

Luminous Landscapes: British Watercolors from the Museum's Collection,
May 27, 2005-August 14, 2005

The watercolor medium and landscape subject were auspiciously linked in Britain during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and the dynamism generated led to a significant artistic achievement. The RISD Museum has a particularly fine collection of this work, primarily due to the remarkable generosity of an anonymous donor. The first gifts were made in 1969 and have continued to the present. The Museum's holdings in this area now number over 800 sheets, illustrating nearly all of the practitioners. The innovations of these artists elevated both the landscape subject and the watercolor medium from their former lowly ranking in British Royal Academy's hierarchy of genres to one of international recognition.

Early 18th-century British landscapes were of two types: topographical views, which were recognizable depictions of specific places, and imaginary or idealized views inspired by 17th-century Continental artists in oil such as Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin. Over the next century, as artists took an increasing interest in the observation of nature, these traditions expanded in new directions.

Topographic watercolors from the mid-18th century were typically drawn in graphite or pen and ink and tinted with color washes, such as those by Thomas Jones and Jonathan Skelton. Others, among them Francis Towne and John "Warwick" Smith, began to experiment with more painterly effects. John Robert Cozens took the expressive possibilities of the medium furthest at this time. His sublime views conveyed his emotional response to nature's drama and were extremely influential for British landscape artists of the next generation.

The early 19th-century Romantics took a close look at nature increasingly included being attentive to the fleeting effects of weather. Watercolor's luminescence and speed of application allowed artists to capture atmospheric conditions as never before. Working outdoors and quickly to capture changing light effects encouraged spontaneity and invention. With minimal underdrawing, watercolor was directly applied in veils of color washes and loose brushwork, evident in the paintings of David Cox, Peter De Wint, and Richard Parks Bonington. J.M.W. Turner's late watercolor sketches, with their energetic brushwork, radiant color, and dissolving form, his subjects are barely recognizable.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

John Ruskin, English, 1819-1900
A Spray of Juniper Berries, ca. 1863
Watercolor, white heightening and gouache on blue paper
Anonymous gift 71.153.55

Ruskin was the foremost art critic of his day and a great proponent of the work of J.W.M. Turner. Among other endeavors, he was also a landscape artist. His botanical studies, such as this one, were the culmination of an intensive investigation into the faithful representation of the details of nature. He used them as teaching aids in his lectures at Oxford University.



Richard Parkes Bonington, English, 1802-1828
Landscape, ca. 1825
Watercolor applied with brush, scraped highlights, and graphite
Mary B. Jackson Fund 30.070



Thomas Shotter Boys, British, 1803-1874
View of Folkstone
Watercolor and opaque watercolor applied with brush, scraped highlights, and graphite
Gift of the Fazzano Brothers 84.198.954



George Chinnery, English, 1774-1852
Sunset, late 1700s - mid 1800s
Watercolor applied with brush, ink and pen, and graphite
Anonymous gift 73.204.6



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John Sell Cotman, English, 1782-1842

Rochester Castle, ca. 1830

Watercolor and watercolor in flour-paste medium and pen and ink
over graphite on paper

Anonymous gift 69.154.7

Cotman was one of the more original interpreters of watercolor. The robust orange and blue colors in this watercolor are the result of experiments Cotman made in the 1830s mixing a flour paste into the watercolor to strengthen the hue, yet retain translucency. The pigment is freely applied with color pen lines sharpening the details of the buildings. The intensity of the color overall corresponds with the boldness of his composition.



David Cox the elder, English, 1783-1859

The Hayfield, 1833

Watercolor applied with brush, scraped highlights, and graphite

Anonymous gift 71.153.24

Cox's reputation rests on his atmospheric watercolors of Britain, particularly its meadows and moorlands under a broad expanse of sky. Vigorous, broad brushstrokes capture a bright sky filled with billowing clouds here. Quick, abbreviated small brushwork convincingly renders details in the foreground, where he has also scraped back into the white paper to add radiant highlights.



John Robert Cozens, English, 1752-1799

Lake Nemi with a Distant View of Genzano (and Monte Circeo), 1778-1790

Watercolor applied with brush, graphite

Anonymous Gift 70.118.19

Between 1776 and 1779, Cozens accompanied Richard Payne Knight (1750-1824) antiquarian, connoisseur, and collector, on the Grand Tour through Switzerland to Rome. Cozens sketched continuously on the journey and throughout the next decade worked from these studies (subsequently part of the Knight collection) to produce distinctly styled watercolors, such as this one, primarily in blue grays contrasted with soft browns. There are at least nine compositions of Lake Nemi looking toward the Swiss town of Genzano, a popular subject.



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Peter De Wint, English, 1784-1849
Landscape with Trees, Near Lincoln, late 1700s - mid 1800s
Watercolor applied with brush and graphite
Anonymous gift 71.153.23

De Wint regularly spent the late summer months in Lincolnshire, where this landscape was made. The sureness of his broad brush on rough wet paper with minimal underdrawing has led scholars to believe that many of his works were completed outdoors. While his works have been particularly susceptible to fading (the blues here are gone), the sheet still conveys the radiance of a sun low on the horizon, particularly with the unusual pink coloring in the trees and the sky. De Wint's technique continues to influence artists working in watercolor today.



Thomas Hearne, English, 1744-1817
Figures by a Rocky Bank in the Forest, late 1700s
Watercolor applied with a brush, and graphite
Anonymous gift 72.171.41



Robert Hills, English, 1769-1844
A View over Chiddingstone, toward Westerham, Kent, ca. 1817-1818
Watercolor applied with brush, and graphite
Anonymous gift 71.153.39

The inscription at the lower right informs us that this piece was made "July 26 8 PM tempestuous rainy evening." Its simplified, banded composition – a spare, open foreground, a line of trees convincingly indicated with dabs of color in the middle ground, and stripes of dark clouds and sunlight in the distance – give the work a contemporary feel. It is one of two sheets in the Museum collection from a series of Kent scenes, likely from a sketchbook.



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Edward Lear, English, 1812-1888

Garf Harbor, Malta, 1866

Watercolor and gouache applied with brush, ink and pen, and graphite

Anonymous gift 69.154.57

Lear may be best known today for his nonsense verses, but he was also an inspired and prolific landscape artist who even gave drawing lessons to Britain's Queen Victoria. He traveled extensively, recording thousands of views, 52 of which are in the Museum's collection. His work continued the 18th-century topographic practice of sketching on site (at the lower right he noted that it was drawn in an hour, "10-11 am 30 Jany 1866") and coloring the work in pale washes in the studio according to notations made in the drawing. He also liked to finish the work by "penning out" and even reinforced his annotations in pen and ink using them as integral elements of a finished composition.



Jane Ogden, British, 1849-1901

Bluebells and Primroses, 1866

Watercolor and gouache

Gift of in memory of Susan Gotti from her family and friends
1993.028



Samuel Palmer, British, 1805-1881

Near Underriver, Sevenoaks, Kent, ca. 1843

Watercolor and opaque watercolor applied with brush, and ink and pen

Anonymous gift 69.154.13



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Thomas Rowlandson, English, 1756-1827
Polruan, Cornwall, after 1790
Watercolor applied with brush, ink and pen, and graphite
Anonymous gift 69.154.20

Rowlandson was one of the most prolific artists of his generation, producing near 10,000 watercolors, and was renowned for his caricatures and illustrations. Summers provided an opportunity to focus on pleasant rustic views such as this, which was made during one of his frequent visits to a friend with a Cornish country house. This example, with its customary energetic and confident drawing and delicate color washes, is unusually fresh.



Joseph Mallord William Turner, English, 1775-1851
Dazio Grande, 1843
Watercolor applied with a brush, and graphite
Gift of Mr. Richard Brown Baker in memory of his parents, Harvey
and Marion Baker 84.080

This is from a group of "sample studies" that Turner made in 1842 in Switzerland while enroute to Italy in order to obtain commissions for a group of ten large-scale fully-worked watercolors. These diaphanous wash studies were all done in a soft-cover sketchbook that Turner would roll up and carry in his pocket.



When John Ruskin, the great art critic, heard of Turner's death, he wrote immediately to his father telling him to look for this work, and he even drew a picture of it from memory in the letter. While Ruskin initially found the preparatory drawings from Switzerland "beautiful but sketchy and imperfect" (quoted in Ian Warrell, *Through Switzerland with Turner: Ruskin's First Selection from the Turner Bequest*. London: 1995, p. 13), by the end of Turner's life, Ruskin recognized them as the best works through which to understand Turner. The sheet was acquired by Ruskin, and when he exhibited it in an 1878 exhibition, he described it as a view from the Italian side of St. Gotthard Pass, two miles above Faido (in 1845, Ruskin had retraced Turner's trip through St. Gotthard Pass).

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Paul Sandby, British, 1725-1809

Landscape with Tree and Pond in the Foreground and Village in the Distances, ca. 1790-1800

Watercolor applied with brush, ink applied with brush, and graphite
Anonymous gift 69.154.8



John Warwick Smith, English, 1749-1831

Keswick Lake from Castlerigg Farm, ca. 1790-1799

Pen and ink, watercolor over graphite on wove paper
Anonymous gift 1986.184.55

An influential artist at the end of the 18th century, "Warwick" Smith continued the topographic tradition in which he was trained, yet was noted for his original use of directly applied, strong color. This view in the Lake District depicts Derwent Water, earlier known as Keswick Lake.



John Constable, English, 1776-1837

The Dorset Coast, 1816

Watercolor applied with brush, and graphite
Anonymous gift 71.153.32

One of the great English landscape painters in oil, Constable also made watercolors, although he seldom exhibited them. His rapid application of watercolor and graphite here is in keeping with drawings found in his small sketchbooks. This sheet is from a notebook that he used during his honeymoon in Dorset (southwestern England).



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John Robert Cozens, English, 1752-1799

Third View on the Reichenbach, 1776

Ink washes applied with brush, ink and pen, watercolor, and graphite

Anonymous gift 69.154.31

Many English watercolorists traveled to Rome in the 1770s, although J. R. Cozens was one of the most influential. This view of Switzerland, made on his way to Rome, conveys the spontaneity of his sketches as opposed to his fully developed watercolors, such as the view of Lake Nemi on the wall in front of you.



Thomas Gainsborough, English, 1727-1788

Landscape with a Waterfall, 1700s

Watercolor applied with brush, and crayon

Anonymous gift 73.204.21

Although best known in his own time and today as a portraitist, Gainsborough was an equally talented landscape artist. Here, the serenity of the scene with small waterfall is conveyed in a pale, neutral watercolor palette with rocks and foliage correspondingly described in soft crayon. The motifs, likely inspired by travel to picturesque mountain areas in Britain and then reinterpreted in the drawing, are similar to those in his paintings from the years 1782 to 1784.



Thomas Girtin, British, 1775-1802

Valle Crucis Abbey (called), ca. 1798

Watercolor and ink applied with brush, and graphite

Anonymous gift 71.153.5

This work is believed to represent the ruins of the 13th-century abbey Valle Crucis (Valley of the Cross) in North Wales. It is a subject that Girtin depicted several times, but because he portrayed only a fragment here, it cannot be identified with certainty. Its role is to heighten the moodiness of the shadowy setting that points up the lone, despondent woman lit by sunlight streaming through the trees. In Girtin's short life, he developed a broad-ranged handling of the



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medium and a rich expressiveness that was recognized along with Turner's contributions as instrumental in elevating watercolor to a serious art medium in the 1790s.

Thomas Jones, Welsh, 1742-1803
Road to S. Maria de Monti, Naples, 1781
Watercolor applied with brush, and graphite
Anonymous gift 71.153.13

From 1776 to 1786, Jones was in Italy as Francis Towne's companion and guide. They spent most of their time in Naples, where this scene was sketched, and Rome. Note Jones's inscription at the upper right corner of the sheet indicating the direction of the sun and that he was capturing morning light. The wonderfully detailed scalloped patterning of the foliage in graphite is characteristic of his work. The watercolor is employed in the typical mode of the topographic tradition to fill in the outlines of a drawing with color.



Jonathan Skelton, British, fl. ca. 1754-1758
Castle on the Edge of a Lake, late 1850s
Watercolor applied with brush, and graphite
Anonymous gift 71.153.42

Skelton was one of the most accomplished watercolorists of the mid-18th century. His technique, referred to as tinted or stained drawing, consisted of washing color over graphite drawing. Lastly, he added dark watercolor to define the landscape elements.



Francis Towne, English, ca. 1740-1816
Vale of St. John, Cumberland, 1786
Pen and ink and watercolor over graphite on laid paper
Anonymous gift 69.154.1

Towne worked almost exclusively in watercolor, exhibiting his work only once in his lifetime and supporting himself as a drawing instructor. His works were rediscovered in the early 20th century, as their unique style of pen outline with flat washes appealed to modern



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taste. Inscriptions on some drawings, including one in RISD's collection, indicate that he drew "on the Spot," usually in graphite, adding watercolor and pen and ink later.

Joseph Mallord William Turner, English, 1775-1851
Rainbow: A View on the Rhine from Dunkholder Vinyard, of Ostersprey and Feltzen below Bosnart, ca. 1819
Watercolor applied with brush with scraped highlights
Anonymous gift 71.153.2



This work is one of three designs developed for a book commission for engraved views of the Rhine, but another similar project was published before this one, ending the need for Turner to finish his group. In this work, Turner brilliantly portrays a rainbow lightening a saturated sky at a wide bend in the Rhine. Windblown figures in the foreground accentuate the stormy atmosphere. Deep blue and pale greens dominate the sheet, which was then worked into with fine brush to portray details. Turner created highlights in the foreground by scraping away the watercolor, and the rainbow was created by wiping pigment from the sky, probably with a cloth, to reveal the brightness of the paper. The long title (with Boppard misspelled as Bosnart) accompanied the work on the only occasion that it was shown during Turner's life (1823).

Joseph Mallord William Turner, English, 1775-1851
Sleaford, Lincolnshire, ca. 1797-98
Watercolor applied with a brush, and graphite
Anonymous gift 71.153.3



Turner was trained as a topographical artist in watercolor, and throughout his life watercolors remained integral to the development of his work. He sketched buildings and sites throughout Britain in his early years and quickly gained commissions for specific projects. This view was requested by Benjamin Howlett along with others for a publication on picturesque sites in the county. It was recorded that the work had already suffered fading in 1908, so the overall brown tonality does not reflect the original conception of the work.

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Samuel Prout, English, 1783-1852

St. Andrew's, Brunswick, after 1824

Watercolor and opaque watercolor applied with brush, and ink and pen

Anonymous Gift 70.118.36

Even though the main thrust in the development of landscape painting in the early 19th century veered toward naturalism, there was a continuing interest in and demand for architectural subjects, especially as illustrations for books with views of towns both in Britain and on the Continent. The detailed line drawing, so prominent in Prout's picturesque watercolors, made his work well suited to meet that need, and much of his work was translated into prints.

