

THE ARTIST'S TECHNIQUES

Joseph Mallord William Turner RA (1775–1851) was arguably Britain's greatest landscape painter, and his engagement with watercolour was lifelong. By developing an exceptional range of techniques, and by fully exploring the materials at his disposal, he advanced the medium further than anyone before or since. The technical aspects of his art are clearly illustrated by works included in the exhibition *Paths to Fame: Turner Watercolours from The Courtauld*.

The Artist's Techniques essay by Eric Shanes

Eric Shanes is an artist, art historian and the current chairman and vice president of the Turner Society. He has written eleven books and catalogues on Turner. He is currently writing the most exhaustive biography of the artist to date.

Cover:
J.M.W. Turner
Chepstow Castle, c.1793–4 (detail)

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The Courtauld Gallery, London.

THE COURTAULD GALLERY PUBLIC PROGRAMMES

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Somerset House, Strand
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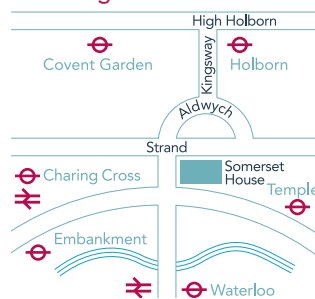
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The Gallery is free to all
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(except public holidays).

Please note

No groups on Mondays
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THE
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PATHS TO FAME TURNER WATERCOLOURS FROM THE COURTAULD

30 OCTOBER 2008 - 25 JANUARY 2009

THE ARTIST'S TECHNIQUES

Exhibition sponsor

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WATERCOLOUR

This comprises pigment suspended in gum-arabic that is soluble and re-soluble in water. The medium is inherently transparent, which is why works made with it can prove intensely luminous, especially when created on white paper. Watercolour is also quick-drying, which proved a boon for Turner when working rapidly on many drawings in succession, as he did frequently. Because of the inherent transparency of watercolour, Turner always coloured his images down the tonal scale from light to dark. It is very difficult to place light marks over dark ones and expect them to remain easily discernible when dry, which is not the case with oil paint brushstrokes. Early drawings in which Turner systematically worked in this way are *Tom Tower, Christ Church, Oxford*, c.1793 and *Shipping off the Coast, near Dover*, c.1794–5 (see below).



Like the majority of drawings in this exhibition, these two works are pure watercolours, or watercolours unadulterated with any thickening agent that might diminish their inherent transparency.

Among the more outstanding examples of pure watercolour on display in this show are *Chepstow Castle*, c.1793–4; *Rome from San Pietro in Montorio*, c.1820–1; *On Lake Lucerne looking towards*

Fluelen, c.1841 and *Crook of Lune, looking towards Hornby Castle*, c.1816–18.

GOUACHE

This is watercolour pigment that has been thickened with the addition of chalk and/or zinc oxide. Being chemically denser than pure watercolour, it is far more opaque and the colours are chalkier. Turner often used that chalkiness to good effect, as in the light area of the sea in *Heaped Thundercloud over Sea and Sand*, c.1835–40 (see below).



Often he added simply a few touches of gouache to watercolours where he wanted small, light forms to stand out from the darker ones that surrounded them. This limited touching can be discerned in *Abingdon from the Thames Navigation*, 1804; *Bonneville*, 1802; *St Goarshausen and Katz Castle*, 1817; *View of Bregenz*, 1840; *The Falls of the Rhine at Schaffhausen*, c.1841 and *Colchester, Essex*, c.1825–6, among other works.

Additionally, Turner created images almost entirely in gouache, often upon coloured papers, as in three watercolours made at Margate: *Margate Pier*, c.1835–40; *Heaped Thundercloud over Sea and Sand*, c.1835–40 and *Storm on Margate Sands*, c.1835–40. He welcomed the added opacity of gouache because it made watercolour behave rather like

oil paint without requiring the slow drying time of the latter.

PAPER

Virtually all the paper Turner used was made from reconstituted cloth rags. The internal structure of rag-made paper was immensely strong and it could be wetted without fear of buckling or suffering from surface ripping. This is what usually happens to modern art papers made from wood-pulp or cellulose derivatives when they are excessively dampened. To obtain highlights, or tiny light touches amid darker surroundings, Turner often scratched or scraped away the surface of the very strong papers he had tinted with watercolour, to reveal the white sub-surface of the sheets beneath. The scratching could be effected with his right thumbnail, which he kept sharpened for the purpose, while the scraping was accomplished with a knife or medical scalpel.

Either or both of these techniques can be witnessed in *The Upper Fall of the Reichenbach*, 1802; *Rome from San Pietro in Montorio*, c.1820–1; *Crook of Lune, looking towards Hornby Castle*, c.1816–18; *Colchester, Essex*, c.1825–6 and *The Falls of the Rhine at Schaffhausen*, c.1841 (see below).



Turner usually used papers specifically designed for watercolour. He occasionally employed writing papers, the surfaces of which were strengthened in the manufacturing process to resist ripping by sharpened quill or steel-nibbed pens. Works that were created on such paper include *On Lake Lucerne looking towards Fluelen*, c.1841 and *Colchester, Essex*, c.1825–6 (see below).



For watercolours that required the finest detail, Turner would employ laminated and glazed drawing boards such as the ones used for *Cologne*, c.1832–3 and *The 'Presentation' Smailholm Tower and Sandyknowe Farm*, c.1831–2.

In order to obtain distinctive colour effects and set himself a technical challenge, Turner would prepare sheets of paper with a wash of colour, as he did for *Bonneville*, 1802; *The Upper Falls of the Reichenbach*, 1802; *St Goarshausen and Katz Castle*, 1817 and *The Falls of the Rhine at Schaffhausen*, c.1841 which were all created over a grey wash of watercolour. Alternatively, he would use coloured papers as for the *View of Bregenz*, 1840, which is on a blue wove paper, and *A Boat on a Rough Sea*, c.1840, which is on a grey wove paper. He would also use cheap parcel wrapping

paper for its colour and absorbency, as he did for *The Drachenfels*, 1817.

WASHES

Turner began a great many of his watercolours by dampening the paper with a wide brush or a sponge, or even by plunging the entire sheet into water and then brushing on the pigment while the paper 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*, c.1841, where a soft yellow and a subtle red have been diffused right across the centre of the image. When this area had fully dried, Turner drew over it in pen and ink, as well as with chalks.

STOPPING-OUT

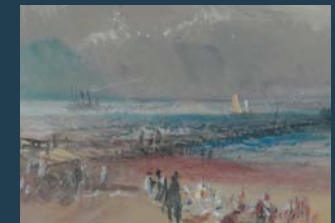
This is a chemical preparation which, when painted as a layer, protects the paper from any subsequent over-painting. Eventually the preparation can be peeled or rubbed away, to reveal the untouched sheet beneath. Areas that have been stopped-out are always easily recognisable, for their edges are sharp and they are lighter in tone than their surroundings. Touches of stopping-out are readily visible in the areas of white ice and the snow-capped peaks in *The Mer de Glace, Chamonix, with Blair's Hut*, 1806 (see below).



FINISHED WATERCOLOURS, WATERCOLOUR STUDIES AND SKETCHES

The majority of works in this exhibition are finished watercolours, or images elaborated to high degrees of detail and smoothness of finish. Often these were created to be reproduced by means of monochrome engravings, where fine detail was a vital necessity. A good example is *Crook of Lune, looking towards Hornby Castle*, c.1816–18. For such complex works Turner would often create preparatory studies in watercolour, in order to test the composition and colouring of the final image. Additionally, he made many thousands of watercolour sketches in which he simply expressed his responses to things seen or imagined.

This exhibition includes some fine watercolour sketches, such as *The Falls of the Rhine at Schaffhausen*, 1841 and Margate views: *Heaped Thundercloud over Sea and Sand*, c.1835–40; *Storm on Margate Sands*, c.1835–40 and *Margate Pier*, c.1835–40 (see below).



These are undoubtedly Turner's most 'modern' images but he would never have exhibited them, for he considered them to be far too unfinished to be seen by the public.