



UNIVERSITÄTS-  
BIBLIOTHEK  
PADERBORN

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

**Turner, Joseph Mallord William**

**London [u.a.], 1909**

The Turner Drawings in the National Gallery, London. By A. J. Finberg

---

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-83286](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-83286)

THE TURNER DRAWINGS IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON. BY A. J. FINBERG.

THE usual way of painting a landscape nowadays is for the artist to take his easel and canvas out into the fields, and to work as far as possible with the scene he is representing before his eyes. The scene, with the artist's chosen effect, is of course constantly changing, so the artist can work only for a short time each day. The effect itself will probably last for a period varying from a couple of minutes to about half an hour, according to circumstances; but the painter may be usefully employed in getting his work into condition for about an hour before the effect is due, and he may work on for perhaps another hour while the effect is still fresh in his memory. As one sitting of this kind will not enable the artist to carry his work far, it is necessary that he should return day after day to the scene; and if he is determined to paint it entirely on the spot, he must be prepared to devote some months at least to the work.

The habit of painting and finishing pictures entirely out of doors was, I believe, introduced by the Pre-Raphaelites during the fifties, but before this, Constable and other artists had worked largely from rather elaborate colour studies made out of doors. Turner did not work at all in this way. All his pictures were painted in the studio, and generally from very slight pencil sketches. So far as I know he never made even a slight colour study from nature for any of his pictures.

As the methods of work employed by the great artists are of very great interest, I think it will be worth while to take one of his well-known works and to trace its evolution somewhat in detail. The beautiful drawing of *Norham Castle*, reproduced here (Plate XIV.), will do very well for this purpose.

This drawing was made to be engraved in a series known as the "Rivers of England." Charles Turner's really fine mezzotint of it was published in 1824, so the drawing must have been made at least a year or two before this date. The pencil sketch on which it was based was made some quarter of a century earlier—to be quite accurate, in the summer or autumn of 1797.

At that time Turner was a young man of twenty-two, but he had already made his mark as one of the best topographical and antiquarian draughtsmen of the day. He had been a regular exhibitor at the Royal Academy for eight years, and publishers and amateurs were beginning to compete for his productions. It was his habit every summer to map out for himself a lengthy sketching tour, his aim being to accumulate in his portfolio a pencil drawing



made by himself of every building or natural feature that he might be called upon to illustrate. These subjects were dictated by the taste of the time, which generally ran towards the ruined abbeys and castles of the middle ages. As Turner's subject-matter was prescribed for him in this way, he did not, like the modern artist, have to waste any time looking for promising subjects. He had merely to study the numerous guide-books that were even then in existence, to make out a list of the more important castles, abbeys, and Gothic buildings, and to hurry from one to the other as fast as the coaches or his own sturdy legs could carry him. The methodical and stolidly business-like manner in which he set about and carried through this part of his work is calculated to shock the gushing and casual temperament of the artist of to-day.

Turner's programme in 1797 was an extensive one, and, what is much more remarkable, he carried it out. He seems to have taken the coach into Derbyshire, as he had already appropriated everything of interest in the Midland counties. He carried two sketch books with him, each bound handsomely in calf, the smaller with four heavy brass clasps, the larger with seven. The pages in the smaller book measure about  $10\frac{1}{2}$  by  $8\frac{1}{4}$  inches, those of the larger about  $14\frac{1}{2}$  by  $10\frac{1}{2}$ . Both these books are now in the National Gallery collection, and will shortly, I hope, be made accessible to students and the general public.

The campaign opens with two drawings of, I think, *Wingfield Manor*, then comes a church with a tall spire on a hill which I cannot identify; then we have one drawing of *Rotherham Bridge* with the chapel on it, then one of *Conisborough Castle*, single views of the exterior and interior of *Doncaster Church*, three different views of the ruins of *Pontefract Church*, and then two neat drawings of the *Chantry on the Bridge at Wakefield*. It is not till he gets to Kirkstall Abbey that the artist seems to pause in his breathless rush to the North. There are no less than nine drawings of this subject, all made from different points of view; one of these leaves containing the sketch of the Crypt—from which Sir John Soane's impressive water-colour was made—contains just a fragment of colour, and has been for many years among the drawings exhibited on the ground floor of the National Gallery. In this way we can follow Turner to Knaresborough, Ripon, Fountains and Easby Abbeys, Richmond, Barnard Castle, Egglestone Abbey and Durham, and then along the coast to Warkworth, Alnwick, Dunstanborough, Bamborough and Holy Island. Judging from the drawings, I think it probable that Turner spent the best part of a day at Holy Island, but he got to Berwick in time to draw a general view of the town and bridge, and to make a slight sketch with his limited gamut of colours—black, blue, and



yellow only—of the evening effect. The next morning he was up in time to see the sun rise from behind the towers of Norham Castle, and to trace a slight and hurried pencil outline of the main features of the scene. There is only this one sketch of the subject, and it does not contain the slightest suggestion of light and shade or of effect. But there were Kelso and Melrose and Dryburgh and Jedburgh Abbeys close by waiting to be drawn, and Turner evidently felt he must hurry on. Having drawn these ruins in his neat and precise way he turned south and struck into Cumberland. In the larger sketch book a drawing inscribed *Keswick* follows immediately after one of the views of *Melrose Abbey*. Then comes *Cockermouth Castle, the Borrowdale, Buttermere, St. John's Vale, Grasmere, Rydal, Langdale, and Ulleswater with Helvellyn in the distance*. Then follow in rapid succession *Ambleside Mill, Windermere, Conistone, Furness Abbey, Lancaster*, and after a single drawing of *Bolton Abbey* we find ourselves in York, where the Cathedral and the ruins of St. Mary's Abbey and Bootham Bar must have detained the artist for perhaps two or three days. The tour, however, is not yet at an end, for the Hon. Mr. Lascelles (who became Earl of Harewood in 1820) wants some drawings of Harewood House and of the ruins of Harewood Castle, and Mr. Howlett wants some subjects to engrave in his forthcoming "Views in the County of Lincoln." It is, therefore, through Howden, Louth, Boston, Sleaford, and Peterborough that Turner makes his way back to London. He must have been back by September, for among the drawings exhibited at the Royal Academy in the following May was one described as "*A Study in September of the Fern House, Mr. Lock's Park, Mickleham, Surrey*." He can, therefore, hardly have been away much more than three months, if so long, but his strenuous vacation had yielded an abundant crop of useful material.

It must have been October before Turner was fairly back in his studio in Hand Court, Maiden Lane, and had settled down to work up this material. By the following April he had four important oil paintings and six water-colours ready for the Exhibition. One of these oil paintings (the *Dunstanborough Castle*) now hangs in the Melbourne National Gallery, to which it was presented by the late Duke of Westminster; two others (*Winesdale, Yorkshire—an Autumnal Morning* and *Morning amongst the Conistone Fells*) hang in the little Octagon room in Trafalgar Square, and the fourth is on loan to the Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter. This is the *Buttermere Lake, with part of Cromack Water*, a really fine painting, though it has darkened considerably. As the first important oil painting in which Turner's genius was clearly manifested, I should rejoice to see it hanging in Trafalgar Square. The pencil drawing on which it was based contains some work in water-colour, possibly made direct from



nature, but the details and general effect have been entirely recast in the finished work. Among the water-colours were the gloomy and superb *Kirkstall Abbey*, now in the Soane Museum, to which I have already referred, and the drawing of *Norham Castle*, with which we are now more particularly concerned.

The drawing exhibited in 1798 is not the one here reproduced. The exhibited drawing is probably the one now in the possession of Mr. Laundry Walters. A photographic reproduction of it was published in Sir Walter Armstrong's "Turner" (p. 34), and it is worth pausing a moment to compare this with the original pencil sketch and to consider in exactly what relation these two drawings stand to each other.

The usual way of describing the process by which a slight sketch from nature is converted into a finished drawing is to say that the artist copied his sketch as far as it went and then relied upon his memory for the further elaboration that was required. An artist's memory is assumed to consist of images of the scenes he has witnessed, which he has some mysterious power of storing somewhere in his mind, something like, I suppose, the undeveloped exposures in a Kodak. According to this theory we should have to assume that the particular sight of the sun rising behind Norham Towers which had greeted Turner on the morning he hurried from Berwick to Kelso had been treasured up in the inner recesses of his consciousness, and then some months afterwards, when the appropriate moment came, he had only to select this particular image from among the millions of other images in the same mysterious storehouse, to develop it and copy it on to his canvas. I need hardly add that this desperate theory is quite fanciful and absurd, and in flat contradiction to the teachings of modern psychology.

A description that would not be open to such objections would run something like this: When we are dealing with the processes of artistic creation we have to assume an intelligent human agent, and analogies drawn from purely mechanical sources can only mislead us. We must not assume that an artist's senses and intellect work like the mechanism of a camera, or in any other abnormal way, unless we have some strong evidence to support us. And we must also remember that a visual image is a useful abstraction in psychology, but in the conscious life of an intelligent human being it is merely an element within the ordinary life of thought and feeling. Let us therefore assume that Turner not only made no effort to retain the exact visual impression of the scene in question, but that he did not even attempt to separate this impression from the general whole of thought and feeling in which it was experienced. The particular matter of sense-perception would then



become incorporated in the general idea or the object—in the ordinary way in which sense qualities are preserved in ideas. When Turner therefore sat down to make his picture, what he would have prominently and clearly before his mind would be a general idea of Norham Castle as a ruined border fortress, a scene of many a bloody fray and of much bygone splendour and suffering. In short, his idea would be what the art-criticism of the Henley type used to describe contemptuously as “literary”; that is, it was steeped in the colours of the historical imagination, and was practically the same as that which a man like Sir Walter Scott or any cultivated person of the present time would associate with the same object. Instead, therefore, of having a single image before his mind which he had merely to copy, Turner started with a complex idea, which might, indeed, have been expressed more or less adequately in the terms of some other art, but which he chose on this occasion to express in pictorial terms.

In this way we can understand why Turner did, as a matter of fact, frequently and constantly attempt to express his ideas in the form of verbal poetry, and why, in the drawing we are now considering, he felt himself justified not only in filling out his sketch with details that were neither there nor in the real scene, but also in taking considerable liberties with the facts contained in the sketch, altering them and falsifying them in ways that could not be defended if his aim had been to reproduce the actual scene itself. The colouring too of Mr. Walter's drawing owes much more to Turner's study of Wilson's pictures than to his visual memory of natural scenes; that is to say, the colour is used as an instrument of expression,—as a means to bring the imagination and feelings of the spectator into harmony with the artist's ideas, as well as to indicate in the clearest possible manner that it was not the artist's intention to represent the actual scene in its prosaic details.

This picture, with the others exhibited in 1798, settled the question for Turner's brother artists and for himself that he was a genuinely imaginative artist and not a merely clever topographical draughtsman. The following year he was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy, at the early age of twenty-four, and throughout his long life he always regarded himself as entitled to take any liberties with actual topographical facts that the expression of his ideas demanded.

The success of the first *Norham Castle* drawing induced Turner to repeat the subject several times. The late Mrs. Thwaites had another water-colour of it in her collection, there are at least three unfinished versions in the National Gallery, and I have seen a version of it in oil. The subject was engraved in the “Liber”



from what purported to be the picture in the possession of the Hon. Mr. Lascelles, but really from a fresh design made by the artist. Then Turner painted the subject again for Mr. Fawkes of Farnley, and again, about 1822 or 1823, he made the drawing for the "Rivers of England" series, here reproduced. What is so interesting in all this is that the details in each of these versions are different, yet they all seem to have been based on the same pencil sketch. The relative size of the castle varies in each drawing, as well as the details of its embrasures and crumbling masonry; the character of the river banks also varies. In the earlier versions the right bank is steep and rocky, as suiting the solemn and gloomy effect of the subject; in the latest version, where the humble pastoral life of the present is thrown more into prominence, this bank becomes flat and peopled with fishermen, their boats and cows.

In one of the many anecdotes told of Turner he is represented as saying to an artist who had complained of the disappointment he had experienced on revisiting a certain place, "Don't you know you must paint your impressions"—or words to that effect. I don't know how true the story is—and I may confess that I have almost got into the habit of disbelieving *all* the stories told about Turner—but whether true or not this particular anecdote is certainly well invented. Turner knew quite well how large a part his subjective feelings and ideas played in all his work, and it made him shy of revisiting places that had once impressed him. But when he spoke of his "impressions" we must be careful not to suppose that he could have used the expression in the way it is often used now. He did not abstract his particular visual impressions from the emotional and ideational context in which they were experienced. In so far as Impressionism means this kind of abstraction, Turner was never an impressionist. And as his first ideas of places were steeped in the colouring of his own subjective life, so his ideas were ever taking on different hues as his temper and character changed. In this way he could use the same sketch again and again and always get different effects from it; the sensuous datum was merely a point of departure for each fresh improvisation, a form into which he could pour his meditations, but a flexible, plastic form which readily took the shape of its spiritual content.

These considerations may help us to understand what is apt at first to strike the student of Turner's drawings and sketches as strange and incomprehensible. Turner was always sketching from nature, and often making drawings that contain an amazing wealth of detail and definition, yet the usefulness of his sketches seemed to vary in inverse ratio to their definition and to the time spent upon them. The beautiful drawings never seemed to lead to anything.



all the pictures being painted by preference from the slightest and vaguest sketches. Thus the sketch book which contains the sketch of *Norham Castle* is filled with over ninety drawings, most of them full of detail and delightfully precise and graceful in handling. Turner made good use of most of this material, but the most prolific "breeding" subject—to use one of Richard Wilson's expressions—was unquestionably the hurried scribble of *Norham*, which was so slight as not to indicate even the general shape of the ruined tower with precision, and which left the number of windows or embrasures entirely undetermined. But when we see how Turner used his sketches we can easily understand that this absence of definition must often have been a positive advantage to him when he came to paint his pictures. There was less "to put him out," fewer obstacles in the way of his subjective utterance, the form was more fluid and tractable to his immediate purpose. The more detailed studies were of course not wasted, for the knowledge they gave him enabled him to fill out the slightest hints of his "breeding" subjects with an inexhaustible wealth of plausible detail.

The National Gallery collection contains just on three hundred of Turner's sketch books, and practically the whole of his work done immediately in the presence of nature. This data enables us to speak with absolute authority upon the difficult question as to the relation between Turner's art and nature. They prove that he very seldom, if ever, painted a picture simply "out of his head." In everything he did—even, I believe, in the case of what have been called his classical nonsense pictures—there was a nucleus of immediately perceived fact. This sensuous basis is seldom, if ever, absent from his work, but it is invariably overlaid and distorted by the purely subjective forces of the artist's personality, which appropriate the data of sense, and mould them into any shape they choose. It is impossible, especially since "*Modern Painters*" was written, to overlook the important part played by natural fact in all of Turner's creations, but it is just as important not to overlook the equally obvious and certain truth that Turner never uses nature simply for its own sake, but only as a means of expression. The methods employed in the particular case we have just studied are, with few exceptions, the methods which he adopted during the whole of his career.

Yet Turner did undoubtedly upon occasion paint in oil directly from nature. An instance of this kind is described by Sir Charles Eastlake in "*Thornbury*" (p. 153, 3rd edition). Eastlake met Turner during his second visit to Devonshire, probably in the summer of 1813, and accompanied him to a cottage near Calstock, the residence of Eastlake's aunt, where they stayed for a few days.



Another artist was with them, a Mr. Ambrose Johns, of Plymouth. It was during their rambles in the neighbourhood of Calstock that Turner gathered the material for his picture of "*Crossing the Brook*." Eastlake says that "Turner made his sketches in pencil and by stealth," that is to say, he did not like to have people looking over his shoulder while he was at work. The sketch book Turner used on this occasion is with the others in the National Gallery. But after the three artists had returned to Plymouth, "in the neighbourhood of which he (Turner) remained some weeks, Mr. Johns fitted up a small portable painting-box, containing some prepared paper for oil sketches, as well as the other necessary materials. When Turner halted at a scene and seemed inclined to sketch it, Johns produced the inviting box, and the great artist, finding everything ready to his hand, immediately began to work. As he sometimes wanted assistance in the use of the box, the presence of Johns was indispensable, and after a few days he made his oil sketches freely in our presence. Johns accompanied him always; I was only with them occasionally. Turner seemed pleased when the rapidity with which those sketches were done was talked of; for, departing from his habitual reserve in the instance of his pencil sketches, he made no difficulty of showing them. On one occasion, when, on his return after a sketching ramble to a country residence belonging to my father, near Plympton, the day's work was shown, he himself remarked that one of the sketches (and perhaps the best) was done in less than half an hour." "On my enquiring afterwards," Sir Charles Eastlake adds, "what had become of those sketches, Turner replied that they were worthless, in consequence, as he supposed, of some defect in the preparation of the paper; all the grey tints, he observed, had nearly disappeared. Although I did not implicitly rely on that statement, I do not remember to have seen any of them afterwards."

There are about a dozen small oil sketches of Devonshire subjects in the National Gallery, which are doubtless part of those made under the circumstances described by Sir Charles Eastlake. They are made on a brownish millboard, prepared with a thin coating of paint and size. On the back of one of them there happens to be some lettering showing that Johns had laid violent hands on the covers of some parts of William Young Ottley's "*British Gallery of Pictures*," then being issued serially. Several of these paintings have long been hung among the exhibited drawings; e.g., Nos. 746, 750, 754, 758, and one, No. 849, which has somehow got the obviously incorrect title of *Bridge over River Lugwy, Capel Curig*. These paintings have undoubtedly sunk very much into the absorbent millboard, thus proving that Turner's remark to



Eastlake about the disappearance of the grey tints—which he “did not implicitly rely on”—was justified. But otherwise the work is in good condition, and I have very little doubt that when Mr. Buttery comes to take them in hand, he will be able to bring them back to something like their original freshness. The chief point of interest with regard to them, from our present point of view, is the curious fact that Turner does not seem to have made the slightest use of them in any of the Devonshire pictures he painted on his return. He evidently found his tiny little pencil sketches much more suggestive and adaptable to his purposes. Even the large oil picture of *Crossing the Brook* is based entirely on his slight and rapidly made little pencil notes. Another point of interest is that even when painting in oil face to face with nature he did not merely copy what he had in front of him. As our illustration shows, these sketches are as carefully composed as his pictures. They are indeed only technically sketches from nature; in reality they are designs for pictures or pictures in miniature, though they happen to have been painted out of doors. Even in working direct from nature Turner remained firmly entrenched in his artistic position as the master of nature. He still retained his power of selection, taking what suited his purpose, ignoring the rest, and supplementing from the stores of his own knowledge what for his purpose were the defects of the momentary image before his eyes.

The fact that Turner always worked in this way makes it exceedingly difficult to separate his sketches from nature from the studies or designs for his pictures. Throughout his sketch books and amongst his loose drawings there are a large number of sketches in colour, and one's first impulse is to assume that these were made immediately from nature. But careful observation shows that Turner was in the constant habit of working over his pencil sketches in colour when away from the scenes he had depicted. In this way the beautiful little sketch of “*Edinburgh from St. Margaret's Loch*,” here reproduced (Plate VI.), is much more probably the draft of a picture the artist had in his mind's eye than a study from nature. But the point whether such a drawing was made “on the spot” or not is relatively unimportant; what is more important is to realise how very small a part the merely imitative or representative study of the colour and tone (as opposed to form) of nature played in Turner's work. His colour is never merely descriptive. The whole bent of his mind is so essentially pictorial that, whether he works face to face with nature or from what is loosely called “memory,” his slightest sketch as well as his most elaborate work is always an attempt to express a subjective conception, and never a merely literal transcript of what is given in sense-perception.



Perhaps the most important group of drawings in the national collection are those which Turner made during the last ten years of his working life, *i.e.*, between 1835 and 1845. These drawings were not made for sale or for exhibition, hence Mr. Ruskin's description of them as "delight drawings," because they were done entirely for the artist's own pleasure and delight. Several of them are reproduced in this volume, among them the beautiful sketch of "*Lucerne*" (Plate XXI.) realized for Mr. Ruskin in 1842, the almost equally fine "*Bellinzona, from the road to Locarno*" (Plate XXIV.), and "*Zurich*" (Plate XXVII.).

These inimitable and delightful sketches have been very widely admired, as they deserve to be, but they have also been praised, somewhat perversely as it seems to me, for their truth and accuracy of representation. As Mr. Ruskin has pointed out, these sketches "are not, strictly speaking, sketches from nature; but plans or designs of pictures which Turner, if he had had time, would have made of each place. They indicate, therefore, a perfectly formed conception of the finished picture; and they are of exactly the same value as memoranda would be, if made by Turner's own hand, of pictures of his not in our possession. They are just to be regarded as quick descriptions or reminiscences of noble pictures." Mr. Ruskin is also unquestionably correct when he adds "that nothing but the pencilling in them was done on the spot, and not always that. Turner used to walk about a town with a roll of thin paper in his pocket, and make a few scratches upon a sheet or two of it, which were so much shorthand indication of all he wished to remember. When he got to his inn in the evening, he completed the pencilling rapidly, and added as much colour as was needed to record his plan of the picture" ("Ruskin on Pictures," pp. 86-7).

It is not my intention now to dwell upon the beauty of these incomparable drawings, on their passionate intensity and emotional sincerity, their nervous eloquence and elusive suggestiveness. The point I wish to insist on at present is that they must not be regarded as attempts to reproduce or imitate the merely superficial qualities of physical nature, as attempts to give an accurate representation of effects of air or light, or of the shapes and forms of mountain, water or cloud. The artist is not immersed in the definite character of physical objects. He seems to feel that as a spiritual and self-conscious being he is something higher than the merely natural, and it is as modes of expression of human freedom and self-consciousness that these lyrical fragments must be regarded.

The colour and tone of Turner's work must therefore be taken as strictly ideal, that is, as a medium of subjective expression, as a mode of spiritual manifestation, and not as an attempt to represent



the merely abstract qualities of sense-perception. And what is true of Turner's colour and tone is also true of his form. I doubt if he ever made a tolerably careful and elaborate drawing of a natural scene from the beginning to the end of his long career—nearly all his elaborate drawings being of architectural subjects. But instead of the prosaic and plodding drawings that other artists make (see, for example, the elaborate pencil studies of trees by Constable in the Victoria and Albert Museum), we find hundreds and hundreds of nervous, eager pencil sketches. When we come to study these ravishing sketches with care we make the astonishing discovery that the bugbear of the drawing school, the prosaic accumulation of particular physical facts known in art academies as "nature," is simply a hideous abstraction of the theoretical mind. Nature, in this sense of the word, never existed for Turner. The world he saw around him was replete with intelligence, was permeated with spirit; where other artists see only the bare, unrelated physical fact and sensuous surface, his mind is already busy with the inner and invisible significance, and his cunning hand is instantly shaping forth a pictorial embodiment of his own insight and passionate convictions.

On the whole, then, this was Turner's consistent attitude towards nature, though of course, in his earlier years, his sketches were comparatively less swift and eloquent than they afterwards became. And there was indeed a short period during which the merely physical fact was forced into undue prominence. This period culminated in the first visit to Italy in 1819–1820. Here the novelty of the scenery and buildings stimulated the thirst for detailed observation which had been gradually growing on Turner during the previous six or seven years. But in England the very quickness and strength of his intuitions had always prevented the desire for precise observation from gaining the upper hand. In Italy his powers of intuition were useless. He was disoriented. Everything disconcerted and thwarted him. His rapid glance no longer penetrated to the inner essence of the scenes around him. He did not understand the people and their ways, and their relation to their surroundings. For a time he seemed to become less certain than usual of his artistic mission. But he set to work with his usual pluck and energy to assimilate his strange surroundings by tireless observation of the outside. The result was a vast accumulation of disorganized or of only partially organized impressions.

It is conceded on all hands that Turner's artistic work went all to pieces as a result of his Italian experiences. The *Bay of Baia* contains faults altogether new in his completed works. Even the feeblest of his earlier works had been animated by some central idea or emotion, to which all the parts were subordinated, and which



infused into them whatever of life or significance they possessed. In the *Bay of Baïæ* the artist has an unusual quantity of material on his hands, but he can neither find nor invent a pictorial idea to give coherence to his disconnected observations. The picture is made up of bits of visual experiences elaborately dovetailed into one another, but which absolutely refuse to combine into any kind of conceptual unity.

Yet if we confine our attention to the merely formal and abstract side of art, there is assuredly much to move us even to enthusiastic admiration among the immense quantity of sketches accumulated during this Italian visit. The very fact that Turner's inspiration was checked prevented his sketches from possessing their wonted rudimentary or forward-pointing character. Instead of being hasty drafts of the pictures that thronged instantly into his mind upon contact with the scenes of his native land, they became more like the drawings which less completely equipped creative artists are in the habit of making; they became "studies" in the modern use of the term. The conditions of their production gave full play to Turner's marvellous powers of draughtsmanship and formal design. Before drawings like *Rome from Monte Mario* who can help waxing enthusiastic over the exquisitely deft and graceful play of hand, the subtle observation and the almost superhuman mastery of the design? No wonder Mr. Ruskin has declared that "no drawings in the world are to be named with these . . . as lessons in landscape drawing" ("Ruskin on Pictures," p. 157). But before assenting wholly to this dictum we must remember that, in spite of all their attractiveness, Turner found these drawings worse than useless for his general artistic purposes, and that only bad and foolish pictures came from them; and the more carefully we study the matter the more clearly do we see that nothing but bad and foolish pictures could come from work in which the spirit of curiosity and of cold and accurate observation is predominant.

We have fixed our attention thus far upon the sketches and drawings made from nature in the National Gallery collection, to the exclusion of the finished water-colours. This may seem all the more inexcusable, as I have preferred to treat these sketches rather with regard to their bearing upon the artist's finished work—as stages in the development of the complete work of art—than as independent productions which can be accepted entirely for their own sake. But in a short paper like the present it is impossible to do justice to all the sides of such an important collection as the Drawings of the Turner Bequest. Numerically, the finished drawings form only a small fraction of the whole collection—about two hundred out of a total of over 20,000 drawings. Among them are about two-thirds of the "Rivers of France" drawings, and most of the "Ports" and



"Rivers of England," and Rogers's "Vignettes." These drawings were engraved during Turner's lifetime and under his active superintendence ; they are, therefore, amongst the best known of his works. The whole of the finished drawings have, moreover, been constantly on exhibition for more than fifty years. There remains, therefore, little either of praise or blame to be said of them that has not already been said many times. While, on the other hand, the studies and sketches are only now on the point of being made accessible to the public.

The practically complete series of Turner's sketches and studies from nature seems to call for comprehensive treatment. Their careful study throws a wholly new and unexpected light upon the fundamental and essential qualities of Turner's attitude towards nature, and therefore upon the essential character and limitations of his art. Or where the light is not altogether unexpected—as it would not be perhaps in the case of a diligent and methodical student of Turner's completed works—the sketches amplify and illustrate in an abundant and forcible way what before could only have been surmised. I propose, therefore, to devote the remainder of my limited space to an attempt to indicate as briefly as possible the main features of Turner's conception of nature, as it is revealed in his sketches, and to point out its importance both for the proper understanding of his finished work and for its bearing upon some adverse criticisms that have been brought against his work.

In my opening remarks I ventured to contrast Turner's attitude towards nature with the attitude of the majority of contemporary artists. My intention in thus opposing these two different methods of work was not to suggest that one of them was either right or wrong in itself, or that one way was necessarily better or worse than the other. My intention was exactly the opposite. There is not one type of art production to which all artists must conform, and two totally different methods of procedure may each be positively right and equally valid. I will even go farther than this and confess that I regard the present-day method of working from nature as the only right and proper way of attaining the results that are aimed at. But it is the result, the purpose of the artist, that justifies the means, and this applies with just as much force to Turner's way of working as to the modern way. To condemn Turner's procedure, therefore, simply because it differs from that now in vogue, would be as unwise and unfair as to condemn the modern way because it differed from his. Different conceptions of the aim and scope of art involve different attitudes towards nature, and necessitate different methods of study.

Let us begin with the current conception—the conception of the landscape artist of to-day and of the public for which he works. The



aim of this art is what is called "naturalness," that is, the picture should be made to look as much like nature as possible. The standard of excellence here is just the ordinary common appearance of physical reality. A picture that looks like nature is good, and one that looks "unnatural" is therefore bad. This kind of art is capable of giving a great deal of innocent pleasure to people who like to be reminded of scenes they love or are interested in. But it has its limits. It cannot go beyond the bare physical world. And it is bound to treat even this limited area of experience from a strictly limited point of view. It is bound to take the physical world as something which exists in entire independence of the spectator, as something which is indeed given in sense-perception, but which the spectator emphatically finds and does not make. Now so far as we take nature in this sense we have to do with an external power which is utterly indifferent to our merely human aims and purposes, and the artist can only look upon himself as a passive recipient, a *tabula rasa*, on which external nature is reflected. This is the standpoint of the prosaic intelligence, the level upon which much of the ordinary reflection and discussion of the day moves.

But man is not really a passive mirror in which a foreign nature is reflected, nor is he satisfied merely to submit himself to natural influences and vicissitudes. Man is never really satisfied to take the world as he finds it, but sets to work to transform it into what he feels it ought to be. The social and political world, with its realms of morality, art and religion, came into existence as a protest against the merely natural. In this world, created and sustained by human intelligence and will, the physical world is not abolished or destroyed, but it is transformed into a more or less willing accomplice of a strange and higher power. It is in this new form which nature assumes under the sway of intelligence and will that we find it in Turner's works.\* In his presence the external world loses its stubborn indifference to human aims and becomes saturated with purely human aspiration and emotion. Its colours and shapes cease to belong to the merely physical world. They become instead the garment in which the inward spiritual nature of the artist robes itself. Nature in this new aspect is no longer a merely hostile and mechanical system of laws; a soul has been breathed into it which we recognize as identical with our own.

Now it is evident that these two kinds of art, the passive and

---

\* Turner's conception of nature, I may remark, is identical with that of Sir Joshua Reynolds, who says: "My notion of nature comprehends not only the forms which nature produces, but also the nature and internal fabric and organisation . . . of the human mind and imagination." (Seventh Discourse.)



the active, with their totally dissimilar aims, cannot and ought not to represent nature in the same way. The art which uses nature as a medium for the expression of ideas and feelings cannot attain its object by representing physical objects in the simple and direct way appropriate to the art which aims merely at naturalness. The artist's intention must make itself manifest even in the manner in which he represents physical objects,—indeed, he has no other way of expressing his ideas. The active or creative artist will therefore make it clear that he has broken entirely with the disconnected, accidental and prosaic look of everyday existence which it is the one aim of the passive artist to retain.

From this point of view the charges that are often brought against Turner, that his colour is forced and unnatural, will leave us cold and indifferent. To make such an objection is merely a proof of mental confusion. The creative artist *must* break with the prosaic vision of nature, if only to make it evident that his objects are not there for their own sake and for their immediate effect, but to call forth a response and echo in the mind of the observer. Turner's colour—"dyed in the ardours of the atmosphere"—is one of his most potent instruments of expression, and must be judged as we judge, let us say, the verbal magic of Shelley's verse, as a work of free beauty, fashioned in response to the deepest and truest cravings of man's nature.

That Turner's art moves mainly among the highest interests of man's spiritual nature accounts to some extent for the pre-eminent position he now occupies among modern artists. It is always as an artist conscious of man's high destiny that he claims to be judged, and though he often stumbled and his hand faltered, he never once sank to the level of the passive and prosaic imitator of nature's finitude. This is not the place to inquire minutely into Turner's failings and shortcomings, nor to study their connection with the innumerable masterpieces in which he dared and sometimes attained the very highest of which art is capable. An adequate discussion of the subtle inter-connection of Turner's triumphs and failings would involve the raising of questions of which English criticism seems to prefer to remain in happy ignorance. I cannot therefore attempt to justify my conviction that he is not only the greatest artist our nation has yet produced, but also one of the greatest of modern artists, a man we must rank with Rembrandt and Jean François Millet. But this at least will be generally conceded, that he fully deserves that consideration and sympathy, which the ready instinct of mankind reserves for those who devote themselves without stint and without measure to the highest and most difficult tasks.

A. J. FINBERG.