Fall 1998

Painting in Watercolor

La Salle University Art Museum

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Selections from the Permanent Collection

La Salle University Art Museum

Fall, 1998
History of Watercolor

A thought conceiv’d in the first warmth, an effect with which we are struck at the first view, is never so well express’d as by the strokes that are drawn at that instant.

Johann Gessner (1764-1826)
Swiss watercolor painter

Until the 18th century, watercolors, with rare exceptions such as those by Albrecht Dürer, were considered a minor by-product of a major production. Related to watercolors were those Old Master drawings which were partially executed with a brush, using flat tints of sepia, bistre and/or various color washes to effect light and shade or provide highlights. However, from the 15th through the 17th centuries, watercolors and wash drawings were usually executed as preliminary studies or as instructional guides for works to be produced later in another color medium such as oil painting, tapestry, or costume.
It was not until the 1750s that the British brought ‘pure’ watercolor into frequent use, producing works intended as finished works of art, and thereby raising its status to an independent medium, valued for its own sake rather than as a means to an end.

The major development of watercolor landscape in the British Isles was indirectly influenced by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, which inhibited travel to the continent until 1816. When ‘tourism’ to the continent resumed watercolors, and their reproductions in print became highly regarded as picturesque mementos of visited sites. Artists, both amateur and professional, ventured to the Middle East and the farthest reaches of the British Empire, and their drawings and watercolors were later reproduced as aquatints, mezzotints, or lithographs, often in large folio publications, providing ‘arm-chair’ travel for their less adventurous patrons.

The prolific output and the apparent ease and impromptu character of watercolors have unfortunately contributed
to their comparably inferior status. This exhibition will hopefully foster an appreciation for a medium which undeservedly still dwells in the shadow of the more prestigious color medium, that of oil painting.
Watercolor Technique

It is necessary to understand the medium and technique of watercolor to appreciate its expressive powers. Briefly, the technique involves painting with pigment ground up with a water-soluble gum, usually gum Arabic, which acts as a binding material or colloid. Without this colloid the pigment would not adhere to the paper. Using a very soft brush which has been previously dipped in water, the pigment is applied to absorbent paper in a varied manner: flecks, dashes, stipple, or a wash in one continuous stroke. The water is an essential ingredient, the only vehicle for the pigment rather than oil. The more water used the paler and more transparent the colors.

The colloid in the pigment determines the type of water-soluble color painting, of which watercolor is one variety. If the colloid is the white and/or yolk of egg, the process is called "tempera". (see the painting by Della Corna in the 16th century gallery). If
gelatinous or glutinous material from animals is used, the process is called 'distemper' painting (see the Vuillard in the 20th century gallery). It is very difficult to differentiate between these mediums and the medium is cautiously described as "opaque," whereas in watercolor as such the washes are transparent.

Because watercolor is transparent or semi-transparent, the white or tinted surface of the paper is never entirely covered. This permits light which is reflected from the paper surface to shine through the thin washes of color, producing the effects peculiar to the medium: fresh luminous colors, softened outlines, and brilliant, vaporous or subtle gradations of tone, so effective in rendering nuances of atmosphere.

The trial and error approach or reworking of the composition, permissible in an oil painting, is not appropriate to watercolor where best results are obtained by anticipating the color effect before it is applied to the paper. Efforts to darken, lighten or mix colors after they have been
applied often lead to dull and muddy tones. Of course, colors may be superimposed without loss of light penetration, but each color layer decreases the luminosity. The greater the thickness of the watercolor pigment, the less light is reflected through it. To make a dark color lighter, it must be washed down to allow the paper to provide more light.

To decrease the transparency of a color wash or to achieve contrast or highlight certain areas, the artist may thicken the pigment with a Chinese white material 'gouache' or 'body color.' If no opaque washes are used, the work is usually referred to as 'pure' watercolor where light reflected from the paper surface through the transparent color washes provides the sole illumination.

In most cases the outlines of a watercolor composition are executed in pencil, chalk, or ink before the color is applied. But in most instances these outlines become barely discernible; the finished work takes on a painterly rather than linear quality. Thus, form is more apt to be defined through color and tone in a
watercolor rather than line. Sometimes the artist will sketch the composition in pencil in ‘situ’ and later apply the watercolor back in the studio. The more customary procedure, however, given the portability of the painting equipment, is to execute and complete the watercolor on the spot. With direct observation and a swift and necessarily spontaneous execution, a sense of immediacy and accuracy of local color is possible.

Caroline Wistar
Curator

Selected Bibliography

Hardie, Martin, *Water-Colour in Britain*, 3 volumes, 1966-1968
(London, B.T. Batsford Ltd., Reprint, 1971)

Reynolds, Graham, *A Concise History of Watercolours*,
(London, Thames and Hudson, 1971)

Wilton, Andrew, *British Watercolours, 1750 to 1850*,
(Oxford, Phaidon, 1977)
Check List

1. Edward Dayes (1763-1804), English
   *Norwich Cathedral*
   Watercolor
   (Sight) 5-1/4 x 8-1/4 inches

2. Herbert Menzies Marshall (1841-1913), British
   *Street near Westminster Abbey, London*
   Watercolor
   7-1/4 x 10-1/2 inches

3. Samuel Prout (1783-1852), English
   *Rouen Cathedral*
   Watercolor, pen and brown ink with touches of body color (gouache).
   (Sight) 13-5/8 x 9 inches

4. William Wood Deane (1825-1873), English
   *A View of St. Paul’s Cathedral from Across the Thames*
   Watercolor with touches of body color (gouache)
   22-1/2 x 18-1/16 inches

5. William Payne (c. 1760-after 1830), English
   *Waterfall at Tivoli, 1819*
   Watercolor
   10-1/4 x 15-3/8 inches

6. Francois-Marius Granet (1775-1859), French
   *Entrance to the Capuchin Cloister, Rome*
   Sepia wash and watercolor
   5-1/2 x 3-7/8 inches
7. Auguste Delacroix (1809-1868), French
   *Seated Monk*
   Watercolor
   22 x 16-3/4 inches

7A. John ‘Warwick” Smith (1749-1831), English
   *Approach to Point Aber Glaslyn from Tan y Bwlch, Caernarvonshire, Wales*  
   July 16, 1792
   Watercolor
   5-1/4 x 8-5/8 inches

8. Carl Friederich H. Werner (1808-1894), German
   *Gypsies Among the Ruins of Diocletian’s Palace, Salona, Dalmatia*  
   1854
   Watercolor
   25-7/8 x 20 inches
   Purchased with funds donated by the Friends of the La Salle University Art Museum, “The Art Angels.”

9. Victor Pierre Huguet (1835-1902), French
   *Landscape With Covered Wagon*  
   1887
   Watercolor
   8 x 12 inches

10. George Wood (1835-1902), American
    *Warming the Hands*  
    1879
    Watercolor
    10 x 7-1/2 inches

11. Edmund Darch Lewis (1835-1910), American
    *The Race, Packeucha*
    Watercolor highlighted with gouache
    9-3/4 x 20-3/4 inches
12. Luigi Loir (1845-1916), French
*A South Italian Town*
Watercolor and gouache
6-7/8 x 5 inches

13. James Hanes (1924- ), American
*Early Spring*
Watercolor
7 x 4-3/4 inches

14. Eric Hesse (Contemporary), American
*Paris*
Gouache
Purchased: The Marjorie and Irwin Nat Pincus Fund for Prints and Drawings

15. Marguerite Zorach (1888-1968), American
*Figures and Autumn Trees, New Hampshire, 1915*
Watercolor
(Sight) 13-1/4 x 9-3/4 inches

16. Earl Horter (1881-1940), American
*Still Life with Wine Bottle*
Watercolor
13 x 10 inches
Given by Jay and Anne Stiefel

17. Sidney Goodman (b. 1936), American
*View From Camp Perry 2, Maine 1975*
Watercolor
10-12 inches
Purchased with funds donated by the Art Angels
18. Marc Byron Whitney (b. 1955), American

*Jackie Sleeping* 1988

Watercolor

22 x 15 inches
PAPER CONSERVATION MUSTS FOR PRINTS, DRAWINGS, AND WATERCOLORS

1. Framing:
Always use 100% rag board—this is available at art supply stores and reputable framers, upon request, in white, off-white, and cream. If 100% rag board is not used, the object will become discolored, and deteriorate from contact with the acid in the mat board, which is composed of woodpulp. The colored mat boards available in art supply stores are often extremely acidic, and they should not be used unless some 100% rag board is used as a “buffer.”

2. When attaching the work of art to a mat board, use Japanese tissue (available at art supply stores) as a hinge. Do not use stamp hinges or other gummed tapes.

3. NEVER use any kind of pressure-sensitive tape (Scotch, masking, mystic, etc.). It will permanently stain the paper. Use library paste, wheat-flour paste,
wallpaper paste, or cornstarch paste. (See recipe below). Never use rubber cement, Elmer's or any other glue that is not watersoluble.

4. Do not frame work of art in a way that will put the paper in direct contact with glass. Use a window mat or a spacer (a thin strip of 100% rag board) to keep the glass off the surface of the object.

5. Never hang a print or watercolor in direct sunlight, which will fade the color and yellow the paper. Avoid hanging the prints on the wall of a frequently-used fireplace. If a frame is to be hung on a damp wall, allow for air to circulate freely around the frame.

6. Completely seal the back with rag board or paper; the high pollution content of city air is as damaging to paper as it is to humans.

7. On a watercolor do not attempt to paint or cover over stains yourself; let them alone or take the object to a qualified conservator recommended by the Curator.