

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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THE GREAT AGE OF BRITISH WATERCOLORS 1750-1880

EXPLORES THE HISTORY AND POWER OF THE MEDIUM

BEGINNING MAY 9 AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY

Washington, D.C. -- A survey of more than 260 superb British watercolors chosen from major collections throughout Great Britain and America, The Great Age of British Watercolor 1750-1880 will be on view at the National Gallery of Art from May 9 through July 25, 1993.

The show assembles masterworks by eighty-three artists -- Thomas Gainsborough, John Constable, William Blake, J.M.W. Turner, and others whose watercolors were of critical importance to the development of this popular medium.

Jointly organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Royal Academy of Arts, London, the show will be arranged according to six themes, including the theory of landscape, man in the landscape, atmosphere, and naturalism. It will demonstrate the full flowering of British watercolor from its origins as a straightforward medium for recording the visible world, through the glories of the romantic era, to the fresh spontaneity and freedom of brushstroke that anticipated French impressionism.

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"We are extremely pleased to present this glorious panorama of British watercolors," said Earl A. Powell III, director of the National Gallery of Art. "As perhaps the most comprehensive group shown in the United States from this revolutionary artistic period, the exhibition will confirm and demonstrate the groundbreaking achievements of British watercolorists."

British watercolor artists recorded literal topographical views of English towns and countryside beginning in the mid-eighteenth century. One of the greatest topographical artists, Paul Sandby (1730-1809) developed and transformed the tradition, introducing lively figures and expressive interpretations of landscape and architectural views. Alexander Cozens (1717-1786), an early watercolor theorist, used random blots of paint to create imaginary landscapes, forging a new direction for the medium and landscape painting in general.

This new direction was reflected in 1804 in the founding of the Society of Painters in Water-Colours, later known as the Old Water-Colour Society. Watercolors previously had been shown at the Royal Academy of Arts (opened in 1768), where they had competed directly with oil paintings. The successful first exhibition of the Old Water-Colour Society in 1805 established the medium's suitability for portraying grand and complex themes.

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Another pioneer in watercolor technique was Thomas Girtin (1775-1802). His simplified broad planes of warm, rich color brought new atmospheric expression to the medium and influenced the work of many, including John Sell Cotman (1782-1842), represented in the show by twenty-one sumptuous watercolors, and J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), the most revered artist of the romantic period with twenty-eight major watercolors on exhibit.

Turner's powerful, intuitive response to nature pushed the medium to a new height with brilliant renderings of atmosphere and light. His dramatic watercolors, such as Great Falls of the Reichenbach and Mer de Glace, capture the grandeur and elemental force of nature that was central to the romantic poetic works of Wordsworth and Byron.

The easily portable, fast drying medium of watercolor proved ideal for artists traveling abroad to depict personal reactions to views in France, Italy, the Rhineland, Spain, and Portugal. Later in the nineteenth century, Edward Lear (1812-1888) and J.F. Lewis (1805-1876) were among those seeking increasingly exotic subjects in North Africa, the Holy Land, and Egypt.

Watercolor was also well suited to depicting the fluid subjects of shifting light and the movement of clouds, as explored outdoors by John Constable (1776-1837). Artists favored the medium for detailed studies of trees, plants, animals, and still lifes.

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Among later developments traced in the exhibition are the richly detailed works of critic/artist John Ruskin (1819-1900), focusing attention on the importance of naturalism during the period; the intense visionary landscapes of Samuel Palmer (1805-1881), whose bold forms anticipate twentieth-century ideas about expressing emotion; and the exquisitely simple watercolors of American expatriate James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903).

Before opening at the National Gallery, the exhibition's sole American venue, The Great Age of British Watercolors 1750-1880 is on view in London from January 15 through April 11, 1993. Andrew Wilton, keeper of the British collection at the Tate Gallery, and Anne Lyles, curator of the Tate's British collection, selected the works in the exhibition and wrote the accompanying catalogue. It presents a new scholarly argument relating the history of aesthetics to the development of watercolor painting in Britain.

Advisors for the exhibition include Andrew Robison, Andrew W. Mellon senior curator, and Judith Brodie, associate curator of drawings, both at the National Gallery; and MaryAnne Stevens and Norman Rosenthal of the Royal Academy of Arts.

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