

## VIEW OF CORK John Butts (1728-1765)

John Butts was born in Cork. He was a talented painter of the local landscape. He spent much of his youth sketching and painting scenes of Cork and copying romantic scenes from local works. He taught art in Cork and two of his pupils were Nathaniel Grogan the Elder (to whom this painting was for some time attributed) and James Barry. James Barry later described John Butts as an inspirational teacher. In 1757, Butts moved to Dublin but was not met with success. He had a large family to support and found he had to work at sign painting, copying and any jobs he could find, to sustain himself. He worked as a forger for a time and produced excellent forgeries, but his own, signed work is very rare. He died young and poor in 1765. His work is to be found in Tate Britain and in the Crawford Art Gallery.



*View of Cork* is a panoramic view of the city seen from an elevated position to the north of the River Lee. It was painted in the later half of the eighteenth century. It is actually an amalgamation of two separate viewpoints and it is a measure of the artist's talent as a landscape painter that he managed to weld them together in a convincing way. Two travellers look down at the prosperous city, one pointing out the landmarks and drawing our attention to St Ann's Tower in Shandon. The painting is an important

record of the city's history, of a time when Cork played an important role in trade with the influential Dutch in the North Atlantic. The Dutch appearance of the quayside houses was echoed in New York and other towns of New Netherlands. On the left we see one of the waterways that coursed through the marshy land over which the city expanded in the eighteenth century. We can trace its route by the broad curves of the city's main street. In the centre of the painting is the Old Custom House, now the Crawford Art Gallery.

## DISCUSSION

- What is the first thing you notice in the painting? What stands out?
- Would you say the painting has a mood that is immediately obvious, what is it? What has the artist done to create this mood?
- Is there a focal point in the painting? Is there a specific emphasis or is the city as a whole the focus? Who do you think might commission such a painting?
- Butts uses line to pick out detail in the painting, where is this most obvious? Can you see this in the detail of the background?
- What are the colours used in the painting? Are these the colours we usually associate with cities? How would you describe the colours used?
- The landscape painter Claude Lorraine had a specific formula for creating his beautiful, idealised landscape paintings; the foreground should be dark, getting lighter towards the background. What is the result of this technique?

- Butts used light and dark tones very cleverly to mould this landscape. In what areas of the painting is this most successful?
- The composition is also very cleverly designed; as well as following the pointed finger of the man in the foreground, there are sweeping lines that take us into the painting. Landmarks stand out to lead us over and back the canvas to examine each detail. Show the eye-path that leads us through the painting?
- This painting is made up of two separate viewpoints, which the artist composed to create this painting, why do you think he did this?
- Only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century did it become acceptable to have landscape as the subject of a painting. Why might this have been the case?

## **WORK IN THE GALLERY**

Find this James Barry painting. Barry was a student of John Butts. What similarities in composition, colour and technique can you see?

Barry also uses outlines in his painting, where can you see this? What purpose does it serve?

Do you think the landscape plays an important part in this Barry painting? Why?

How can you tell that Barry studied landscape painting?



## **HANDS ON**

Consider what imagery and colour you would use to portray your nearest town or city. Using a black ink pen, plot on paper the composition of the town centre, putting in everything you can remember. Try to show if your town is hilly or flat etc... If possible use watercolours and paint your work using your chosen colour scheme.

In the painting there is a great contrast between the homes of the wealthy along the quay and the little one-windowed shacks of the poor on the hillside. Carry out some research on life in Cork in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. Choose a rich merchant, a worker or a peasant and draw this person in traditional dress in an appropriate setting.

Discuss your findings in class.