

COLLECTION CONNECTION

The Brush of a Master: Turner's Watercolor Technique

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While the Taft Museum of Art hosts the exhibition *From Winslow Homer to Edward Hopper: American Watercolor Masterpieces from the Brooklyn Museum*, visitors can also see some of the Taft's own watercolor masterpieces by Joseph Mallord William Turner. American watercolorists were undoubtedly familiar with Turner (1775–1851), the British master of the medium. Indeed, some Americans, such as Thomas Moran, drew direct inspiration from Turner's work. Turner's innovative and influential watercolor techniques can be observed in details from four watercolors created over the course of his career. These techniques can also be seen in many works in the American watercolor exhibition.

Chateau de Rinkenber

The fruit of a trip Turner made to the Alps in 1802, this watercolor evinces a largely traditional 18th-century painting technique. The artist first sketched the scene in delicate pencil lines. Then, with fine brushes, he applied his pigments, suspended in water, to small areas of the composition, taking care to keep the color within the outlines. In the last phase of work, he added touches of opaque white paint to create details of white clothing and smoke. Similarly, to complete the details of the architecture at the far right, he waited until the painted surface was dry before adding tiny strokes of a relatively concentrated, almost dry paint over the underlying washes, working quickly so that he wouldn't dissolve them. A hint of his future, more experimental style can be found in the center foreground, where he blotted



J. M. W. Turner, *Château de Rinkenber, on the Lac de Brienz, Switzerland* (detail), 1809, watercolor

damp watercolor with a sponge or rag to remove some of the color, creating a patch of light on the lake.

Valley of Chamouni

In this view of an Alpine glacier in southeastern France, Turner used a technique called "stopping out" to preserve a diagonal streak of pure white paper to serve as the glacier. Reserving an area this way can be done freehand, by withholding paint throughout the execution of the composition, or it can be achieved by applying a layer of removable wax or other blocking agent to the area. Later Turner went back to the white area and added faint scalloped touches of pale blue to suggest the shadows on the glacier's craggy surface.

Another watercolor effect visible here is "scratching out," seen in the foreground conifers. After painting



J. M. W. Turner, *Valley of Chamouni* (detail), about 1808, watercolor

the trees in tones of brown and green, Turner used sharp tools—such as a fingernail, the wrong end of a brush, a knife, or perhaps a comb—to scrape away thin lines of paint, revealing the white paper below. He made bolder scratches to indicate the scrubby branches and finer scratches to evoke needles.



J. M. W. Turner, *Lake Nemi*, (detail), about 1835, watercolor and pencil

Such effects of bristling branches also help to reinforce the spatial illusion that the trees are close to the viewer, since the smoother-textured surfaces seem to recede into the background. Turner's expressive surface action communicates the rugged terrain of this relatively barren part of the Alps.

Lake Nemi

Turner made this tiny but brilliant watercolor—the entire sheet of paper measures only ten by eight inches—as a design for a vignette (an unbordered book illustration). To give the effect of the distant forests across the lake, Turner made repeated tiny stippling touches with a fine pointed brush carrying a small amount of concentrated color. When painting the lake below, he mixed more water with the pigment, applying fine washes of color, which he let blur and smudged slightly to mimic the lake's reflective and transparent surface. Throughout the image, the faintness of his paint application, which lets the white paper shine through, skillfully captures the sunny, light-filled air of this famous vacation site southwest of Rome.



J. M. W. Turner, *Lake of Thun* (detail), about 1845–51, watercolor

Lake of Thun

Comparing this late watercolor with the earlier works shows how Turner's technique grew more open and fluid over the course of his career. The comparison overstates the case, however, because this sheet was probably a broad, improvisatory color study, as opposed to a commissioned, "finished" watercolor such as the preceding one. In this relatively speedy production, Turner used liquid washes of heavily diluted paint and a less controlled execution. He seems to have achieved his goals without completing the image: many pencil sketch marks remain undisguised, a small tower outlined on the hill at the upper left has received no color, and patches of bare paper remain in the foreground. Turner formed the tree

trunk of the dominant tree at the left by boldly dragging paint upward. He continued this energetic and rapid gesture for some of the branches, smearing paint with a fingertip or swab-like implement instead of a brush. The indeterminate, misty forms born from his methods here seem awash with light and floating in space.