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TURNER – FOR OUR DELIGHT

Many books and articles have been written about Joseph Mallord William Turner, RA, by general consent the greatest of all British painters.

Interest in his art has recently received a fresh stimulus from many exhibitions held in Europe, and the United States, to commemorate the 200th anniversary of his birth.

Worldwide attention to a painter of his standing is not surprising. What is surprising is that no work has, until now, been dedicated to his superb Swiss and Alpine watercolours, which rank among the finest examples of his genius.

'Turner in Switzerland', by John Russell and Andrew Wilton, edited by Walter Amstutz, now sets the matter right.

This new book, coming from Switzerland, is an expression of posthumous gratitude and appreciation for Turner's glorification of its scenery.

Between 1802 and 1844 Turner visited Switzerland six times. He was greatly attracted by the country and its inspiration enabled him to produce some of his greatest masterpieces. No other painter has ever identified himself so completely with the Swiss landscape and yet Switzerland has, so far, taken relatively little notice of his art.

Until quite recently there has been no single drawing or painting of importance by Turner in any public or private Swiss collection. However, in October 1976 on the occasion of the Turner exhibition, the Kunsthaus, Zürich acquired the important painting 'A Fete Day in Zürich — Early Morning 1945', with help from various donors.

During his lifetime Turner's work fetched exceptionally high prices at a period when prosperity in Switzerland was modest by comparison with Britain. As it increased the Swiss collectors became mainly interested in French impressionism, and so ignored the rich harvest of thousands of drawings, oil paintings and sketches that Turner made.

To do justice to Turner, with any reproduction of his drawings, is no easy task. The delicate nuances of his colours are so subtle that satisfactory results are rarely achieved by the usual four-colour printing process. The difficulty is aggravated by the unavoidable medium of transparencies, even when proofs are compared with originals and corrected before printing. To achieve optimum results the plates have been printed in five colours in the hope that they will do full justice to the infinite variety of Turner's paintings.

As Turner never kept a diary, his routes in Switzerland have been determined and pieced together with the aid of his sketch books, letters

and other information. *'Turner in Switzerland'* with its portraits, five maps – old and modern, marked in some cases with Turner's itineraries – is a handsome volume of work and ranks high in the extensive list of Turner literature.

But what of Turner, the man and his motivations?

Born in the age of patronage on April 23, 1775, he was the son of an hairdresser. He was called William at home, but soon became known by his initials 'JMW'.

From his parents, Turner inherited the tradesman's respect for money, which became the greatest help in the furtherance of his career and main prop of his artistic independence.

His home life, however, was far from happy. His mother was subject to maniac fits of anger and later became insane. Devoted to his father, Turner cared for him throughout his lifetime. There is no doubt that his father encouraged his artistic temperament. It was not an uncommon sight to see his son's drawings for sale in his barber's shop window, for one to three shillings each!

A Londoner, Turner lived with his parents in Hand Court, Maiden Lane until he was twenty-four. The house has long disappeared, but its situation – only three minutes walk from the Thames – made it an ideal base. In those days the river was the main highway for London's traffic and provided Turner with a variety of subjects.

His home was also convenient for Covent Garden, where he could observe daily the colourful jumble of vegetables, fruit and flowers. This early childhood impression of London and its river, with rigged ships seen through fog and mist, is one vital key to the constant exploration of vaporous effects in his art.

An added advantage for Turner was the fact that the Academies were within a stone's throw of his birthplace. Less advantageous was the absence of natural beauty in his surroundings. As a child he had no conception of the country scene. He could therefore not relate as easily to this as to the natural phenomenon he experienced on the river and streets of London.

He soon came to know the country scene for, at the age of ten, he was sent to live with his uncle, JMW Marshall, a butcher in Brentford, then a country village. From a shop in the market place Turner attended the Free School and there laid the foundations of an interest in literature, particularly poetry, which he cherished all his days.

This early transplantation into country life set up his lasting affection

for the more westerly reaches of the Thames.

Later he was to build a country house at Twickenham and, in old age, to live in a cottage on the river at Chelsea.

At only fourteen years of age Turner became a student of the RA, entering its portals in December, 1789. The drawing that procured his place for free tuition was a study made from a cast. The following year he was successful in having a drawing chosen by the Academy for exhibition. Only three years later he won the prize for landscape drawing presented by the Society of Arts.

Always anxious to extend his knowledge, he commenced his varied travels in 1791 with a visit to Bristol. At only sixteen he was already beginning to show feelings for the wild and romantic scenery of the West country. Because of his rapidly extending programme of tours he was able to increase his exhibits at the RA, with subjects culled from his prolific store of sketches. Even so he had not yet developed the graphic shorthand which later enabled him to simplify what he saw in a few swift strokes. Turner's industry was as remarkable as his ability. It is aptly illustrated by his practice of invariably arising in time to see the sun rise.

Three years after becoming an RA Associate in 1797, he left the family home to take lodgings in Harley Street. He required more space to house his mounting store of art, particularly as he had now started to paint in oils.

Turner was one of the first British painters to own his own exhibition gallery, which he kept for over 50 years. After becoming a full Academician in 1802, he extended his Harley Street accommodation and, in 1804, commenced his one man shows, something of a novelty at that period of time.

From the wealth of material at his disposal, he was able to supply enough paintings for exhibitions lasting until 1819, some from ideas formulated as far back as 1802.

His first association with Switzerland came about through employment as a copier for a Dr. Munro. This gentleman could not afford to purchase originals, so employed artists of the period for three or four hours each evening, paying them a fee of 2/6d to 3/6d each, plus supper. In return, they traced or copied outline drawings and worked to a finished effect. Much of the subject matter included the wildest and most romantic scenes of Switzerland and Italy. This fired Turner with the ambition of seeing and painting this scenery in his own way.

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