

# The Courtauld

## **DRAWN TO BLUE**

### **Artists' use of blue paper**

4 October 2024 - 26 January 2025  
Gilbert and Ildiko Butler Drawings Gallery  
Curated by Rachel Hapoienu

Blue paper was first adopted by Italian artists in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the region of Venice, but its use quickly spread throughout the rest of Europe. In contrast to the starkness of white paper, blue served as a subtle mid-tone, ideal for exploring shade, volume, and the contrast between light and dark. Artists often employed blue paper for figure or sculpture studies, as they grappled with the representation of three-dimensional objects on a flat surface.

Blue paper could be created in various ways: the pulp could be made of macerated blue textiles mixed with rags of other colours, thus producing 'variegated' paper (the majority of the papers in this display). Alternatively, a blue dye could be added to the vat of pulp during the papermaking process, or a finished sheet of white paper could be dip-dyed in a blue solution. Blue paper could also be created by brushing blue wash across a white sheet.

Blue paper is especially prone to fading and discolouration, often now appearing brown, grey, buff or green. It is therefore unlikely we are viewing any of these drawings as they would have looked originally, and so we must consider how this affects our understanding of their intended use and appearance. This display presents a selection of drawings on blue paper, mainly drawn from the Courtauld Gallery's collection, demonstrating the range of functions and variations of blue employed by artists from across Europe over several centuries.

The programme of displays in the Drawings Gallery is generously supported by the International Music and Art Foundation, with additional support from James Bartos, and the *Drawn to Blue* exhibition circle.

# The Courtauld



Jacopo Tintoretto (1518-1594) or Workshop  
**Studies after Michelangelo's 'Samson and the Philistines'**

Around 1560

Charcoal, black chalk, white opaque watercolour  
Princes Gate bequest, 1978  
D.1978.PG.99

The Venetian artist Jacopo Tintoretto had a flourishing workshop with numerous assistants. A crucial step in an artist's training was learning how to depict the human form by first copying sculptures. Tintoretto must have owned a smaller replica of this figure group by Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), as there are over 60 drawings after this sculpture from Tintoretto's workshop. The repetition of the figure in the same position and identical dimensions reinforces the suggestion that this sheet was used as an educational exercise.

Blue paper provided an ideal mid-tone for exploring shade and volume of sculptural figures, and thus played a key role in Tintoretto's workshop. Though now discoloured, magnification reveals blue fibres in the paper are mixed with other coloured fibres; this is called 'variegated blue paper' (see video on the website). Unless otherwise stated, this is the paper used for all the drawings in this display. These blue fibres came from textiles coloured blue, such as sailors' cloths or workers' smocks.



Attributed to Domenico Tintoretto (1560-1635)  
**Study of a seated man with arms raised**

Charcoal and white chalk  
Princes Gate bequest, 1978  
D.1978.PG.369

Domenico was trained in the workshop of his father Jacopo (see drawing above), and adopted his use of blue paper for figure studies. This sheet now has a brown tone, but the edges reveal its original colour. They were protected by a mount and remained undamaged by light. Other environmental factors such as exposure to humidity, heat or pollutants can also speed up the deterioration of the blue colour.

# The Courtauld



The contrast between how the back of the sheet appears compared to the front demonstrates how dramatically the colour of blue paper can change over time. As there is no drawing on the verso side of the paper, there was no reason to display it, thus affording it more protection.

Blue paper was most commonly coloured with indigotin, which is derived from woad and indigo plants. This colourant is more resistant than other blue pigments to the chemicals used in the papermaking process.



Francesco Salviati (1510-1563)

## **Sacking of a temple**

After 1540

Black chalk, pen and brown ink, brown wash, white opaque watercolour, incised

Robert Witt bequest, 1952

D.1952.RW.412

Francesco Salviati, along with his fellow Florentine Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), was one of the first outsiders to adopt blue paper into his practice after working in Venice. He used two different types of white heightening here, one of which has now turned grey. The ink lines are incised, suggesting the composition was transferred to a printing plate, though no engraving is known. Perhaps the use of blue paper and white heightening was intended to suggest a certain tone to the printmaker.



Federico Barocci (around 1535-1612)

## **Figure study**

Mid-1580s

Black, red and white chalk over blind stylus

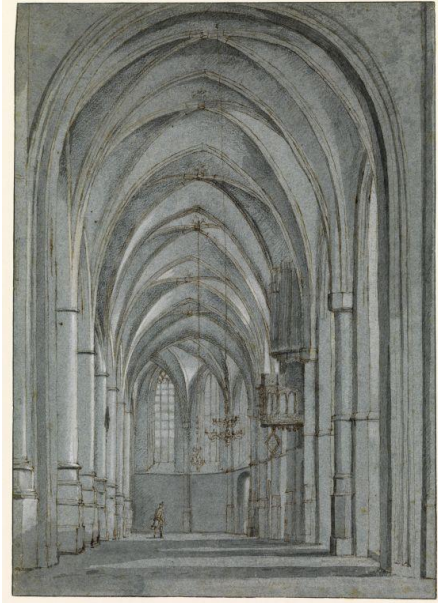
Sir Robert Witt bequest, 1952

D.1952.RW.2329

Federico Brocci was an early and extensive practitioner of the new method of drawing with three coloured chinks, rather than just black and white. In combination with the blue paper, this allowed him to explore a greater range of shades and the play of light. Here, the artist used red chalk to redraw the left sleeve, clarify revisions,

# The Courtauld

lighten modelling and suggest a brighter tone. Barocci's technique anticipated the preference for blue paper by pastel artists two centuries later.



Pieter Saenredam (1597-1665)

**South ambulatory of St Bavokerk, Haarlem**  
1634

Black chalk, pen and brown ink, grey wash, white chalk, white opaque watercolour

Sir Robert Witt bequest, 1952

D.1952.RW.2010

This is a preparatory study for a painting now in Berlin (reproduced below). Architecture is a relatively unusual subject for blue paper, but the artist is experimenting here with transcribing an object as seen in the round onto a flat surface. For this study he abandoned accurate rendering of perspective in favour of conveying the direction and strength of light on the interconnecting spaces of the interior. The result is a masterly study in luminosity, evoking the sensation of being inside this grand, historic building, and portraying a more naturalistic pattern of light and shadows than the final painting.



Pieter Saenredam, *South ambulatory of St Bavokerk, Haarlem, with the Presentation in the Temple*, 1635, oil on panel, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

Govert Flinck (1615-1660)

**Seated female nude, partially draped**  
1648

Black and white chalk

Robert Witt bequest, 1952

D.1952.RW.4002

# The Courtauld



Govert Flinck's prolific use of blue paper coincides with his departure from the studio of his master, Rembrandt (1606/7-1669), and the development of his own mature style. From the 1640s he used a combination of black and white chalks on blue paper to skilfully model figures in a variety of positions, especially nude studies of women.

This figure represents one of the earliest documented cases of women posing nude in Western art, as a lawsuit informs us that in 1648, Flinck painted three sisters 'stark naked'.



Attributed to the Master of the Blue Landscapes  
**View of Rome with the Tiber**

Around 1650

Black chalk, pen and brown ink, brown wash

Sir Robert Witt bequest, 1952

D.1952.RW.2866

The anonymous artist of this sheet takes his name from the blue paper he used in over 60 landscape drawings, depicting both imaginary and real settings in Rome and the surrounding areas. The small size of these sheets suggests they were once part of a sketchbook. The colour of the paper doubles both as the blue of the river Tiber and the sky, evoking a city suffused in warm sunlight.



Attributed to Johann Joachim Pfeiffer the Elder  
(1662-1701)

**Cavalry battle**

Late 17<sup>th</sup> century

Brush and black wash, white opaque watercolour

Robert Witt bequest, 1952

D.1952.RW.1827

The blue background here was formed by brushing opaque indigo watercolour across a sheet of white paper. The resulting hue is much darker than that achieved with paper made from blue rags. The figures' faces are cast in black shadows by the wash, contributing to the sense of chaos and horror in the fray. The white highlights

# The Courtauld

contrast forcefully with the dark blue wash, the soldiers and their horses appearing like ghostly spectres in a nighttime battle.



Jonathan Richardson the Elder (1667–1745)

## **Self-portrait**

1728

Black and white chalk

Robert Witt bequest, 1952

D.1952.RW.1552

Jonathan Richardson was a prolific self-portraitist and frequently used blue paper, which provided a more subtle mid-tone for his chalks compared to white paper. Blue paper was also readily available, as it was widely produced to wrap white goods such as paper and sugar. In addition, he may have chosen blue paper for its historic association with venerable Venetian Renaissance artists such as Tintoretto and Veronese, whose drawings were well-represented in Richardson's own collection of over 4,700 works.



Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1688–1755)

## **The joker and the fishes**

1732

Brush and black ink, grey wash, white opaque watercolour

Private Collection, London

This is one of 276 drawings by Jean-Baptiste Oudry, all on blue paper, illustrating the fables of Jean de La Fontaine (1621–1695). In this tale, a dinner guest jokingly asks the fish he has been served whether he knows the fate of a friend lost at sea.

Oudry painted the startlingly blue frame directly onto the sheet using Prussian blue, a synthetic pigment created around 1706. The intensely blue border draws attention to the paper itself and contrasts more strongly with the white opaque watercolour.

# The Courtauld



Allan Ramsay (1713-1784)  
**Studies of arms and drapery**  
Around 1746  
Black and white chalk  
Sir Robert Witt bequest, 1952  
D.1952.RW.1401

Allan Ramsay was a Scotsman who moved to London and became a successful portrait painter. He produced over 600 portraits, necessitating a repertoire of poses and costumes to draw upon. The studies seen here were used in a number of female portraits.

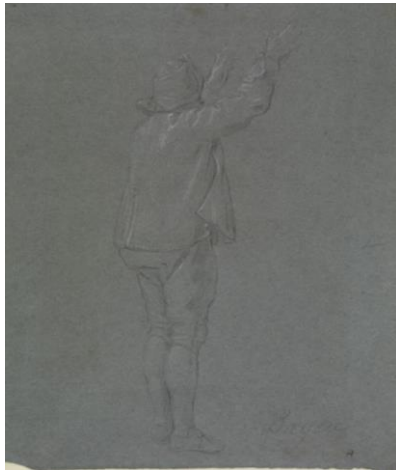
Ramsay used his figure studies on blue paper to study how white highlights accentuate the play of light on skin and fine draperies. The deep hue of this sheet is due to an unusually high proportion of blue fibres in the paper (see video on the website).



Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770)  
**Bacchus**  
Around 1751-53  
Red and white chalk  
Princes Gate bequest, 1978  
D.1978.PG.160

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo and his family's workshop continued the Venetian tradition of using blue paper for drawing into the 18th century. Although the figure here is identified as Bacchus due to the wreath of grape leaves, this drawing probably belongs to a series of nude studies drawn from life, which are not connected to any known paintings. Rather, Tiepolo used these studies to explore hatching and tone when depicting the muscular nude form. The warm red chalk, approximating a skin tone, is complemented by the cool blue background.

# The Courtauld



Attributed to Francisco Bayeu y Subias (1734-1795)  
**Standing man with arms raised**

1770s

Black and white chalk

Robert Witt bequest, 1952

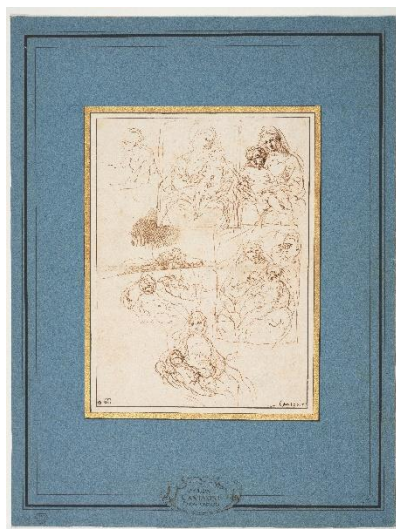
D.1952.RW.1641

The Spanish artist Bayeu stands out for his reliance on blue paper, which he used for the majority of his over 500 drawings. He and his brother Ramón (1746-1793) worked as designers for the royal tapestry manufactory in Madrid. Francisco often made drawings on blue paper, which Ramón would enlarge and complete as full-scale designs, which were then placed as guidance directly under the weavers' looms. The tapestries would thus be in the reverse direction of the original drawings.



*The young bull of Carabanchel*, tapestry, San Lorenzo del Escorial, Spain

This figure is a study for one of the onlookers in a tapestry called *The young bull of Carabanchel* (reproduced at left), which depicts an amateur bullfighting scene. The man is attempting to distract the bull from the injured man lying on the ground.



Simone Cantarini (1612-1648)

**Studies for a Virgin and Child**

Around 1642-48

Pen and brown ink

Robert Witt bequest, 1952

D.1952.RW.1641

This drawing is framed in a distinctive blue mount which belonged to the famed French collector Pierre-Jean Mariette (1694-1774). He owned over 9,000 drawings, most in his characteristic mounts, giving rise to the description of the colour as 'Mariette blue'. These custom-made mats provided a unified and refined system of display, forcing the viewer to focus on the image at the centre. A Mariette mount came to denote a drawing of significance and was often imitated by later collectors.



# The Courtauld



Louis-Marin Bonnet (1736–1793) after François Boucher (1703–1770)

## **Young woman with a rose**

1767

Chalk manner print

Private Collection, London

In the 18th century, pastel reached unprecedented heights of popularity as a drawing medium. These fabricated chinks, available in portable sticks, enabled artists to create luminous portraits in unlimited hues. Pastellists like Boucher favoured blue paper, as its tone and surface texture provided the perfect backdrop for the powdery chinks.

Printmakers were then faced with a new challenge: how to replicate the vibrant effects of these drawings in the limited palette of engraving. Bonnet made the significant invention around 1763 of a white printer's ink that could successfully imitate white chalk but would not discolour over time.

The first version of *Young woman with a rose* was printed on blue paper (see left). In the version on display here, Bonnet instead used a plate inked in blue to imitate blue paper, a more effective attempt to replicate the original drawing by Boucher.



Louis-Marin Bonnet after François Boucher, *Young woman with a rose*, 1765/67, chalk manner print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC



Jean-Claude Richard, Abbé de Saint-Non (1727–1791) after Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806)

## **Recueil de griffonis, de vues, paysages, et sujets historiques**

Around 1780

Etching, aquatint, white opaque watercolour

Princes Gate Bequest, 1978

B.1978.PG.115

Saint-Non was one of the earliest practitioners of aquatint, a new printing technique which could, for the first time, effectively imitate drawings executed in wash or watercolour. He used it to produce several volumes of prints after drawings by Fragonard and other artists, but these displayed here appear to be from a unique set published on blue paper. This rare version was likely destined for an important collector, who mounted these prints in an album on pages of varying hues of blue.

# The Courtauld



Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825)

## **Head of a bearded man**

Around 1775-80

Black chalk

Robert Witt bequest, 1952

D.1952.RW.3867

The barely discernible hint of colour in the sheet here is likely a result of 'blueing' the paper: the unbleached fibres used to produce white paper often had a yellowish cast, so small quantities of blue fibres or pigments were added during the papermaking process to tone down this effect. This was less expensive than bleaching the pulp. Analysis of this sheet determined the pigment used here was smalt, which is made of finely ground cobalt glass, and was commonly used in papermaking throughout the 18th century.



Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851)

## **View of Bregenz, Austria**

1840

Graphite, coloured chalks, watercolour, opaque watercolour

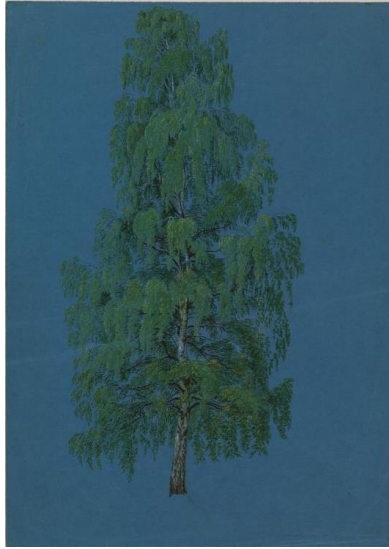
William Spooner bequest, 1967

D.1967.WS.96

From the 1830s, Turner increasingly used coloured papers for his drawings. He usually travelled with blue paper produced by his preferred English papermaker, George Steart at De Montalt Mill in Bath, but this paper appears to have been made in Europe.

The blue here has been left untouched to represent water and sky, allowing Turner to add loose touches of shade and highlights in his quest to capture atmospheric effects. The blue support enhances the misty appearance of the distant Alps.

# The Courtauld



William Turner of Oxford (1789–1862)

***Birch Tree, Magdalen College***

October 1855

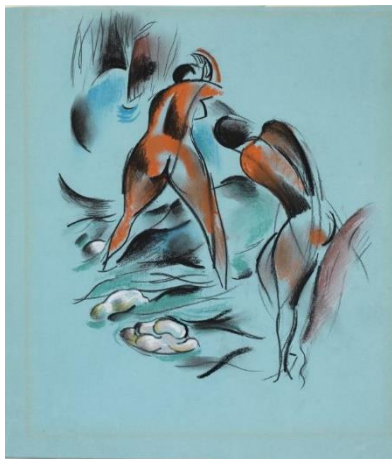
Graphite, pen and brown ink, watercolour, opaque watercolour

Robert Witt bequest, 1952

D.1952.RW.812

William Turner was praised by his critics for his success at capturing the sky in different kinds of weather. The brilliant blue of the paper here throws the tree into high relief and evokes the brightness of a cloudless summer day.

This sheet was coloured by the addition of synthetic Prussian blue dye into the vat during the papermaking process, ensuring an even tone throughout the paper and achieving a greater vibrancy than blue rags could have produced.



Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957)

***Bathing women***

1941

Coloured chalks

On long-term loan from the Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust

Wyndham Lewis purchased this paper from a drugstore near his hotel in Toronto, where he stayed throughout World War II. The paper was produced by a Canadian mill, which was one of the first in the country to synthesise wood pulp, rather than rags, into paper. This light-blue shade was created using azurite, a natural pigment found in many parts of the world. It enhances the striking hues of the bathers, picking their way across the shore into the blue water, evoked by the paper itself.