

Rome Is Awash in Watercolors

by Edith Schloss

ROME — Until a little while ago, people felt oddly about painters of watercolors, imagining them as amateurs diddling with little picturesque views of foreign parts, or fluffy bouquets of flowers. In their mind's eye, the work was decorative and minor. But all that has changed.

The centuries-old technique of diluting pigment with water and brushing it over a white sheet of paper is no longer for fuddy-duddies, illustrators or academicians. It has come into its own again as one of the most felicitous of modern mediums.

In the West, it started in the Renaissance, when painters applied large splotches of cuttle fish ink or bistre against linear marks in their preliminary sketches to indicate where masses and solids were to move against areas of space and light in their oils and frescoes. Beiges or browns were washed over the sheet, and so-called *lavis*.

Then Dutch landscape painters — the word landscape, *landschap* itself comes from the Dutch — employed loose deft washes as studies for their oils of marvelously deep stretches of land toward the far, everchanging seas and skies.

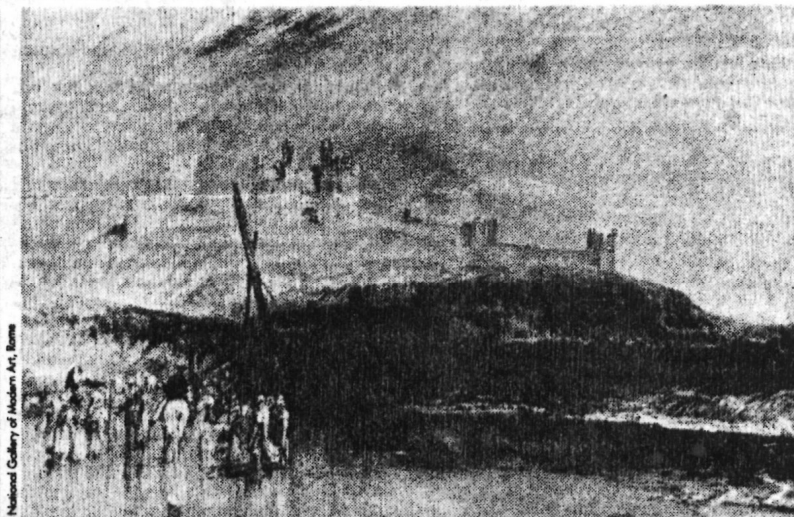
Albrecht Durer, traveling to the promised land of art, Italy, began to enhance his small, graphically detailed views and his closeups of all that crept and crawled in pen and pencil, with careful areas of varied color, and these were perhaps the first watercolors *per se*.

Later a Swisswoman, Maris Sibylla Merian (1647-1717), dedicated herself to a patient inquiry into the structure of insects and plants (so close was her communion with nature that waders nested in her paintbox). Her poetic renderings, apparent scientific studies, were in watercolor. Before embarking on their oils, Poussin and Claude Lorrain also exercised themselves in *lavis* of lush vegetation, but in sepias and other monotones.

But it was in the 18th century and in England that the medium came to its greatest flowering, whether it was because of insularity, the love of homey countryside, volatile atmospheric conditions or the predilection for intimacy and smaller statements.

When Alexander Cozens, in his treatise on "a new method of assisting the invention of drawing" in 1784, explained that "a splash or blot of paint that happened to fall on the paper could be used as a starting point... a shape suggesting an element in a landscape for the creative imagination," the critics were shocked.

For the English — Cozens, Constable, Bonington, Girtin and the greatest watercolorist of them all, Joseph Mallord William Turner — watercolor meant landscape, but for the French, from Delacroix, Cezanne to the Post-Impressionists, it could be used for any subject



Turner's impression of "Dunstanborough Castle" in Northumberland (1828-9).

drenched in sunlight. Kandinsky early in this century employed it for his sideways traveling, glowing abstract impressions; the German Expressionists for their emotional onslaughts.

In America in the 1920s, the pioneers of modernism — Dove, Demuth and O'Keefe — preferred it, but it was most of all John Marin, in his sparkling, adamant renderings of the rough Maine coast and weather, who was a watercolorist *par excellence*.

For the late Post-Impressionist De Pisis in Italy, with his passion for the sensuousness of surfaces, for evanescent sea weather, it was the perfect foil; while Morandi, in his last years, painted his simple, monumental still lifes only in watercolor.

But recently the technique has been used in ways no one could ever have dreamed of.

In the current exhibition of Turner in Rome, he can be seen in all his pride of technique. Flaunting some cardinal rules already quite long ago — usually covering a spot with glue to work comfortably over and around it, and then removing it to let in the white of the paper burst out like a sun or a moonbeam — he handled brush and paper every which way, using all the tricks of his trade. And he ran the whole gamut of blues, the preferred color in watercolors — from cobalt to indigo to antwerp, from cerulean to aquamarine.

Whether it was the choice of the Manchester City Art Gallery, which lent these 35 works, they begin with the ones that pleased the pedant Ruskin, and though all of them are technically intriguing, they run to tightness. In many of them, the device of placing little people and cattle in the foreground, for scale, is puzzling. Only a view of Heidelberg, a Swiss cape — swept with grandiose atmospheric contrasts and opalescent light effects — are exceptions.

While his friend and early influence Thomas Girtin faithfully painted *real* landscapes in minute detail and with a limited imagination mainly as travel documents, Turner at the height of his career let himself be carried away: The castle, the mountain crag, the waterways were only springboards for his inner moods, his romantic vision.

Cities and valleys aflame with sunsets, or wrapped in lavender mists, were turbulent entities, legendary and exalted, rather than specific recordings. To those familiar with his watercolors in the London museums, especially the late ones called "unfinished," grandiose vortices of golden and azure luminosities, this show is not altogether rewarding.

Nor does a ramshackle installation against walls painted the blue-green of a brand new truck help. Nevertheless, there is many a lesson for the contemporary watercolorist and viewer here.

Why has there been such a sudden resurgence in the practice of a medium dormant for so long?

"When I found artists of different genera-

tions and of the most divergent styles turning to watercolor again, I couldn't imagine this happened by chance — there had to be a reason," says Angelica Savinio de Chirico, who in her Roman gallery Il Segno has lately specialized in exhibitions of watercolorists, from older Abstract Expressionists to the youngest Minimalists and New Image painters.

"Watercolors today aren't just preliminary sketches, but an end in themselves, a conclusion. It is a lean and difficult technique, despite its apparent lightness. A unity is achieved by the medium itself."

When Giulia Napoleone, a young printmaker, turned to painting, she showed her taut, meticulous, grid abstractions at De Chirico's gallery. "I preferred watercolor to oils because I did not want to give up working on paper," she explains, "I go ahead with thicknesses, spreading layer over layer of paint. It is like etching. Each work becomes a finished expressive image."

Toti Scialoja, a veteran abstractionist, also showing his watercolors at Il Segno, was experimenting with the medium as recently as 1978 because, he says, "It fuses psychic automatism with the provocation of the material. It is stenographic: The sum of many experiences can be put down with a single brush stroke. It is a spiritual technique. It goes along with my belief in action. Action is the work itself."

"Each person creates his own matter," says Bianchi, a New Image painter at Il Segno. "I sometimes scratch on the back of the paper, so marks come through the color in front."

Also at De Chirico's gallery, the American Minimalist Richard Tuttle showed paintings of little elements in the middle of a sheet, like commas or quotes. Thought too spare for some people in their loneliness, they looked like cunning little monuments.

Perhaps the secret of the return is the small format of watercolor paintings. Artists are turning away from the oversized, the fake heroic, to the intimate, to statements like diaries or poetry again.

The liquid splash, the direct attack of the loaded brush. The quick spread of color over the white of the paper underneath, made luminous by it. Lakes and puddles of paint. The magic of its blues. The "controlled accident."

Seemingly less committed than oil painting, which lends itself to correction and complex structure, this "hit or miss" technique is for the experienced only. It is also immensely adaptable. In its immediacy, clarity and freshness, it is superbly adapted for today's resurgence of painterly painting.

"J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) — *Watercolors*" from the collection of the City Art Gallery of Manchester, England, is at Galleria Nazionale D'Arte Moderna, Viale Belle Arti 131, until Dec. 15. "Wassili Kandinski" is at the Pinacoteca Capitolina Palazzo dei Conservatori, Piazza Campidoglio, until Jan. 4. "Toti Scialoja: New Abstractions in watercolor" is at Galleria Il Segno, Via Capo Le Case 4, until Dec. 31.



"Little Owl," by Durer (1506).