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The water-colours of J. M. W. Turner

Turner, Joseph Mallord William

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A Foreword by Sir Charles Holroyd, R. E.

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A FOREWORD BY SIR CHARLES HOLROYD, R.E.

I AM particularly glad to write a foreword to this collection of reproductions of water-colours by J. M. W. Turner, as they are perhaps the best renderings of the beautiful originals that I have yet seen. The more reproductions we can have of the master's drawings the more will it be possible to study properly his great message, and the more will his genius be recognised. I would like to see everyone of his nineteen thousand water-colour sketches and lead-pencil drawings reproduced, so that we could all hold them in our hands and carry them about with us; for in them there is an unfailing beauty of composition, and a glorious truth of effect and of detail, by which Turner managed to make complete pictures out of even the fewest touches. No one realises Turner's full genius till he studies these drawings, often made in the very presence of nature. They teach us to look at her with a new and seeing eye. Their absolute truth has hardly yet been fully recognised. I have had the fortune to carry reproductions of these drawings with me in Wharfedale and in Venice, and I have compared them touch for touch with nature. Often and often have I been able to see the meaning of what appears a careless scratch or even an accidental wriggle, only when the actual scene was before me. They are mostly drawn from one exact spot, as may be seen by the crossing of the branches of the trees, although these are now so many years older, and the folding of the hills. It was in the seventies that I first made these comparisons in Wharfedale and I still remember my delight at recognising the gnarled markings on three ash trees a little below Bolton Abbey; the angle of their growth forming a rough letter N was identical although they were mere saplings in Turner's drawing, and even the broken bank of the river was still the same, all the winter floods of variable Wharfe not having washed away nature's truth to Turner's drawing. My experiences in Venice are similar. With the reproduction in my hand I could say that Turner drew a particular scene from a particular flagstone on the quay, or *piazza*. The lines of the houses on both sides of the canal cut one another in the exact way they did in Turner's sketches only from one particular spot, but from there the whole scene was complete exactly. Many subjects were sketched from the middle of the canal and owing to the movement of the water it was not easy to compare exactly the reproductions with the scenes in nature. Curiously nearly all these scenes from the canal were taken from the *traghettos*, or ferries, of which there are several up and down the Grand Canal, where gondolas wait for hire, tied to their posts, somewhat as cabs stand in their ranks in our streets. It is possible that Turner in his economy made use of these waiting gondolas by giving the gondolier a palanca for

permission to sit in a gondola whilst it was thus at rest. It was an ideal place for working from in his day, for no "penny steam-boats" then splashed up and down the canal making things rock in their wake, but peace reigned in the reflections of the palaces.

Only very few of the drawings of which I had reproductions went unrecognised; one was a view from high up, probably from some room in the monastery of San Giorgio, and others all contained a view of a tall tower, which, from the neighbouring buildings, ought to have been the Campanile of San Marco. But the tower in the drawings had an extra cornice on the slope of the pyramidal top, with supports below, which I could in no wise reconcile with nature and which puzzled me for some time, in fact until I saw the restoration begun on the tower of San Giorgio. Then I found that the extra cornice and supports were a peculiar and ingenious form of scaffolding, used for the placing of new tiles on the steep slope of the pyramidal top—and sure enough when I got back to London and looked at the original drawing with a glass, the touches of water-colour indicated the scaffolding quite plainly, and a wonderful small splash of colour enabled one to realise the angel on the top, wings and all. I found, too, that all drawings, in which the Campanile appeared, done by Turner during that visit, gave the restoration works quite plainly, even when the tower was seen from a long way off. The beauty of the touches in Turner's drawings from nature can only be fully appreciated when the drawing, or a reproduction of it, is compared with the actual subject, for every bend and movement of the supple brush means something. It is not possible to convey the drawings all over Turner's far-stretching wanderings, but, if only we had good reproductions of them all, what a pleasure we should all have, and how much we should learn to appreciate his greatness. I should like to see, as I have said, every fragment before the public. It is practically the only way of using our great legacy fully. The original drawings are perishable things, and must not always be in the light; many have faded already, let us reproduce them while we may. The slighter sketches reproduce best, as may be seen in this book. Such drawings as the *Edinburgh from St. Margaret's Loch*, about 1801 (Plate VI.), for example. Note, too, the splendid sketch of *Barnard Castle*, about 1827 (Plate XVI.); how well it comes, we can almost see the brush-marks draw the forms of the foliage, and the way Turner has used the water; they are perfect in their way. When Turner worked up a drawing it became like a lovely flower with a delicate bloom upon its infinite distances, as in the *Lake of Nemi*, about 1818 (Plate XI.), and the *Crook of the Lune* (Plate XIII.); they are like a gloxinia or an auricula.

This curious beauty of theirs was often obtained, as it appears to me, by alterations in the surface of the paper and by colour left in the grain of the paper after washing out or rubbing down a tone—it alters when the lighting of the drawing is altered, and its changeableness is part of its beauty.

I should like to see reproductions of the sketch books, made page by page and bound in similar bindings to the originals, where these exist. Mr. Finberg has lately put some of these books together again—some drawings having been removed from the books for exhibition—for purposes of the very useful inventory of our Turner drawings that he is so carefully making for the Trustees of the National Gallery. The books are much more interesting when seen together. I remember one which Turner had with him in the Lake District and you could trace his itinerary by turning over the pages. He evidently left Keswick in the morning and drew two or three views of Lodore and the end of the Lake of Derwentwater, the hills getting bigger as he comes nearer to them; familiar views of Castle Cragg and the river come next, and to me some most interesting views of that wide-spreading mountain Glaramara, some of them from unfamiliar points of view; but I was able to recognise them because I have stayed for a month at a time in farmhouses on the lower slopes, and I have explored that beautiful mountain's inmost caves. After this Honister Crag and Buttermere appear in due course. How interesting it would be to have reproductions of such books and follow the track of the master page by page. How we should learn to know him and to see familiar scenes with his eye. We should find that exaggeration was not the character of his landscape drawing, when he was working from nature, but insight into the forms. His effects of extra height can generally be got by sitting low on the ground or even right in a ditch. From his drawings, from those in this book of reproductions, we learn again a forgotten truth. Fine drawing, form, is the essential in our art; great and noble colourist as Turner was, we have had other fine colourists in the British school of water-colour painting, but it is just in his drawing and his sense of the beauty and significance of line that he is supreme. As Titian in Venice excelled the great colourists of his time, such as Bonifazio and Paris Bordone, so by his drawing and sense of form Turner excelled as a draughtsman even more than as a colourist.

CHARLES HOLROYD.