British Watercolor

Before the mid 1700s, painting with watercolors was considered a kind of drawing: a way to easily and informally record visual notes. However, over the following century and a half it gained a new status, thanks primarily to British artists.

During that period Britain was becoming an empire, the strongest in the world by the mid-1800s. As Britain strove to lead in every aspect of science, from aviculture to zoology, it also looked to its arts, determined to make them as sophisticated as those of their continental counterparts.

In this hothouse of culture, watercolor flourished. Artists in Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, had favored watercolor for its portability. The pigments, brushes, and paper could easily be tucked under an arm. This made it ideal for on-the-spot landscape paintings, like Samuel Hieronymous Grimm's *View of Barlborough Hall, Derbyshire*. Watercolor often served in the role that photography plays today, recording pleasure excursions by amateur artists as well as official expeditions by commissioned artists, such as the foreign coastlines and costumes in William Alexander's *Chinese Military Post on the River Eu Ho*. Professionals might be hired by a client wanting a record of the family estate. For all these purposes watercolor was a convenient medium.

However, as the British took themselves more seriously, the documentation of their accomplishments and explorations, and even their pastimes and pleasures, grew in importance. In continental Europe, a simple topographical ink-drawing, usually the basis of the watercolor, would be given dimension and atmosphere with monochrome ink washes. In Britain, however, watercolorists experimented with ways to enrich their work. They developed an ever-expanding range of pigments and techniques and broadened the definition of what was appropriate subject matter for the medium.

Watercolorists moved beyond landscapes, taking on imagery traditionally reserved for its more celebrated cousin, oil painting. Even descriptive landscapes, which by definition left little to the artist's imagination, became something more in the hands of artists like Paul Sandby and his followers, who brought picturesque elements together not just as they were in nature but improved, creating imaginary landscapes more perfect than nature's. Even the bastions of high art—portraits and classical subjects—became fair game for watercolor artists. Henry Ryland's *Two Ladies Playing Musical Instruments on a Marble Terrace* is such a historical topic, with details based on the archaeological findings of the day.

By the 1800s, watercolor had become suitable for the highest artistic imaginings. It couldn't capture the detailed accuracy achieved with oil painting; watercolor pigments were more transparent and harder to control, and mistakes harder to conceal. However, like oil painting, watercolor allowed virtuoso brush handling to shine. Since every application of pigment showed, the finest watercolor painting demonstrates the skill of its creator. Watercolors were especially prized when they recorded the artists' every stroke, which somehow coalesced into recognizable objects.

These works, which rival oil paintings not only in bravura but in size, mark the acceptance of watercolor as a serious medium in its own right. Their freedom of brushwork and interest in painterly effects continued the tradition of exploration and experimentation that would be the hallmark of the most modern art through the twentieth century.