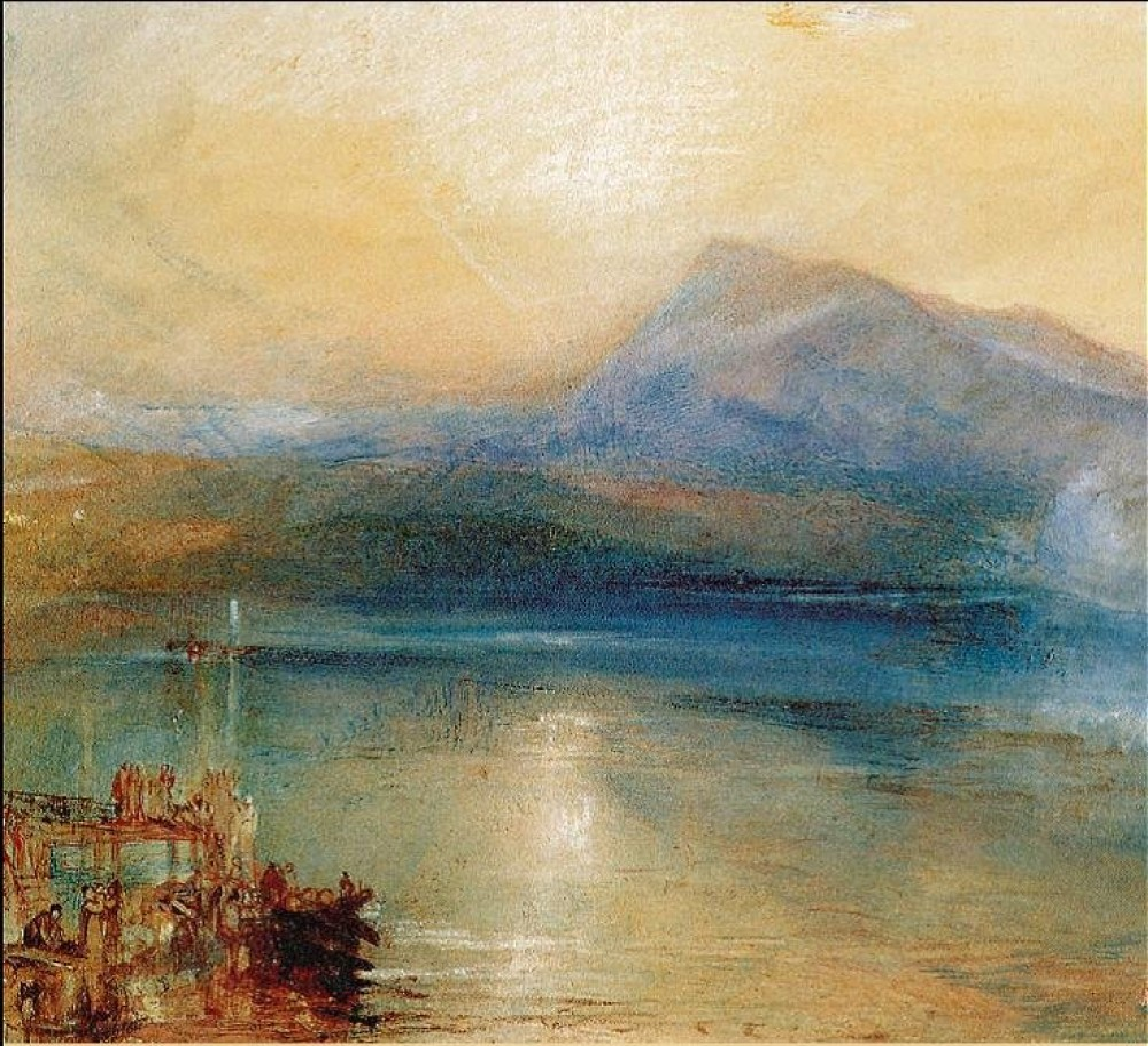

BRITISH WATERCOLOURS

1750–1880

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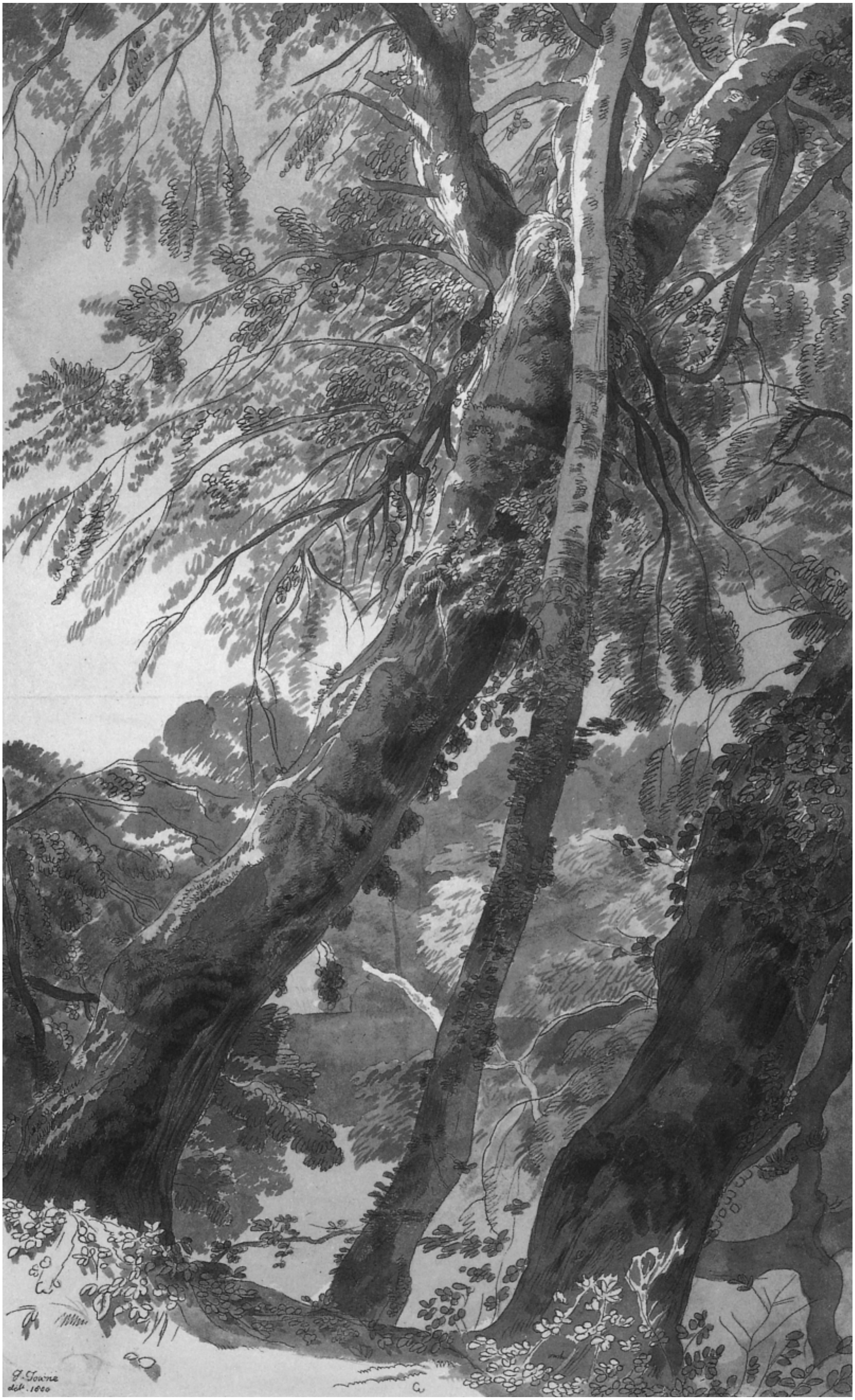
British Watercolours

1750–1880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British Watercolours

1750–1880

Andrew Wilton
Anne Lyles

Prestel
Munich · London · New York

First published on the occasion of the exhibition *The Great Age of British Watercolours, 1750–1880*, held at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, 15 January–12 April 1993, and at the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 9 May–25 July 1993.

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Back cover: William Blake, The Arlington Court Picture, 1821 (detail), see pl. 218
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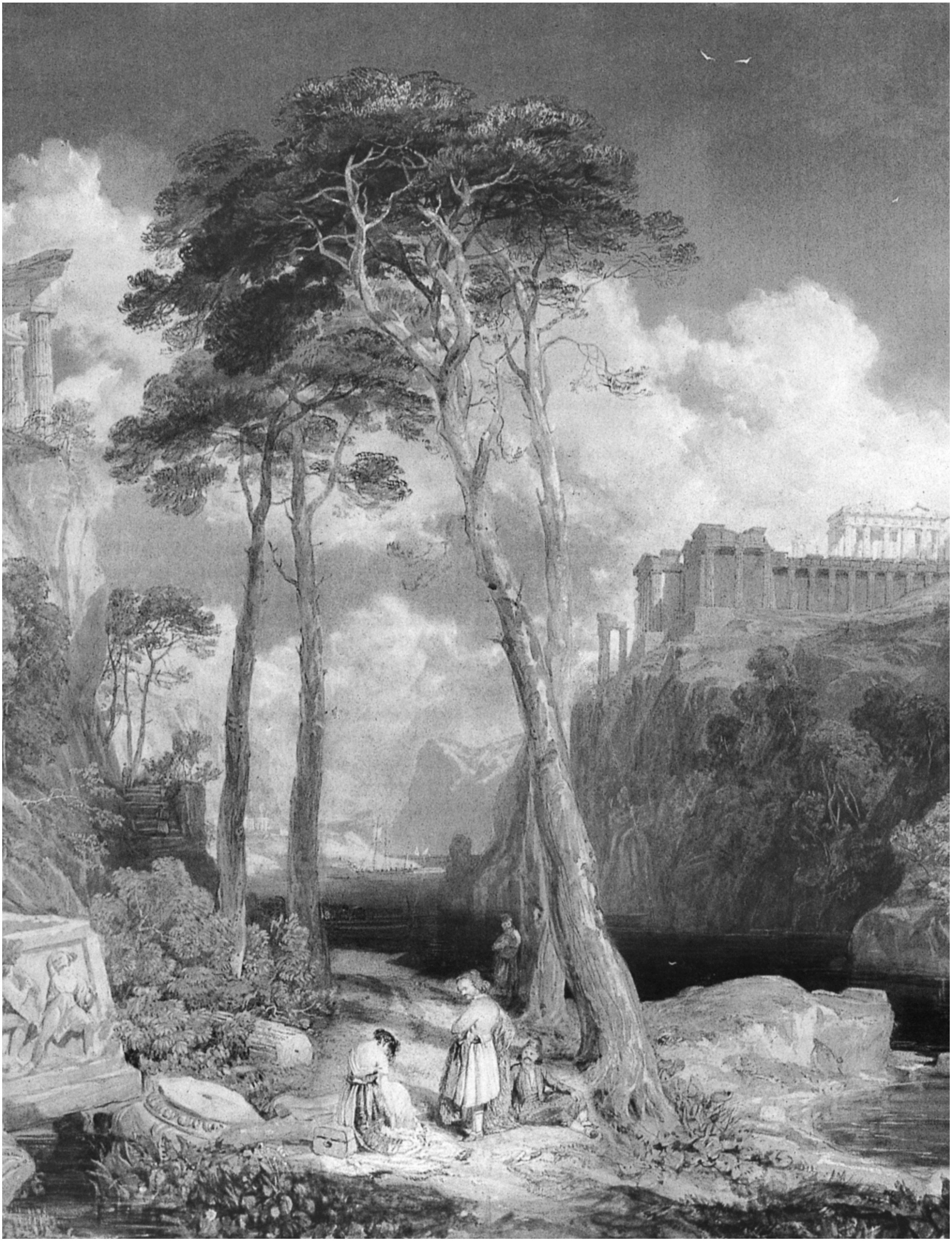


AMBITION AND AMBIGUITY: WATERCOLOUR IN BRITAIN

Watercolour is well named: it embodies in its very nature an uncertainty, a fluidity and ambiguity that seems to symbolise its interest and aesthetic importance. Should we speak of a watercolour drawing, or a watercolour painting? Reporting on the opening of the Old Water-Colour Society's exhibition in 1824, William Henry Pyne recalled: 'Just twenty years ago, almost to the very day, … we met an old friend on entering the new rooms, one of the founders of the society … "Well," said we, almost simultaneously, "time was, in discussing the *title* for this society, whether the novel term *Painters* in Water Colours might not be considered by the world of taste to savor of assumption – who now, on looking round, will feel disposed to question the merits of that title?'[1] Thanks to the extraordinary developments of those decades, the terms 'drawing' and 'painting' are both correctly applied to watercolour, but in different contexts.

A drawing in pen or pencil may be amplified with washes, applied with a brush, that can be monochrome – grey, blue, or brown – or coloured. Such a drawing might be made out of doors, and in a short space of time, to record a particular idea, a particular set of observed facts or a response to them. It might be quite elaborate, yet still retain its identity as a drawing, perhaps even as a sketch. Completed, it would be mounted on a sheet of thin card decorated with a few parallel lines as a border, possibly tinted to harmonise with whatever colour is in the design (fig. 1). Rather than being framed, it would then, as like as not, be consigned to an album or portfolio, to be viewed in a collector's study or shown to friends in the course of discussion among antiquaries.

But watercolour can also be used in a quite different way, worked at laboriously in the studio as the medium of a large-scale picture with elaborate conceptual content, dense tones and complex imagery. In other words, a watercolour may be a finished painting in the same sense that a finished work in oils is a painting. Some oil paintings, of course, are themselves sketches or studies. There is a parallel between the two kinds of watercolour and these two uses of oil paint, for preliminary or exploratory studies and for evolved, finished works. There is also a striking historical difference: whereas watercolour evolved from the more tentative to the more complete form, the use of the oil sketch was a development from the process of making a finished oil painting. And while the oil sketch from Nature, which had been in use occasionally since the Renaissance, emerged as a distinct genre in many western European countries at roughly the same moment in the late eighteenth century, the watercolour painting, which developed contemporaneously, was an almost uniquely British phenomenon.

It presented the medium in a new dimension, that of the public statement. From being an essentially private channel of communication, small-scale, intimate and provisional, functioning according to the *ad hoc* requirements of individuals engaged in many aspects of recording the visual world, it became a fully fledged art form, with its own intellectual programmes and purely aesthetic criteria of judgement. At the same time, watercolour retained its other, more practical, purpose, and so the two uses of the medium marched side by side through the nineteenth century, a uniquely flexible and varied means of expression.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, watercolour was developing somewhat similarly on the Continent. Although it had been in use in the Middle Ages for the illumination of manuscripts, its modern application as a medium for recording Nature was pioneered in a watery country, the Netherlands. It was reintroduced into Britain by artists from that part of the Continent in the early seventeenth century. There was no dearth of inventive skill in its use among the Dutch, the French and the Germans, who employed it for more or less elaborate landscape views (fig. 2). By the end of the eighteenth century artists all over Europe were using it as the medium for decorative landscapes, usually of a classicising kind, with subject-matter often drawn from the Grand Tour.

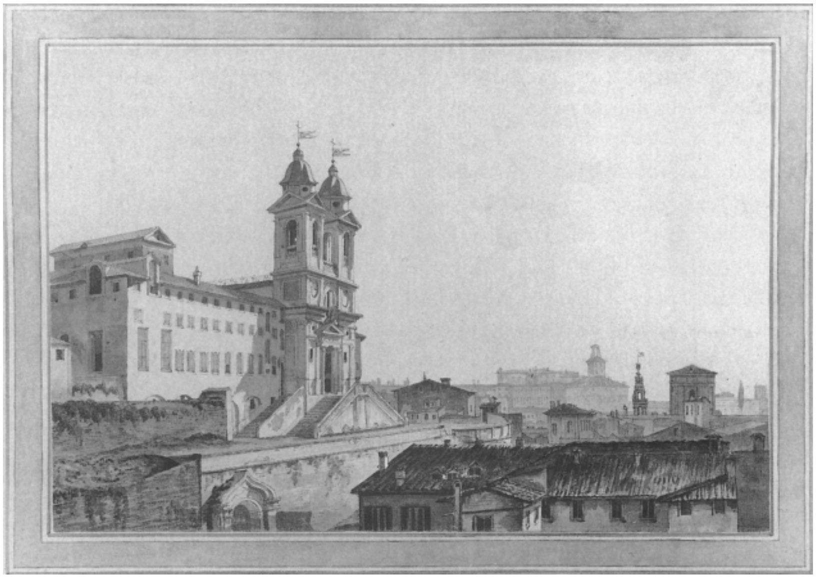


Fig. 1 John 'Warwick' Smith, *Church of SS Trinita dei Monti, Rome*, c. 1776, pencil and watercolour with pen and ink, 34.1 x 54.1. British Museum, London

For the British who made the journey through Europe to see the artistic wonders of ancient and modern Italy, and in due course came to appreciate the natural splendours of the Alps as well, the traditional interests of the antiquary were happily combined with the enthusiasms of the tourist, and watercolour was increasingly called upon to gratify both.[2] The need to record gave way to the need to recall, and recollection was as much a matter of atmosphere as of factual detail. Artists adapted themselves accordingly.

There was close contact between the British artists who travelled in Europe and their Continental *confrères*, and some stylistic interaction: the

German Philipp Hackert (1737–1807), for instance, was much patronised by British travellers, and his drawings were copied by English watercolourists: the connoisseur and collector Richard Payne Knight (1750–1824) took Hackert with him on a journey to Sicily in 1777, although Knight also travelled in the company of an accomplished English amateur draughtsman, Charles Gore (1729–1807), and later, in England, got another of his travelling companions, the professional Thomas Hearne (1744–1817), to make versions of Gore's drawings.[3]

Perhaps the most sophisticated of the Continental practitioners at this period was the Swiss painter Louis Ducros (1748–1810), whose often enormous scenes of Italy and Malta epitomise the technical virtuosity of the time (fig. 3).[4] They embody the dramatic vision of the moment when science and history gave way to the more subjective appreciation of early Romanticism, with its passion for Antique ruins, waterfalls and the scenery of the Roman Campagna. They demand to be treated as paintings, require no mount, and should be viewed in a heavy gilt frame like an oil painting. Ducros employs watercolour in a direct, brilliant way that takes maximum advantage of its inherent luminosity: he revels, for instance, in effects of sun shining through foliage, in which the idea of light transmitted through a membrane of colour is the essence of the image.

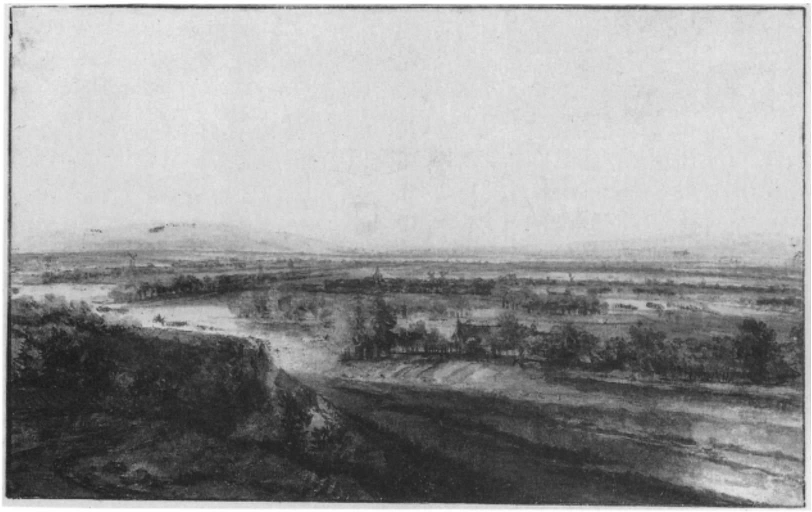


Fig. 2 Philips Koninck, *Landscape with a River and Distant Hills*, c. 1655, watercolour and bodycolour, 13.8 x 21.2. British Museum, London

It is an exact illustration of the principle of watercolour, where the transparent, water-based colour, applied directly to sheets of white paper, reveals the brightness of its ground in varying degrees according to the density of the pigment. The brilliance of sky or falling water is contrasted with the denser masses of rock or woodland, which are often strengthened with applications of gum arabic. Darker areas are often worked on first in a preliminary under-painting with a layer of grey or some other deeper tone. The human figure abounds, and Ducros's foregrounds are alive with the well-drawn and animated crowds that distinguish most good eighteenth-century topographical work. Outlines are lively and have a prominent role in the overall texture, but the linear rhythms of the whole design are generally subordinated to the visual wealth of detail.

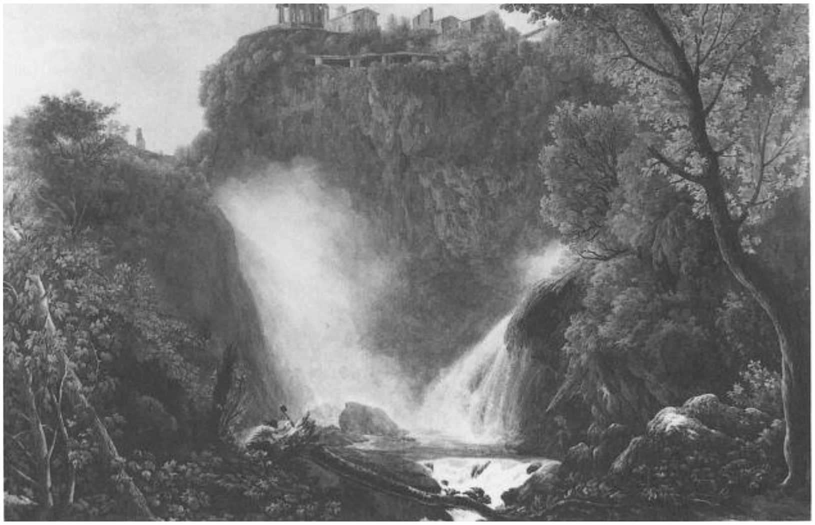


Fig. 3 Louis Ducros, *View at Tivoli*, 1787, watercolour and bodycolour on paper laid down on canvas, 66 x 101.5.
The National Trust, Stourhead

Continental watercolours remained at this stage of development for the next half-century; indeed, on the whole they rarely again approached the complexity of Ducros's work. Hackert and his many followers, such as Franz Kaisermann (1765–1833), applied a decorative and effective formula to produce countless civilised views of an entirely predictable type. If the Continental artists developed technically it was towards a more adaptable sketching style, and hardly at all in the field of the finished watercolour. In Britain, by contrast, the eighteenth-century topographical view, however sophisticated, was soon left behind, and by the early years of the new century the expressive capacity of the medium had been stretched beyond recognition.

This rapid evolution is usually attributed to a special relationship between the British character and the medium of watercolour, to the unique beauty of the British landscape, or to the superabundance of bored young ladies requiring drawing-masters. These considerations all have some bearing on the quantities of topographical sketches produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but they cannot adequately account for the profound conceptual seriousness with which watercolour was pursued by professional artists in these years.

The decisive factor in the evolution of the Romantic watercolour in Britain was precisely the same as the motive behind the development of the national school of oil painters. Since the early successes of William Hogarth (1687–1764) in the 1730s, there had been a heightened sense of national purpose in the visual arts, a chauvinism that impelled artists to incorporate themselves as a fully recognised establishment, setting standards at home and winning admiration abroad. The movement coincided with the first great expansion of Britain's imperial interests world-wide, with the Seven Years War and the confident heyday of the East India Company. The instinct for national advancement in the international context was becoming explicit, and when, in 1768, the Royal Academy of Arts was founded in London, supporters of the visual arts could argue for the first time that their activities, too, were taking a rightful place in the expanding scheme of things.[5] The watercolourists were a part of this patriotic progress, caught up like everyone else in the pushy spirit of the times.

There were two strands to their ambition. On the one hand, they wanted to be part of the Academy; when they found that their work was rendered insignificant in the contest with oil paintings, they determined to make it more impressive; when that did not work, they formed an academy of their own, the Society of Painters in Water-Colours. This new institution was academic in the important sense that it incorporated the professional identity of the watercolourists, and provided them with a centre for exhibitions, their principal means of contact with the public. It did not, however, attempt to teach, as the Royal Academy did. Its 'schools' remained the studios of practitioners who trained their apprentices from the artisan class as engravers, scene-painters or topographers. On the other hand, the watercolourists believed in the intellectual importance of British painting, an idea that had received a substantial boost in the 1760s when William Woollett's engraving *Niobe*, after a historical landscape by the Welsh painter Richard Wilson (1713–82), was marketed all over Europe by Josiah Boydell (fig.4).[6] Similar triumphs abroad were scored with the mezzotints produced by the reproductive printmakers that Joshua Reynolds (1723–92), the Academy's first President, was nurturing to disseminate his portraits.[7] There was no reason why watercolours should not reflect and embody this new international importance as much as oil.

This last assumption was, on the face of it, an illogical leap from the premisses. Until the 1780s there was little indication that watercolour might be a medium for the expression of the higher aspirations of art.

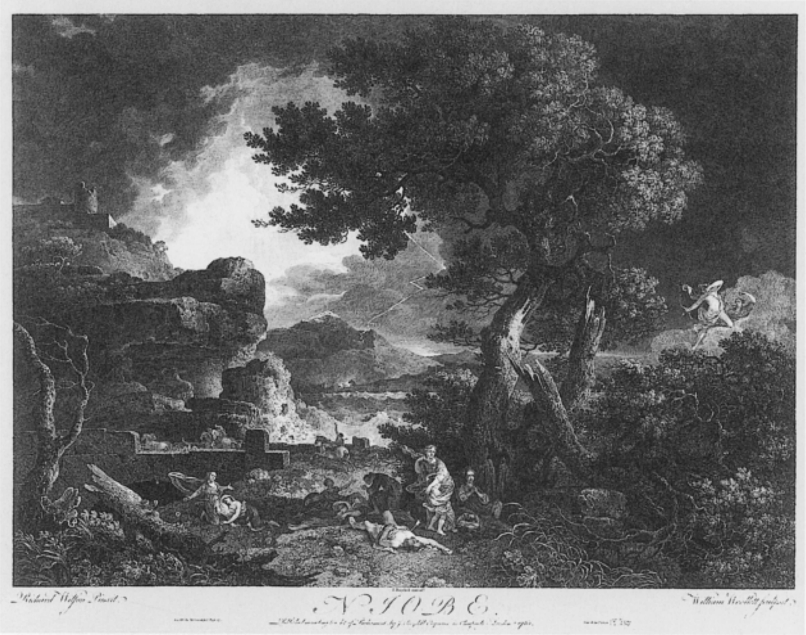

Richard Wilson Pinxit.
NIOBE.
William Woollett sculpsit.

Fig. 4 William Woollett after Richard Wilson, *Niobe*, 1761, etching and engraving, 47.5 x 60. British Museum, London

Indeed, it was by definition a lowly and inferior branch, devoted chiefly to landscape (itself inferior to historical painting and portraiture), and a lesser type of landscape at that – topographical view-making. Because the art establishment was locked into this system of hierarchies, there was plenty of scope for rivalry.

The very relegation of watercolour as a lesser art-form stimulated its practitioners to assert its potential. Those practitioners were a considerable body, with a well-established and much sought-after function in society. For the best part of a century they had supplied views of towns, of country seats, of antiquities to the nobility and gentry; they had accompanied the Grand Tourists on their journeys to Italy, and the archaeologists to Greece and Asia Minor and Sicily, with colours always ready on the spot to take an exact and scientific likeness of whatever objects of interest might appear. They had demonstrated the power of watercolour in worked-up views that might be hung like paintings on the wall. Ducros was by no means alone in doing so: Paul Sandby (1731–1809) had for much of his career specialised in large watercolours of just this type (pl. 24, 51), and had experimented with variations on the pure watercolour medium that gave his work a greater richness and intensity. While some artists, such as Ducros, preferred gum for this purpose, Sandby frequently adopted the thoroughly Continental medium of bodycolour – *gouache* as the French call it, from the Italian *aguazzo*, meaning mud. (In the early nineteenth century the word was sometimes expressively mistranscribed as 'gwash'). Instead of being mixed, as watercolour pigments are, with a transparent binding medium such as gum, and applied in thin washes that permit the tone of the support to contribute to their effect on the eye, the powdered pigments in bodycolour are combined with opaque matter, usually a fine clay or lead white, and applied thickly, so that the colour of the support cannot influence what the eye sees. When using pure watercolour the painter leaves the paper untouched (or 'reserved') as a way of introducing highlights, but bodycolour functions like oil paint: with it, the artist mixes increasing amounts of white into the pigment to achieve the lighter tones, with pure white for the highest lights.

Bodycolour pigments tend to be dense and saturated, more brilliant than watercolour. The medium had been used in Italy and France for two hundred years for painting fans and little fancy scenes, many of which were copied on a small scale from oil paintings. It had been put to serious purposes in the Renaissance when Albrecht Durer (1471–1528) executed a series of exquisitely observed landscapes and Nature studies in bodycolour, but by the eighteenth century it was a largely decorative medium, associated particularly with the French. Its use in England was typified by the *capriccios* of the Italian viewmaker Marco Ricci (1676–1729; fig. 5) and the meticulous, brightly coloured copies after Old Masters of the Flemish draughtsman Bernard Lens III (1681–1740). Two Huguenots, Louis (1700–1747) and Joseph Goupy (c. 1680–c. 1768), used it in similar ways; Louis practised as a fan-painter and it was he who taught the young James 'Athenian' Stuart (1713–88), later famous as one of the earliest Greek Revival architects and co-author of *The Antiquities of Athens*. Stuart's bodycolour views in Greece (pl. 59, 60), drawn according to the most strict topographical principles, 'preferring', as he said, 'Truth to every other consideration',[8] are therefore executed in what was by tradition an essentially frivolous medium, and one which was, and remained for many decades, rather un-British.

If Stuart had direct influence on any of the topographers it was on William Pars (1742–82), who learnt much from his work but did not imitate his use of bodycolour (pl. 58). Paul Sandby, on the other hand, employed it frequently The numerous *capriccios* that he painted in bodycolour, although often Italianate in general style, effectively Anglicise the convention passed down by Ricci; and the decorative quality of body-colour perfectly suits his topography, imbuing his sunny mornings with a light-hearted, Haydnesque cheerfulness that has come to epitomise a certain aspect of eighteenth-century life. Sandby's fresh insouciance often disguises the richness of these works, but despite appearances, there is in the topographical discipline considerable complexity both aesthetic and intellectual, complexity of structure and, correspondingly, of the economic and social perceptions conveyed. When the watercolourists asked for academic recognition, they were protesting against a serious undervaluing of their art.

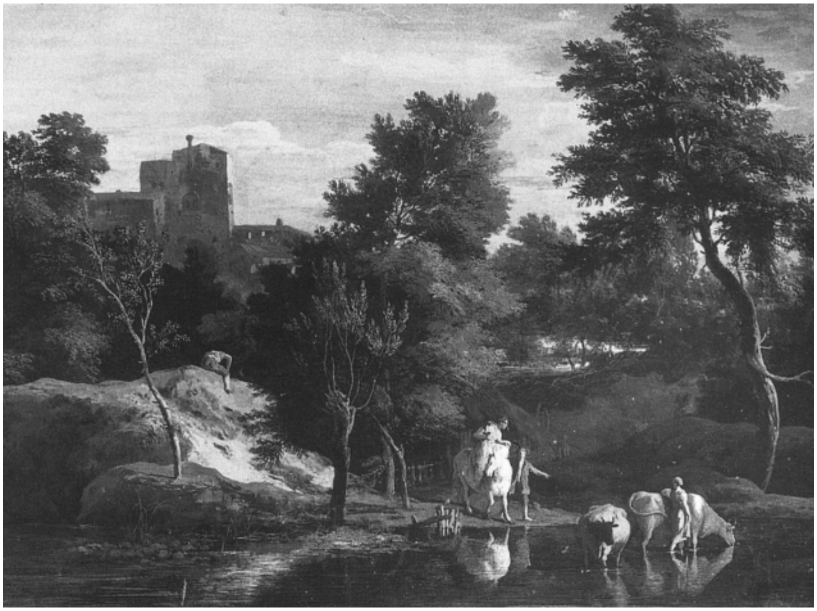


Fig. 5 Marco Ricci, *Capriccio Landscape*, c. 1710, bodycolour on leather, 29.5 x 44.6. Private Collection

The late arrival of an academy in Britain was symptomatic of a typically British attitude to oil painting: a pragmatic readiness to experiment and evolve techniques according to need. No formal painting courses were instituted in the Academy's Schools; students were expected to work out their own technical salvation. The expressive vitality and variety of British Romantic painting, in which every artist devised his own means of expression, is due to this approach, although the frequent technical disasters of the school must also, no doubt, be ascribed to it. A precisely similar psychology governed the evolution of watercolour. Once the patriotic motivation and the professional competition had been established by the successful inauguration of the Royal Academy, innate inventiveness took over. Between 1770 and 1800 a gamut of technical innovations had been tried, and the whole appearance of watercolours had been changed unrecognisably. This experimental drive had no parallel on the Continent, where watercolour was to change little until the 1820s or later.

Since the revolution in watercolour of the 1790s was so closely linked to contemporary oil practice, the connections between the two media need to be examined in more detail. The progenitor of the movement, if a single figure can be named, was John Robert Cozens (1752–97), who in the 1770s systematised a method of applying watercolour pigment, without the admixture of bodycolour or any other substance, that for the first time comprehensively answered the requirement of landscape painting that it should represent vast expanses of land and sky. If earlier artists had failed to achieve this, it was because public sensibility had not required it: the appreciation of landscape scenery as a moving experience in its own right was only beginning at that time to make headway against the conventional perception of it as the setting for objects and actions of essentially extrinsic interest. The achievement of Richard Wilson was to reinterpret the seventeenth-century Ideal landscape of Claude Lorrain (1600–82), with its beautifully disposed and balanced elements and subtly diffused light, in terms appropriate to the eighteenth century (fig. 6). In consequence, a poetic value had at last come to be placed on open space, distance and aerial perspective for their own sakes. Cozens found the visual equivalent of that value in the physical language of the watercolourist.

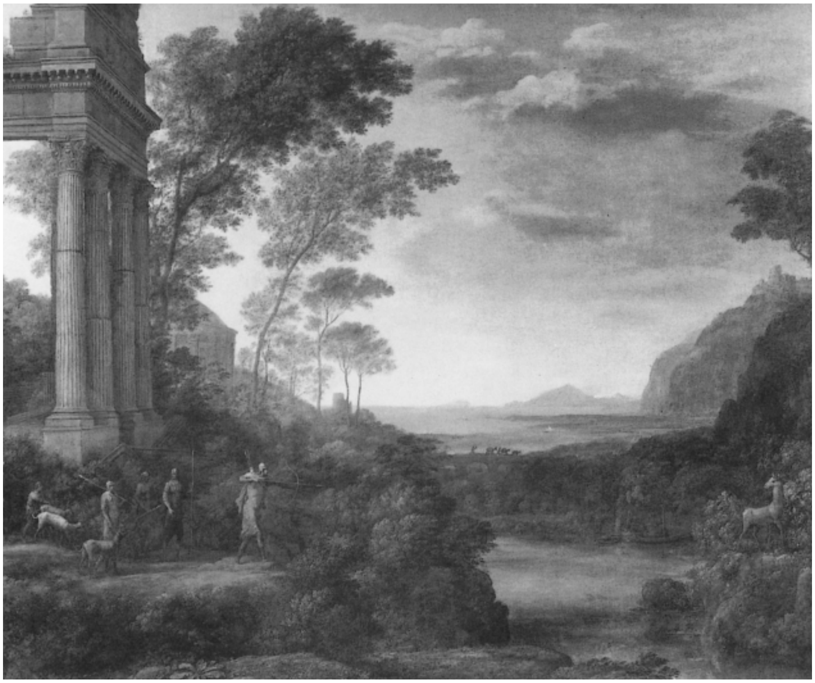


Fig. 6 Claude Lorrain, *Landscape with Ascanius Shooting the Stag of Silvia*, 1682, oil on canvas, 120 x 150. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

The main characteristic of John Robert's mature style largely derives from his training with his father, Alexander Cozens (c. 1717–86), which explains almost everything about him – his attitudes to composition, to texture and to colour are all present in some form in his father's work. It may be that his watercolour technique came to him by the same path, but that is less obvious, and there is something of mystery about the appearance of so masterly, powerful and poignant a means of expression at this moment in the history of landscape appreciation.

For John Robert was profoundly original. In his mature watercolours he propounded a view of Nature that was yet to be fully articulated in literature. The main direction of eighteenth-century writing on the natural world had been established as early as 1730 by James Thomson in his great sequence of poems, *The Seasons*, where for the first time a detailed, almost scientific description of natural phenomena was married to a dramatic exposition of the place of humanity in the scheme of things. But the intimate personal engagement of the Romantic poets was not to be articulated clearly until the 1790s, when William Wordsworth invoked

> this majestic imagery, the clouds,
> The ocean, and the firmament of heaven

as representative of the grandeur of creation, echoing the main themes of John Robert's work. But Wordsworth went on to draw broader moral conclusions:

> All things shall live in us, and we shall live
> In all things that surround us. This I deem
> Our tendency, and thus shall every day
> Enlarge our sphere of pleasure and of pain.
> For thus the senses and the intellect
> Shall each to each supply a mutual aid.. .[9]

A passionate involvement in Nature as the embodiment, symbol and determinant of human experience was to form the kernel of Wordsworth's attitude to life and art alike. Many other Romantics voiced similar ideas. In 1798 Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote to his brother: 'I love fields & woods & mountains with almost a visionary fondness'; like Wordsworth he saw this passion as central to his moral identity: 'because I have found benevolence & quietness growing within me as that fondness increased, therefore I should wish to be the means of implanting it in others – & to destroy the bad passions not by combating them, but by keeping them in inaction'.[10]

The close interconnection between the natural world and the moral well-being of the individual was a notion that had received its impetus from several sources. The Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau had identified the truly healthy human being as one free from the corruption of evolved modern civilisations, and set up as an ideal the 'natural' and 'innocent' state of primitive societies. In Britain, writers concerned with a range of different aspects of life and thought had defined increasingly precisely the conditions that determine aesthetic experience. In particular, they had related our perceptions of the external world to mental and emotional states: our appreciation of beauty can be traced to our reproductive urge, and hence 'beauty' is determined by those qualities that make a woman physically attractive to a man: softness, smoothness, gentleness, grace, delicacy, and so on. Our instinct for self-preservation, on the other hand, produces a *frisson* both disturbing and aesthetically exciting when we are confronted by danger. To contemplate the unknowably vast, the infinite, the empty, is to receive such a *frisson*, as is the experience of high waterfalls and cliffs, mountains, oceans and storms. These all threaten, or seem to threaten, our safety and can be classified as 'Sublime', either in themselves or in the effect they produce on our minds. Memory, likewise, gives a dimension to experience that renders particular places powerfully stimulating for their historical, literary or personal associations. In Germany, the most profound of the Romantic philosophers, Immanuel Kant, argued that in grasping such ideas as those presented by the Sublime, the human mind is capable of a transcendent effort 'which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature'.[11]

This sense of transcendental striving, of man in a vast and challenging universe, was fundamental to the thinking of the new age – the age that the French Revolution, beginning in 1789 and continuing into the wars of the 1790s and the conflict with Napoleon, was forcing into a new mould. The long ruminations of the Enlightenment were suddenly focused by that lens and burst into violent flame. Thomson's calm acceptance of a divine and immutable order was transmuted into a fierce sense of the value of the individual, however insignificant: landscape is the context of human life; its splendours are our splendours, our moral exemplars and encouragers. By the same token, it is the dwelling-place of humanity, and conditions our existence in all its aspects.

It so happened that the topographers had already given eloquent demonstration of at least some facets of this latter truth, although without any awareness of its Romantic implications. For them, Thomson's account of the place of man in his environment sufficed as a framework within which to describe the towns and countryside of Britain, a broad sunny realm in which everyone had his appointed place. Wordsworth restated that vision as a more thoughtful perception of 'The still, sad music of humanity',[12] – but, as Byron was to show in the succession of colourful and impassioned descriptions of Europe in his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18), the survey of countries in terms of their civilizations and populations could still be a powerful vehicle of polemic and poetry alike.[13] Topography remained relevant, and its enduring strength as a basis for serious thought is one important reason why watercolour, the topographical medium *par excellence*, retained its value into the nineteenth century. As Samuel Palmer (1805–81) put it in 1856: 'Landscape is of little value, but as it hints or expresses the haunts and doings of man. However gorgeous, it can be but Paradise without an Adam'.[14]

Against this rapidly changing intellectual background, landscape began to undergo a succession of substantial investigations at the hands of a sequence of major artists. As its spiritual and emotional value was reappraised, so it was reformulated aesthetically, and in the process theories of aesthetics, too, were modified. By the 1830s, a potent new visual language had been created, ranging in its scope from the spontaneous atmospherics of David Cox (1783–1859) to the lean linearism of Edward Lear (1812–88) and the almost art-nouveau distortions of Samuel Palmer at Shoreham.

Revolutionary though these artists were, all of them belonged quite consciously to the watercolour tradition that stretched back to John Robert Cozens. It was a tradition as much cultivated and promoted as that of the 'national school' of oil painters at the Academy. If the Academy held Hogarth and Reynolds to be its founding fathers, so the watercolour societies revered, on the one hand, the topography of Paul Sandby and, on the other, the Sublime of John Robert and his great successor, Thomas Girtin (1775–1802). Girtin's early experience included copying the outlines of Cozens's sketches at the evening sessions of Dr Thomas Monro's famous 'academy' at the Doctor's home in Adelphi Terrace, by the Thames. It was Girtin's colleague J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) who, according to Joseph Farington (1747–1821), 'washed in the effects',[15] but no doubt Girtin became well enough acquainted with Cozens's watercolour technique. His work evinces a thorough understanding of it. But temperamentally Girtin was not a fey, melancholic poet like Cozens. He was a modern, idealistic classicist, strongly sympathetic to the French Revolution and with a formalist streak that suggests that if he had ever found himself leading a revolutionary party he would have been the first to institute rigorous proceedings against faint-hearts and equivocators. There is no parallel to be drawn between a political and an aesthetic personality, of course; but Girtin's style of drawing and painting is a decidedly authoritarian neoclassicism. It abolishes the tender, feathery touches of Cozens's style and proceeds by firm, vigorous definitions, bold generalisations and a ruthless suppression of detail. His natural sympathies were surely with the academic establishment. There is something Reynoldsian about his masterly abstraction from the particular to the general. He modelled his style quite specifically on that most Reynoldsian of landscape painters, Richard Wilson, although Wilson never used watercolour. Girtin's clear intention was to reproduce in watercolour the full, solid tonality of Wilson's paintings, and at the same time to attain something of Wilson's high seriousness in the depiction of natural scenery (fig. 7).[16]

Yet the wish to emulate oil painting in its appearance and content did not extend to compromise with the medium itself: there was no question of Girtin's enlisting bodycolour to strengthen the effect of his watercolour. The rule applied to everyone. This was partly a consequence of the chauvinistic pride of the watercolourists. To be sure, Sandby, their doyen, had used bodycolour – indeed he continued to do so until his long career ended in 1809; but he generally distinguished carefully between works in that medium and works in watercolour: the two were not to be mixed. And then, again, Sandby was not a Romantic poet, but a more earthy and practical artist, seeking effects that were not incompatible with the lighter mood of bodycolour.

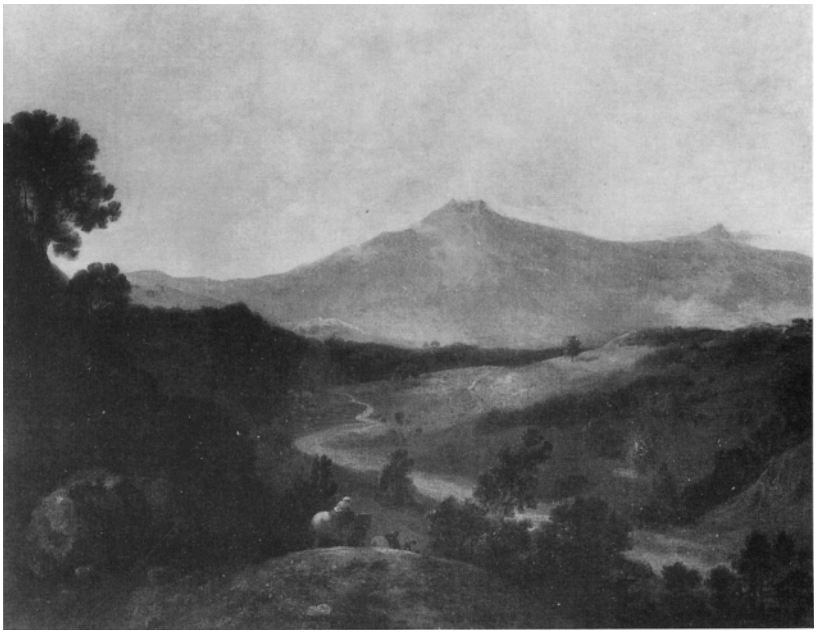


Fig. 7 Richard Wilson, *The Valley of the Mawddach, with Cader Idris Beyond*, early 1770s, oil on canvas, 92 x no.
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

J.M.W. Turner, a Beethoven to Sandby's Haydn, was equally convinced of the rigid distinction to be made between watercolour and bodycolour, though unlike Girtin he used both throughout his life. He too imitated

Wilson, and did so in both media: his finished watercolours of the late 1790s are highly Wilsonian, and so not far removed from Girtin's in mood and purpose. By that date he was also working regularly in oils, with a similar debt to the Welsh master. At this stage, however, he confined his use of bodycolour to experimental sketches.[17]

William Blake (1757–1827), whose concerns lay in very different fields from those of Girtin and Turner, illustrates the ferment of the time in quite another way. His subjects were rarely landscape, though like Coleridge he approached all experience with an intensity that found its natural expression in terms of the 'visionary'. More literally than Coleridge, he claimed to depend on visions for the imagery of the intricate mythological dramas that he recorded in both his paintings and his poetry. Equally visionary were the means he adopted to transcribe them. His dead brother Robert revealed to him in a dream the system of stereotype printing by which Blake produced his Prophetic Books; and some of his most ambitious works, the great colour-printed drawings that he was making about the same moment as Girtin and Turner were experimenting so fruitfully, use a related technique of printing and hand colouring that creates a richness of effect and density of tone precisely parallel to the performances of the landscapists (fig. 8).[18]

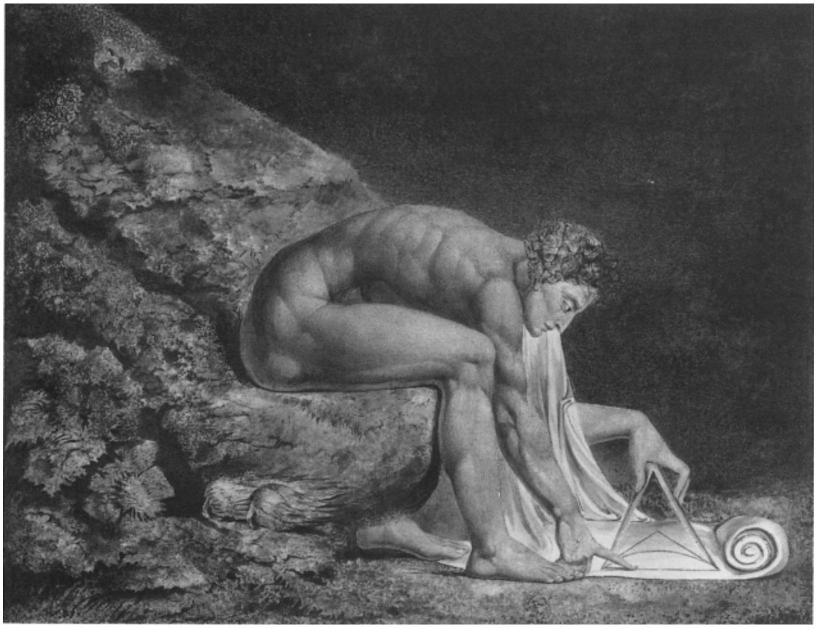


Fig. 8 William Blake, *Newton*, c. 1805 (first impression 1795), colour print finished in pen and watercolour, 46 x 60. Tate Gallery, London

Although his subject-matter was of the profoundest, and sometimes made use of fantastic and dreamlike landscapes, the bulk of Blake's later work, outside the Prophetic Books, is in pure watercolour – indeed, though entirely suited to his own needs, his methods were reactionary by 1810. Some other artists maintained the traditional techniques because their preoccupations did not require them to change. Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827), who would never have claimed the highest intellectual status for his popular comic drawings, found the old washes, supported by energetic pen outlines, congenial to his purposes throughout his life (pl. 69).[19]

Girtin retained one thing in common with the old guard: his methods were essentially simple, in conformity with the view of watercolour as a 'pure' medium, best tackled directly and rapidly. He applied his washes boldly, sometimes over a simple underpainting of gamboge or earth colour, the intention of which was not so much to differentiate tones as to unify the whole design – a significant change of function – and used little or no scratching and scraping away of the pigment layers. What Girtin achieved he achieved by the dexterous laying on of the wash, and by the grandeur of his initial conception. The finer points of description he left to calligraphic touches of brown colour applied with a fine brush, which he used to define details. His system was an eminently reproducible one, and was widely copied, adapted and reduced to simple formulas by the writers of watercolour manuals, which became the handbooks of a thousand amateurs. Turner, by contrast, evolved a technique unfathomable in its variety and complexity and subtle shades of expression; having been taught watercolour during the first decade of his career, he abandoned any attempt to do so, and moved further and further from the common practice, assuming more and more the role of miracle-worker, an inspiration rather than an example.[20]

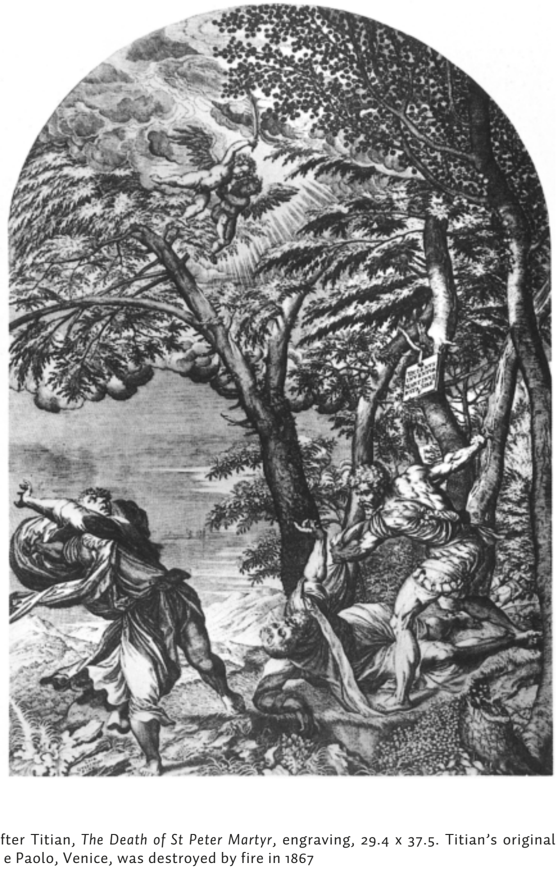


Fig. 9 Martino Rota (*fl*. 1558–86) after Titian, *The Death of St Peter Martyr*, engraving, 29.4 x 37.5. Titian's original altarpiece of 1528–30 for SS Giovanni e Paolo, Venice, was destroyed by fire in 1867

Turner was not the only artist of the period to whom virtuoso powers were attributed. Indeed, sheer brilliance of execution became a characteristic of much Romantic art – the idea is summed up in the 'demonic' reputation of Paganini as a violinist. The greatness of Richard Parkes Bonington (1802–28) can be seen as resting primarily on his consummate manipulation of his materials – a pure technical control that leads on to Aestheticism. Even more notable is the magical draughtsmanship of John Sell Cotman (1782–1842), whose abstract invention in pure line, supported by infinitely subtle arrangements of colour, sets him apart from all his contemporaries in his approach to the very nature of picture-making. Beside him, Turner's attitudes to composition were, quite deliberately, conventional. On the other hand, Turner in the end combined the virtuosities of all the virtuosos of his time in a single astonishing achievement.

If Turner was moved to imitate Wilson in his early years, he quickly found other models. As a painter in oils as well as watercolours, he was avidly concerned to bring into his stylistic net a range of masters whose work was worthy of emulation, even of straight imitation. Titian and Claude were among the earliest and most enduring of these influences, and when, after Girtin's untimely death in 1802, Turner became the prime inspiration of the Society of Painters in Water-Colours (OWCS) that was founded two years later, both Titian and Claude featured largely as stimuli to its members.[21] Claude's position as the inventor of Ideal landscape painting was well enough understood; the status accorded to Titian reveals more tellingly the role that the water-colourists had cast themselves in. He was, pre-eminently, the master who had demonstrated the symbiotic relationship of the genres of landscape and history – he had painted landscape which 'tho natural is heroick' as Turner put it, analysing Titian's *Death of St Peter Martyr* in Venice (fig. 9).[22] Turner spoke – or wrote – as an oil painter on this occasion; but his interest comprehended watercolour, and the early members of the OWCS devoted much energy to establishing the principle that a heroic landscape, that is, one containing large-scale and significant figures, might be expressed in their medium. Joshua Cristall (1768–1847) often made single figures or groups the whole subject of his pictures, and as often incorporated them in landscapes that are either arcadian or idyllic recastings of the contemporary countryside. A primary inspiration was Nicolas Poussin (1593/4–1655; fig. 10), but it has been pointed out that in painting his idealising subjects Cristall was responding to an entirely modern fashion. His stalwart peasants resemble the figures in contemporary neo-Greek illustrations by artists such as Samuel Buck and Thomas Hope (pl. 289); and the arrival in London in 1808 of the Elgin Marbles, which so inspired painters like Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786–1846) and David Wilkie (1785–1841), must have had a profound influence on Cristall as well.[23] Thomas Heaphy (1775–1835), on the other hand, saw himself as continuing the Northern tradition, painting large-scale figures in cottage interiors that have nothing of the idyllic about them, but concentrate on vividly realistic still-life detail, and a dramatic, sometimes comic presentation of the psychology of his characters that depends heavily on the work in oils of Wilkie (fig. 11). Wilkie's reinterpretation of the Dutch genre tradition, from his first appearance, in 1805, at an Academy exhibition, put realistic rustic genre on a new footing (fig. 12), and began a movement that was to lead directly to the triumph of realist genre at the mid-century. So the Continental tradition of painting in oils became a crucial source for the new watercolour school, sometimes (as it was for Turner himself) through the medium of contemporary oil practice.

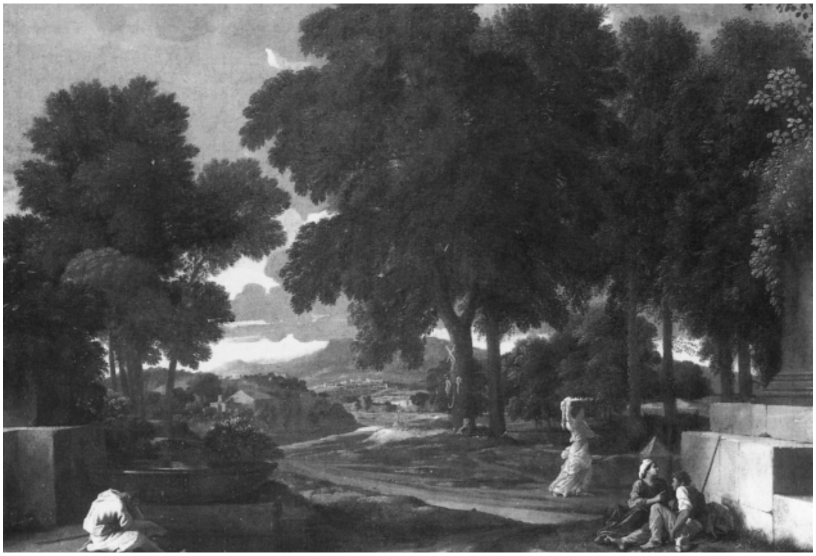
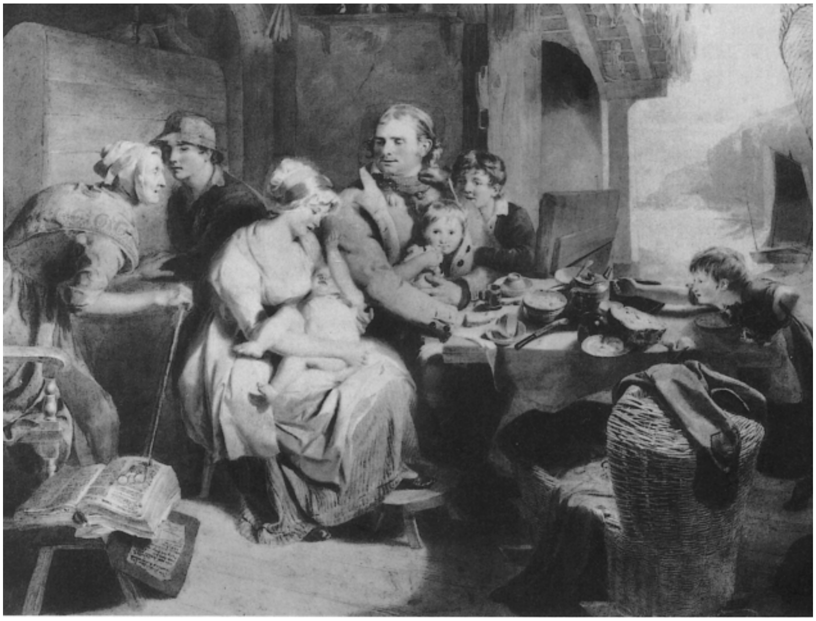


Fig. 10 Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with a Man Washing his Feet at a Fountain*, c. 1648, oil on canvas, 74.5 x 100.
National Gallery, London

The development distinguished the new generation of watercolourists sharply from those of the recent past who had been content to paint landscape views but to adventure no further. Now, watercolour had to be seen to be infinitely versatile, susceptible of no limitation either technical or conceptual. To Girtin's bold washes was added Turner's arsenal of effects, assiduously gleaned or guessed at by careful analysis of his exhibited works, since he divulged few clues even to his closest associates, and had a habit, even when he did vouchsafe a hint, of letting it out in a sort of code that was deliberately intended to be difficult for any but the genuinely gifted to understand.[24]

Fig. 11 Thomas Heaphy, *Fisherman's Cottage*, 1810, pencil and watercolour, 47 x 62.2.
Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne



Turner may have begun by subscribing to the generalised Sublime style perfected by Girtin, but his broad and inquisitive interest in everything natural and human rapidly forced him to diversify his methods and to invent ever more ingenious techniques. He took the manipulation of washes on wet paper to the point at which they became an incomprehensible jumble of marks, and used sponging, stopping-out, scratching-out and blotting-out with exquisite refinement and deftness. The hatching that he had adopted from John Robert Cozens, and which was a technique quite alien to Girtin's system, became a staple that enabled him to transfer the grandest ideas onto the smallest sheets of paper, a miniature technique that treated the details of Nature as if they were the details of an individual face, characterful, subtle, never to be fixed in permanence (pl. 89).

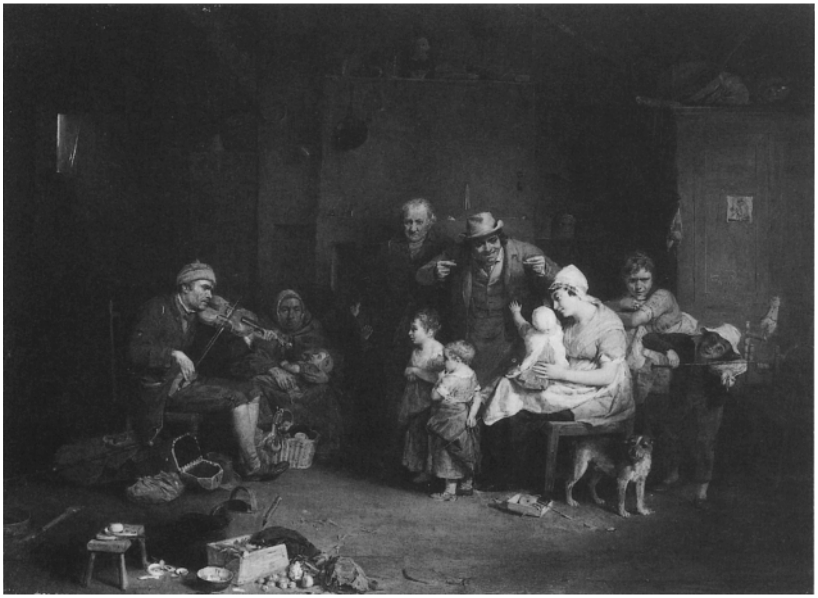


Fig. 12 David Wilkie, *The Blind Fiddler*, 1806, oil on canvas, 57.8 x 79.4. Tate Gallery, London

There was, then, a healthy opposition of approach and method between Turner and Girtin. Although so frequently thought of as 'twins' of the watercolour revolution, and although both were evangelists of the Sublime in landscape watercolour, they exemplified different principles, and exerted contrasting, and somewhat unexpected, influences. Through two of his most brilliantly inventive followers, David Cox and Peter De Wint (1784–1849), Girtin was the initiator of a development that led to a fullblown British impressionism in the 1840s and 1850s (pl. 234, 236). By contrast Turner, whose work as a watercolourist was known almost exclusively from his elaborate finished views – which contain important elements of the topographical tradition and, in particular, a strong emphasis on the role of the figure – became the progenitor (with John Ruskin as midwife) of High Victorian realist and Pre-Raphaelite landscape.

In practice, it is impossible to speak of either strand separately from the other. Much of what is thought of as a tight, hard Victorian realism is in fact often dedicated to the examination and reproduction of evanescent effects of atmosphere – of dappled sunlight, mist, cloud or spray. One of the most technically and visually adventurous of these 'Pre-Raphaelite' artists, Alfred William Hunt (1830–96), took Turner as his supreme model and could quite easily devote a whole drawing to the study of a nebulous mist or a twilit shadow. An even younger artist, Albert Goodwin (1845–1932), often focused on the smooth surface of a stretch of weedy river or a band of morning haze along the sea-shore (pl. 320). What would for Turner have been only a part of a larger design can become for Hunt or Goodwin the self-sufficient subject of an elaborately finished work, heavy with moral overtones. Goodwin, in his self-dramatising diaries, wrote of 'a morbid liking for clouds' which are 'of the nature of *stain* on the clear heavens', with the rider, 'How impossible to see good without its shadow – evil'.[25] The Victorian landscape was a parable in which the patterns of Nature expressed the forces of human life. It could even take the form of a reflection of the artist's moral being.

Conversely, the breezy effects of light and air that foreshadow a much more apparently 'modern' approach to landscape in the work of Cox or Constable spring directly from the long-established impulse to observe and record precisely what nature presents to the eye. In the context of the ever-expanding scope of watercolour in the period, the two apparently contradictory streams, Pre-Raphaelitism and Impressionism, so clearly separate in the history of oil painting, can be seen as facets of the same development, a manifestation of the inherent ambiguity of the medium.

British watercolour, then, has stimulated a network of interacting experiments, trials and explorations that were made possible by the very nature and status of the medium. Empiricism was an integral part of the British temperament, and watercolour was the ideal vehicle for recording its progressing experience. In spite of its proud independence from oil painting, watercolour was from first to last a close sibling, appearing to follow but often leading in matters of expressive range and innovatory technique. The watercolourists' wish for an established position in the London art world was in no way at odds with their real independence of thought and originality of spirit. Their sheer virtuosity in expanding the technical capacity of the medium is alone a fact of primary significance. On this level, the innovatory brilliance of John Robert Cozens, Cotman or Cox must be seen in an international perspective if it is to be fully understood. But what gives that virtuosity its true importance is its close alliance with a wide-ranging content that draws its strength both from the intellect and from the emotions.

Much of the aesthetic evolution that worked itself out in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is adumbrated in the work of the watercolourists. The heightened value attached to form and colour in twentieth-century aesthetics can be traced to their innovations. Few artists in Europe were as sophisticated as Cotman in the handling of pure form, or as expressive as the young Palmer in its manipulation for emotional purposes. Constable and Cox explored the physical qualities of air and sky with unprecedented insight. Turner married the poetic grandeur he had imbibed in the eighteenth century from J. R. Cozens with the minutest observation of a range of natural phenomena never before discussed in art. The Victorians developed all these ideas in a perception of landscape that was a yet further development, a blend of poetry and pragmatism, of pure aesthetics and careful science. It arose out of, and responded to, the first period in history when technology threatened the natural world with extinction. Nature was injected with a new poignancy, and emerged as a fresh and urgent metaphor for the lot of humanity.

The institutionalisation of watercolour in nineteenth-century London was a measure of its status and of its estimated contribution to the national culture. If its biossom was splendid, its roots ran deep. Most of the members of the watercolour societies were teachers, and for every artist who exhibited professionally with the societies, there were dozens who pursued humble careers as drawing-masters to the gentry. The amateurs that this great force instructed, either directly or through the medium of published manuals, were legion. They were by no means confined to young ladies and maiden aunts; the activity was a highly respectable one for everybody, and was growing in popularity for much of the early nineteenth century, as the complaint of Thomas Uwins (1782–1857) from Rome in 1830 makes clear: 'What a shoal of amateur artists we have got here! I am old enough to remember when Mr Swinburne and Sir George Beaumont were the only gentlemen who condescended to take a brush in hand, but now gentlemen painters rise up at every step and go nigh to push us from our stools.'[26]

The amateur provides, as Vaughan Williams has said in another context, the loam from which great art can grow,[27] and this was never more true than in the case of watercolour. The machinery by which talent emerged from this social and economic structure can be seen in the operation of the regional schools of watercolour. In Exeter, for instance, a group of artists received their training and their inspiration from the teaching of Francis Towne (1740–1816), whose style they all imitated. One of them, John White Abbott (1763–1851), became a considerable figure on his own account while never shaking off the characteristic mannerisms of Towne (pl. 133). In Norwich, first John Crome (1768–1821) and then Cotman, with contrasting approaches and methods, disseminated a technical and aesthetic sense that has had an enduring influence on the way we perceive the landscape of East Anglia. Two great ports, Bristol and Newcastle upon Tyne (pl. 71, 282), stimulated significant local schools, and from both centres emerged major as well as highly talented secondary figures. These observations can be made despite the fact that, inevitably, London, with its academies and its wider market attracted many of the more accomplished artists.

If watercolour in Britain has been immeasurably enriched by the armies of amateurs who have practised it, it has been bedevilled as an art-historical subject by so amorphous and intractable a context. The traditional practice of oil painters throughout Europe, working professionally on technically complex projects with studio assistants who were themselves professionals either actually or potentially, has had the effect of limiting the field of research to a relatively compact and definable, albeit often large, body of practitioners. Watercolour, taught throughout Britain by itinerant or local masters as the accomplishment of almost every member of the upper social classes above the age of fifteen, comprehends a vast mass of work that ranges from the abysmal to the inspired. The penumbra of each professional may consist of drawings by others virtually indistinguishable from his own, of drawings executed partly by him and partly by a pupil, and of independent work more or less recognisable as having been derived from his. The pressure on artists even of high calibre to produce run-of-the-mill examples, for copying purposes, or to augment an exiguous wage, was often great. The very nature of watercolour practice encouraged repetition. Turner, as is well known, operated a kind of production line, having many sheets going simultaneously, washed with preliminary colour grounds and hung up on lines to dry or part-dry, like laundry.[28] The steady application of layers of colour to a sheet of paper brought to the requisite degree of moistness or dryness meant that the process required delays, and it was more efficient to work on a group of sheets together than to finish each one individually. The effects of this method are quite evident in Turner's output, although he was able to maintain an astonishing degree of freshness and originality from one composition to the next. Other, lesser artists inevitably concealed the artifice with less skill, and even the best of them can be accused of over-production. The proliferation of minor examples, the application *ad nauseam* of compositional formulas, which were disseminated by means of potboiling manuals and eagerly adopted by the amateurs – all these factors have made it difficult for any but *aficionados* and specialist connoisseurs to find their way through the vast mass of material, to identify the significant threads and follow them through to some meaningful art-historical judgement. All this has only confirmed the view, assiduously propagated by the British themselves, that watercolour is of local and national interest only, hardly deserving of consideration in the wider international context. It may be added that the intrinsic charm of most watercolour, its cheerful palette and congenial subject-matter, while recommending it to collectors, has obscured the importance of its intellectual content and its aesthetic significance in the history of European art.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to the understanding of watercolour is the problem of condition. Any painting is subject to change, to chemical alteration, to damage and to inappropriate cleaning or restoration. Watercolour is vulnerable to all these things, but most of all to the effects of light on its pigments, which far more than oil paints are liable to complete chemical modification under the influence of ultra-violet rays. The indigo blue that is so vital a component of many landscapes has been particularly fugitive, and its loss has reduced most greens, as well as blues, to a dull brown or pink. Where other pigments have survived unchanged, their relationship to the tonal and chromatic scheme of the work as a whole has been hopelessly distorted. Crisply defined forms have become vague; subtleties of lighting are annihilated, sunshine and shadow alike turned to a feverish, or pallid, twilight. The great developments in watercolour manufacture that accompanied the expansion of the art in the early nineteenth century only contributed to the problem, for many of the new, experimental pigments were even more unstable than the traditional ones.

The difficulty was unimportant as long as watercolour drawings were kept in portfolios or albums, as many were in the eighteenth century; but it was in the very nature of the reformed watercolour painting of the early nineteenth century that it should be given more prominence: that was, after all, what the watercolourists themselves wanted. Watercolour paintings were to be framed and hung in a good light. Many collectors at that time were perfectly well aware of the dangers. Smaller works were often equipped with fine gilt frames fitted with green silk blinds, which were religiously drawn down when the watercolour was not being examined. But the larger pictures rarely had this benefit and few artists seem to have taken precautions to ensure that their owners were properly advised. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century John Ruskin, among others, was warning watercolour owners of the risks of exposure to light, and as late as the 1880s was having to argue his case against a determined opposition – there have always been those who refuse to believe, or to care, that watercolours can be destroyed by this form of neglect.[29] Yet it is almost impossible now to see the more important finished work of some leading figures of the school: for instance, the larger watercolours of John Glover (1767–1849), a prolific early member of the OWCS (pl. 211), hardly survive to be studied.

In Europe, British watercolour, like British painting in general, is known only by isolated examples, and those not necessarily of high quality or in good condition. In keeping with its popular character as an essentially intimate medium, watercolour still thrives in private collections, and that is a highly desirable state of affairs, though the proviso must be added that private collections are the least susceptible of the kinds of control needed to ensure the conservation of works in the best condition. The more important the work, the more vulnerable it is: it is required for display and decoration, and needs a ‘good light’; it is attractive to dealers and collectors alike. Watercolour, unlike oil painting, cannot be ‘retouched’ successfully. Like fading, overcleaning is permanent and disastrous.

These problems should not discourage collectors: it is possible to distinguish the fresh from the faded, and, with some practice, the pristine from the overcleaned. Watercolours can be kept in low light and still enjoyed. The old-fashioned system of blinds or easily removable covers is an excellent one; indeed it is ideal, for it combines the possibility of unlimited light on the work while it is being viewed, and total darkness at other times. But a due awareness of the dangers may help those who appreciate the watercolour as an art form to understand that, like all forms of art, it requires knowledgeable handling. It is as delicate, in its way, as porcelain; but its content is as robust as the greatest of Western painting. In this, as in so much else, it is characteristically ambiguous.

A.W.