

## The Making of the English Landscape; from Isaac Oliver to Spencer Gore

**Isaac Oliver** (c. 1565 – 1617) was a painter of portrait miniatures. Born in Rouen, he moved to London in 1568 with his Huguenot parents to escape the Wars of Religion in France.



**Edward Herbert 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Herbert of Cherbury**  
c. 1613-14

Here the Noble lord is seen resting at the edge of a wood, as if on a bed. The landscape is like a stage set, fabricated in simplified tones of green and blue. It is there as background to give a lyrical setting to the figure, which looks as though painted indoors in even light. Although it is a bright summery day there is no sense of light falling through the trees onto the reclining figure.

Except for his shield he has removed his armour. In the background his squire tends to the horses and hangs the armour on a tree. We are reminded that at this time the country beyond the city and its cultivated fields was a place of mystery, wild animals and possible dangers.

**Sir Anthony van Dyck** (1599 – 1641) was a Flemish Baroque artist who became the leading court painter in England after success in the Southern Netherlands and Italy.

### ***Equestrian Portrait of Charles I*** c.1637-8

King Charles is shown seated on a horse on high ground overlooking the English countryside. It is a wide view with deep space to the distant blue horizon. The darkening sky and the yellow tinge to the clouds suggest that it is late afternoon with evening coming on. Based on studies and deriving from the Dutch tradition of landscape painting it would have been composed in the studio. We can imagine the king sitting for his portrait astride a wooden frame. The armour would have been added from separate studies, or maybe worn by a studio assistant. Likewise the anatomically implausible horse would have been invented from separate studies.



Van Dyck's success led him to maintain a large workshop in London, which became "virtually a production line for portraits". According to a visitor he usually only made a drawing on paper, which was then enlarged onto canvas by an assistant; he then

Painted the head himself. The costume in which the client wished to be painted was left at the studio and often with the unfinished canvas sent out to artists specialised in rendering such clothing.



**Sir Peter Lely** (1618 – 1680) was a painter of Dutch origin whose career was nearly all spent in England, where he became the dominant portrait painter to the court. He arrived in London in around 1643. His early English paintings, mainly mythological or religious scenes, or portraits set in a pastoral landscape, show influences from Anthony van Dyck and the Dutch baroque.

### ***Frances Stewart, Duchess of Richmond as Diana*** before 1662

Set in an English pastoral landscape with lowering skies, Lady Stewart carries a bow and is represented as the Greek goddess Diana. Coming from the Dutch tradition of landscape painting Lely would probably have made sketches on the spot in the

countryside, and from this experience and a large reservoir of studies put together his landscape backgrounds.

Frances Stewart was one of the Windsor Beauties, a famous collection of portraits by Sir Peter Lely, painted in the early to mid-1660s, that depict ladies of the court of King Charles II, some of whom were his mistresses.

### van Dyck, *Cupid and Psyche* 1638

One of the last works in van Dyck's oeuvre, *Cupid and Psyche* shows a marked influence of Titian.

The mythological couple are shown in a generalised Northern European landscape; however, the lighting on the figures appears to be unmodulated by atmosphere as if posing in a studio. The landscape background forms a backdrop for the drama before us.

**Alexander Cozens** (1717–1786) was a landscape painter in watercolours. He taught drawing and wrote treatises on the subject, evolving a method in which imaginative drawings of landscapes could be worked up from abstract blots on paper.



### *Vale Near Matlock* 1756

In 1746 Cozens went to Italy, where he spent two years before travelling onward to England. While in Rome, he worked in the studio of the French landscape painter, Claude-Joseph Vernet. His studies from this time show that Cozens was a well-trained artist who observed nature and was not without poetical feeling.

This painting of an English scene at sunset shows an Italianate landscape style and lighting influenced by Claude Lorraine's paintings of the Roman Campagna. Although the lonely figure on the path introduces an element of storytelling it gives scale to the scene, and here we see the introduction of

landscape as the principal subject into British art.

From 1763 to 1768 he was drawing-master at Eton College. He gave lessons to the Prince of Wales, Sir George Beaumont and William Beckford, arguably, the three most important British art patrons and collectors of their generation. Beckford continued to correspond with him for some years.

In 1785 Cozens published a pamphlet on his manner of drawing landscapes from blots, called *A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape*. Cozens defined a blot as "a production of chance with a small degree of design" and acknowledged the influence on his ideas of a passage in Leonardo da Vinci's *Treatise on Painting*, which recommends that artists should look for inspiration in stains or marks on old walls.

Henry Angelo, who was his pupil at Eton, described Cozens' unusual method of teaching in his *Reminiscences*:



*Cozens dashed out upon several pieces of paper a series of accidental smudges and blots in black, brown, and grey, which being floated on, he impressed again upon other paper, and by the exercise of his fertile imagination, and a certain degree of ingenious coaxing, converted into romantic rocks, woods, towers, steeples, cottages, rivers, fields, and water-falls. Blue and grey blots formed the mountains, clouds, and skies'. An improvement on this plan was to splash the bottoms of earthenware plates with these blots, and to stamp impressions therefrom on sheets of damped paper.*

Joseph Wright of Derby was influenced by Cozens, owned paintings by him, and used his ideas as inspiration for his compositions. He also described the technique Cozens recommended for creation from blots.

**Richard Wilson** (1714 – 1782) was an influential Welsh landscape painter, who worked in Britain and Italy. With George Lambert he is recognised as a pioneer in British art of landscape for its own sake and was described in the Welsh Academy Encyclopedia of Wales as the "most distinguished painter Wales has ever produced and the first to appreciate the aesthetic possibilities of his country."



**Lake Avernus I** c. 1765

From 1750 to 1757 Wilson was in Italy, and became a landscape painter on the advice of Francesco Zuccarelli. Painting in Italy and afterwards in Britain, he was the first major British painter to concentrate on landscape.

In this painting of Lake Avernus in the Campania region of southern Italy an artist, probably himself, is working on a large canvas, depicting a scene with ancient ruins. A man seated at his side observes the work in progress. This is a visual statement from an artist insisting that landscapes must be done in open air. The painter of human likenesses had become a portraitist of nature as it really is, the first in

Western art to commune so deeply with its delicate nuances. Wilson takes note of the topography, if rather loosely, as was his habit. But his response to nature revealed in this picture was extraordinarily sensitive. He was the first in European art to bring this kind of exquisite attention to the reflections of a monument in the water,

He composed well, but saw and rendered only the general effects of nature, thereby creating a personal, ideal style influenced by Claude Lorraine and the Dutch landscape tradition. John Ruskin wrote that Wilson "paints in a manly way, and occasionally reaches exquisite tones of colour". He concentrated on painting idealised Italianate landscapes and landscapes based upon classical literature, but when his painting, *The Destruction of the Children of Niobe* (c.1759–60), won acclaim, he gained many commissions from landowners seeking classical portrayals of their estates. Among Wilson's pupils was the painter Thomas Jones. His landscapes were acknowledged as an influence by Constable, John Crome and Turner.

**Llyn-y-Cau, Cader Idris** c. 1774

This picture shows the lake of Llyn-y-Cau, on the mountain of Cader Idris in North Wales. The 'discovery' of such rugged and uncultivated scenery was greatly stimulated by the taste for the sublime: previously it would have seemed only raw and disorderly. Richard Wilson was one of the first to adapt the conventions of landscape painting to this sort of scenery, and was a major



influence on other artists, including Turner. However, Wilson has still invented landscape features and heightened the precipice at the rear of the composition (Craig-y-Cau) to create a more simplified and balanced composition.

**Thomas Gainsborough** (1727 – 1788) was a portrait and landscape painter, draughtsman, and printmaker. Along with Sir Joshua Reynolds he is considered one of the most important British artists of the second half of the 18th century. He painted quickly, and the works of his maturity are characterised by a light palette and easy strokes. Despite being a prolific portrait painter, Gainsborough gained greater satisfaction from his landscapes. He is credited (with Richard Wilson) as the originator of the 18th-century British landscape school. Gainsborough was a founding member of the Royal Academy.



***Cornard Wood, near Sudbury, Suffolk, 1748***

Gainsborough wrote that *Cornard Wood* was “actually painted at Sudbury, in the year 1748”, while he was still learning his craft.

Cornard Wood is on the outskirts of the village of Great Cornard, two miles from Sudbury, where Gainsborough was born. The view is taken from Abbas Hall, looking towards the village of Great Henny. The church of St Mary's Great Henny appears in the background, our eyes led to it by the path winding through the wood.

Cornard Wood was common land, and villagers had ancient rights to gather wood, graze animals, dig marl for manure and sand for building materials, take the path to Great Henny, or just to stroll

there. In Gainsborough's painting we see many of these activities.

Gainsborough was later famously given to complaining that well-paid portrait work kept him away from his true love of landscape painting.

### ***Mr and Mrs Andrews* c. 1750**

A young, recently married couple are portrayed resting on a walk and surveying their farmland. Most of the land in the picture was owned by them. Robert was a keen farmer and it may have been his idea to include the neat parallel rows of corn produced by Jethro Tull's revolutionary and controversial seed drill which show that this is a thoroughly modern and efficient farm. Such details are not typical of Gainsborough's landscapes, but rather anticipate the work of John Constable who was born some 25 years later. In fact the whole wheat field has been brought far closer to the house than would really have been the case; it is “invented,” or transposed from further away. The portraits would have been painted indoors and her somewhat stiff figure was probably painted from a dressed artist's mannequin. He is dressed in a loose hunting coat with dangling bags for gunpowder and shot. hunting garb. He carries his gun and is accompanied by his hunting dog. Frances wears an informal summer suit, informal mules and a straw hat.



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The church glimpsed in the middle of the work is All Saints, Sudbury, where the couple had been married. The small tower in the left background is that of Holy Trinity Church in Long Melford. On the right hand side the barns of the home farm of Frances's childhood home at Ballington Hall can be seen; such an identifiable and accurately depicted location is unusual in Gainsborough's work, and was probably also a specific request of the sitters. Their house, also called Auberies, would be in their sight in the portrait, behind the viewer to his right, and much closer than the picture implies. The oak tree in

front of which the Andrews pose has several connotations beyond the choice of location: Englishness, stability and continuity, and a sense of successive generations taking over the family business. The landed gentry had been compared to the oak, holding Britain together. The oak tree still survives, now considerably larger.

The work is an unusual combination of two common types of painting of the period: a double portrait, and a landscape view of the English countryside. The striking combination of these two different genres, side-by-side in this extended horizontal format is unique in Gainsborough's oeuvre, and extremely rare for other painters.

**Paul Sandby** (1731–1809) was an English map-maker turned landscape painter in watercolours. His paintings have the look of topographical studies, depicting accurately the details of the buildings. However, variations in the angles and placement of the buildings suggest that they are put together rather than painted entirely on the spot.

Following the suppression of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, Sandby was employed to assist in the military survey of the new road to Fort George, and of the northern and western parts of the Highlands. He was later appointed draughtsman to the survey. While undertaking this commission, which included preparing designs for new bridges and fortifications, he began producing watercolour landscapes documenting the changes in Scotland since the rebellion, and making sketches of Scottish events such as the hanging in Edinburgh of soldier-turned-forger John Young in 1751.



***Windsor Castle View of the Round and Devils Towers from the Black Rock***

He left his post with the survey in 1751, and spent some time living with his brother, who had been appointed Deputy Ranger of Windsor Great Park. There he assisted his brother, and made a series of drawings of the castle, the town, and its neighbourhood. His skills were applauded by fellow artists such as Thomas Gainsborough who declared: if one wanted "real Views from Nature in this Country", there was no better artist than Sandby, who frequently "employ'd his pencil that way."

***Windsor Castle from Datchet Lane on a rejoicing night 1768***

This view (or 'prospect') appears to be taken from the same promenade as the study by daylight but the buildings are in different positions, so is probably composed from a number of on the spot sketches and a memory of the event.



***An Unfinished View of the West Gate, Canterbury***  
1780-85



Detail

The sketchiness of line, alterations and double lines of this study indicate that it was probably made on the spot and partly finished in the studio.

**Joseph Wright** (1734 – 1797), styled **Joseph Wright of Derby**, was an English landscape and portrait painter. He has been acclaimed as "the first professional painter to express the spirit of the Industrial Revolution."

Wright is notable for his use of chiaroscuro effect, which emphasises the contrast of light and dark, and, for his paintings of candle-lit subjects. His paintings of the birth of science out of alchemy, often based on the meetings of the Lunar Society of Birmingham - a group of scientists and industrialists living in the English Midlands - are a significant record of the struggle of science against religious values in the period known as the Age of Enlightenment.

Derby was a place that was fast becoming a hub of the Industrial Revolution following the construction of Arkwright's Mills in Cromford in 1771. The friends that Wright had in the town, were his safe haven.



**Arkwright's Mills** 1795-6

Depicting the world's first water-powered cotton mill at Cromford this painting is a key record of the changes that the early Industrial Revolution wrought on the landscape of Derbyshire. It was presumably commissioned by Arkwright, who is generally considered to be the father of the modern industrial factory system.

The factory is shown sitting easily in its location, with its accompanying canal and aqueduct carrying the water across the road, the wheelhouse and workers' accommodation (?) as if a natural part of the English landscape. A horse-drawn carriage on the road contrasts

the modern industrial installation with the old form of transport.

Thomas Smith had executed two detailed topographical views of a Shropshire industrial site as early as 1758, Edward Penny exhibited *The Gossiping Blacksmith* at the Royal Academy's inaugural exhibition in 1769; and Sandby and Ibbetson made numerous sketches of mines, coal-pits and factories in the North of England. Wright was, however, was the first artist of his generation to explore the full potential of contemporary industrial scenes as a subject for serious academic art.

**Francis Towne** (1739 or 1740 – 1816) was a British water-colour painter of landscapes that range from the English Lake District to Naples and Rome.

In 1780 he travelled to Italy. His works from this trip include over 200 sheets, and 54 large views of Rome which emphasize the ancient ruins rather than the post-classical sights or the contemporary life of the city. These 54 were later exhibited as a group in 1805 but never sold; he painted copies of them instead when he got commissions. Many were reworked later, starting around 1800, in the heavier and more conventional style he had by then adopted. At his death Towne left the group to the British Museum where they remain.

### **On The Dart**

On his return to Devon, he was asked to paint some views in Devon and North Wales, and in 1786 he went on a painting tour of the Lake District.

In this painting of a fast flowing river the height of the background hills is exaggerated for dramatic effect. Towne's characteristic style of clearly delineated shapes and subtly variegated colouring is evident in this painting; although there is a greater contrast of tone than is typical of his work.





### **Ambleside** 1786

In this painting Towne divides the surface into horizontal bands, with a strong diagonal leading the eye in from the bottom right. The hills rising up to the top edge, leaving little suggestion of sky, and the close tones and subtly variegated hues have the effect of flattening the view and bringing it up to the picture plane; much in the manner of twentieth century abstract painting.

He remained an obscure figure until the early 20th century, so that the collector Paul Oppé was able to acquire numbers of important works very cheaply. Oppé was greatly impressed, especially with Towne's elegant and somewhat stylised early manner, which chimed with trends in English painting at the time, "the taste of our own century for flat colourful pattern-making", as Andrew Wilton put it in 1993.

From January 2016, the British Museum held an exhibition of the watercolours he painted in Rome, and art critic Jonathan Jones commented:

*Francis Towne, who failed 11 times to get elected to the Royal Academy but had the foresight to leave these watercolours to the British Museum when he died in 1816, may not be a famous British artist. He is, however, as this entrancing exhibition reveals, a great one.*

**John Crome** (1768 – 1821) was an English landscape artist and one of the principal artists and founding members of the Norwich School of painters. He lived in Norwich for all his life and most of his works are Norfolk landscapes.

### **The River Wensum, Norwich** c 1814

The **Norwich School of painters** was the first provincial art movement established in Britain. Artists of the school were inspired by the natural environment of the Norfolk landscape and owed some influence to the work of landscape painters of the Dutch Golden Age such as Hobbema and Ruisdale.

It was founded in 1803 by John Crome and Robert Ladbrooke as a club where artists could meet to exchange ideas. Its aims were "an enquiry into the rise, progress and present state of painting, architecture, and sculpture, with a view to point out the best methods of study to attain the greater perfection in these arts."



The leading light of the movement was John Crome who attracted many friends and pupils until his death in 1821. The mantle of leadership then fell on John Sell Cotman, a member of the society since 1807, who continued to keep the society together until he left Norwich for London in 1834. The society effectively ceased to exist from that date. The broad washes of J.S. Cotman's water-colours anticipate French Impressionism.

### **The Poringland Oak** c1818-20

Andrew Graham Dickson has written:

John Crome, who painted **The Poringland Oak** near the end of his life, was known as "the Norfolk Hobbema": on his deathbed he is said to have gasped "Oh Hobbema, my dear Hobbema, how I have loved you".

In a corner of the sunlit, reedy pool, next to the rutted track, beneath the branches of the ancient oak tree, the painter has included a group of boys bathing. Two of them are his own sons while another is said to be the son of one Mr Aldous, mail-coach driver. The bravest of the boys has waded into the water up to his waist and now gingerly immerses his forearms in preparation for the plunge. His face is ruddy, his flesh as white as English porcelain.



The scene seems both real and ideal: a moment in time perpetuated and, in the process, transmuted into an idyll. It is a picture shot through with trace memories of other kinds of picture. Viewed through half-closed eyes, the boys at play could be Diana and her nymphs bathing, about to be spied by Actaeon; or they could be early Christians being baptised out of doors.

Crome was a subtle and sophisticated interpreter of the landscape painting tradition, alive not only to the work of Dutch masters such as Hobbema – and Rembrandt, the drama of whose landscapes he emulated in his own striking watery nocturne, *Moonrise on the Yare* – but also to the new strains of romantic sensibility that stirred during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Like his contemporaries Girtin, Turner and Constable, he made landscape painting into a vehicle of feeling, often experimenting with rough and sketchy effects which led critics of his work to complain of a lack of finish. “This is the scribbling of painting,” one disapproving commentator remarked of a particularly free, early Crome. But the

raw naturalism of many of his pictures was a conscious device, an abandonment of “polish” which might be compared to Wordsworth and Coleridge’s forsaking of ornate poetical diction for a more brusque and vernacular language in the *Lyrical Ballads*.

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Like many of the more experimental artists and writers of his time, Crome was a dissenter and a political liberal, which may also have informed his work to a certain degree. He is known to have been an opponent of Enclosure, the national agricultural policy which led to the privatisation of previously common land and its division into rectangular fields and fenced farms. As a writer in the local Norwich newspaper, *The Iris*, complained in the early years of the nineteenth century, this spelled the destruction of much common heathland “where many hundreds could once be seen on a summer’s evening engaged in their different sports and games ... the only place in the vicinity of the city where it was possible to retire from ‘the busy hum of men’...”

Yet long after the land around had been enclosed, Crome persisted in painting it as it had once been, a wild and open heath. It is as if, by preserving the memory of a better and fairer world in his art, he wanted to remind his contemporaries of what they had lost. He also seems to have found a religious significance in scenes of simple, untamed nature. A year before his death Crome bought a complete set of the works of William Paley, including his *Natural Theology*, in which Paley set forth his belief that nature was a kind of patternbook of God’s benevolence, for those with eyes to see it. Such ideas – which were later to have a great influence on Ruskin - may well have coloured Crome’s *The Poringland Oak*. The great tree that dominates the picture, its leaves backlit by the sun, has the character of a vision or sign. Nature seen through the eyes of John Crome, radical and dissenter, was a form of benediction.



**Thomas Girtin** (1775 – 1802) was an English watercolourist and etcher. A friend and rival of J.M.W. Turner, Girtin played a key role in establishing watercolour as a reputable art form.

### ***Kirkstall Abbey, Yorkshire* 1801**

In this freshly painted landscape sunlight and shadows from the drifting clouds flood the scene. A sense of depth is conveyed by contrasts of dark and light, and greying of the colours in the distance. Although it may have been completed in the studio we have a distinct sense that the artist painted the view before him.



Girtin's early landscapes are akin to 18th-century topographical sketches, but in later years he developed a bolder, more spacious, romantic style, which had a lasting influence on English painting. The scenery of the north encouraged him to create a new watercolour palette of warm browns, slate greys, indigo and purple. He abandoned the practice of undershadowing in grey wash and then adding pastel patches of colour, in favour of broad washes of strong colour, and experimented with the use of pen, brown ink and varnish to add richer tones. Girtin's early death at the age of twenty seven reportedly caused Turner to remark, "Had Tom Girtin lived I should have starved."

**John Sell Cotman** (1782 – 1842) was an English marine and landscape painter, etcher, illustrator, author and a leading member of the Norwich School of painters.

The 1887 edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* noted that Cotman's reputation had improved over time, and described him as "one of the most original and versatile of English artists of the first half of this century, a draughtsman and colourist of exceptional gifts, a water-colourist worthy to be ranked among the greater men, and excellent whether as a painter of land or sea"



### ***Greta Bridge* c. 1806**

The bridge spans the river Greta in North Yorkshire near the gates of Rokeby Park, where he stayed as a guest of the owner, later taking a room at the local inn, which is the large building to the left of the bridge, in order to continue the work he had begun along the river Greta, which skirts the park. It was this landscape, rather than the more conventionally dramatic scenery of the Tees which evidently appealed to Cotman and became the focus of his work.

The bridge was designed by John Carr of York, and built in 1773 and replaced a Roman single-arched

bridge. The strong, elegant lines of Cotman's watercolour seem to reflect an awareness of these classical associations. A small drawing of the composition is likely to be the preliminary study from nature. This drawing is remarkable in that the process of refinement and simplification seems already far advanced, and the essential character of the finished watercolour is already envisaged by the artist, so that very few further adjustments were necessary.

Andrew Graham Dickson wrote:

John Sell Cotman, the other luminary of the so-called "School of Norwich", has suffered from a different form of underestimation. No one has ever accused him of lacking sophistication. His work has been underrated primarily because of the medium in which it was painted – watercolour - and its concomitant small scale. The fact that Cotman himself lacked confidence in his own abilities has not helped his reputation either. He trained in London, exhibiting at the Royal Academy, but on failing to gain admission to the Royal

Society of Watercolourists became so discouraged that he moved back to Norwich, later settling in Yarmouth. To judge by his letters, he seems to have been well aware that this was tantamount to committing professional suicide. He wrote often of his “blasted hopes” and advised his son, who also wanted to be a painter, that “If you wish to be an artist you *must*... give up and all its small associations.”

But although he did not prosper until very late in his career, when friends secured him a teaching job in London, and despite his often depressed and somewhat neurotic personality, Cotman created one of the most remarkable bodies of work by any nineteenth-century English painter.

The taste for picturesque, topographical watercolours that developed during his lifetime led to the production of a vast mass of imagery: innumerable studies of the ruined abbey, the romantic coppice, the swiftly coursing brook. Much of this work now seems almost interchangeable, yet Cotman’s work is always instantly identifiable. The essence of his art seems to reflect the very particular cast of his temperament. He was romantically fascinated by nature’s beauty and abundance and movement, but his sense of pictorial structure was classically, almost ascetically rigorous. The result was an art consecrated to the most evanescent phenomena – wind blowing through a tree, clouds scudding through the sky, the movements of water – which simultaneously aspires to a condition of absolute stasis and order.

Cotman used the range and flexibility of watercolour brilliantly to convey his experience of nature, but he also controlled his own repertoire of effects within compositional schemes quite unlike those adopted by any other painter of his time. He treated cloud and hill and sky almost as if they were elements in a collage, to be moved about at will; he found or made, in fencepost or tangle of trees, a graphic order of such rigour that it seems almost to anticipate the art of Mondrian. The desire to elevate sudden impulses or insights into permanent structures of feeling, whether they be poems, paintings or symphonies, was common to many romantics, but few realised the ambition as consummately as this relatively little known, Norwich-born watercolourist.

**John Constable** (1776 – 1837) was an English landscape painter in the Romantic tradition. Born in Suffolk, he is known principally for revolutionising the genre of landscape painting with his pictures of Dedham Vale, the area surrounding his home – now known as “Constable Country” – which he invested with an intensity of affection. “I should paint my own places best”, he wrote to his friend John Fisher in 1821, “painting is but another word for feeling”.

### **Wivenhoe Park 1816**

The National Gallery, London says of this painting:

A pleasant sense of ease and harmony pervades this landscape of almost photographic clarity. The large areas of brilliant sunshine and cool shade, the rambling line of the fence, and the beautiful balance of trees, meadow, and river are evidence of the artist’s creative synthesis of the actual site.



Constable’s art is always penetrated by longing, melancholy and a yearning for the simple, natural life, for a bucolic, pastoral idyll, to rural subjects and aspects of life in the countryside, a “golden age” when people lived together in harmony with nature, a world which due to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution was disappearing when he painted his landscapes. He was aware of the issue of urban growth, of urban life’s unpleasantness- which he contrasted to life in the countryside. Constable’s art was rather unconventional for his time, and he loved simple things, a natural landscape without the ruins and dramatic effects of the Romantics, or of exalted, often excessive feelings, such as is

displayed in the paintings of his contemporary, J.M.W. Turner. His landscapes are flooded by a silvery brilliant light in the water and air and in the sky - and are characterised by a special intensity that is such an important feature of this artist's works.



**Stonehenge 1835**

Constable's watercolours were also remarkably free for their time: the almost mystical *Stonehenge*, 1835, with its double rainbow, is often considered to be one of the greatest watercolours ever painted. When he exhibited it in 1836, Constable appended a text to the title: "*The mysterious monument of Stonehenge, standing remote on a bare and boundless heath, as much unconnected with the events of past ages as it is with the uses of the present, carries you back beyond all historical records into the obscurity of a totally unknown period.*"

**Seascape Study with Rain Cloud c.1824**

The sketches themselves were amongst the first ever done in oils directly from the subject in the open air. To convey the effects of light and movement, Constable used broken brushstrokes, often in small touches, which he scumbled over lighter passages, creating an impression of sparkling light enveloping the entire landscape. One of the most expressionistic and powerful of all his studies is *Seascape Study with Rain Cloud*, painted about 1824 at Brighton, which captures with slashing dark brushstrokes the immediacy of an exploding cumulus shower at sea. The creamy pink ground is allowed to show through in areas, creating a foil for the white cloud tops and harmonising the turbulent skeins of paint.



**William Turner** (1789 – 1862) was an English painter who specialised in watercolour landscapes. He is often known as **William Turner of Oxford** or just **Turner of Oxford** to distinguish him from his contemporary, J.M.W. Turner. Many of Turner's paintings depicted the countryside around Oxford.



**Newnham-on-Severn from Dean Hill 1800s**

This exceptionally good example of William Turner's work is also of local topographical interest as a detailed view of the Vale of Gloucester. It is a rather belated exercise in the 'Picturesque', the aesthetic ideal that dominated landscape painting in the late eighteenth century.

The composition betrays elements of the Claudian Italianate style: framing trees, darker on the left to lead the eye in, along with the lighter pathway, a procession of horse-rider

and cattle; darker band of middle-ground and sunlit distance under a delicate cerulean blue sky.

The Picturesque stressed the appeal of variety, decay and historical associations. Old farm buildings, rugged taverns and ruins often featured in such landscapes. These motifs were clichés by William Turner's time, but the idyllic view of the countryside embodied in Picturesque landscapes proved enduring, and is familiar even today.

**Richard Parkes Bonington** (1802 – 1828) was an English Romantic landscape painter, who moved to France at the age of 14 and can also be considered as a French artist, and an intermediary bringing aspects of English style to France. Becoming, after his early death from tuberculosis aged twenty five, one of the most influential British artists of his time, the facility of his style was inspired by the old masters, yet was entirely modern in its application.

In 1825 he met Delacroix on a visit to London, and they sketched together there, and shared a studio for some months in Paris on their return. He also developed a technique mixing watercolour with gouache and gum, achieving an effect close to oil painting.

### ***Sea Coast, the Dunes* 1828**

His landscapes were mostly of coastal scenes, with a low horizon and large sky, showing a brilliant handling of light and atmosphere. Influenced by Delacroix he also painted small historical cabinet paintings in a freely-handled version of the troubadour style.

This oil study, probably of the Norfolk coast, is painted in broad brush strokes. The ragged clouds casting drifting shadows bathes the scene in a fleeting effect of natural light.



***Study of Clouds with Low Sun* 1828**

This colourful study of evening sunlight bursting through clouds would not have been intended for exhibition; however the fact that it is signed indicates that he may have regarded it as more than something only for his own use.

**James Ward** (1769 – 1859) was a British painter, particularly of animals, and an engraver. Ward's career is conventionally divided into two periods: up until 1803, his single greatest influence was his brother in law George Moreland; after 1803 Rubens was his main influence. From about 1810, Ward started to paint horses within landscapes; slightly later, he turned to very large-scale landscapes, of which *Gordale Scar*, a Limestone ravine in Yorkshire, is considered his most important work. As an evocation of the sublime in art it is a potent example of English Romantic painting.

### ***Gordale Scar* c1812**

This large picture (3.33 x 4.22 metres) was painted for Lord Ribblesdale, a local landowner. Ward emphasised the height and scale of the cliffs by subtly manipulating the perspective. In the foreground he shows deer and cattle, including a white bull from the (originally wild) Chillingham herd, who appears to guard the cleft of Gordale Beck. Working in the last years of the Napoleonic wars, Ward aimed to depict a national landscape, primordial and unchanging, defended by 'John Bull' in animal form. His painting also epitomised the awe-inspiring qualities of the fashionable 'Sublime' landscape.



The gigantic *Gordale Scar*, nearly four and a half metres wide, shows James Ward's venture to express his emotionally charged faith through a masterpiece of natural observation: the towering expanse of rock and thundering cataract, set beneath a stormy sky, takes on a symbolism of its own. The encircling amphitheatre of the Scar becomes a microcosm, and the beasts who graze or lock antlers before it - few of which had actually roamed there since much earlier times - emphasize its primordial state.

**John Martin** (1789 – 1854) was an English Romantic painter, engraver and illustrator. He was celebrated for his typically vast and melodramatic paintings of religious subjects and fantastic compositions, populated with minute figures placed in imposing landscapes.



***Moonlight, Chepstow Castle*** 1815

Although depicting a real, historic site Martin romanticises the view, greatly exaggerating the height of the mound, adding a rugged mountain range refashioning the landscape which he bathes in a misty silvery light. A group of cattle herded down a winding, rutted path towards a distant village at the end of the day contributes an element of storytelling; but this is not a scene of a bucolic English landscape, tamed by the plough and transformed by the industry of the farmer and labourer. It is a landscape of the mind, remote and terrifying in its wild hillsides and remote and crumbling ruins.

**Samuel Palmer** (1805 – 1881) was a landscape painter, etcher and printmaker. He was also a prolific writer. Palmer was a key figure in Romanticism in Britain and produced visionary pastoral paintings.

Samuel Palmer's contribution to Romanticism in painting lies in his highly distinctive portrayal of the English countryside. For Palmer's interpretation of the 'pastoral' is not remotely conventional; rather, it is visionary and idealistic. As he wrote in 1871: "I was always imagining and trying to draw". What his imagination created was a mystical and idyllic English landscape.

Through John Linnell, he met William Blake in 1824. The landscapes he produced over the next ten years around Shoreham, near Sevenoaks in the west of Kent under the influence of Blake, are generally reckoned to be his greatest. He purchased a run-down cottage, nicknamed "Rat Abbey", and lived there from 1826 to 1835, depicting the area as a demi-paradise, mysterious and visionary, often shown in sepia shades under moon and star-light. There Palmer associated with a group of Blake-influenced artists known as the Ancients (including George Richmond and Edward Calvert). They were among the few who saw the Shoreham paintings as, resulting from attacks by critics in 1825, he opened his early portfolios only to selected friends.

### ***Early Morning*** 1825

Palmer was also a prolific writer and his lyrical Romantic transformation of a local landscape is a far cry from that of John Martin. In *Early Morning* "each living organism has been individuated, defined with emphatic shape."

It suggests that man can live peacefully in and with nature, sharing it with other creatures. And this sense of community in nature is heightened by the fearless hare whose presence introduces an animal consciousness to the woodland idyll. All is harmoniously framed: the distinctively curved cottage on the horizon echoes the shapes of the surrounding hills. All is innocent also, in that the picture constitutes what Simon Schama describes as "the miraculous preservation of the innocently wide-eyed vision of the child."



Palmer was largely forgotten after his death. In 1909, many of his Shoreham works were destroyed by his surviving son Alfred Herbert Palmer, who burnt "a great quantity of father's handiwork ... Knowing that no one would be able to make head or tail of what I burnt; I wished to save it from a more humiliating fate". The destruction included "sketchbooks, notebooks, and original works, and lasted for days". It wasn't until 1926 that Palmer's rediscovery began through a show curated by Martin Hardie at the Victoria & Albert Museum, *Drawings, Etchings and Woodcuts made by Samuel Palmer and other*

*Disciples of William Blake*. But it took until the early 1950s for his reputation to recover, stimulated by Geoffrey Grigson's 280-page book *Samuel Palmer* (1947)

The Shoreham work has had a powerful influence on many English artists after being rediscovered. Palmer was a notable influence on Graham Sutherland, Paul Nash, Eric Ravilious and John Minton, among others.

**Joseph Mallord William Turner** (1775 – 1851), known in his time as **William Turner**, was an English Romantic painter, printmaker and watercolourist. He is known for his expressive colourisations, imaginative landscapes and turbulent, often violent marine paintings.

Norham is a village in Northumberland in the border country between England and Scotland. The castle was a key stronghold overlooking the river Tweed. Turner visited the castle and the surrounding country in 1797. Following his journey, Turner created the watercolour *Norham Castle: Sunrise*, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1798 to critical acclaim. He revisited the ruins in 1801. In 1806, Turner began work on his *Liber Studiorum*, a collection of monochrome landscape prints. *Norham Castle, Sunrise* was among a series of unfinished coloured re-workings of these prints.



***Norham Castle, Sunrise*** c.1845

Painted in thin washes of oil colour the merest indication of the castle is shown in a blue haze; cattle graze in a dewy, golden early morning light.

In Turner's later years he used oils ever more transparently and turned to an evocation of almost pure light by use of shimmering colour. The intensity of hue and interest in evanescent light not only placed Turner's work in the vanguard of English painting but exerted an influence on Claude Monet and the Impressionists, who carefully studied his techniques. He is also generally regarded as a precursor of abstract

painting, influencing American Abstract Expressionist artists, such as Mark Rothko.

Later in his career Turner was in the habit of taking to the Royal Academy for exhibition what he called his 'Beginnings': canvases with the merest indication of atmosphere and landscape. On varnishing day when the exhibitors came to touch up their canvases or repair any damage to the surface, Turner would put on a virtuoso display adding striking details and finishing his painting.

**David Cox** (1783 – 1859) was an English landscape painter, one of the most important members of the Birmingham School of landscape artists and an early precursor of Impressionism. He is considered one of the greatest English landscape painters, and a major figure of the Golden age of English watercolour.

### ***Rhyl Sands*** c1854

Cox's later work produced after his move to Birmingham in 1841 was marked by simplification, abstraction and a stripping down of detail. His art of the period combined the breadth and weight characteristic of the earlier English watercolour school, together with a boldness and freedom of expression comparable to later impressionism. His concern with capturing the fleeting nature of weather, atmosphere and light, as in this oil painting, was similar to that of John Constable, but Cox stood apart from the older painter's focus on capturing material detail, instead employing a high degree of generalisation and a focus on overall effect.



The quest for character over precision in representing nature was an established characteristic of the Birmingham School of landscape artists with which Cox had been associated early in his life, and as early as 1810 Cox's work had been criticised for its "sketchiness of finish" and "cloudy confusion of objects", which were held to betray "the coarseness of scene-painting". During the 1840s and 1850s Cox took this "peculiar manner" to new extremes, incorporating the techniques of the sketch into his finished works to a far greater degree.

The materials used for his later works in watercolour differed from his earlier periods: he used black chalk instead of graphite pencil as his primary drawing medium, and the rough and absorbent "Scotch" wrapping paper for which he became well-known – both of these were related to his development of a rougher and freer style.



### ***A Train on a Viaduct***

This rapid sketch, capturing the movement of this modern method of transport was intended as a page of notation and a memory device for the artist's own use, and never intended for exhibition. It gives us an insight into the artist's mind and method of working; and, looking back on it from the perspective of twentieth century art, we can see qualities of expression, of movement and abstraction that are attractive and worthy of attention for its own sake. It has become an independent work of art. The curved lines of the arches are repeated in the smoke of the train, rushing from a tunnel and the hills and clouds. Creating an overall 'abstract' effect.

During a period dominated by sleek and detailed picturesque landscape, however, the Birmingham School were still condemned by publications such as *The Spectator* as "the 'blottesque' school", and failed to establish themselves as a cohesive movement.

John Ruskin in 1857 condemned "the work of the Society of Painters in Water-colours of potted art, of an agreeable flavour, supple and taxable as a patented commodity", excluding only the late work of Cox, about which he wrote "there is not any other landscape which comes near these works of David Cox in simplicity or seriousness".

**Henry Bright** (1810 – 1873), was a distinguished English landscape painter associated with the Norwich School of painters. He painted in various locations in England, Scotland, Wales and across Europe, working in oils, watercolour, chalk and pencil. During a few of these sketching expeditions he was accompanied by J.M.W. Turner, with whom he had struck up a friendship. Bright's work was also highly regarded by John Ruskin.

### ***On the Norfolk Broads* c. 1855**

This broadly painted study shows a consummate technique. It sums up the scene with deftly placed brush-marks and subtle contrasts of tone, and in its swiftly painted informal style anticipates French Impressionism.



Henry Bright was a popular and successful artist during his lifetime and this is supported by his own statement of 1870:

*"I seldom exhibit I can sell all I do at a good price."*

## Effect after Rain

The Art Journal's said in its obituary notice:

The death of this excellent landscape-painter occurred at Ipswich on the 21st of September. . . The subjects of Mr. Bright's pictures are very varied, but his manner of treating all shows great originality and a high degree of self-possession, while his manipulation is most broad and masterly, and his colouring rich and deep. With us his most attractive subjects are the banks of a stream, or a river, sometimes with a mill situated on them, and sometimes a group of noble trees, telling against a sky brilliant with the rising or setting sun. His snow-scenes are also most faithfully and skilfully represented.



**William Holman Hunt** (1827 – 1910) was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. His paintings were notable for their great attention to detail, vivid colour, and elaborate symbolism.



**Our English Coasts, 1852 ('Strayed Sheep')**  
1853

For the painting of *Our English Coasts* Hunt worked *en plein air* at the location depicted between August and December 1852. Despite the cold and rainy weather it is executed in many layers, with brilliant colours.

The location for the picture was the Lover's seat, a well-known beauty spot perched on the cliffs overlooking Covehurst Bay, near Hastings. Hunt has paid scrupulous attention to natural detail, but the cliffs, sheep and parts of the foreground were all painted from different viewpoints, and the butterflies in the left foreground were painted indoors from a live specimen.

In *Modern Painters* (1847) the writer and critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) exhorted young English artists to 'go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instructions; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth.' Following Ruskin's dictum that art in its truthfulness can teach a moral lesson, William Holman Hunt created his greatest and most Pre-Raphaelite landscape.

Critics of the time were struck less by the picture's symbolism than by the treatment of light. Ruskin wrote in 1883 that 'It showed to us, for the first time in the history of art, the absolutely faithful balances of colour and shade by which actual sunshine might be transposed into a key in which the harmonies possible with material pigments should yet produce the same impressions upon the mind which were caused by the light itself'

**Sir John Everett Millais, 1st Baronet**, (1829 – 1896) was an English painter and illustrator who was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He was a child prodigy who, aged eleven, became the youngest student to enter the Royal Academy Schools.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed in September 1848 in the London studio of John Everett Millais. Although they had no clear manifesto, the members were all devoted to 'truth to nature' which, for the five or so years of the Brotherhood's existence, required a meticulously detailed style of painting. Millais was the most advanced of the artist members, and his technique the most distinguished.



### **Portrait of Ruskin 1853-4**

Ruskin is depicted "standing in front of a fast-flowing stream and a steep rocky bank, dark with foliage and mosses, looking down stream in a contemplative way; no sky would be visible in the portrait; the foaming cloud-reflecting water would form the only bright area." [Susan Owens]

The portrait was commissioned by John Ruskin's father; and begun while the author and sitter were in holiday in the summer of 1853 at Brig o'Turk, in the Trossachs near Stirling. The portrait was begun in July, with Ruskin's old Oxford friend, Sir Henry Acland, holding the canvas. This was not the first time that Millais had painted outdoors, but it was an experience fraught with difficulties – it rained frequently and the party were plagued by midges. Millais worked very slowly, but most of the background was completed by the end of October. The figure of Ruskin was painted from life in Millais's studio in London in the following year, and Millais returned to Brig o'Turk in June 1854 for about ten days to complete the landscape.



Millais had completed the picture with increasing reluctance, having fallen in love with Ruskin's wife, Effie, while they were in Scotland. The affair eventually led to the dissolution of Ruskin's marriage in April 1854, and Millais married Effie in July 1855. The portrait became distasteful to the sitter and he gave it to Sir Henry Acland in 1871.

**John Ruskin** (1819 – 1900) was the leading English art critic of the Victorian era, as well as an art patron, draughtsman, watercolourist, philosopher, prominent social thinker and philanthropist. He wrote on subjects as varied as geology, architecture, mythology, literature, education, botany and political economy. He was hugely influential in the latter half of the 19th century and up to the first World War. After a period of relative decline, his reputation has steadily improved since the 1960s with the publication of numerous academic studies of his work. Today, his ideas and concerns are widely recognised as having anticipated interest in environmentalism, sustainability and craft.

**Modern Painters** (1843–1860) is a five-volume work by John Ruskin, begun when he was 24 years old based on material collected in Switzerland in 1842. Ruskin argues that recent painters emerging from the tradition of the picturesque are superior in the art of landscape to the old masters. The book was primarily written as a defence of the later work of J.M.W. Turner. Ruskin used the book to argue that art should devote itself to the accurate documentation of nature. In Ruskin's view, Turner had developed from early detailed documentation of nature to a later more profound insight into natural forces and atmospheric effects. In this way, *Modern Painters* reflects *Landscape and Portrait-Painting* (1829) by American art critic John Neal by distinguishing between "things seen by the artist" and "things as they are."



### **Study of gneiss rock, Glenfinlass 1853**

Susan Owens, in *Spirit of Place: artists, writers and the British Landscape*, writes:

"while Millais was plugging away at his picture [his portrait of Ruskin] in Glen Finglas, painstakingly adding the lichen on the rock and the bubbles in the water, Ruskin was on the bank too, within instruction-shouting distance of his young protégé, making his own portrait of the gneiss rock face opposite. Ruskin worked on this drawing obsessively for two months, intent on describing every detail of the striations, folds and hollows of this tightly focussed landscape."

Ruskin believed that all great art should communicate an understanding and appreciation of nature. Accordingly, inherited artistic conventions should be rejected. Only by means of direct observation can an artist, through form and colour, represent nature in art.

**William Dyce** (1806 – 1864) was a Scottish artist, who played a part in the formation of public art education in the United Kingdom. Dyce was associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and played a part in their early popularity.

***Pegwell Bay, Kent – a Recollection of October 5th 1858*** 1860

In *Pegwell Bay, Kent – a Recollection of October 5th 1858* Dyce employs a mode of heightened realism and intricate detail to create a powerful landscape, which is considered to be Dyce's best painting.

The painting was inspired by a visit by the Dyce family to Pegwell Bay, a shallow inlet on the coast of Kent at the estuary of the River Stour, in August 1857. It was a popular Victorian holiday destination, with tea gardens and donkey rides; and also a popular place for fossil hunters.



In the painting, the tide has gone out, revealing a flat expanse of sand, pools of water, rocks, and algae. Standing separately in the foreground are Dyce's son with a spade with his back to the sea; his wife, and her two sisters are collecting shells and fossils on the beach. The women are wrapped in shawls against the cool of the autumn evening. In the background are smaller figures hunting in rock-pools, or taking a ride on a donkey. A male figure to the right, carrying artist's materials and looking up at the cliff, (or the comet) may be a self-portrait of Dyce himself. The setting sun gives the cliffs and beach a pink glow, but the scene remains bleak. Dyce was a keen geologist, and the strata of the cliffs behind the beach are carefully delineated. A white streak in the sky (above figure in white) is Donati's Comet.

Dyce made initial studies on the beach, *en plein air*. The completed oil painting depicts a later time in the evening than a small watercolour study made in 1857; Dyce also adds his family in the foreground of the final painting, and moves the date one year to include the comet.

The painting can be seen as an allegory of time and space, geology and astronomy, family and history, with science meeting Christianity on the beach: Pegwell Bay was reputedly the place where Saint Augustine landed in 597, on his mission to bring Christianity to the British Isles (and also where Hengist and Horsa arrived in the 5th century). The comet may be an echo of the Star of Bethlehem from the Biblical nativity story, but could also be a reference to the science of astronomy and the place of humans in the universe.

**James Abbott McNeill Whistler** (1834 – 1903) was an American artist based primarily in the United Kingdom. He was averse to sentimentality and moral allusion in painting, and a leading proponent of the credo "art for art's sake". His signature for his paintings took the shape of a stylized butterfly possessing a long stinger for a tail.



***Nocturne- Blue and Gold - Old Battersea Bridge*** 1872

This painting is of the old wooden Battersea Bridge across the River Thames before it was replaced by the modern bridge. Chelsea Old Church to the left (on the north bank of the river) and the then recently built Albert Bridge to the right, with fireworks above, can be seen in the distance. The picture is an evening view and is full of atmospheric effect. The bridge is painted taller than it actually was for added effect. The Japanese artist Utagara Hiroshige, a favourite of Whistler's, produced a similar picture of a tall wooden bridge with fireworks.

Whistler's *Nocturne* series, of which this painting was a part, achieved notoriety in 1877, when influential critic John Ruskin visited an exhibition of the series at the Grosvenor Gallery. He wrote of the exhibition that Whistler was "asking two hundred

guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face". Whistler sued for libel, the case reaching the courts in 1878. The judge in the case, one Baron Huddleston, caused laughter in the court when he (apparently sincerely) asked Whistler "Which part of the picture is the bridge?" The case ended with Whistler awarded token damages of one farthing.

### ***Nocturne in Black and Gold: the Falling Rocket* 1874**

First shown at the Grosvenor Gallery in London in 1877, this painting is most famously known as the inception of the lawsuit between Whistler and the art critic John Ruskin. It is one of two works (the other being *Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Firewheel*) inspired by the Cremorne Gardens, a celebrated pleasure resort in London.

Whistler sought in his *Nocturnes* to convey a sense of the beauty and tranquility of the Thames and its environs by night. It was Frederick Leyland who first used the name 'nocturne' to describe these moonlight scenes, suggesting the concept of evening, or night, but with musical associations. The expression was quickly adopted by Whistler, who later explained:

*By using the word 'nocturne' I wished to indicate an artistic interest alone, divesting the picture of any outside anecdotal interest which might have been otherwise attached to it. A nocturne is an arrangement of line, form and colour first.*

He never painted his *Nocturnes* on the spot, but rather from memory in his studio, employing a special medium devised for painting swiftly in oils. He thinned his paint with copal, turpentine and linseed oil, creating what he called a 'sauce', which he applied in thin, transparent layers, wiping it away until he was satisfied. In this picture he used thin washes to give the impression of smoke blowing across the velvety darkness. He then dripped paint across the surface to convey the effect of the fireworks, and brought the figures to life with deliberate, studied brushstrokes. His intention was to preserve the mood of the Cremorne Gardens, as they appeared to him, by not describing the scene too literally.

#### **Ruskin trial**

In 1877 Whistler sued John Ruskin for libel after the critic condemned his painting *Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket*. Ruskin. In a review of the exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery he wrote:

For Mr. Whistler's own sake... ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.

Whistler went to his solicitor and drew up a writ for libel. The case came to trial the following year after delays caused by Ruskin's bouts of mental illness, while Whistler's financial condition continued to deteriorate. It was heard in the High Court on November 25 and 26, 1878 before Baron Huddleston and a special jury. Counsel for John Ruskin, Attorney General Sir John Holker, cross-examined Whistler:

Holker: "What is the subject of *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*?"

Whistler: "It is a night piece and represents the fireworks at Cremorne Gardens."

Holker: "Not a view of Cremorne?"

Whistler: "If it were *A View of Cremorne* it would certainly bring about nothing but disappointment on the part of the beholders. It is an artistic arrangement. That is why I call it a *nocturne*...."

Holker: "Did it take you much time to paint the *Nocturne in Black and Gold*? How soon did you knock it off?"

Whistler: "Oh, I 'knock one off' possibly in a couple of days – one day to do the work and another to finish it ..." [the painting measures 24 3/4 x 18 3/8 inches]

Holker: "The labour of two days is that for which you ask two hundred guineas?"

Whistler: "No, I ask it for the knowledge I have gained in the work of a lifetime."



However, his case was not helped when *The Falling Rocket* was accidentally presented to trial upside down. His explanation of the composition proved fruitless before the judge.

Whistler had counted on many artists to take his side as witnesses, but they refused, fearing damage to their reputations. The other witnesses for him were unconvincing and the jury's own reaction to the work was derisive. With Ruskin's witnesses more impressive, including Edward Burne-Jones, and with Ruskin absent for medical reasons, Whistler's counter-attack was ineffective. Nonetheless, the jury reached a verdict in favour of Whistler, but awarded a mere farthing in nominal damages, and the court costs were split. The cost of the case, together with huge debts from building his residence ("The White House" in Chelsea), bankrupted him by May 1879.

Nonetheless, artists have been grateful ever since to Whistler for establishing the premise that it is not the time taken to produce a work of art which determines its monetary value, but the experience and ability of the artist.



*Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket* is fundamentally composed of bleak tones, with three main colours: blue, green, and yellow. Restricted in its use of colours, the piece develops a muted yet harmonious composition. The billowing smoke gives the viewer a clear distinction between the water and the sky, where the separation blurs into a cohesive and somber space. It is this large avalanche of fog that represents the rocket of the title. Dabs of yellow enliven the artwork as exploding fireworks in the misty air. The figures watching are almost transparent, their shapes general and simplistic. To the left, the artist signs his name in a manner that has clearly been influenced by Japanese prints, with thick, straight brushstrokes that appear to imitate Japanese characters. Influenced by Japanese art, Whistler spent years perfecting his splatter technique, eventually possessing the ability to make an object or person with what appeared to be nothing more than a single flick of paint. Although Whistler's critics denounced his technique as reckless or lacking artistic merit, it is notable that Whistler spent much of his time with meticulous details, often viewing his work through mirrors to ensure that no deficiencies were overlooked.

*The Falling Rocket* retains a certain degree of colour-laden luminosity that provokes spatial ambiguity set against a structure of line and form. Nocturnes were a series of paintings which, through a painterly style, were evocative of differing night time scenes. The artist insisted that they were not pictures, but rather, scenes or moments. Working against contemporary inclinations for narrative (indicative of the heavy consumption of literature), Whistler's pictures argue for painting's essential difference from literature, as colour and tone counter hints of narrative or moral allusion. Whistler's focus was on colouristic effects as a means of creating a particular sensation. More than that, a Nocturne is concerned with its depiction of space, seeking a particular sense of void that seems to arise only in the night time. As part of the Art for Art's Sake movement, the artwork seeks to provide complex emotions that go beyond the technicalities of the imagery. Whistler believed that certain experiences were often best expressed by nuance and implication. These compositions were not designed to avoid the truth of a scene, but instead served as a means of reaching deeper, more hidden truths. His artistic endeavours no longer concerned themselves with physical accuracy, seeking only to capture the essence of an intangible, personal and intimate moment. Whistler has been quoted as saying "If the man who paints only the tree, or flower, or other surface he sees before him were an artist, the king of artists would be the photographer. It is for the artist to do something beyond this." In essence, *The Falling Rocket* is the synthesis of a fireworks scene in London, and so by no means does it aim to look like it. His nocturnes, are meant to be seen as an arrangement, set to invoke particular sensations for the audience.

**John Atkinson Grimshaw** (1836 – 1893) was an English Victorian-era artist best known for his nocturnal scenes of urban landscapes. Today, he is considered one of the great painters of the Victorian era, as well as one of the best and most accomplished nightscape and townscape artists. He was called a "remarkable and imaginative painter" by the critic and historian Christopher Wood in *Victorian Painting* (1999).

### **Late October 1882**

Grimshaw's primary influence was the Pre-Raphaelites. He created landscapes of accurate colour and lighting, vivid detail and realism, often typifying seasons or a type of weather. Moonlit views of city and suburban streets and of the docks in London, Hull, Liverpool, and Glasgow also figured largely in his art. His careful painting and his skill in lighting effects meant that he captured both the appearance and the mood of a scene in minute detail. His "paintings of dampened gas-lit streets and misty waterfronts conveyed an eerie warmth as well as alienation in the urban scene."

James McNeill Whistler who Grimshaw worked with him in his Chelsea studios, stated, "I considered myself the inventor of nocturnes until I saw Grimmy's moonlit pictures."

Unlike Whistler's Impressionistic night scenes, Grimshaw worked in a realistic vein: "sharply focused, almost photographic", his pictures innovated in applying the tradition of rural moonlight images to the Victorian city, recording "the rain and mist, the puddles and smoky fog of late Victorian industrial England with great poetry."



### **Shipping on the Clyde 1881**

Grimshaw's paintings depicted the contemporary world but eschewed the dirty and depressing aspects of industrial towns. *Shipping on the Clyde*, a depiction of Glasgow's Victorian docks, is a lyrically beautiful evocation of the industrial era. Grimshaw transcribed the fog and mist so accurately as to capture the chill in the damp air, and the moisture penetrating the heavy clothes of the few figures awake in the misty early morning.

**Philip Wilson Steer** (1860 – 1942) was a British painter of landscapes, seascapes, portraits and figure studies. His sea and landscape paintings made him a leading figure in the Impressionist movement in Britain but in time he turned to a more traditional English style, clearly influenced by both John Constable and J.M.W. Turner, and spent more time painting in the countryside rather than on the coast. As a painting tutor at the Slade School of Art for many years he influenced generations of young artists.

After finding the examinations of the British Civil Service too demanding, he became an artist in 1878. He studied at the Gloucester School of Art and then from 1880 to 1881 at the South Kensington Drawing Schools. He was rejected by the Royal Academy of Art, and so went to study in Paris between 1882 and 1884, firstly at the Académie Julian and then in the École des Beaux Arts under Alexandre Cabanel, where he became a follower of the Impressionist school. In Paris he was greatly influenced by seeing works by Manet, Whistler and the French impressionists.

### **Poole Harbour, Dorset c. 1890**



When he returned to England, Steer established a studio in London and began to develop an impressionist style in which he depicted beach scenes and seascapes in a silvery translucent light. His painting of *Poole Harbour*, completed in 1890, is an example of the outstanding atmospheric effects he was able to capture; and betrays the influence of Monet and Sisley on his early work.



***The Bridge* 1887-8**

This picture was strongly attacked by the critics when it was first exhibited in 1887, and dismissed by one as 'either a deliberate daub or so much mere midsummer madness'. Steer considered giving up painting in the wake of this disapproval. With its exploitation of the creamy fluency of oil paint, its atmospheric lighting and subdued colouring, '*The Bridge*' is similar to Whistler's 'Nocturnes'. It was unusual in London at the time for its lack of detail, and for the uncertainty about its subject. The view is probably at Walberswick in Suffolk.

***Girls Running- Walberswick Pier* c 1888-94**

Steer often stayed at the Suffolk coastal town of Walberswick and the works he painted there are remarkable for their freshness and depiction of light and shade. Works such as *The Bridge*, *The Beach at Walberswick* (1890) and *Girls Running: Walberswick Pier* (1894) show Steer at the peak of his abilities.



Steer completed a number of paintings of the beach at Walberswick that are among the most authentically Impressionist works produced in Britain. Here he captures the rich warmth of late afternoon sunlight but, unlike the French Impressionist Monet, he was just as interested in the figures as in their setting. Steer has reworked the dashed, broken colour of the paint surface extensively. The two girls were originally holding hands, as is evident by their shadows. This kind of picture was seen as uncompromisingly *avant-garde*. One critic in 1892 described such works at the New English Art Club exhibition as 'evil'.

### **Manet and the Post Impressionists**

"On or about December 1910," wrote Virginia Woolf in her essay *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, "human character changed". She wasn't talking about the general election, or even the suffragette movement, but an art exhibition. *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* was the show organised by the critic Roger Fry at London's Grafton Galleries that introduced England to the work of Seurat, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Cézanne, all of whom were dead by then. It was a public and critical disaster, yet it became one of the most important moments in the history of modern art. Fry was a painter and critic who embraced French art with a missionary zeal after discovering Cézanne in 1906. Excited by the way in which the modern French painters were moving away from Impressionism's devotion to naturalism and exploring deep emotions through paint, Fry believed that their work would infuse British art and culture with new and potent ideas and give it direction. So he came up with a term for the loose collection of mostly French artists who came to prominence in the wake of Impressionism, and displayed about 100 of their paintings. The show's secretary, Desmond McCarthy, best articulated the general reaction to Fry's selection: 'Kind people called him mad, and reminded others that his wife was in an asylum'. This hurt Fry deeply, as his artist wife Helen Coombe did suffer from mental illness. Cézanne's paintings were compared to children's doodles.

Virginia Woolf remembered the public reacting with rage and laughter, while the influential critic and author Charles Ricketts wrote: 'Why talk of the sincerity of this rubbish?' It is hard to believe that these bright paintings of landscapes, still lifes and exotic locations, now so firmly embedded into the history of Western art, caused such outrage. But they offended the morality of the age by being apparently anarchic, and challenged its aesthetics for placing form over content.

*Manet and the Post-Impressionists* ruined Fry's credibility as a critic, but it cemented his place in history. Woolf, Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell were prescient enough to recognise it as a pivotal movement in British culture, and the art of the Post Impressionists revealed itself as the major influence on key modern movements including Cubism, Art Nouveau and German Expressionism.

Fry understood the immense value of the way artists such as Van Gogh and Cézanne expressed their personal feelings and world views through their paintings, even if his audience had not. Now the artists who had been shunned by their own national arts academy and critically derided during their lifetime are recognised as the fathers of modern art.

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Fry followed it up with the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* in 1912, which included English artists, many from the Camden Town Group and London Group.

**Spencer Frederick Gore** (1878 – 1914) was a British painter of landscapes, music hall scenes and interiors, usually with single figures. He was the first president of the Camden Town Group, and was influenced by the Post-Impressionists. The Camden Town Group was a group of English Post-Impressionist artists founded in 1911 and active until 1913. They gathered frequently at the studio of painter Walter Sickert in the Camden Town area of London. In 1913 he became a member of the London Group; a society, formed in 1913, and one of the oldest artist-led organisations in the world. It was created to offer exhibiting opportunities to artists additional to the Royal Academy of Arts.

### ***From a Window in the Hampstead Road* 1911**

The colouring of the street is sombre and drab with a grey sky suggestive of an English winter afternoon. However, the crisp contrast of light and shade suggests sunlight on snow; while the stark cross of the window frame dividing an everyday mundane view adds a surprising and dynamic element to the composition.

The construction of a window pane in front of the window's view appealed to Gore, and it was a motif to which he returned on several occasions. He was intrigued by his Camden Town surroundings and used it as the inspiration for his pictures. '*From a Window in the Hampstead Road*' was painted in from Sickert's third floor school, Rowlandson House. The view shows Hampstead Road and Rutland Street. In the lower right foreground a housemaid is scrubbing the steps leading up to a doctor's surgery. In 1912 Gore moved from Mornington Crescent to the nearby Houghton Place, which he also painted from the view from his house.



Gore probably looked to Sickert's painting of 1906 *La Seine du Balcon* as inspiration for the composition of *From a Window in the Hampstead Road*. However, Sickert painted his view from the balcony, whereas Gore here paints the view from inside and includes the window pane in the composition. Another view by Sickert called *Girl at a Window, Little Rachel*, 1907 includes the figure of a woman in front of the window, making it more literal, but in this painting Gore 'abstracts' it by omitting the figure.

The work of Cézanne and Gauguin, and of the post-Impressionist artist Roger Fry, variously influenced Gore's painting and he was included in the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Gallery in London in 1912.



### ***Mornington Crescent* c1911**

From 1909 until 1912 Gore rented a front room at 31 Mornington Crescent in Camden. During this period he painted numerous views from his window of the surrounding houses, gardens and tube station. Mornington Crescent faced leafy gardens until the Carreras Cigarette Factory was built on the site in 1926. Its fine curve marked the northern edge of the area conceived in outline by John Nash in the early nineteenth century. This area of north-west London is today home to millionaires, but in the early twentieth century its population was mainly working-class.

In the flattening of forms, the brighter colours and the heavily laden brushstrokes Steer's paintings of Mornington Crescent show the influence of Matisse and the Fauves in particular; albeit in a more cautious and less extreme manner than the French masters.

### ***The Beanfield, Letchworth* 1912**

From August to November 1912 Gore stayed in Harold Gilman's house in Letchworth while Gilman was away in Scandinavia. Letchworth was a New Town, and so at the forefront of contemporary ideas about town planning and modern living. Gore produced some of his most stylistically original work while living there. In his landscapes he used a bright, unrealistic palette and arranged shapes into geometric patterns. *The Beanfield* is notable for the zig-zag border of the coloured bean plants in the foreground. Gilman wrote that Gore told him that 'the colour found in natural objects (in the field of beans) is collected into patterns'.



### ***From a window in Cambrian Road, Richmond* 1913**

This painting shows the view from a top-floor window at the rear of 6 Cambrian Road, Richmond, where the Gore family relocated in 1913. The visible transfer grid underneath the thin paint reveals Gore's process of painting from squared-up studies. Colour is loosely applied without gradation to create stylised forms within a flattened pictorial space. Chosen to illustrate his obituary in the Vorticist periodical *Blast*, this may be the last picture Gore worked on before his early death from pneumonia.

At their new home, Gore immediately revived his practice of painting views from the front and back of the house. In *From a Window in Cambrian Road, Richmond*, Gore shows the view from a top-floor window at the rear. Many of the buildings visible were part of a hospital in Grove Road. The whole area has now been redeveloped and looks very different, but some of the buildings on the right, perhaps ward blocks, are still present. The bare branches of the trees in the foreground suggest that this must be a late autumn or early winter scene.

The paint is very thinly applied and the squaring-up shows through clearly, indicating the picture is not finished. The picture shows evidence of Gore continuing the modernist approach he had developed at Letchworth, stylising forms and using areas of flat colour. Indeed, the whole scene is 'flattened' out; there is no attempt to create an impression of recession and this is apparently a quite deliberate action, rather than a symptom of its incomplete state. Two studies for the painting survive: a graphite and blue pencil drawing on wove paper that has been torn carefully into three pieces and a squared-up and numbered graphite and blue pencil drawing on wove paper of the whole composition on a single sheet, from which the oil must have been transferred. Gore's normal procedure when making a painting was either to stand in front of his subject and paint direct, or else to make careful drawings and then execute the oil in his studio, as in the present case.



Recommended reading:

Peter Ackroyd: *The Origins of the English Imagination*

Kenneth Clark: *Landscape into Art*

W.G Hoskins: *The Making of the English Landscape*

Susan Owens: *Spirit of Place: artists, writers and the British landscape*

Simon Schama: *Landscape and Memory*