

From Dover to Penzance: Watercolor Views of the English Channel

December 3, 2010-June 5, 2011

The intersection of land, sea, and sky along England's southern coastline offered a rich variety of subjects for 19th-century watercolor painters. Countless artists visited the white chalk cliffs at Dover, the remote rocky shores of Cornwall, and the many harbor towns and seaside resorts in between, depicting the waters of the English Channel in every observable mood and weather condition. Drawn from the Museum's exceptional collection of British watercolors, the works in this exhibition showcase the natural beauty of this region and bespeak the cultural importance of the Channel as a maritime gateway connecting England to its vast overseas empire and to the European continent.

This selection features some of the period's foremost watercolor specialists, including Copley Fielding, David Cox, and others who worked almost exclusively in this medium. Founding the Society of Painters in Water Colours in 1804 and contributing regularly to its annual exhibitions, these artists firmly established watercolor painting as a unique branch of art-making worthy of esteem and patronage from the English public.

The popularity of seascapes such as these mirrored the growth of domestic tourism within Britain in the late 18th century and during the Napoleonic Wars. Proximity to London made the coastal towns of Kent, Sussex, and the Isle of Wight popular destinations, first for restoring health, then increasingly for the beauty of the coastal landscape. Artists followed, and as the adjacent map and this exhibition demonstrate, their works depicted and celebrated the entire length of the southern coast.

Curated by Crawford Alexander Mann III, Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow, Department of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Philip James de Loutherbourg, French, 1740-1812

Margate, from the Parade, ca.1801

Watercolor with brush and ink with pen over graphite on cream wove paper

Anonymous gift 1986.184.16



As this watercolor illustrates, health, not pleasure, was the primary motive for early beach-going at Margate in Kent. Therapeutic activities included strolling the waterfront to inhale the salty air and immersion in the cold, frothy surf, facilitated by a "bathing machine," a horse-drawn cart with an expandable canvas bonnet. These curious contraptions, seen here in the left half of the shallow harbor, allowed modest gentlefolk to undress and take the plunge

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out of sight from neighboring bathers. This watercolor is one of six by Philip James de Loutherbourg showing facets of daily life in Margate and the nearby resorts of Ramsgate, Brighton, and Worthing, reproduced in aquatint by J. C. Stadler and published in 1801 as a portfolio entitled Picturesque Scenery of Great Britain.

William Trost Richards, American, 1833-1905

Coast of Cornwall, ca. 1879

Watercolor over graphite on cream laid paper

Anonymous gift 1992.001.116

On his first trip to England in 1879, the American painter William Trost Richards braved harsh winter weather conditions to sketch the remote and sparsely populated cliffs and coves of Cornwall. Like his well-known coastal views of Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Maine, this small watercolor demonstrates the artist's lifelong fascination with geology and natural history, interests nurtured by the writings of the English art critic John Ruskin. Consequently, Richards's works, even on this intimate scale, display remarkable attention to color and topographical accuracy. While abroad, Richards often enclosed small vignettes like this in letters to patrons in America, using these homemade postcards both as friendship mementos and as advertisements of his skill.



Frederick Nash, English, 1781-1858

Dover Road, Shoreham, Sussex, ca. 1834-1856

Transparent and opaque watercolor over graphite on cream wove paper

Anonymous gift 2005.142.116

Thanks to his early training in architectural drawing, Frederick Nash earned high praise among the watercolor specialists of the early 19th century for his detailed topographical views of cities. Here he uses discrete dots of opaque pigment to give solidity and clarity to the houses and foreground foliage while masterfully blending transparent washes of blue, lavender, and gray to create the smooth surfaces of the sky and water. Like many of his contemporaries, Nash eventually made the southern coast his permanent home, settling in Brighton in 1834 and ensuring that an abundant supply of picturesque coastal views would always be near at hand.



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David Cox the elder, English, 1783-1859
Shipping Off the French Coast, ca. 1832
Watercolor over graphite on cream wove paper
Anonymous gift 2005.142.79

Like many of his contemporaries, David Cox crossed the English Channel and painted coastal landscapes along both its northern and southern shores. This small study of a group of ships likely dates from Cox's third and final visit to the continent, during which he executed numerous pictures of the principal pier of Calais and the tall sailing vessels passing through the busy French port. For these marine subjects, he used soft layers of pale wash to portray the calm waters and foggy atmosphere of the harbor.



James Baker Pyne, English, 1800-1870
Off Portsmouth, 1837
Transparent and opaque watercolor over graphite on cream laid paper
Anonymous gift 69.154.51

For this view of the harbor city of Portsmouth, James Baker Pyne places us offshore amid a dramatic and threatening storm. Though the landmarks of the city are recognizable in the distance, the principal subject here is the violence of the sea, with small boats tossed by massive waves as they enter the open waters of the English Channel. Looking closely at the foamy peaks of the foreground waves, one can see Pyne's technique of building white highlights with a thicker, opaque watercolor pigment, thereby adding volume and brilliance to these details. He painted several related watercolor views of important English ports, perhaps hoping to publish the group as a portfolio of prints or guidebook illustrations.



Anthony Vandyke Copley Fielding, English, 1787-1855
Culver Cliff from Bembridge, 1847
Watercolor with brush and ink with pen over graphite on cream laid paper
Anonymous gift 71.153.25

Large and highly detailed exhibition watercolors like this seascape were a specialty of Anthony Vandyke Copley Fielding, perhaps the most prolific and commercially successful watercolor painter of his generation.



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This view of the chalk cliffs below Culver Down on the Isle of Wight uses many of his favorite technical tricks, such as subtle scraping on the paper surface to reveal white highlights and blotting with bread to create the mottled texture of the clouds. By repeating these formulae, Fielding learned to work quickly and satisfy the public demand for his work, consistently outselling contemporaries like David Cox, whose work appears to the far left. Serving as President of the Society of Painters in Water Colours for over three decades, Fielding exhibited a total of 1,748 watercolors during his lifetime.

George Jones, English, 1786-1869

Exmouth, ca. 1812-1814

Transparent and opaque watercolor on blue wove paper

Anonymous gift 72.171.18

Rich blue paper gives a somber and nocturnal cast to this watercolor view of the mouth of the River Exe in Devon. Against this cool background, the beach and the surface of the sea blend together in a white swath of moonlight, punctuated by the shadowy form of a twomasted boat, likely either a cargo vessel or a small warship. George Jones executed many intimate landscape studies in this manner, using techniques learned either from his father, a prolific mezzotint engraver, or from his early studies at the Royal Academy.



George Fennel Robson, English, 1788-1833

From Shakespeare's Cliff, Dover, Kent, ca. 1813-1832

Watercolor over graphite on cream laid paper

Anonymous gift 74.107.56

Overlooking the English Channel's narrowest point, the towering white-chalk headland known as Shakespeare's Cliff lies just twenty-one miles from the coast of France. The name stems from its association with King Lear, in which the blind Earl of Gloucester attempts suicide from "a cliff, whose high and bending head looks fearfully in the confined deep." Here we see Gloucester in the lower right, the hunched old man in brown robes and a red cap, accompanied by his son Edgar, who saves him from self-destruction.



Unlike most watercolor specialists, George Fennel Robson worked primarily with historical and literary subjects, often combining Shakespearian narratives with actual landscape settings and using rich, saturated colors to further distinguish his paintings from those of competitors.

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George Barret the Younger, English, 1767-1842

Ventnor, Isle of Wight, ca. 1821-1823

Watercolor with brush and ink with pen over graphite on cream laid paper

Anonymous gift 83.217.4

Although Ventnor, on the south coast of the Isle of Wight, is famous as one of England's warmest and sunniest towns, this watercolor presents its rocky beach shrouded by heavy gray clouds. The artist, George Barret the Younger, specialized in dawn and sunset scenes, frequently painting the same locale at various times of day to perfect his understanding of light, climate, and color. No other views of this spot are known, but it is one of many products of Barret's 1821 sketching tour of the Isle of Wight. At that time, Ventnor remained an isolated place, but the arrival of the railway in 1866 sparked commercial development and transformed it into a popular destination for Victorian tourists.

