"Ye Mists and Exhalations That Now Rise"

by CLAUS VIRCH  Assistant Curator of European Paintings

Examples of that most typical medium of English art, water color, while abundant in England, are comparatively rare here. This makes all the more precious the possession of a masterpiece which marks the climax of English water-color painting. In 1959, a late work by J. M. W. Turner, The Lake of Zug—Morning, was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum for the Department of European Paintings, then also in charge of drawings. A large water color, in marvelous condition, lustrous as a jewel and rich in color, it belongs to Turner’s celebrated “Swiss Series.” Its history, which is unusually complete, forms an integral part of the drawing and adds an especial interest to it.

Born in 1775, the son of a barber, Turner lived a most uneventful life, until his death in 1851. He never married and had but few friends. His work was his life, from the early days when he copied drawings by J. R. Cozens for a few shillings per night until the last when he sketched clouds from the window of his cottage in Chelsea by his beloved Thames. Come spring he took his sketchbook and little else and went off to the farthest corners of the British Isles, to France, Switzerland, and Venice. After a day’s sketching he spent the evening working out his drawings, and later, back in London, he painted finished water colors and oils from these sketches and from his astounding visual memory.

Working hard, he thought highly of his work. Unremittingly and unbelievably industrious, he issued numerous books of engravings after his water colors and illustrations that brought him high praise and recognition. A member of the Royal Academy from 1802, his pictures sold well and at high prices. These were gladly paid, although some patrons grumbled at having to pay extra for the frames. To keep prices up, he re-acquired his own drawings and even paintings when they appeared at auction; to keep standards up he bought the plates of engravings after his works so that they would not be reused in issues of lesser quality.

In 1843, Turner, then sixty-eight years old, went to see his agent, Thomas Griffith, with a bundle of sketches rolled up under his arm. He wanted to raise money toward the publication of a new set of engravings; for these works he always set the highest standards, securing the best engravers available and personally supervising every detail. Not that he really needed the money, for he was as rich as he was famous. Yet the fortune he had amassed he carefully reserved for various charitable plans, a home for old artists, and the proper installation of the works he was going to bequeath to the nation.

The drawings he brought to Griffith were what one might call modellos, based on sketches made in Switzerland in the summers of 1840 and 1841, for Griffith to show to clients and collectors, who were to choose scenes that appealed to them and commission Turner to execute finished water colors. Turner had attempted the same—but for him quite unusual—plan in 1842. At that time he had offered a choice of fifteen sketches from which he intended to make ten finished works. To show what their quality would be, he had submitted four in their final state.

John Ruskin, in the Epilogue to the catalogue of the 1878 exhibition of his own collection of Turner drawings, reported at humorous length on the first conversation between Turner and Griffith on the subject of this particular series.
OVERLEAF: The Lake of Zug—Morning, 1843, by Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851). Water color with gouache and colored chalks, over traces of pencil; extensive scrapings with penknife. 11 3/4 x 18 3/4 inches

Marquand Fund, 59.120
Turner asked, "What do you think you can get for such things as these?" Says Mr. Griffith to Mr. Turner: 'Well, perhaps, commission included, eighty guineas each.' Says Mr. Turner to Mr. Griffith: 'Ain't they worth more?' Says Mr. Griffith to Mr. Turner (after looking curiously into the execution, which you will please note, is rather what some people might call hazy): 'They're a little different from your usual style'—(Turner silent, Griffith does not push the point)—'but—but—yes, they are worth more, but I could not get more.'"

Only nine drawings of the ten proposed were commissioned and bought, all by old and staunch supporters of Turner's work: Mr. H. A. J. Munro of Novar, a wealthy amateur and friend of many years' standing; Mr. Windus of Tottenham, a retired coachmaker and enthusiastic Turner admirer; Mr. Bicknell of Herne Hill, whose collection was not quite as extensive as theirs; and a young newcomer, John Ruskin, then twenty-two, who coaxed his indulgent father to buy two of them for him, even though Papa Ruskin thought them quite expensive. (One of them Ruskin sold thirty years later for a thousand pounds, wishing that Turner were still alive to witness this enormous rise in the value of his works.) A tenth drawing was given to Griffith in lieu of a percentage.

In 1843, on Turner's second try, only five orders were received for the ten water colors proposed—again from the same loyal admirers. Number two was The Lake of Zug, bought by Mr. Munro. The modello for it, which remained in Turner's possession, is now, with part of the Turner Bequest, in the British Museum. H. A. J. Munro (not to be confused with the patron of Turner's youth, Dr. Thomas Monro) was a highly cultivated man and a distinguished collector whose gallery included paintings by old and modern masters of all schools as well as numerous works by Turner. Two of the Museum's three oil paintings by Turner, The Whale Ship and The Grand Canal, Venice (Figure 1), once belonged to him.

We have seen that Mr. Griffith, when Turner brought him the first examples of the Swiss Series, thought them different from the artist's usual style and, at least in Ruskin's interpretation, a bit hazy. "Indistinctiveness," others called this much-deplored development in Turner's style. When Ruskin once flattered the artist, saying that he could never see enough of the latter's paintings, Turner dryly and ironically retorted that yes, that was their quality. Turner was leaving the realistic realm of his early success. As he grew in stature, his style became more and more expressive and his expression more and more visionary, but the critics did not follow him. Other artists, collectors, even some of the public recognized and appreciated the beauty and poetry of his later paintings, but professional criticism, which conceived of landscape painting only as an imitative art, increased in violence at the same rate as did Turner's colors and brushwork. The young Thackeray, under the pseudonym of Michael Angelo Tittmarsh, Esq., writing criticism that was as vile as it was unperceptive, gibed in 1839: "O ye gods! why will he not stick to copying her [nature's] majestical countenance, instead of daubing it with some absurd antics and fard of his own."

All this outraged young John Ruskin, who was to be Turner's greatest admirer. Ruskin had grown up seeing the world first through the engravings, and later through the paintings and water colors of Turner. On various trips with his parents, through England, France, Switzerland, and Italy, he had visited many of the spots known to him through Turner's works. A precocious youth, he became Turner's declared champion at the age of seventeen when a truculent attack on the artist's recently exhibited paintings in Blackwood's Magazine raised him "to the height of black anger." He wrote a reply in Turner's defense, which was shown to Turner but left him unmoved. It was never published.

For Ruskin, Turner was the perfect artist. In 1843, the year in which our Lake of Zug originated, John Ruskin, twenty-four years old, published his Modern Painters: Their Superiority in the Art of Landscape Painting to all the Ancient Masters Proved by Examples of the True, the Beautiful, and the Intellectual, from the Works of Modern Artists, especially from those of J. M. W. Turner. The book was an unabashed, single-minded panegyric on the genius of Turner, a wild fling of a brilliant mind, useless except for the biographer of Ruskin, based on no knowledge of art history except for some preoccupied studies of paintings at the
National Gallery and nearby Dulwich and, of course, Turner’s works. It is long-winded but full of descriptive passages that delight through the masterful beauty of their language. After a slack beginning the book became something of a literary success for the “Graduate of Oxford,” Ruskin’s pseudonym. Turner remained unmoved.

Ruskin never flagged in his extreme enthusiasm for Turner. Venerated in his own lifetime as a writer, critic, and prophet of beauty, he wrote constantly about Turner, collected his works, arranged exhibitions, and catalogued the vast bulk of Turner’s studio contents that formed the Turner Bequest. His greatest praise he always reserved for the Swiss Series. He called these late water colors “the noblest drawings ever made by him for passion and fully developed power.” At one time he himself owned seven of the fifteen made to order in 1842 and 1843.

Included among them was The Lake of Zug, originally painted for Munro. But “Mr. Munro thought the Zug too blue and let me have it,” and that is all we know of the transaction. About this and the other two of the 1843 series he owned, Ruskin wrote in the same 1878 exhibition catalogue quoted earlier: “Done passionately; and somewhat hastily, as drawing near the end. Nevertheless, I would not take all the rest of the collection put together for them. For the end had not come, though it was near. His full, final, unshortened strength is in these; but put forth, as for the last time—in the presence of the waiting Fate. Summing his thoughts of many things, —nay, in a sort of all things. He is not showing his hand, in these; but his heart. The [drawings] of the year 1842, are the most finished and faultless works of his last period; but these of 1843 are the truest and mightiest. There is no conventionalism,—no exhibition of art in them;—absolute truth of passion and truth of memory, and sincerity of endeavour.”

About our drawing in particular he wrote: “The town of Aart seen yet in shadow over the inner bay of the lake; the first rays of rosy light falling on the nearer shore. The sunrise is breaking through the blue mist, just above the battlefield of Morgarten. The two Mythens which protect the central and name-giving metropolis of Switzerland, Schwytz, are bathed in full light.”

His admiration for this work was not, however, complete; surprisingly enough he then betrayed the naturalistic bias of Turner’s detractors: “An inestimable drawing, but with bad faults, of which I need not point out more than the coarse figure drawing, and falsely oblique reflection of the sun.” In additional notes in the catalogue a friend of Ruskin, the Reverend W. Kingsley, refutes the criticism of “too blue,” yet he also explains it away with the naturalistic approach typical of his period: “Look quietly at this drawing for a little time and I think you will feel that it is not too blue, but does most truly give the effect of the instant before the sun appears over a mountain. Before you venture to criticise it be sure that you have watched one hundredth of the sunrises Turner studied,” to which, in a footnote, Ruskin answered superciliously: “Quite right, my dear old friend;—just what I wanted to say of it, but hadn’t time.—J. R.”

We have been brought to accept so much under the terms of art within the last fifty years, we are so far removed from the conceptions, rules, and regulations of landscape painting in the first half of the nineteenth century, that we can hardly understand the objections raised: “too blue,” coarse figure drawing, and faulty reflections. (In any case, Turner’s figure drawing was always admittedly poor, and it seems strange that Ruskin should have especially objected to it here.) In a total reversal of academic values and naturalistic standards we now put imagination high above imitation. Baedeker’s Switzerland dryly describes the Lake of Zug as “very picturesque,” giving it one star. Turner, like a poet who has taken to the brush, transforms a topographical veduta as demanded by Ruskin’s contemporaries into a panoramic vision of nature, leading us from the domain of fact into a region of fancy. In endless depths, far behind the blue-shaded Rossberg to the left, in the silent region of the eternal Alps, the sun is rising through the morning mist. Milton’s lines, which Turner himself used as a theme for an early picture, apply here:

Ye mists and exhalations, that now rise
From hill, or steaming lake, dusky or gray,
Till the sun paint your fleecy skirts with gold
In honour to the world’s great Author, rise.

254
The fullest brightness is concentrated next to the darkest shadow in the center of the picture. Like many of the water colors of the Swiss Series, the vast sweeping circle of the landscape is anchored in the foreground by the two groups of figures. Separated by the sun’s reflection, these figures seem to represent symbolically night and day. At the left are two nude bathers, Nereids of the night who disappear with dawn. On the right, day has come: golden sunlight floods the shore, and women in peasant costumes are beginning the day’s chores. But our eyes are drawn by converging lines back into the immeasurable distance. Turner has created here, and even more in his other water colors of the series, a world landscape, comparable to those by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, whose drawings of the Alps are equally immense and vast in their conception of cosmic nature. In a more facile and superficial manner, Kokoschka recently has attempted panoramas of similar flavor.

The most striking, even startling, feature of the water color is the predominance of the powerful blue to which Mr. Munro had objected. Its varying shades and degrees bring to mind a passage by Ruskin describing the waters of the Rhone river: “...and, while the sun was up, the ever-answering glow of unearthly aquamarine, ultramarine, violet-blue, gentian-blue, peacock blue, river-of-paradise blue, glass of a painted window melted in the sun, and the witch of the Alps flinging the spun tresses of it for ever from her snow.” Sunrises had been painted before, as for instance in the gentle picture by Claude Lorrain in our galleries. But never had this natural event been abstracted as here into a sheer play of pure color. Though perfectly recognizable, the tangible forms of the

1. Grand Canal, Venice, 1835, by Joseph Mallord William Turner. Oil on canvas. 36 x 48½ inches
   Bequest of Cornelius Vanderbilt, 99.31
motif have been dissolved into a fantasmagoria of air and color. Line has disappeared and only close search will discover faint pencil traces in the mountain peaks. The absolute and vehement use of color—almost vulgar to the classical taste with its reliance on line and form—is truly romantic. It links Turner with the impressionists, but where they experimented with visual sensations to the disregard of subject matter, he used color to express the universal and poetical aspects of his subject. Even more than the purity, it was the light key of his colors that made Turner a forerunner of the impressionists. After centuries of dark pictures he dared bright colors and was not unjustly branded “the white painter.” The brightness of our landscape is far closer to paintings by Monet and Renoir than to the landscapes by any of Turner’s contemporaries, including Constable.

He worked on the paper as a painter works on a canvas. Thus his water colors, when seen in reproductions, often can hardly be distinguished from his oil paintings. His technique, especially here, is enormously complex, carried far beyond the regular and fairly simple use of water colors. And with absolute sureness of his varied means he created such extraordinary effects of shimmering light and iridescent hues as appear in this landscape. The color is laid on in full brush strokes and diluted into the faintest, most translucent washes. Then, large areas are scraped with the penknife and scumbled over again with almost dry color to give a pastel-like, textured appearance. A few strokes of colored chalk are worked in. Accents are added in tiny touches of gouache, and the rays of the rising sun and their reflections are highlights of the purest white, scratched out with the penknife. Over the broad washes the brush has worked in dabs and vigorous strokes like that of an impressionist painter. The figures have outlining shadows in red, in negation of local color but in perfect unison with the heightened key of the over-all color scheme. The total effect is one of dazzling brilliance.

Our water color is in the freshest state imaginable. This is always an important aspect to be considered with Turner’s water colors, for, sparkling fireworks that they are, like fireworks they fade away. As was the habit in Turner’s time, and still is, they were framed and hung as the pride of many a drawing room. But exposure to light has done them great harm. Ruskin was acutely aware of this and compared the finished water colors of Turner with pages of a precious manuscript, not to be rashly exposed or handled.

Turner’s paintings fared no better. Though he definitely had his eyes set on posterity, he did not gear his technique to it. He developed a highly individual technique, not yet quite understood, to achieve the desired effects in his oils, using the white canvas for transparency, often adding also water color, and working rapidly and extensively with quick-drying mediums on varnishing day, before the opening of Royal Academy exhibitions. At his death, paintings in his damp studio were in a deplorable state: cracked, peeling, rotted, often only shadows of their former glory. Finally, the habit of indiscriminate cleaning and frequent varnishing that was common in the nineteenth century—and far from uncommon today—has added to the ruin of many of his delicate works. So much the more is the pleasure that we can find in our water color, from which Turner’s genius shines unimpaired.

For Turner was a genius, not merely the greatest English landscape painter. The main body of Turner’s work is anchored in English tradition and taste. He follows the centuries-old English preoccupation with topography, the representation of places seen, loved, and remembered, in the serials of engravings after his water colors, such as the Rivers of England, the Rivers of France, the Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England, etc., etc., published during a period of high appreciation for fine engravings. The medium of water color employed by Turner so prolifically, and with such mastery, had never enjoyed as much popularity as it did in England during Turner’s lifetime. His much-discussed early seascapes, in keeping with contemporary taste for the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century, reflect Van de Velde; his arcadian landscapes imitate a favorite of English collectors, Claude. His Venetian scenes, of which the Metropolitan Museum owns the resplendent Grand Canal of 1835, follow the English nostalgia for this enchanted city and its representations by Canaletto. But as the years went on, Turner’s art left all tradition behind. His late works reach into a lofty and timeless realm of romantic vision. The Lake of Zug—Morning, is one of these.