

British Artists Abroad, December 1, 2008-April 19, 2009

In the 18th and 19th centuries, many upper-class Britons traveled to ancient and Renaissance historical and cultural sites in France, Italy, and the Near East. Known as the Grand Tour, this journey was, for much of the educated elite, the culmination of a proper classical education. Artists comprised an important part of this traveling culture by participating in it as well as recording it for those back home. They carried with them easily transportable watercolor paints, ink, graphite, chalk, and paper for drawing monuments and landscapes.

Most of the works in this gallery were made by artists in the midst of their travels; others were created after the fact from sketches and memories of their journeys. Their functions vary, and reflect the circumstances under which they were created. Artists such as Richard Wilson and Joseph Paxton traveled abroad in the employ of aristocrats, charged with the task of depicting notable sites. On return, the artist's works were pasted into albums for the enjoyment of the patron, to be perused much like a photo album today, or shown in small exhibitions at the patron's home.

Other artists traveled independently, seeking subjects that would satisfy the 19th-century explosion of public interest in picturesque touring and illustrated books. Fashioning themselves as travel specialists who could bring the great and humble sites of the world to a broad public, artists such as Alfred Gomersal Vickers and John Frederick Lewis traveled with writers, translating their journeys into travel essays with illustrative lithographs or engravings when they returned.

Many watercolorists, also responding to the public appetite for travel imagery, envisioned their works on gallery walls for public exhibition. Hugh William Williams's view of Athens (above the mantelpiece), painted from sketches and memories after his return to England, was intended to have a commanding presence on the wall of a large exhibition space. He employed a large piece of paper to approximate the scale of oil painting as well as opaque gouache in the foreground to create luminous, painterly effects.

Both highly detailed and sketchy, ephemeral interpretations of landscape appear in this gallery. The latter emerged in the early 19th century, as artists became engrossed in the effects of light and fleeting temporal experience. William Collingwood Smith's view captures a sensation or impression of the Venetian canal rather than all its particulars. Such watercolors anticipated the Impressionist paintings of the next several decades.

This exhibition continues the rotation of works from the RISD Museum's fine collection of British watercolors, numbering some nine hundred sheets.

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CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Frank Dillon, British, 1823-1909

Ventimiglia, 1867

Graphite, watercolor, gouache on beige paper

Anonymous gift 1986.184.17

This meticulous study, unfinished and made for an unknown purpose, exhibits the artist's concern for recording all the particulars of the place. Beige paper was a popular backdrop for scenes set in the south of Europe or the Near East, perhaps for the immediate warmth and slightly terracotta effect it lent to the scene.



John L. Fulleylove, British, 1845-1908

Scutari, Istanbul, ca. 1900

Graphite on blue paper

Anonymous gift 1986.184.28

In the first decade of the 20th century, John L. Fulleylove, together with author John Kelman, published several travel volumes of trips to the Mediterranean and the Holy Land. This confident graphite drawing relays his desire to capture the character of a place as well as its topography.



William James Müller, British, 1812-45

Nazareth, ca. 1838-1843

Graphite, watercolor, gouache

Anonymous gift 1986.184.39

William James Müller was known for the rapidity and efficiency of his sketches, and for his ability to capture the shifting conditions of weather and light in rugged landscapes. He made two separate trips to the Near East, the second, in 1843, in the company of an archaeologist who was studying sites in the region. He exhibited his elegant drawings in exhibitions after returning home.



William Collingwood Smith, British, 1815-87

Venice from the Gondola, Returning from the Armenian Convent, 1857

Watercolor and gouache over graphite on blue paper

Anonymous gift 1986.184.57



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William Collingwood Smith's quickly executed watercolor of the passing canal, with its conflation of sky and reflective water, approaches the lighting effects of Impressionist paintings. His title, which pinpoints the exact placement of the scene, indicates his desire to capture a particular place—but only for one, fleeting moment.

Alfred Gomersal Vickers, English, 1810-1837

The Castle Square, Warsaw, with Sigismund III's Column, ca. 1835-36

Pen and ink, watercolor, gouache over graphite

Anonymous gift 1986.184.65

Alfred Gomersal Vickers accompanied the author Leitch Ritchie to Eastern Europe and Russia in 1835 and 1836, making pictures of the urban centers they visited along the way. Their travel accounts were quickly published in a series of books illustrated with lithographs. Although this particular scene never appeared in print, it was likely painted on the journey.



Hugh William "Grecian" Williams, Scottish, 1773-1829

Athens from the Southwest, ca. 1818-1822

Graphite, watercolor, brown ink, touches of gouache with resist and scraping

Anonymous gift 1986.184.72

After traveling extensively in the Mediterranean, Hugh William Williams mounted an exhibition of views of Greece in Edinburgh in 1822. The critical acclaim he received earned him the nickname "Grecian" Williams. His view of Athens combines the general with the specific, altering the placement of major monuments in favor of a pleasingly balanced composition.



Richard Wilson, British, 1713/14-1782

Grotta Ferrata, 1754

Black and white chalks on blue (now faded) paper

Anonymous gift 69.154.28

Richard Wilson, a founding member of the British Royal Academy, traveled extensively with the 2nd Earl of Dartmouth, for whom he produced sixty-eight drawings of Roman scenes. The scenes were shown at his patron's home in the lilac mat, also made by Wilson, seen here. The RISD Museum collection includes two sheets from this series.



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Sir Joseph Paxton, British, 1803-65

A Hilltown with a Church and Ruined Castle in Asia Minor (Turkey), ca. 1838-1839

Pen and ink, watercolor, gouache over graphite

Anonymous Gift 70.118.35

Best known for his breathtaking design of the Crystal Palace at the Great Exhibition of 1851, Sir Joseph Paxton was a lifelong landscape designer, horticulturalist, and architect in the employ of the 6th Duke of Devonshire. In 1838–39, he accompanied the Duke on an eight-month tour of Mediterranean countries, creating watercolors to record their travels. Watercolor painting was an essential component of Paxton's education, as it was for most educated architects, because it revealed an essential way to see and understand the world.



William Callow, English, 1812-1908

Versailles from the Heights of Satory, 1837-39

Pen and ink, watercolor, gouache with scraping

Anonymous gift 71.153.15

William Callow exploited the taste for travel imagery by depicting tourist sites such as the Grand Canal in Venice and the great palaces of Europe. In 1837 the engraver Charles Heath commissioned this and several other drawings depicting the exterior palace and gardens of Versailles. The unusual viewpoint and eye for composition are characteristic of Callow's works; his precise, highly finished technique reveals a desire to approximate some of the effects of oil painting.



John Frederick Lewis, British, 1805-1876

The Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, ca. 1838

Pen and ink, watercolor, gouache over graphite

Anonymous gift 71.153.59

A student of the famous portraitist Sir Thomas Lawrence, John Frederick Lewis turned to landscape and topographical views when he traveled around Europe in the late 1820s. Many of his originals, which feature a unique technique combining watercolor with areas of gouache, were made into lithographs in volumes recounting his journeys. This view of the Palazzo Vecchio from the Uffizi records one of the vistas most frequently observed by British tourists.



RISD MUSEUM

Edward Lear, English, 1812-1888

Amalfi, 1839

Crayon and gouache on grey paper

Anonymous gift 84.203.1

Described as a “poetic topographer” by his contemporaries, Edward Lear produced hundreds of masterful drawings during his wanderings in southern Europe. In this work, he combines a faithful depiction of the stunning seaside village of Amalfi with a foreground scene that romanticizes the languid lifestyle of southern Europeans.

