The background of the cover is a classical painting. On the left, a large, dark, leafy tree stands against a pale sky. In the lower-left foreground, a figure in a long, reddish-brown robe stands looking towards the right. The middle ground is a bright, hazy landscape with a path leading towards a distant horizon. On the right, there are faint, classical-style columns or structures. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by yellows, oranges, and browns.

LAURE MEYER

MASTERS OF ENGLISH LANDSCAPE

AMONG OTHERS

GAINSBOROUGH STUBBS TURNER
CONSTABLE WHISTLER KOKOSCHKA

TERRAIL

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MASTERS
OF
ENGLISH
LANDSCAPE

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GAINSBOROUGH STUBBS TURNER
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TERRAIL

Cover illustration

J.M.W. TURNER:

LANDSCAPE: WOMAN WITH TAMBOURINE.

c.1840-1850. Oil on canvas.

88.5 x 118 cm.

Private Collection.

Previous page

FRANCIS COTES:

PORTRAIT OF PAUL SANDBY.

c.1760. Oil on canvas.

Tate Gallery, London.

Because he looked on nature as poetry,
and sought to express the nuances of
colour and atmosphere, Paul Sandby can,
perhaps, be regarded as the father of
English landscape painting.

Opposite

SIR ANTHONY VAN DYCK:

A COUNTRY LANE.


Watercolour (detail).

British Museum, London.

The frequenter of the greatest courts of
Europe seems to have needed to go into
the countryside to enjoy its beauty and
freshness.

Editors: Jean-Claude Dubost and Jean-François Gonthier
English adaptation: Peyton Skipwith, with Eugène Clarence Braun-Munk
Art director: Christophe Merlin
Iconography: Claire Balladur
Composition & filmsetting: Compo Rive Gauche Paris
Lithography: Litho Service T. Zamboni, Verona

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MASTERS
OF
ENGLISH
LANDSCAPE







J.M.W. TURNER.

THE FIFTH PLAGUE OF EGYPT

1800. Oil 124 x 183 cm.

Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis.

The title of the painting is incorrect. The scene depicted is not the fifth, but the seventh plague. A perfect example of the "sublime", which was in vogue at the end of the 18th century.

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INTRODUCTION

Great Britain witnessed a unique flowering of a school of native landscape painters. It developed spasmodically as artists reacted to the tastes of aristocratic collectors and to Continental influences alike.

It was only in the 19th century that landscape came to occupy a prime place in an art which had been dominated previously by portrait and history painting. This change of emphasis was important and evolved as individuals gradually relinquished their position as dominant subject matter in favour of nature. During the 17th and 18th centuries landscape existed chiefly in a supporting role as a backdrop to various human activities, or else to serve as the expression of the ideals of individual artists. It was not then regarded as an art form in its own right.

The beauty of specific sites, domesticated or wild, combined with the changing quality of light, heavy with mist or iridescent in hazy sunshine, the abundant vegetation and the presence of the sea, always close to hand and often angry, each of these elements favoured the development of an important school of landscape painters. The names of Turner and Constable immediately spring to mind, but one should not overlook their predecessors or those who followed after them. There were dozens of artists of great talent, painters of remarkable pictures, at whose work it is equally important to look. Just think of Gainsborough, Girtin and Whistler.

The transition which led to the pre-eminence of landscape was gradual, starting in the 17th century and then ripening in the 18th. This development was influenced by many different factors including the aesthetic dictates of the Royal Academy, ideas from the Continent, the tastes of rich collectors and amateurs alike and, above all, the skill and ability of individual artists.

LANDSCAPE AND THE ROYAL ACADEMY

The Royal Academy in London was slow to recognise the importance of landscape painting; although the Academy had been founded in 1768, it was only much later that it recognised landscape as a special subject and that was due to Turner's Will of 1833. Prior to its foundation other artistic bodies had existed but equally none of these had paid any attention to landscape in its own right.

The Royal Academy Schools admitted only thirty pupils a year and, in the 18th century, the practice of landscape painting was not taught there at all. A young man wishing to study in this field had to gain admittance, as

pupil or apprentice, to the studio of a practicing artist, and such mentors were not always of the highest calibre. In following this tradition Girtin was apprenticed to the watercolourist Edward Dayes, whilst Turner worked alongside Thomas Malton as a lowly collaborator.

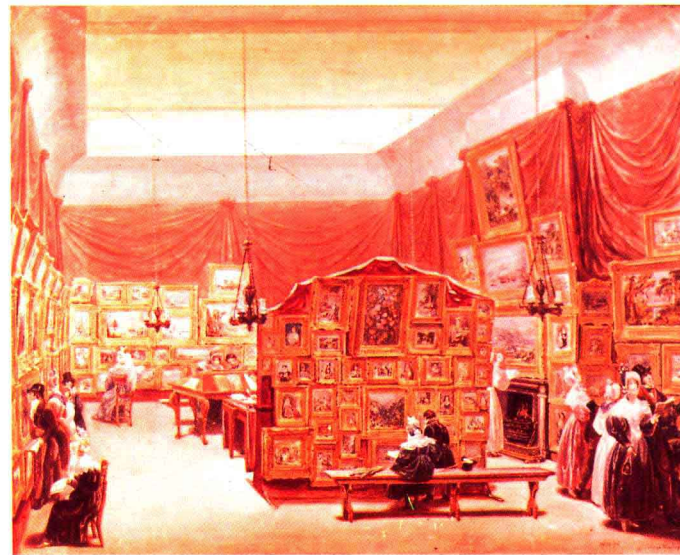
The contempt in which landscape painting was held can be explained by the theories advocated by the Royal Academy at the end of the 18th century. Sir Joshua Reynolds, its first President, considered that the object of painting was not to copy or transcribe nature but to present an idealised vision of her. In this belief he was heir to a long tradition. He also believed in the hierarchy of subject matter, an artistic theory first developed by the French Academie des Beaux-Arts, but expounded with even greater rigour by its English counterpart.

According to this principle history painting, inspired by biblical, historical or mythological incidents, was the highest branch of art because it conveyed a philosophical message, and its nobility was far removed from the mundane material world of everyday life. A special style, the 'grand style' or the 'grand manner', which was deemed to be both classical and noble, was evolved to enable artists to depict with suitable dignity such morally uplifting episodes.

Portrait painting, so long as it aspired to the ideal, held second place in this hierarchy, and was regarded as a laudable profession for an artist. It was at this level that Reynolds placed himself. Other categories of painting – narrative, portraiture (in the sense of transcribing a straightforward likeness), landscape and still life – were placed firmly at the bottom of the ladder.

However, one should not conclude from this that the Academy's role was a purely negative one. Founded by artists and enjoying complete independence, despite the privilege of its royal charter, it organised annual exhibitions, which enabled many artists to show their work and build their reputations. For many, especially the watercolourists, the hanging was not ideal. Pictures were hung in every available space, banked up one above another from floor to ceiling – conditions were no different at the Old Watercolour Society (now the Royal Society of Painters in Watercolour) – and watercolours were framed close up in heavy gold frames rather than isolated in wash-line mounts. Such conditions explain the need for artists to have created strong works of a considerable size which could be clearly seen from a distance. Finally, it was the existence of these crowded conditions, which meant that many works were skied, and others hung below the line, that led some artists, like Turner, to open their own galleries.

The auction houses, where works of art were offered to the public, have existed since 1744 (Sotheby's) and 1766 (Christie's). It was only in the middle of the 19th century that the idea of holding exhibitions in the newly founded provincial museums was developed, making important artistic centres of such cities as Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool. Also, at much the same time the new breed of entrepreneurial dealers started to open commercial galleries.



GEORGE SCHARF.

INTERIOR OF THE GALLERY OF THE
NEW SOCIETY OF PAINTERS IN WATER-
COLOURS IN OLD BOND STREET.

1834. Watercolour.

Victoria & Albert Museum, London.