

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

WILLS, Rev. James

fl. Italy 1733; England 1740; –1776

“Mr Wills an english painter” was in Rome by 1734, and is presumably the “J. Wills” listed at the university of Padua 22.IX.1733 (Ingamells 1997). From this it has been inferred that the future clergyman studied history painting in Rome before returning to England by 1740. He may well have visited Florence, as his pastel self-portrait was acquired by the collector Gabburri and lent to the exhibition at SS. Anunziata in 1737.

He published a translation of Du Fresnoy’s *De arte graphica* in 1754, and subsequently adopted the pseudonym “Fresnoy” in occasional art criticisms (published in *The Middlesex journal* 1769–70) against Reynolds, Zoffany and Barry in particular (whom he disliked because of their defection to the new Royal Academy). He joined the St Martin’s Lane academy, of which he became director. On 21.IV.1754 he was privately ordained deacon (by Frederick Cornwallis, bishop of Coventry & Lichfield) at the request of Charles Yorke (who later married a pastellist, *q.v.*); he was for many years curate of Whitchurch (or Little Stanmore) on the Cannons estate in Middlesex, and in 1772 was appointed vicar by the living’s patron, William Hallett (and where his burial, 22.VIII.1776, is recorded contradicting the date of 1777 normally cited for his death). However he continued to exhibit in London, at the Free Society and at the newly incorporated Society of Artists, of which he was appointed chaplain for the purposes of preaching a sermon to take place on St Luke’s day. The first sermon was delivered on 19.X.1767 at St Paul’s Covent Garden, and was printed in 500 copies. Correspondence with James Paine of the Society of Artists indicates that Wills received a gratuity of 30 gns for the sermon, and that it was intended that he should receive the same amount annually because of the Society’s “great regard” for him; however was prevented by ill health from delivering a subsequent sermon in 1769.

Although known to have made pastels, none is known today with certainty after his Italian period. Wills’s oil portraits are not uncommon; a conversation piece, the Andrews family (1749), is in the Fitzwilliam Museum. A number of prints are also extant where the medium is unspecified and might include crayons. Alastair Laing (in Maddison 1995) identifies Wills as the more likely author of a 1754 pastel bearing the initials JW, traditionally attributed to James Worsdale (*q.v.*).

Bibliography

Bénézit; Brownlow 1847; Ingamells 1997; Royal Academy archives; Waterhouse 1981; Whitley 1928, II, p. 275

Pastels

J.8.101 AUTORITRATTO, pstl, Florence 1737 (Gabburri). Lit.: Turner 1993, p. 215 n.r.

J.8.102 Alured CLARKE (1696–1742), dean of Exeter, crayons (Exeter Hospital 1884; not located 2010). Lit.: W. B. Eye, letter, *The Western antiquary*, III, 1884, p. 106 n.r.,

apparently as by Wills, version of pnt.; DNB, 1887, n.r., anon.

~pnt., 1741 (Exeter Hospital 1884). Lit.: George Oliver, *The history of the City of Exeter*, Exeter, 1861;

~grav. Haskol

J.8.105 Sir John Perceval, 1st Earl of EGMONT (1683–1748), pstl, 1740. Lit.: *Diary of the 1st Earl of Egmont*, London, 1923, III, 28.v.1740, “Sat for my picture in crayons to Mr Wills”

J.8.106 Mrs William WINDHAM, née Sarah Hicks, Mrs Robert Lukin (1710–1792), pstl, sd “JW 1754” (Felbrigg Hall, National Trust. Ketton-Cremer). Lit.: Maddison 1995, p. 71 n.r. [attr.; cf. Worsdale] \varnothing

