

## **The Golden Age of British Watercolor in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

### **By Dr. Patricia Crown**

One of the most striking accomplishments of British art was the development of watercolor painting beginning in the second half of the 18th century. Britain produced works of truly remarkable quantity, quality and variety throughout the 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some of the best painting in Europe was done in this medium during this period. English watercolors had an international reputation: French painters like Delacroix, for instance, were admiring imitators of British watercolor subjects and techniques. The unique sparkle, brilliance, and vivacity of surface that could be achieved by transparent wash or combinations using transparent techniques opened up possibilities of a very different sort than that which had been explored in oil painting.

The watercolor medium had practical roots; it was portable and quick drying. Pen-and-wash drawings of specific places, buildings, landscape features and fortifications were commissioned by the military; studies of topography, flora, fauna, and exotic peoples were useful records of voyages of exploration and served commercial and scientific interests. As the practice of traveling for pleasure –tourism–developed in the 18th century, tourists made or bought watercolor drawings of places that they had been or wanted to go . The small scale, often quickly executed images, functioned then as postcards or photographs do for travelers today.

Watercolor painting became virtually synonymous with landscape painting in the late 18th and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It became evident that watercolor was suited to capture the mutability of English weather, its fleeting and shifting atmospheric effects, subtle transitions of light and half-light, and the opalescence of water, clouds and mists. Because of its fundamental liquidity, watercolor was regarded as an unruly medium requiring special skills and concentration. For some the recurring adventure of watercolor painting became part of its allure, others sought to subdue and control it.

In 1804 the formation of The Society of Painters in Water-Colours (later known as the Old Water Colour Society) brought into existence the first professional artists' group since the creation of the Royal Academy in 1768. The Society was the first to define itself by medium. Watercolor artists separated themselves from the Royal Academy because the Academy regarded watercolor to be of secondary status in comparison with oil painting. In 1831 The Institute of Painters in Water Colours (The New Water Colour Society) was established because the Old Water Colour Society was regarded as too exclusive: for instance "amateurs" (a term very tricky to define then as now) were not allowed membership for fear the professional status of the group might be compromised.

Amateur sketching societies had been formed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. J.M.W. Turner, Thomas Girtin and Thomas Varley are some distinguished painters who at one time or another were part of such societies. The popularity of drawing in

watercolor was enhanced by its being regarded as a polite social accomplishment for women of the aristocracy and the upper middle classes. Queen Victoria, for instance, took drawing lessons from Edward Lear (the author of "The Owl and the Pussy Cat" was also an accomplished landscape painter in watercolor) and she appointed an official "Painter in Watercolour" to teach her children. In 1863 she decreed that the New Water Colour Society be known as the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours, and in 1863 that the Old Water Colour Society be officially known as the Royal Society of Painters in Water Colours.

There were several regional schools and societies; the Norwich Society of Artists, established in 1803, being the most prominent and John Sell Cotman's works being the best known. In contrast to the blurred outlines and misty effects characteristic of most landscape painting he created a system of tonal contrasts, transparent flat washes tending toward abstract simplification with precise outlines accented with pencil or thin bands of white unpainted paper.

Later 19<sup>th</sup> century watercolor painting continued and elaborated the achievements of the landscape painters. In addition more and different subject matter proliferated. Detailed and exact studies of plants, birds, and rocks showed that watercolorists could paint with almost photographic precision. Pictures of village gardens or city streets populated with lively figures were much admired. Painters such as William Henry Hunt made use of stippling, white highlights and opaque body-color, producing works that displayed the depth and finish of traditional oil painting. Watercolors came to be associated with a kind of art that was aesthetically and financially accessible to middle class collectors.

Literary illustration had long been one of the specialties of British art. William Blake's watercolor illustrations to his own poems were highly original. We now take for granted artistic imaginative freedom; however it was a revolutionary notion at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Using watercolor Blake, like other poet-painters after him, gave free rein to his imagination, distorting anatomy, space and color in creative ways. He was inspired by the pre-renaissance art of gothic manuscript illustrations which had been executed in transparent and opaque watercolor. This medieval source also influenced poet-painters such as Dante, Gabriel Rossette and William Morris to illustrate their own works, many of which had medieval subjects.

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century watercolor was integrated into general artistic production, rather than being relegated to a special and separate practice. In some cases it became associated with the avant garde of European art: for instance in the 1880's James McNeill Whistler exhibited a group of almost abstract landscape watercolors which owed something to Whistler's knowledge of Japanese art and of the work of the French impressionists. Whistler is a figure who marks the close relationship between British and American watercolor art, and its development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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