

Healy (Hayley), Robert

by Daniel Beaumont

Healy (Hayley), Robert (d. 1771), artist, was born in Dublin. His family background is obscure but it would appear from one contemporary reference that his father was an architect and decorator with a particular flair for designing garden buildings and theatres. Robert Healy attended the Dublin Society schools from c.1765 and was taught by the figurative artist Robert West (qv). Healy probably developed his particular skill for drawing small-scale portraits in grisaille (black and white chalks) while studying at the schools; pastel drawing was then an important component of an artist's training. Between 1766 and c.1770 he is known to have lived at addresses on Wood Quay, Essex Quay, and Dame St. in Dublin, and he exhibited a number of drawings (nearly all small portraits) at the Dublin Society of Artists. In February 1768 Healy received his most important commission: to make a series of drawings for Thomas Conolly (qv) at Castletown, Co. Kildare. In 1769 he won a premium from the Dublin Society for the best drawing of a group of figures.

Healy's oeuvre is exceedingly small on account of his short life; just twenty-five drawings, all in monochrome, can be firmly attributed to him. His small full-length portraits are a little stiff and doll-like, but he achieved subtle tonal qualities using just grey and white chalk. His *chiaroscuro* effects are similar to those that were produced by Thomas Frye (qv) on his mezzotints in the late 1750s. Healy's drawings of Thomas Conolly and his family, friends, and servants hunting, skating, walking, and shooting offer rare glimpses of life on a landed estate and are among the most original pictures produced in Ireland during the eighteenth century. Contemporaries admired Healy's depiction of horses and it is possible that he painted sporting oils in the manner of George Stubbs. A series of murals for the earl of Moira's town house in Dublin (now lost) may have been painted by Robert Healy or his father. Healy's career was too short to have a major influence on Irish painting but a number of other Dublin-based pastellists such as Charles Forrest and Francis Robert West developed a similar style.

Robert Healy apparently caught a chill while sketching cattle on the demesne of the 1st earl of Mornington (qv) at Dangan, Co. Meath, and died in July 1771. Two self-portraits are in the NGI. His brother William Healy (*fl.* 1770) was also an artist; he attended the Dublin Society Schools in 1769 and exhibited c.1774 while living at Cork Hill, Dublin. He seems to have made copies of his late brother's work, and the surviving chalk drawings of Robert and William Healy are virtually indistinguishable. William Healy may be the William Hayley who published *An essay on painting in a poetical epistle* (1782), along with other collections of poems in Dublin. A portrait of William Healy by his brother is also in the NGI.

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Anthony Pasquin, *An authentic history of painting in Ireland* (1796), 18; *DNB*; Strickland; Anne Crookshank and the knight of Glin, *Irish portraits 1660–1860* (1969), 73–7; *The painters of Ireland c.1660–1920* (1978), 73–9; Desmond Guinness, 'Robert Healy: an eighteenth-century Irish sporting artist', *Apollo*, cxv (1982), 80–85; Adrian Le Harivel (ed.), *National Gallery of Ireland: illustrated summary catalogue of drawings, watercolours and miniatures* (1983), 276; *NHI*, iv, 520; Ann M. Stewart (ed.), *Irish art loan exhibitions 1765–1927: index of artists* (1990); John Turpin, 'French influence on eighteenth-century art education in Dublin', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, v (1990), 112; Anne Crookshank and the knight of Glin, *The watercolours of Ireland* (1994), 62–4, 73, 100; John Turpin, *A school of art in Dublin since the eighteenth century: a history of the National College of Art and Design* (1995), 10, 19, 39; Jane Turner (ed.), *The dictionary of art*, xiv (1996), 278; Anne Crookshank and the knight of Glin, *Ireland's painters* (2002), 82, 84–5, 89–90, 113