illuminates the artistic opportunities available in the provinces, notably the local networks shaped by familial, friendship, literary and intellectual connections that Wright belonged to and benefitted from.

### **Applicant's submission**

7. The applicant did not disagree that the painting could potentially meet the Waverley criteria, however, they noted that the application should be seen in the context of there being multiple treatments of the subject by Wright of Derby extant in British collections, including two works, one in Tate Britain and one in a private collection, which are both larger and arguably more dramatic.

### **Discussion by the Committee**

8. The expert adviser and applicant retired and the Committee discussed the case. The Committee agreed this was a very interesting late painting from Wright of Derby's oeuvre. It was an elegiac and lyrical rendition of this subject, and it showed a development in style in comparison with Wright's other dramatic and fiery depictions of Vesuvius. However, they noted the condition of the painting and commented that the pigments in the foreground had sunk in colour and some of the glazing had suffered losses which affected the painting's impact and nuance.

9. They then discussed potential further research into provincial patronage within Derby, and how this was key to Wright's rise to prominence. However, the majority felt this area was well researched, and that this particular painting would not add significantly to this avenue of study.

### **Waverley Criteria**

10. The Committee voted on whether the painting met the Waverley criteria. Of the 10 members, no members voted that it met the second Waverley criterion. One voted that it met the third Waverley criterion. The painting was therefore not found to meet any of the Waverley criteria.

### **Communication of findings**

11. The expert adviser and the applicant returned. The Chairman notified them of the Committee's decision on its recommendation to the Secretary of State. The Chairman noted that although the painting did not meet the Waverley

criteria, the expert adviser had provided an excellent submission and was correct in their decision to bring the painting to the Committee.