

Visionary landscapes, intricate miniatures & exquisite flowers - Fitzwilliam exhibits rarely seen watercolours

Watercolour: Elements of nature

16 June to 27 September

Free admission, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Rarely exhibited and in superb condition, the collection of watercolours in the Fitzwilliam Museum is one of the finest in the world. The exhibition explores the versatility of watercolour: showing its unique ability to capture the fleeting effects and elemental forces of nature, but also how it was used to observe the natural world in minute detail. At the same time its transparent films of colour wash offer a glimpse into the visionary world of the imagination.

The exhibition includes works by great masters of the medium from its origins to the 20th century, with portrait miniatures by Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver, flower drawings by Pierre-Joseph Redouté, as well as a series of stunning landscape watercolours by John Constable, Peter de Wint, John Sell Cotman, Samuel Palmer, J. M. Whistler, John Singer Sargent, Paul Cézanne, Camille Pissarro and Paul Nash.

From medieval times, artists have valued watercolour for its delicacy and luminosity, as well as for its intimacy. The earliest portrait miniatures were painted at the beginning of the 16th century by artists known as 'limners', trained as manuscript illuminators with experience of working on vellum (animal skin). Soon across Europe it would be accepted above all for botanical drawing and wildlife illustration.

The mid 18th to the mid 19th century in Britain was a Golden Age. Styles for landscapes changed from broad washy brush strokes to incredible precision as watercolour began to compete with oil painting. It was adopted by the Romantic movement to capture the sublime effects of the elements – Turner was absorbed in capturing the play of light on water in Venice and artists such as Cotman recorded the rapidly changing moods of nature with landscapes that still fascinate and delight.

Watercolour looks easy but is formidably difficult to master, requiring patient planning and deft handling of the loaded brush. Despite this, it is an art form which from at least the 16th century was continuously recommended to amateur practitioners, lauded for being sufficiently neat as well as



Shakespeare Cliff, Dover, 1825, J.M.W Turner



Guidecca, John Singer Sargent



Still-life flowers in a jar (unfinished) (detail), c.1890, Paul Cézanne

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rewarding and soothing. Illustrated books such as David Cox's *Progressive Technique in Landscape* helped amateur painters replicate details. Most leading landscape painters, such as Peter de Wint, John Ruskin and David Cox, were involved in some form of teaching for most of their careers; the majority, too, hated it. John Sell Cotman routinely bemoaned the 'sorry drudgery' of his teaching responsibilities in Norwich and London.

The exhibition will also show the materials used by artists over the centuries. In the 16th and 17th centuries, artists obtained dry pigments - mostly derived from minerals, plants, natural earths and insects - from the apothecary. These were mixed with a binder such as gum arabic in mussel shells. Later inventions included the revolutionary development in 1781 of small hard cakes of soluble colours. Windsor and Newton created moist colours, first in porcelain pans, then in metal tubes: some of their secret recipe books from the 19th century will be on show.

Later painters would come to appreciate the informality of watercolour. It was well attuned to a generation of artists seeking, like Cézanne, to record the subjective feeling, or 'sensation', they experienced before nature. Some like Signac, Steer and Whistler positively relished its proto-abstract qualities.

The Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Tim Knox said: "This will be an utterly ravishing exhibition, for the Fitzwilliam Museum can show the grand sweep of watercolour painting that few other museums can rival. From the bejewelled miniatures of Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver, through masterpieces by Turner, Cotman and Girtin, to rapidly executed, virtuoso performances in coloured wash by John Singer Sargent, these watercolours are only rarely shown precisely because they are so delicate and vulnerable to damage from exposure to light."

The exhibition will be complemented by an exhibition in the Shiba Gallery of watercolours by J.M.W. Turner, many given to the Museum by his greatest champion, John Ruskin. *Watercolour: Elements of Nature* opens at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge on June 16. Admission is free.

- Ends -

For further information and images contact the Press Office:
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Notes to editors:

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB
FREE ADMISSION

OPEN: Tuesday - Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00
Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 - 17.00
CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January and Good Friday.

Complementary exhibition: *Ruskin's Turners* | 16 June - 4 October 2015

The twenty-five Turner watercolours gifted to the Fitzwilliam in 1861 by John Ruskin will be shown together in their own exhibition. The Turner collection was devised as a teaching aid for students at the University of Cambridge. It illustrates the artist's various types of work throughout his career from the ages of around seventeen to sixty-eight, including book illustration, architectural drawings and landscapes. Ruskin was one of the first collectors to recognize and take action the damaging effect of light on works on paper, ensuring that works he owned were kept in the dark in mahogany cases. His concern for the Fitzwilliam collection of Turners was such that as part of his gift he imposed terms that that they may never be lent outside the Museum.

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. The Fitzwilliam's collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of applied arts, ceramics, coins, and Asian arts. The Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation. www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

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