English Romantic Water Colors

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On April 17, an exhibition of English Drawings and Water Colors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sponsored by the English-Speaking Unions of the United States and the British Commonwealth, will open in the Special Exhibition Galleries, next to the Rowlandson’s England show (see the February 1962 Bulletin). The English drawing and water-color showing contains more than a hundred works, on loan from many of the major public collections in Great Britain, including the Royal Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, the Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, the Tate Gallery, the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, and the Leeds City Art Gallery. Among works never exhibited before in this country is a group of exceptionally impressionistic late water colors by Turner, from the Turner Bequest. The exhibition will close on June 3.

Water color is often spoken of as a peculiarly British medium, and the British water-color school as something sui generis. In the past, British writers, with a characteristic mixture of diffidence and chauvinism, have sometimes tended to treat it as a purely national possession, with essentially national roots and ramifications, to be enjoyed, but not criticized, by foreigners—something not unlike the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan. The French, with their own brand of insularity, have usually brushed aside the claims of our school to serious international importance, and other nations, for various reasons, have been inclined to follow suit.

ON THE COVER: Coast Scene near Dunbar, 1857, by John Ruskin (1819-1900). Pen and water color, touched with body color. 12 3/4 x 18 1/2 inches City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham


Now that knowledge of art history is more widely diffused, means of communication more efficient, and traveling exhibitions an accepted part of museum activities, it should be possible to redress the balance a little. And at the outset I should like to spike the guns both of our own chauvinists and of their critics by narrowing the claims to be made for this school.

By declaring that water color is a characteristic British medium, what we mean, or should mean, is that for a century or so—from the

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middle of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth centuries—there was a succession of British artists who used water color (and the allied medium of gouache) to paint landscapes and figures not simply as preliminary studies for other works, nor as material to be copied by engravers, but as independent works of art, to be exhibited and sold. Furthermore, during this period there was a steady increase both in the number of English painters who employed water colors, and in the quantity of their works in the medium. This efflorescence of water color is not paralleled exactly by any other national school, and so the adjective “characteristic” is correctly applied.

It is of course totally incorrect to suppose from this that the English “invented” water color: one has only to point to occasional landscapes by Dürer and the works of Dutch water-colorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to dismiss any such claim. Nevertheless, once the medium had taken firm root in England during the eighteenth century, British artists produced a body of work that in its coherence and significance may be called unique, while certain themes and attitudes, emerging first in water color, had an important bearing on a later and more fully developed Romanticism in oils.

But first of all a word about how this efflorescence came about. Its roots lie partly in the practice of topography, which was itself a typically British preoccupation. Just as portraiture
has always been close to our hearts, so the portraiture of places, whether country seats, royal palaces, or whole cities in panorama, has a long history in England. Military topography too played its more utilitarian part in creating a style within which the earlier draughtsmen worked. By the seventeenth century we can point to at least two artists—Wenceslaus Hollar, a Bohemian who settled in England, and his stylistic successor, Francis Place—whose drawings and etchings had an artistic validity independent of the places represented in them, and although their drawings were essentially pen and ink, the works of these two men were not infrequently tinted with water color. During the early eighteenth century, volumes of engravings of English views became very popular—a popularity that continued for more than a hundred years—and in consequence more and more draughtsmen were employed in providing material for the engravers.

Parallel with a growing interest in topography was another phenomenon no less important to the birth of our water-color school. This was the enormous fascination that from the early years of the eighteenth century was exerted upon Englishmen by the works of the French and Italian masters. This fascination took an especially strong hold on those fortunate young men who made the fashionable Grand Tour. The much-admired idealized landscapes of Claude and the Poussins, of Salvator Rosa and Magnasco, became familiar to generations of young noblemen and others whose parents were rich enough to send them abroad; even those who were unable to travel could get the gist of the matter from excellent and increasingly available engravings. Snobbery based upon pretensions of intellect and culture is perhaps one of the few varieties of this disagreeable human failing that has fertilizing effects; it would certainly be a mistake not to acknowledge its part in the de-

2. The Great Niche of the Belvedere at the Vatican, about 1783, by John Robert Cozens. Water color. 9 3/8 x 14 7/8 inches

City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham

*Tate Gallery*

City Art Gallery, Leeds

5. The Layerthorpe Bridge and Postern, York, about 1802, by Thomas Girtin. Water color. 13 3/8 x 18 3/8 inches

Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester
velopment of British landscape painting, both in oil and water color, in the eighteenth century.

We must also remember that English eighteenth century collectors were no less interested in the realistic Dutch landscapes of the seventeenth century. There had always been a close link between Great Britain and the Netherlands, both economic and artistic, and from the sixteenth century onward our painters often found

Thus it was that when water colors, as opposed to pen drawings more or less tinted, came to be made in England in increasing numbers, we find a conflation of Italian idealism and Dutch realism beginning to inform the more native tradition of topography.

In one focal decade of the period—the 1790s—the threads of the preceding half century were gathered together in the hands of two young

themselves in debt to the Flemish or the Dutch, whether through the effect of a single strong artistic personality such as Van Dyck—who transformed our portraiture in the seventeenth century—or for the influence of the paintings in general, sometimes, as in the present case, exerted only after a hundred years or so.

artists and woven into a new and more complex tradition. These two artists, both of them born in 1775, were Thomas Girtin and Joseph Mallord William Turner. From an early age each had received orthodox training in the topographical/picturesque style, and before they were twenty years old they were able to produce water

City Art Gallery, Manchester
colors fully up to the acceptable professional standard. But by that time something else had occurred: they had come within the circle of Dr. Thomas Monro, a well-known mental specialist and art patron whom we can now see as one of the key figures in the development of English water color. Monro was not only himself a by no means negligible amateur draughtsman (rather in the manner of Gainsborough); he was also a passionate admirer of the work of John Robert Cozens, who was his patient.

Cozens was the greatest of a number of English water-colorists whose most significant work was derived from sketches made during periodic trips to the Continent—especially to Italy and Switzerland. Cozens was in fact among the first of these artists to produce recognizable topographical works which were at the same time landscape paintings. His water colors are marked by a harmony of tone and a unity and sense of drama in their composition that set them apart from those of his contemporaries, and indeed justify our calling him the first Romantic landscape painter in England. Unfortunately his career was cut short by insanity during his early forties; after three years under the care of Dr. Monro, he died in 1797.

It was apparently Cozens's custom to bring back to England a number of pencil sketches that he had made abroad and to work them up into finished water colors at his leisure. During the period of Cozens's illness, Monro employed Girtin and Turner to work in his house in the evenings, evidently making finished versions of Cozens's sketches for the doctor's collection. According to their own testimony, preserved in the diary of Joseph Farington, a minor landscape painter and Royal Academician, "They went at six and stayed till ten. Girtin drew in outlines and Turner washed in the effects. They were chiefly employed in copying the outlines or unfinished drawings of Cozens, etc., etc., of which copies they made finished drawings. Dr. Monro allowed Turner 3/6 each night. Girtin did not say what he had."

Beyond this brief reference, tantalizingly little is known of the proceedings at what is now known as "The Monro Academy." We must assume however that the "etc., etc." involved the works of other artists, and the fact that Girtin's graphic style has at times close affinities with that of Canaletto, while at others he was to produce variations on themes by Marco Ricci and Piranesi, suggests that these Italian artists at least may have been among them. Nevertheless, Cozens's remains the crucial influence, and if the very existence of Monro and his "Academy" had been forgotten, we should have had to invent some such hypothesis to account for the sudden transformation that came over the work of Girtin and Turner during the few years in question.

In each case it was the transformation of a dry, neat, delicately controlled topography into a broad, expressive, genuinely Romantic land-

already nineteenth century artists several years before the century itself was born.

Girtin’s development during the last five or six years of his life—he died suddenly in 1802 at the age of twenty-seven—was phenomenal. Although only a minority of his drawings are dated or securely datable, modern scholars have been able to establish a chronology for his mature works which, though arguable in detail, is broadly acceptable and shows a consistent enriching of his vision and style. During the last two years of his life he applied his landscape discoveries to the townscapes of London and Paris, and although the precedent of Canaletto has been discerned in these works, they remain convincingly his own and essentially unlike anything that preceded them.

Great artists, and especially those who, like Girtin and Turner, were stylistic innovators, can be studied in two distinct ways: for themselves and their works alone, and for their relevance to their successors. In this respect Girtin and Turner are somewhat different in kind. Tragically short-lived as it was, Girtin’s art had an immediate effect on his younger contemporaries and successors. Even before Girtin’s death in 1802, the youthful John Sell Cotman was developing the lessons he had learned from Girtin’s work in a series of water colors as delicate and powerful as any that he was to do in later life. And admittedly minor but influential artists such as John Varley and Copley Fielding were reinforcing the bridgehead that Girtin had made into nineteenth century Romanticism. It is in fact hard to think of any important water-colorists who came to the fore in the first decade or so of the nineteenth century whose style and vision do not owe some essential quality to Girtin: Peter De Wint and David Cox immediately come to mind, and Constable, who was of course by nature and practice a painter in oils, nevertheless acknowledges the same debt in his earlier water colors.

The case of Turner is different. During the 1790s, his technical precocity may have given him the lead in the more mechanical aspects of his art. But it was not until considerably later in his long career that he was able to outstrip the extraordinary advances in vision made by Girtin during the last few years of his life. And by this time Turner had become a painter very much on his own, owing allegiance to no school and exercising strangely little influence on his contemporaries. It is surely true to say that if Girtin had never existed, the history of Romantic landscape painting in England would have been markedly different; without Turner, while the sum total of achievement would have been immeasurably and deplorably reduced, the main lines of development would have been substantially the same.

Toward the end of his life Girtin began to experiment in oils, but unfortunately none of his canvases can now be identified, and it is impossible to say what effect this extension might have had on his style. Turner, however, had already established his reputation as a painter in oils before the turn of the century, and from then onward we find his stylistic development reflected in both mediums. Although the precise chronology of Turner’s works is not always easy to determine, there is a large body of water colors and gouaches in the Turner Bequest—that is, the contents of his studio, which he willed to the British nation at his death and which are now divided between the Tate Gallery and the British Museum—in which the extraordinary color experiments in his later oil paintings are anticipated.

Past writers have been only too liable to treat the British water-color school as an isolated sequence of achievements, as to a lesser degree has been the fate of the British school of oil painting. But now that European art has been more and more studied as a unity, and vast international exhibitions have been held to demonstrate this fact, it becomes at last possible to see the wood for the trees. A key event in this re-evaluation was the Romantic Movement exhibition held in London in 1959. Along with a representative selection of nineteenth century paintings by such artists as Caspar David Friedrich


British Museum, Turner Bequest


British Museum, Turner Bequest
and Eugène Delacroix, to whom the adjective Romantic has been more traditionally applied, a generous and carefully chosen showing of the earlier British water-colorists tellingly established their claim for serious consideration as Romantic artists.

Seen in this company, the school can be analyzed into two major strains. One derives directly from the eighteenth century topographers and reaches its climax in the work of Bonington and his followers. It is fundamentally an art of the picturesque, with increasing, if somewhat superficial, Romantic overtones. The other strain, which in the light of history can be seen as vastly more important, is a total Romanticism, coloring both vision and technique, at times lyrical, at times fantastic, epic, verging even, as in the early work of Cotman, on the abstract. It is to this second strain, represented at its purest in the work of John Robert Cozens, Girtin, Turner, and Cotman, that the school owes its ultimate importance within the tradition of European art. For the British water-colorists of this group were among the earliest painters of modern times to face the larger forms of nature—mountains, moorlands, and forests—with the poetic awe which was rapidly to become one of the informing tones of nineteenth century landscape painting in other countries. A basic quality of the Romantic vision, whether in painting or poetry, is the personal response of the artist to nature; it is not perhaps surprising that such a quality should have first of all revealed itself visually through the medium of water color, which of all painting techniques imposes the least obstacle between idea and execution.

12. Porch, St. Philip's Church, Birmingham, by David Cox (1783-1859). Water color. 12 x 9 ¼ inches
City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham