

by LOUISA WOODVILLE

Attributed to George Morland, *The Turnpike Gate*, oil on canvas. Collection Museum of Hounds and Hunting, N.A., Leesburg, VA. Late 18th century.

One of the most spectacular paintings at the Museum of Hounds and Hunting could well be by the 18th century English artist George Morland. *The Toll House* (or more accurately, *The Turnpike Gate*) has a bucolic charm that engages the viewer. A red-jacketed man with a with a broad-brimmed brown hat sits atop a gray horse whose browband sports a sprig of foliage. The rider looks off to his right, a riding crop lodged firmly under his arm. A silhouetted figure, to the right of the mounted man, looks up at this rider. His upturned face, though hidden from our view, creates an air of quiet expectation. An Old English bulldog (today extinct), completes the circle of hatted men, dependable horse, and faithful dog.

The rider reaches his right hand into his yellow breeches's pocket. It is the rider's gesture that clues us into the painting's narrative: the man astride must be a merchant, reaching for some coins to pay the toll. His bundle of goods atop the saddle's pommel reinforces this identification.

These figures, dog and horse inhabit a landscape of ancient rocks and trees, set against cumulus clouds in a blue sky. A large tree on the left, veering to the right, has extended its branches to create a horizontal bobbing of leaves over the mounted man, visually creating a protective umbrella that is echoed in the cloud formation.



A rectangular structure dominates the right-hand side of the canvas, and inside this building one makes out a seated figure, arms folded and legs crossed with a stick by his side. A table is to his left. Is this a guard? Is he asleep? What is his role in this scene notably void of drama?

Technically, the painting shows evidence of overpainting and abrasion. We have, however, an excellent idea of its original appearance because of prints artists fashioned soon after Morland's death in 1804. William Ward engraved the painting, and extant copies reveal such details as the interplay of cool and warm colors in the walls of the farmhouse. Like his older contemporary, the French painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Morland understood how to juxtapose colors to create the illusion of depth. Cool colors like blue recede in the distance and warm colors like pinks and red advance. When an artist can subtly play these two colors off each other, he or she creates a push-and-pull sensation that creates a sense of light and air, a convincing illusion of a third-dimensional space on what is a two-dimensional surface.

Compositionally, the work's quiet simplicity belies Morland's sophisticated composition. The artist has interplayed three-dimensional forms with two-dimensional shapes and negative space to achieve a finely-tuned balance. For example, the vertical edge of the large structure at right cuts the canvas into two halves, creating a dominant foreground with its weight reinforced by a mound to the right of the seated man's feet. On the left, the rocks and trees create an airy counterpart, complementing this weight by a perspectival shift to a receding background. Subtle foreshortening of the horse, cut off at the head, leads our eyes back into a recessed distance; like the man reaching into his breeches to pay the toll, we anticipate what road lies ahead. -end-