

History of Modern Watercolor

An on-line presentation to Fabriano in Watercolor 2020

The Ancient History of Watermedia

People have used watermedia since the beginning of time. In ancient history, man created paintings on the walls of caves using watermedia. With recent discoveries, we have learned that this had been going on for hundreds of thousands of years earlier than we thought around the world.

Approximately 3000 years ago, the Chinese started using water-based inks to draw and paint on rice paper and mulberry paper. This approach became very refined and stylized over time and is still practiced in that manner.

In the middle ages, monks used watermedia paints to illuminate pages of the Bible and other religious documents on sheets of parchment.

During the early Renaissance, about 1492, Durer used watercolor both as studies for oil paintings, for paintings in Plein Air, and for creating finished paintings.

Albrecht Durer



With all this activity, the development of what we know as modern watercolor - using ground pigments in water enhanced with Ovgall or honey to paint on a paper substrate - started in England in the mid-18th century.

1750 – 1836 The Beginnings of Modern Watercolor

During this period watercolor began to be used across England by four groups of people: 1. The Royals were almost always taught to draw and paint. Watercolor became their primary resource. 2. Wealthy ladies were forced to stay in their country estates where they had the choice of making lace, knitting, needlework, or watercolor. There were itinerate instructors who traveled from estate to estate teaching the ladies of the house how to paint. 3. Surveyors and engineers might learn to watercolor to record the land they were asked to survey. 4. Military officers were taught to watercolor so that they could record the places their ships visited.

The use of watercolor by the military became increasingly important as England spread its colonization effort around the globe. Every Man-O-War had a botanist and a staff of officers whose job was to record and paint the local land and structures, the local population, the flowers, and fauna of any lands claimed for the crown. That way they could illustrate to the King or Queen and the people back home the lands that had been claimed for England. This did much to spread the knowledge of the use of watercolor. This made a big impact on the artists in India as England took over control of that country in the mid-19th Century.

England –Watercolor Society Development

Since the beginning of art history, artists have ever sought to get paid and to get paid more for their art. In order to establish painting as a profession in England, artists in London and around there created the Academy of Art. Later, it was encouraged by the crown and given a royal warrant and became the Royal Academy of Art. This “society” was primarily made of oil painters, but included many other mediums, including watercolor.

At this time, watercolors were not considered serious art and even when they were created, they were usually framed in a paper mat and put into a book and not on the wall.

Watercolor, since the beginning of recorded history, has been considered a medium that had a second place to oils. In the late 1700's a number of watercolorists came together to form a group to promote the profession of watercolorists. Most of these artists were members of the Royal Academy, but not all. In 1804 the Society of Painters in Watercolour was formed. This eventually became the Royal Society of Painters in Water Colour.

In 1832, there was a splinter group of watercolorists who disagreed on a number of things with the existing watercolor society. They formed the New Watercolor Society (NWCS). This became the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours when it obtained its Royal warrant.

A similar effort was taking place in Scotland. The Scottish Society of Painters in watercolour was formed in 1876. Queen Victoria, in 1886, recognized the society and it became the Royal Scottish Society of Painters in Watercolour (RSW).

Who were the artists that led the development of Watercolor?

At the center of this effort to create a profession for watercolor were some of the most famous painters in England, including many who also had significant careers as oil painters, though some were specialists in watercolor.

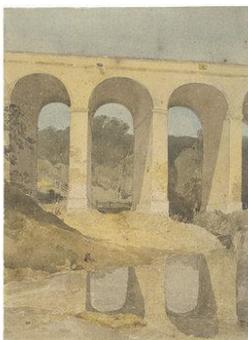
Some of the most significant figures were William Reeves, Thomas Girtin, John Sell Cotman, Fredrick Lewis, John Constable, David Cox, John Robert Cozens, and J M W Turner. We could add a number of names to the list: Peter Dewint, William Gilpin, William Blake, and James McNeil Whistler. My friends and fellow watercolorists in England and Scotland will probably chastise me for leaving out their favorite watercolorists.

Examples of Watercolors by a few of the leaders:

Thomas Girtin-



John Sell Cotman



J.M.W. Turner



Frederick Lewis



I encourage you to study the history of these painters and to become familiar with their work. These artists as a group and as individuals shaped what we know today as British Transparent Watercolor. This approach to watercolor is the platform on which the majority of watercolor is created around the world today. It has set the international standards by which watercolor is judged.

John Robert Cozens is given credit for codifying much of what we know today as the basics that a painter must master to become a watercolorist. He said that a

painter must have a mastery of the following techniques to be able to paint successfully in watercolor: Continuous Wash, Graded Wash, Broken Wash, Wet into Wet, Wet into Dry, Dry Brush, The Two-Brush Technique, blotting, lifting, and masking.

John Cotman and Thomas Girtin set the standard for the Continuous Wash. Frederick Lewis set the standard for Graded Wash with his paintings of the deserts from his visits in the Middle East.

Other techniques have been added over time as technology and practice have advanced, but these remain the basics of what we know as modern watercolor.

1837 and The Industrial Age – Growth in Watercolor.

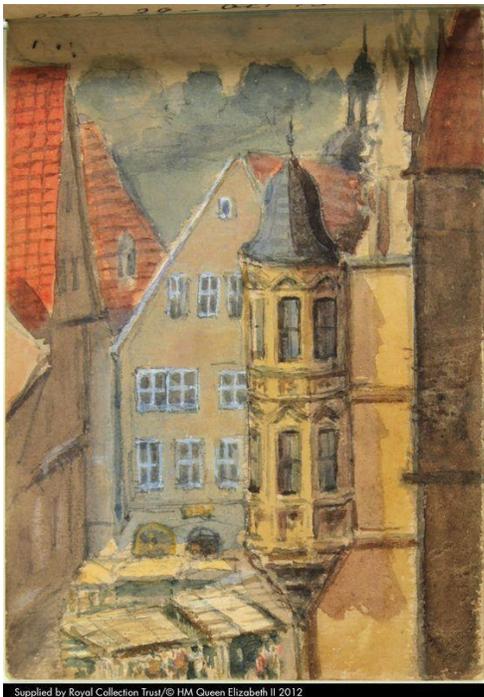
Queen Victoria came to the throne of England in 1837 and this was the opening of the industrial age in England. The steam engine, the cotton gin, and many other new inventions were taking England out of the hand labor era and into the machine era. This would have a major effect on the growth of watercolor.

Queen Victoria had a positive influence on the growth of watercolor. She, like many Royals, was a watercolorist. She was an enthusiastic watercolorist and

supported the painters' efforts to create a profession for watercolor and the sale of watercolors. She and Prince Albert attended the openings of the exhibitions of the Academy and gave warrants to art societies.



Watercolor by Queen Victoria of her son Arthur, 1853



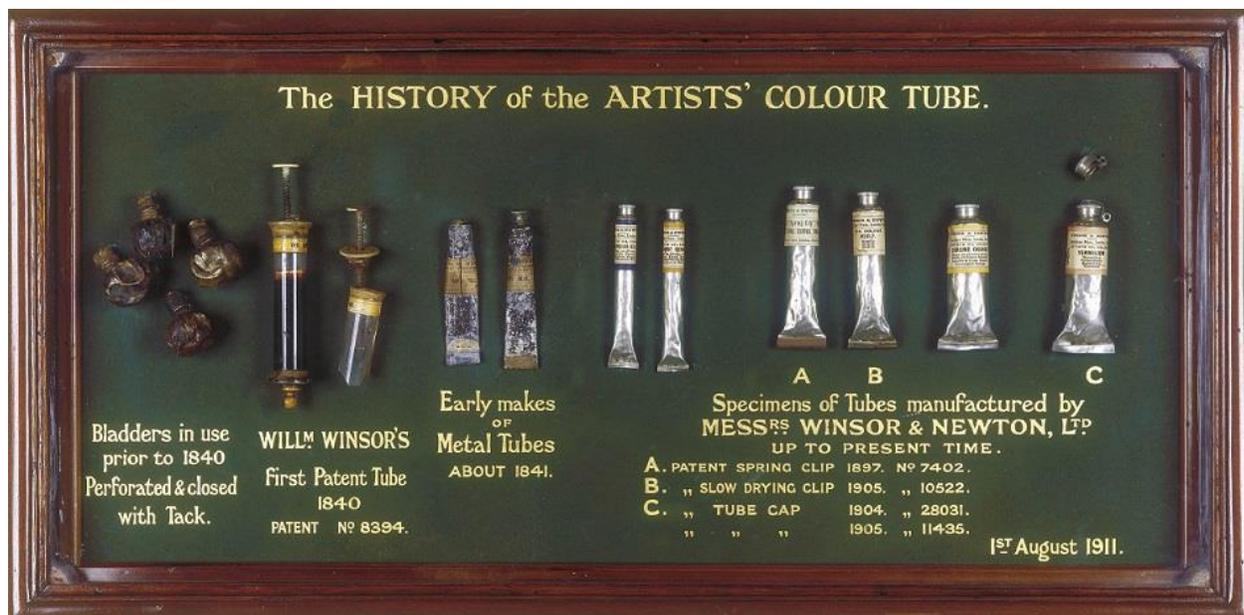
From my sitting room window, Queen Victoria, Coburg, 1860

The industrial age gave watercolorists and other artists tools that made the art more accessible and affordable. This created a popularization of watercolor across the country. Because of the growing number of watercolorists, making products for these artists became a viable business venture. Some of the artists even got into the manufacturing and sale of art materials. The Reeves brothers became a major supplier of art materials as well as being watercolorists.

Two of the major improvements were the manufacture of paints in cakes and then in tubed paints. Prior to this time artists had to make their own paints. They obtained dyes, stones, and oils from the apothecary. They then ground and blended their own paints. J M W Turner's father performed these duties for him. William Reeves started his business as a "colorman" around 1766. In 1781, he and his brother, Thomas Reeves, were awarded the Silver Palette of the Society of Arts for the invention of the moist watercolor *paint-cake*, a time-saving and travel convenience. This and other improvements and inventions introduced the "golden age" of English watercolor painting.

Tin mining had become a central effort in the industrial age in England. From this pliable metal, the tin tube was invented by the American oil painter John Goffe Rand as a way of transporting paints to use outside. The tubes preserved the paint for a longer time, allowing artists increased flexibility and the possibility of a larger palette as colors took longer to perish.

John Goffe was visiting England from Charleston in the USA. He invented the tube for holding paint, but he had no interest in patenting his invention. Upon hearing of this stunning innovation, William Winsor immediately sought the patent as Winsor & Newton were the only colourmen producing moist water colour. Once the patent was secured, William Winsor added one essential improvement to this design: the all-important screw cap.



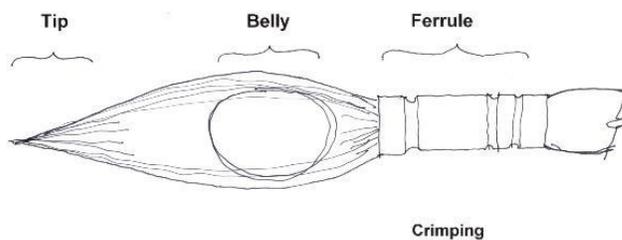
The evolution of watercolor containers

Another major contributor to the advancement in watercolor was the invention of a better brush with which to apply watercolor. The painters that were championing watercolor in the second half of the 18th century were struggling with the brushes that were available to them. Their primary brush was the oil painting brush made with hog bristles.

A number of these artists came together to create a competition between the better brush makers in England to create the “Perfect” brush for use with watercolor. Some reports say this group was a dozen artists, while others report it was as many as 16; it is not clear. The brush makers were encouraged to use any material and they did. There were brushes of feathers, horsehair, cat hair, etc.

The winning brush maker was the man who had obtained some Kolinsky weasel hair. He fashioned it to fit into a round hole that was held to a piece of wood with a metal ferrule. The watercolor round was created. This became the unanimous choice as the best watercolor brush. It is still the standard brush for applying the techniques of watercolor as outlined earlier by John Cozens.

Kolinsky Brush



The Kolinsky Round became the preferred watercolor brush. There are a few particular reasons for this. The Kolinsky bristle can grow to a length of 2 inches or more. This means that it can form a brush as large as a number 24. The bristle

has a natural curve and a taper from a wide base to a very small tip. When formed properly, this can create a natural belly to hold watercolor paint. The hairs have a natural texture which helps to control the flow of the water or paint onto the paper.

Another aspect of this invention is the practice of painting with your paper at a slant. The suggested slant of the paper is between 11 degrees and 17 degrees. At 11 degrees gravity become stronger than the tension of the surface of water. At 17 degrees the force of gravity is so strong that it overcomes the tension of the water or the paint so that it is very difficult to control. To create a continuous wash or a graded wash requires the flow of the paint by the force of gravity.

There were a lot of changes to the substrates on which watercolor was applied. In the mid-18th century there were not any papers that were specially made for watercolor. There are stories of Turner's purchasing paper from many sources and applying his own wash or early forms of sizing so that they would take the watercolor as he desired. One of the first people to produce paper for use in watercolor in England was Whatman, who perfected his "wove" paper in the 1780's.

Fabriano Paper in Italy claims to have been the first manufacturer to create a paper especially for use with watercolor. They had been making paper for artists

for a long time. They made a mould-made paper that both Michelangelo and DaVinci used for drawing and for washes. However, their records are not clear as to when they began to ship paper to England. There were a number of small paper mills both in England and on the continent that began to make paper for the the English watercolor trade. These then developed into usage across the world as the art of watercolor became more and more popular.

Today there are many manufacturers of paint, brushes, paper, and many other wonderful and bizarre tools for use in watercolor. These may vary country to country as their watercolor culture has evolved and is evolving. However, watercolor paints in pans and tubes as well as the Kolinsky round brush have remained at the core of traditional watercolor.

Gallery Development

One of the factors that help the profession of painting, both in oils and watercolor, was the development of the Gallery system of showing and selling art. Prior to the mid-19th century if you wanted to purchase a painting, you sent a request to an artist to bring certain works for you to view. Or you sent for a painter and gave them a commission to paint a subject, or you brought an artist into your estate to live for a time and produce art for certain walls of your home or other of your holdings. Rarely, a client would visit a studio to purchase a painting or place a commission.

Prior to the mid-18th century there had not been, down through history, a place where artists displayed their paintings and clients went to view them and purchase them. The primary place that people interested in art saw new works was the exhibitions of the Academies of Art. That was one of the reasons that competition to get into these exhibitions was so important.

Turner purchased a second townhouse in London, not far from the one he used as a home and studio. He used this as a place to show his paintings to prospective clients. He had so much success that other painters purchased townhouses in the neighborhood to exhibit their paintings. Thus, the gallery system was established.

The Present and Future of Watercolor

Many artists have taken up a watercolor brush since Turner and Girtin showed us how useful and versatile the medium can be. There have been improvements in the materials we use. Watercolor is now the most environmentally friendly way to create art. Fabriano paper has recently announced that all of its sizing is now vegetable based.

The use of watercolor continues to attract artists and would-be artists. In the US record numbers of retiring men and women are taking classes and buying watercolor supplies. The Covid -19 pandemic has causing many art students to be schooled at home by teachers using new software programs to see and interface with their students. Many of the art teachers are using watercolor as a medium of instruction in place of acrylics or oils because it is so quick and easy to set up and take down. This means that thousands of students are using watercolors for the first time

Watercolor is still a very popular medium in China where whole universities are committed to the teaching of watercolor. More and more Chinese watercolorists are adapting to the traditional methods of watercolor I have presented here.

According to the leading manufacturers of watercolor art materials, the sales of their materials are growing in Europe, in Russia, and the former Soviet states. There is significant growth in watercolor in parts of India and throughout Asia. The Australians, in spite of their spare population, are turning out some of the top watercolorists.

I hope that this brief history of modern watercolor has given you a better sense of how and why what we call “Traditional Transparent Watercolor Methods” were created and are still been taught and used around the world.

Laurin McCracken AWS NWS WHS

NOTE: If you find errors in my presentation, please let me know and cite your source; and I will be pleased to update this piece.

References

These are a few of the key books that I used as references in preparing this piece.

Many of the books are out of print but can be obtained as used. I used a number of web sites, such as those of the Watercolour Societies included in the text. I also referenced the web sites of watercolor materials manufacturers as well other web sites such as Wikipedia and The Encyclopedia Britannica.

British Watercolours 1750 – 1850, Andrew Wilton, Published by Phaidon

The Great Age of British Watercolours 1750 – 1880, Andrew Wilton, Anne Lyles, published by Prestel

Watercolour, edited by Alison Smith, Published by Tate Publishing

A History of Watercolor, Bernard Brett, Published by Excalibur

Turner, The Extraordinary Life & Momentous Times of J.M.W. Turner, Fanny Moyle,
Published by Penguin Press.

Durer Watercolours and Drawings, John Berger, Published by Taschen