

Rapid Gestures: Waterfalls in British Romantic Art, December 18, 2009-June 6, 2010

The art critic John Ruskin devoted three chapters of his multi-volume treatise *Modern Painters* (1843-1860) to the depiction of water in all its forms: as clouds, snow, lakes, rivers, oceans, and waterfalls. "What shall we compare to this mighty, universal element, for glory and beauty?" he asked. Portrayals of water, Ruskin further argued, can be a tool for measuring artistic skill, particularly when one examines the degree of truthfulness in pictures of nature's sublime cascades. Selected from the wealth of 18th- and 19th-century British landscapes in the RISD Museum's permanent collection, the nine watercolors and drawings displayed in this gallery challenge us to follow Ruskin's lead by admiring and comparing a century of waterfall imagery.

According to Ruskin, the greatest painter of waterfalls was J.M.W. Turner, who alone could illustrate "the majesty of motion" of these tumbling torrents. Here we see Turner's powerful presentation of the Alpine gorge Dazio Grande, 1843, juxtaposed with depictions of waterfalls by John Robert Cozens, John Constable, Edward Lear, and other master landscape painters to reveal the variety of materials, colors, lines, and brushstrokes used to portray these turbulent torrents. This diversity of styles and media in turn gives each cataract a unique character—playful, poetic, breathtaking, or terrifying—thereby capturing the rainbow of emotional responses such sites elicit.

For many period viewers, these works celebrated both the sentiments inspired by waterfalls and the active agency of rushing rivers in Earth's geological history, slowly carving into the planet's surface to form magnificent mountains or gentle valleys. Artists, scientists, writers, and tourists traveled great distances to gaze on rocks and rapids, and this exhibition follows Turner, Ruskin, and their contemporaries to such sites of artistic and poetic inspiration in Britain, Switzerland, and beyond.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

John Constable, English, 1776-1837
Landscape with a Waterfall, ca. 1806
Graphite on wove paper
Anonymous gift 2005.142.76



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John Robert Cozens, English, 1752-1799

Third View on the Reichenbach, 1776

Ink washes applied with brush, ink and pen, watercolor, and graphite

Anonymous gift 69.154.31



Edward Lear, English, 1812-1888

Waterfall, Albania, after 1858

Watercolor, ink, and gouache on paper

Anonymous Gift 70.118.33



John Ruskin, English, 1819-1900

Pass of Faido, St. Gothard, ca. 1845-56

Watercolor on wove paper with scraping

Anonymous Gift 70.118.57



William Daniell, British, 1769-1837

Gungarapetta, Waterfall near Vatlagunta, Madras, 1792

Graphite, ink with pen, and ink and watercolor with brush on laid paper

Anonymous gift 72.171.11



Edward Duncan, British, 1803-1882

Fall in Borrowdale, Cumberland, ca. 1835 - 47

wash technique; gouache; pencil

Anonymous gift 73.204.19

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John Warwick Smith, English, 1749-1831
Canton Zurich, ca. 1785-86
Graphite and watercolor on laid paper
Anonymous gift 73.204.45



John White Abbott, British, 1763-1851
At Lynton, North Devon, ca. 1793 - 1831
Graphite, watercolor, and opaque watercolor on wove paper
Anonymous gift 83.217.2



Joseph Mallord William Turner, English, 1775-1851
Dazio Grande, 1843
Watercolor applied with a brush, and graphite
Gift of Mr. Richard Brown Baker in memory of his parents, Harvey
and Marion Baker 84.080

