

# Turner - Seminar 3

## *Background Notes*

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**WAHG**

## Turner: Lecture Notes N°3

### An overview of his Watercolours

Turner's lifetime spans the classic age of English watercolour painting, and yet he hardly belongs to it. Two of his closest friends, W. F. Wells and James Holworthy, were founder-members of the 'Old' Water-Colour Society (1804), but Turner never exhibited with it, or with any of the other societies nor did he give his time to promoting the medium.

At the Royal Academy, where in the 1790s he had founded his fortune with topographical watercolours, from 1803 he showed only a handful, and, after 1830, none at all. After 1800 and until 1840 the public aspect of Turner's watercolours was chiefly a functional one: they served as models for engravers. For the rest, he used watercolour as he used oil to explore the visible world and, no less intensively the potential of paint. His success in producing watercolours of beauty was based not only on his acute observation of nature but also on his understanding of the properties and techniques of watercolouring. Furthermore Turner experimented with new coloured pigments and paint formulations throughout his life while maintaining an interest in chemistry and scientific theories of his day relating to painting. He was a member of the Atheneum and he must have been on nodding terms with all the great inventors of the day there. He knew Michael Faraday, with whom he discussed the nature of pigments and the light effects in the sky — one of the artist's obsessions.

*Watercolouring techniques*

Watercolour paint is made by mixing pigments with a binder, usually gum Arabic and then applying it with water to a support such as vellum (fine animal skin) or paper. The water evaporates and the

binder fixes the pigment to the support. There are different techniques in doing this and they produce different results. Basically these are based on varying the amount of its constituents – pigments, binder and water and/or adding additives. The amount of gum used to bind the pigment and the amount of water used to spread the paint mixture onto the support affect the appearance of the finished work. For example the finished effect of using a lot of pure pigment bound with only a little gum and applied with little water produces dense and bright colouring. In the 17<sup>th</sup>C, miniaturists toned down pigments by adding white, thereby creating more natural, opaque tones.

The basis of the British school of watercolour which developed from the 1750s and used by Turner was to use a small amount of pigment mixed with a lot of gum and applied with a lot of water. The result is that the pigment is less dense and so the paint becomes transparent. This allows the painting support, such as white paper, to shine through the paint.

The addition of chalk and/or zinc oxide to a watercolour pigment and thereby thickening it produces more opaque and chalkier colours. The term used for this process is termed *Gouage*. Turner often used that chalkiness to good effect to highlight particular areas or individual aspects within the painting.

The type of support that is the paper used is important not only for the ultimate result but also for its influence upon the working methods of the painter. Virtual all the paper Turner used was made from reconstituted cloth rags because it was strong and could be wetted without fear of buckling or ripping. Turner often scraped away the surface to reveal the underlying white surface. This is not normally possible without damage if wood pulp papers are used.

Turner began a great many of his watercolours by dampening their paper supports with a wide brush or sponge, or even by

plunging the entire sheets of paper into water and then brushing on the pigment while those supports remained wet. This would produce broad diffusions of colour. Such a spread of pigments can be seen especially clearly in the *Falls of the Rhine at Schaffhausen* where a soft yellow and a subtle red have been diffused right across the image. When this area had fully dried, Turner usually then drew over it in pen and ink as well as with chalks to define outlines. Turner's early watercolours such as '*Radley Hall: South Front and East Side*' of 1789 have careful pencil outlines, filled in neatly with graduated washes of watercolour on white paper, while architectural details were ruled in pencil or ink. In later years he sometimes dispensed with drawing outlines.

Turner for his landscape paintings, where mists and spray were involved prepared the paper with a wash of grey before applying other colours. He then rubbed and scraped into the surface to achieve the effects of spray and moisture laden air. This is how he achieved it in the *Falls of the Rhine at Schaffhausen* 1841.

Turner frequently augmented the conventional means of producing lights by scratching out darker colours with a sharp point, his thumbnail, or the end of the brush, or stippled over them with a hard, dry brush and/or removed colour with blotting paper or rubbing out areas of watercolour wash with stale bread. *Upper falls of the Reichenbach* 1802 and *Loch Coruisk, Skye* 1831 are examples of the use of scratching out by Turner.

By late 1830's light and colour and the transitory effects of weather were Turner's prime concern. This is demonstrated by the painting *On Lake Lucerne looking towards Fluelen* 1840.

*Turner used watercolours mainly as:*

1. Topographical images
2. Sketches for engravers



3. Sketches for his memory bank for future reference
4. Sketches as preliminaries to oil paintings
5. Sample studies
6. Paintings in their own right to vie with oil paintings
7. Paintings painted for enjoyment or illustrating *The Farnley Book of Birds*

One of the watercolours that he painted one morning in 1791 for the enjoyment of the young son of his friend and a patron, Walter Faulkes was *A First-Rater taking in Stores*. Walter later wrote a description of Turner's method of painting

*'Turner began by pouring wet paint on to the paper till it was saturated, he tore, he scratched he scabbled it in a kind of frenzy and the whole thing was chaos but gradually as if by magic the lovely ship with all its exquisite minutia came into being and by luncheon time the drawing was taken down in triumph.'*

Some critics consider that in some instances Turner displayed a lack of empathy in his representations of people and animals. Thus it is all the more dramatic when he concentrates upon the impact of a living creature's condition and agitation. In *Dawn after the wreck Circa 1841* the whole of the emotional impact of the painting as well as its subject is focussed upon the silhouette of the howling and shivering dog.

Turner's fascination with Switzerland's landscape in the last decade of his career manifested itself almost exclusively in watercolours: studies briefly noted on the spot and worked up in colour afterwards. They were transformed, under the stimulus of consciously sought commissions, into a sequence of transcendental visions of mountains and lakes defined by the sweeping, swirling spaces between them. Whereas his 1840 Venice trip resulted in a

number of *oil paintings* celebrating Venice, he chose in 1841 to honour the inspiration of Switzerland with a set of *finished watercolours*. Among the ten he painted, seven were views on Lake Lucerne, and of these three took as their subject the Rigi, which Turner could study at leisure from the window of his hotel Le Cygne, on the opposite shore of the lake. Like the Blue Rigi this watercolour celebrates a mountain that seems to have meant much to Turner and at the same time pays homage to Switzerland as a land both of Sublime grandeur and of transcendental peace. These works convey the feeling that Turner is drawing a line under his lifetime of Continental journeys and thankfully registering his contentment with the wonders of the natural world. On his return to London Turner presented his dealer, Thomas Griffith, with a new format for marketing his art, providing him with fifteen small sketches from which his patrons could make selections to be worked up into finished watercolours, together with four such completed 'specimens' to demonstrate the result. The four included two contrasting views of the Rigi, one now known as *The Blue Rigi*, in which the looming mass is shadowed by the radiant dawn light emanating from behind it, and this work, *The Red Rigi*, in which the mountain's heights glow ethereally pink with the last rays of the setting sun. In both, Turner explored the reflections and refractions in the foreground water and the activity on the lake's surface, probably viewed from his hotel window. *The Red Rigi* was purchased by his Scottish friend and patron H.A.J. Munro of Novar, who acquired half the resulting ten watercolours, commissioning another dawn view, known as *The Dark Rigi*. Turner's great advocate John Ruskin first saw *The Red Rigi* displayed at Griffith's salesroom and recalled '*such a piece of colour as had never come my way before*': *within a few years his father had acquired it from Munro*. In 1851 Ruskin senior wrote to

his son in Venice informing him of Turner's death, saying that *The Red Rigi 'fed and soothed me like a Dead March all this evening*

Not content with the ten watercolours that he had asked his agent Thomas Griffith to commission from his clients in 1842 Turner presented Griffith with a second set of Switzerland in 1843. These included watercolours *The Pass of Fido* and *Goldau*. Ruskin's comments on the former are illuminating: "*There is nothing in this scene, taken by itself particularly interesting or impressive. The mountains are not elevated or particularly fine in form ...But, in reality, the place is approached through one of the narrowest and most sublime ravines in the Alps, and after the traveller. ..has been familiarized with the aspect of the highest peaks of the Mont St Gothard. Hence it speaks quite another language to him from that in which it would address itself to an unprepared spectator ...the aim of the great inventive landscape painter must be to give the far higher and deeper truth of mental vision, rather than that of the physical facts. ...*"

Ruskin purchased *Goldau* which depicts an astonishingly operatic scene. He called it '*on the whole the mightiest drawing of his final time*' and described it as follows: "*Lake of Zug in the distance, seen like a lake of lava under the fiery sunset. Under the dark masses of rock in the foreground lies buried the ancient village of Goldau. The spire of the village of Arth ...is seen here as a point of fire at the edge of the distant lake*"

These paintings reveal the significance of Turner's works for he demonstrated therein that the expressive power of *watercolour painting* could be as great as oil painting and thus should be considered its equal as a serious art medium; John R Cozens *watercolour* revolution initiated seventy years before was now realized.





*The Red Rigi: Lake of Lucerne, Sunset 1842*





*The Pass of Faido*, watercolour, 1843



*Goldau*, watercolour, 1843