

British Watercolours



Left: Thomas Girtin, *Westminster and Lambeth*, around 1800. Watercolour over pen and ink 293 x 526 mm. Presented by Chambers Hall 1855-2-14-23

Watercolour came into regular use in England around the end of the 17th century, some two hundred years after Dürer's pioneering work with this medium. It was in the last third of the 18th century that watercolour established itself as the preferred technique for what had become a veritable craze: landscape views, whether conceived as an accurate topographical record, a travelogue of picturesque scenery, or more fanciful compositions of romantic features such as ruins and rural genre subjects.

An increasing emphasis was placed on capturing the transient effects of the weather, for which watercolour was particularly well suited. Despite its undoubted popularity among amateurs and professional artists, it was to take a hundred years and the compelling advocacy of John Ruskin before the landscape watercolour came to be recognised as the outstanding achievement of British art, in the hands of J.M.W. Turner above all, but also of Thomas Girtin, John Constable, David Cox or Samuel Palmer, all of whom are well represented in the British Museum collection.

Many of the finest watercolours in the Department of Prints and Drawings entered the Museum as gifts or bequests. The collection began in earnest in 1816, when Francis Towne (1740-1816) bequeathed three albums containing seventy-four of his own watercolours made during a visit to Rome in 1780-81. This was followed in 1855 by a gift from Chambers Hall of sixty-six drawings and watercolours by Thomas Girtin (1775-1802). The purchase in 1902 of the collection of James Reeve brought the Department four hundred and eighty-one drawings and watercolours by artists of the Norwich school, including many of the best known works of John Sell Cotman (1782-1842). The Salting Bequest in 1910 provided sixty-eight more exceptionally fine watercolours, including eighteen important works by J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851). Arguably the finest, most immaculately preserved watercolours in the Department came in 1958 with the bequest of Robert Wylie Lloyd. This collection of one hundred and thirty-seven British drawings and watercolours, including sixteen works by John 'Warwick' Smith (1749-1831) and sixty-one by Turner, had been carefully preserved from damaging natural light and the watercolours remain among the freshest examples of the medium.

Highlights

John White's watercolours (active 1585-1593) are some of the earliest in the collection. As draughtsman-surveyor on Raleigh's expedition to colonise Virginia, he produced a detailed series of watercolours illustrating the native inhabitants of Virginia and Florida, their customs and the region's flora and fauna. These drawings are a unique record for the study of early American history.

The British school of watercolour painting as we know it, was not firmly established until the middle of the eighteenth century. It is represented in the Department by artists such as the brothers Paul (1725-1809) and Thomas Sandby (1721-1798), who produced topographical 'stained' drawings of scenes around the British Isles. The landscapes artists made while travelling abroad during the Grand Tour, provide the collection with picturesque Italian and Alpine views. Some of the finest of these were produced by John Robert Cozens (1752-1792), John 'Warwick' Smith and Francis Towne.

A fine selection of watercolours illustrating contemporary life form an important part of the collection. The careful draughtsmanship and sharp wit of Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) make him one of the most skilled satirists of the period. The artist George Scharf (1788-1860), a Bavarian who settled and worked in London, also produced watercolours which documented everyday life in the Regency and early Victorian periods.

In addition to those artists already mentioned, the Department contains representative groups of works by David Cox (1783-1859), Peter de Wint (1784-1849) and Richard Parkes Bonington (1802-1828), three of the most accomplished watercolourists of the nineteenth century. John Constable (1776-1836), although best known for his oil painting, used watercolour for marvellous nature and sky impressions, particularly from his beloved Hampstead Heath.

Works in Other Collections

London	Victoria and Albert Museum Tate Britain
UK	All the major regional and university museums
USA	Yale Center for British Art, New Haven; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Morgan Library, New York; Huntington Art Gallery, San Marino, California
CANADA	Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Further Reading

Binyon, L. *Catalogue of Drawings by British Artists and Artists of Foreign Origin Working in Great Britain preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings*, British Museum. London, 1898-1907

Hardie, M. *Watercolour Painting in Britain*. 3 Vols. Batsford, 1967

Sloan, K. *A Noble Art: amateur artists and drawing masters, c. 1600 - 1800*. British Museum Press, 2000

Stainton, L. *British Landscape Watercolours 1750-1850*. British Museum Press, 1985

Wilcox, T. and Newall, C. *Victorian Landscape Watercolours*. Yale University Press, 1992

Wilton, A. *British Watercolours 1750-1850*. Phaidon, 1977

Wilton, A. and Lyles, A. *The Great Age of British Watercolours 1750-1880*. Royal Academy, 1993