



The Masterful Use of Watercolor Throughout History

From the first daring practitioners in the 18th century to the modern artists of the 20th century, watercolor has long been a medium of the masters. | **by John A. Parks**



LEFT
A View of Vinters at Boxley
 by Paul Sandby, 1794, gouache, graphite, and watercolor on wove paper, 26½ x 40. Collection Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven, Connecticut.

OPPOSITE PAGE
The Mall, Central Park
 by Maurice Prendergast, 1900–1903, watercolor and graphite on wove paper, 22 x 20. Collection National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

The medium of watercolor was the last of the traditional media to emerge. Although oil painting and fresco had flourished for centuries, it wasn't until the end of the 18th century that watercolor, with its dazzling transparencies stained into rich paper, became widely used. A few artists had

tried watercolor previously. In the late 15th century, Dürer created a number of remarkable watercolors, including his famous *Great Piece of Turf*, and even artists as diverse as Claude Lorrain and Van Dyck made the occasional colored drawing. Such works were generally considered "stained" sketches and not exhibited. Botanical illustrators, topographical draftsmen, and mapmakers used a water stain, but usually by way of filling in a line drawing or a black-and-white print. The modern watercolor came about through a confluence of factors, perhaps most important through advances in paper technology in England.

Until the second half of the 18th century all paper was "laid"—made by a process in which a simple wire mesh was pulled up through a vat of water on which a raft of cellulose fibers made from pulped cotton floated. Cellulose has a peculiar property of combining with the surface tension on top of a body of water to create a strong, flat sheet. As the wire

mesh lifted the sheet out of the water it imparted its texture so that the paper had a bumpy and often uneven surface. All this changed in the 1750s, when the English manufacturer James Whatman discovered that he could make a much smoother paper by weaving the wire mold into a tight mesh. This is now known as "wove" paper. Whatman further refined his paper by developing new ways of sizing it, using various gelatinous substances to control its absorbency. The resulting product was more predictable in the way it took a wash and more resilient than anything that had come before.

A number of other factors contributed to the emergence of watercolor at this time. This was the age of the Grand Tour, when English gentry considered a trip to France and Italy to be a necessary adjunct to any education. There was money to be made from the paintings created on such trips, and watercolor made fast, on-the-spot sketching possible. Technological innovations in the production of cakes and eventually tubes of watercolor quickly followed in the first half of the 19th century.

Naturally, the emergence of a new medium was met with resistance from oil painters. The annual exhibition at the Royal Academy, the primary showcase for art at the time, tended to relegate watercolors to a small and overcrowded part of the space. In response, the Society of Painters in Watercolor was formed in

London in 1804, and its own exhibitions served to promote and spread the art with considerable energy.

Artists quickly discovered that watercolor allowed for new kinds of expression in painting at a moment when dynamic shifts in movements and styles were beginning to occur at an ever-faster pace. The medium offers a number of novel qualities for the artist. The pigment, bound only in gum arabic, is transferred to the paper in an almost raw state, which makes for a kind of "singing" brilliance of hue not found in oil paint. The medium also offered new possibilities for using free-flowing techniques, washes, transparencies, and sensitivity of touch, adding whole new realms to the art of painting. For the last two-and-a-half centuries, watercolor has allowed a wide range of artists to explore and develop their visions in ways that would have been impossible without it. Below, we take a look at the work of 10 such artists, all of whom utilized the unique properties of watercolor in new and interesting ways.

Paul Sandby

Using Layers of Gouache and Watercolor to Create Visual Richness

Paul Sandby (1731–1809) is known as the father of English watercolor. At the age of 16 he began working for the Board of Ordnance, a governmental body, as a topographical draftsman. Although the artist's course of study is

unknown, his talent was evident at this early age, and he quickly became one of the leading figures in the art world. Sandby used both opaque pigment (gouache) and transparent watercolor to make paintings of enormous richness and depth. His painting *A View of Vinters at Boxley* was commissioned by James Whatman the Younger, who had inherited the papermaking factory from his father. The painting is thus a wonderful documentation of the advent of papermaking, the appearance of industry in the English rural landscape, and a marvelous demonstration of how watercolor can be used to create a compelling combination of luminosity and topographical detail.

J.M.W. Turner

Using the Fluid Properties of Watercolor to Create Luminous Atmospheric Effects

J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) unleashed the expressive and lyrical qualities of watercolor in an unprecedented fashion. From his humble origins as the son of a London barber, he began his art career as a meticulous draftsman. He learned his watercolor technique when a Dr. Thomas Munro hired him to copy works in his collection by J. R. Cozens, an earlier landscape painter of great originality. Turner entered the Royal Academy Schools at the age of 14 and was soon showing artwork in the annual exhibitions. His early works were highly controlled renderings, but with the

