

# Turner - Seminar 2

## *Background Notes*

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**WAHG**

**Turner: Lecture Notes N°2**  
***The Turner Bequest***  
**&**  
***Liber Studiorum (1806-1819)***

In 1856, nearly five years after Turner's death, his estate was settled by a decree. The works found in his studio that were considered to be by his own hand were accepted by the nation as the '**Turner Bequest**'. This comprised nearly 300 oil paintings and around 30,000 sketches and watercolours including 300 sketchbooks. It included the watercolours for Turner's great enterprise the ***Liber Studiorum***. Amongst the works there were a small number of collaborations and works since identified as by other artists.

In the nineteenth century the demand for prints was great. The number of people who could see art at the annual Royal Academy exhibition or at the very limited number of galleries in London and Edinburgh and elsewhere was few. Prints were the method of disseminating to fellow artist and to the general public the fruits of the artists' work; a tradition that developed in the Renaissance. In England there were expert engravers. Turner fully understood their methods of working and techniques and closely supervised them (to their annoyance) when undertaking the conversion of his watercolours into prints

***Liber Studiorum*** consists of drawings with his etchings and the mezzotints both engraved by Turner himself and by Charles Turner, (no relation) and other engravers. Prints in the first state were issued when finally approved by JMW Turner himself.

Turner, spurred on by an artist friend, Mr W.F. Wells of Knockholt, to emulate Claude's *Liber Veritatis*, began his sketches for the *Liber Studiorum* in 1806 and the publication of the plates went on irregularly from 1807 to 1809.

The *Liber Studiorum* coincides with the works of his early middle period, when he was pitting himself against Claude, Poussin and the Dutch painters. The years after 1805 mark a shift in Turner's development towards a more determinedly didactic tendency. Turner's intention was that the *Liber Studiorum* should be a series, not of sketches, but of fully-finished pictures; and that these pictures were to illustrate his whole range of powers, and to embrace every sort of subject of which he considered himself master. Designed therefore with this distinct aim, the ground work of nearly every plate (and in several cases the whole plate) the work of his own hand, and each after-stage entrusted to the best engravers of his day, over whom he kept the strictest supervision. Thus the idea was to publish a part-work containing a series of etchings which would demonstrate the range of Turner's abilities in landscape. The subjects of the *Liber Studiorum*, a hundred in number, were partly invented or composed by Turner expressly for the work, partly taken direct from nature, and partly adopted from pictures or drawings which he had already painted.

The prints were classified somewhat quaintly, but in a manner characteristic both of Turner and of the time under six headings, each indicated on the print by its initial letter. Each plate was given a letter code, distinguishing it as under::

A: Architectural, P: Pastoral, M: Marine, H: Historical, MS: Mountainous, and EP: not explained, but probably Elevated or Epic Pastoral.

Fourteen parts, comprising seventy-one plates in total, were issued between 1807 and 1819. (A further twenty plates were engraved but not published.)

The *Liber Studiorum* is best considered as a landscape treatise, even though it contains no letterpress. Although its most immediate function was to disseminate Turner's powers to a wider public, its systematic treatment of landscape as a genre with an extensive range had the additional purpose of underscoring the importance of landscape for *modern art*. Conventionally, academic theory had reserved the highest praise for history painting, which were images derived from classical history and mythology, national history or the Bible. Landscape, casually understood as merely the record of a given spot, seemed to offer little potential for the creative imagination in its execution, nor for the arousal of profound emotions in its spectators. As we have seen, Turner's artistic practice had already begun to challenge such assumptions, repositioning landscape as fully capable of competing with history painting. Now, in the *Liber Studiorum*, he could demonstrate how his expansive understanding of landscape incorporated much that history painting had considered its unique preserve.

The *Liber Studiorum* coincides with the works of his early middle period, when he was pitting himself against Claude, Poussin and the Dutch painters. They succeed in contributing to the study of subject-matter, line, composition, atmosphere and tone. Each part consisted of five plates, printed in brown ink and sewn in a paper wrapper. Each plate carried an etched outline, usually etched by Turner himself, with light and shade expressed by mezzotint engraving. The mezzotint was usually added by an engraver under Turner's supervision, but in a few cases it was done by Turner

himself. The five prints in each volume were stitched together in grey-blue paper covers.

The drawings for the work were made in sepia, the vehicle of the Claude's *Liber Veritatis* and therefore of its rival, and they were mostly of the size which had been chosen for the Prints. Their tone varies considerably. Most are of the natural cool and pleasant brown of sepia; but in some bistre has been admixed, giving a more sombre hue and others are red or *foxy* from the addition of umber. The prints were produced by etching, aquatint and mezzotint on paper

Fifty one of the drawings are in the print room Tate Britain. Those of you who are going on the 6<sup>th</sup> October will have the opportunity to view examples

The *Liber Studiorum* is a monumental work, taking rank with the highest productions of Turner's genius, and exhibiting intimately his strength, during a period of his life in which a large part of his strongest and soberest, though not his most imaginative, work was done.

### ***Other Works***

In 1799 Turner obtained the prestigious commission from Oxford University Press to provide ten watercolours for engraving as the headpiece of the annual Oxford Almanack which were published between 1799 and 1811. But an important part of his work was to meet the demand of the increasing numbers of tourists by producing a series of prints based on his watercolours that depicted geographical series such as: *The Southern Coast, Rivers of England, Ports of England, Picturesque views of England and Wales, Picturesque tour of Italy*, etc.