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THE ENGLISH NOVELTY

"I saw a tall adolescent making watercolour studies after Flemish landscapes. Already in this genre, which was an English novelty at the time, he had an astonishing ability."

— Eugene Delacroix on Richard Parkes Bonington

LANDSCAPE PAINTING didn't originate in England. Its emergence there in the late 18th century came as a modest but momentous revival initiated by the Welsh painter Richard Wilson (1713-1782), who converted from portraiture to painting landscapes in the "classical" manner of Claude Lorrain following a sojourn in Rome in the 1750s. Wilson's example was reinforced by a burgeoning English interest in the sublime and the picturesque, which attracted both philosophers and poets. Related to this was an English appetite for "rural pleasures" exemplified in revolutionary landscape design: Shenstone, "Capability" Brown, and their like pointed their prospects, diversified their surfaces (using naturalistic bodies of water to reflect trees and sky), and entangled their walks in the great country properties of the realm.

In spite of these interests, in mid-18th century England portrait painting remained supreme. Landscape was scarcely mentioned in Horace Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting* (1762) or Joshua Reynolds *Discourses* (1769-90), yet by the turn of the 19th century landscape had all but displaced the portrait. This quiet revolution was effected through the efforts of topographical artists like Paul Sandby (1731-1809) and especially by Alexander Cozens (1717- 86) and his son John Robert (1752-97), both of whom painted Alpine and Italian subjects in watercolours for British patrons on the "Grand Tour". In their hands watercolour became an ideal medium for painting en plein air. It was light and portable; it wasn't messy; above all it added colour to drawing.

WATERCOLOUR is more than just a different kind of paint — it's a unique water-borne paint used in combination with a specific support, nearly always an appropriate paper. The paint itself is inherently transparent, consisting of finely-ground pigment, and because of this its whites and highlights tend to be "reserved" after the practise of wash drawing, presented by the paper itself rather than by additions of opaque white paint. In the mid-18th century, watercolours were essentially tinted drawings — in many cases barely tinted, because a wide range of finely-ground pigments weren't manufactured commercially until the introduction of cake watercolours by William Reeves in the late 1880s. However, by the early years of the 19th century, in the hands of masters like Thomas Girtin (1775-1802), J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851), John Sell Cotman (1782-1842), and Richard Parkes Bonington (1802-28) watercolour had become a medium of power and flexibility.

Drawing, usually in pencil or some similar graphic medium, has been traditionally the foundation of watercolour: lightness is all, for drawing leaves traces, sometimes subtle, which can be seen through the transparent washes. The great watercolour painters all mastered drawing in one way or another. One can scarcely tell where Girtin's pencil ends and his brush begins; Cotman's subtle shadows and divisions seem to detach from their subjects; Turner's drawing often floats above his washes.

Watercolour subjects ranged across the picturesque and the sublime in concert with contemporary poetry. In the late 18th century, abbeys and gothic ruins abound, as did "shooting torrents" and "black drizzling crags," but these were tempered by more homely subjects, as in Cowper's:

"Here Ouse, slow winding through a level plain
Of spacious meads with cattle sprinkled o'er,
Conducts the eye along its sinuous course
Delighted."

DURING THE GOLDEN AGE of British landscape painting, her artists were shut off from Europe by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars (Turner made a famous trip the French Alps during a brief peace in 1802). As a result, the British landscape school — and watercolour in particular — developed along independent lines, which explains Delacroix's enthusiasm for this "English novelty" which struck him so forcefully when he encountered Bonington in the 1820s.

Despite Delacroix and even Cézanne, watercolour never took hold on the continent. The great British influence on French art came, instead, from Constable's oils, which inspired the Barbizons and through them the Impressionists. Ironically, England was slow to accept Constable during his lifetime, and acceptance was impeded even after his death by Ruskin's disdain.

Painting in watercolour continued to develop in England throughout the 19th Century, but too often painters sought to demonstrate that watercolour was as "worthy" a medium as oil, finding proof in emulation. Their efforts were exemplified by large "exhibition watercolours" painted meticulously in the studio, often imitating the effects of oil paint. Impressive though they were, these productions were a symptom of decline. After about 1830 the great age of watercolour had passed. Girtin had died in 1802, Bonington in 1828; Samuel Palmer's vision had subsided; Turner had succumbed to the vapours; and, overwhelmed by Turner's fame, Cotman had taken to imitating the effects of oils. The next great revival of landscape painting belonged to France.

To be sure, the British watercolour tradition didn't die out altogether. It was carried on by artists as substantial as Peter deWint and David Cox. Like a hidden stream it nourished artists throughout the English-speaking world well into the 20th century. It was brought to English Canada in the 19th century by successive waves of British immigrants, and in the 20th to the Canadian West by numerous artists, among them Inglis Sheldon-Williams, A. C. Leighton and Walter J. Phillips.

ARTISTS

ALEXANDER COZENS, b. 1717, d. Apr. 23, 1786, was one of the earliest masters of landscape in watercolor. He often used abstraction as a starting point for his compositions. His technique was to cover the paper with what he called "blots," arbitrarily placed landscape elements, and to develop an imaginary landscape from them, usually in monochrome. Cozen's unique methods may be what make his work so powerful, if somewhat coarse. His influence on his son, John Robert, was particularly strong. The elder Cozens also published numerous treatises on drawing techniques.

The Cloud is an early cloud study. The British watercolourists were among the first artists to recognize that naturalistic representations of clouds powerfully affected landscape expression as well as assisting in the overall unity of light and colour. Cozens cloud studies were admired by John Constable.

JOHN ROBERT COZENS, b. 1752, d. December 1797, continued his father's work in imaginative landscape compositions; his most important contribution was to demonstrate that watercolor landscapes can convey far more than mere topography. His brooding, almost menacing drawings of mountains, clouds, and atmospheric effects, such as alpine storms and mists foreshadow the work of J. M. W. Turner, John Constable, and Thomas Girtin. Constable observed that "Cozens was all poetry." The younger Cozens brought to watercolour landscape an air of sublimity and an emotional content that, through its influence on other artists, made it a major development in English painting. In his own painting of a cloud, the sense of a tinted ink wash drawing has given way to a subtle sensation of atmosphere evoked by light and colour.

THOMAS GIRTIN, b. Feb. 18, 1775, d. Nov. 9, 1802, together with his friend J. M. W. Turner, revolutionized watercolour painting and introduced the romantic style in English landscape painting. (Like Keats and Shelley, he died young.) Colour in broad transparent washes together with precise, exquisite drawing (one can scarcely tell where drawing in pencil ends and drawing with the brush begins) make Girtin one of the great masters of watercolour painting. This painting is roughly contemporaneous with Wordsworth's Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, capturing something of the same mood in a different medium.

JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER, b. London 1775, d. 1851, was the foremost English romantic painter and the most famous English landscape artist of his time. A prodigy, at the age of 14 he was a student at the Royal Academy of Arts and two years later exhibited at the Royal Academy for the first time. By 1799 the sale of his work had freed him from drudgery and he devoted himself to the visionary interpretations of landscape for which he became famous. In 1802 (during a brief negotiated peace with Napoleon) he made a trip to the Continent where he embraced alpine scenery. From then on he traveled constantly in England or abroad, making innumerable direct sketches from which he drew material for his studio paintings in oil and watercolor.

Turner made much of sublime and picturesque landscape. His art was prolific and varied; he worked in oils as well as watercolours, absorbing influences from Claude as well as the Dutch and experimenting with a variety of manners. His reputation in England — enthusiastically promoted by the critic, John Ruskin — remains exalted to this day. Yet — to my eyes, at least — his art is difficult to wholeheartedly admire. His colour can be crusty and dull or pallid and thin, his pictures sometimes undermined by drawing which seems improvident or curiously detached. Dulais Mill reveals his early mastery of watercolour, somewhat in a picturesque “Dutch” manner. Quite likely it was done up in the studio from sketches made on the spot.

JOHN SELL COTMAN b. 1782, d. 1842 is, in my estimation, the supreme watercolour painter of his generation. Although his career was not cut short like so many of the famous Romantics — Keats, Girtin, Schubert — it was curiously aborted; his best work was done in the first decade of the century when, under the influence of Girtin, he produced a remarkable series of watercolours characterized by firm drawing, delicate washes, and an uncanny sense of design. Atmosphere doesn't play a strong role in Cotman's work; light does. Cotman had a unique ability to give masses and shadows a kind of equivalence in the design which in some respects prefigures Cubism, a full century in the future. In his latter years, Cotman was troubled by fits of depression and this, combined with relative isolation in Norfolk (he was one of the founders of the “Norwich School”) led him away from his genius to pursue the influence of Turner and what Ruskin came to call “The Turnerian sublime.”

RICHARD PARKES BONINGTON, (1802-1828) was born a generation later than Girtin but, like Girtin, died young. Bonington's family moved to France in 1816 and his mature work was done largely on the Continent. He and John Constable were instrumental in bringing the English vision to France after the wars with Napoleon (he inspired Delacroix). Bonington was a remarkable artist combining Girtin's precise drawing and firm design with sparkling colour washes, setting a professional standard to which watercolour aspired for over a century thereafter.