

Watercolours

Mired in the past?

Painting with water should respond to the times. Some lessons for England from an unexpected quarter

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AT THE British Royal Watercolour Society's spring exhibition in 1993, one watercolour attracted particular attention: a pleasant view of alpine ski slopes at Klosters. It happened to be painted by Prince Charles, heir to the British throne, who took art lessons from, among others, John Ward, a member of the Royal Academy. The work was competent but, in the view of Chris Beetles, a passionate collector and dealer in London, such "gifted amateurs" have done more harm than good to watercolour as a serious art form.

Why? Because watercolour in Britain tends to model itself, year in year out, on the work of celebrated British artists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The two watercolour societies which dominate the medium in Britain have been "hijacked by elderly professionals who tend to elect clones of themselves," says Mr Beetles. "For half of what you see, it looks as if the clock stopped in 1880," says Frank Whitford, an art critic for the *Sunday Times*.



Bernhard Vogel, "Dresden Altstadt", 2001

For excitement these days, you have to look across the Channel to another tradition, which was born in Austria in the 19th century, revitalised by the German expressionists in the early 20th century, born again in the 1970s, and is alive and well in the galleries of Linz, Salzburg and Vienna. Although contemporary watercolour is appreciated, and bought for high prices, all over continental Europe, the wellspring of inspiration for the last two decades has been Austria.

The painter as fighter-pilot

The essence of watercolour, say aficionados, is a highly personal, immediate relationship between the artist and his subject, whether it is a still life, landscape, or the human figure. Watercolours can be done quickly, on site, and mistakes cannot be corrected—the work must be changed to incorporate them. The watercolourist takes risks, reacts like a fighter-pilot to changes in front of him, and races against time, light and the weather. The greatest of all, J.M.W. Turner, had himself lashed to a ship's mast to record a storm first-hand. But the experience of man in nature—the essence of watercolour—should produce new results for each generation. In Britain, lately, it hasn't.

Even the “elderly professionals” admit there is a problem. “Yes, there is an establishment,” says Ronald Maddox, the president of the Royal Institute of Painters in Water-Colours (founded in 1831). “It's quite difficult to get elected, and it takes time.” Only two to four members each year are voted on to the august body of 64. In its heyday the Royal Institute occupied its own building at 192 Piccadilly, provocatively close to the Royal Academy, but the lease ran out in 1971.

The Royal Watercolour Society (RWS, with 83 members) was founded even earlier, in 1804, because the Royal Academy did not take watercolours seriously. It was fantastically successful. The watercolourists worshipped Turner, though he never became a member, because he handled the interplay of water-based paint and the luminescence of the underlying paper in a way that has never been surpassed. Despite that, he was unorthodox, using thick white paint (called bodycolour) in places where the purists would have let the paper shine through.

The watercolour establishment has bickered ever since about what constitutes a true watercolour. In the early days, painters were disqualified for using ingredients other than water-based pigment and paper. Even today, the most celebrated watercolour competition, the annual Singer & Friedlander/*Sunday Times* prize, stipulates that entries should uphold the “finest traditions of British watercolour painting”.

Upturned boats in estuaries

However, the rules are bending. In June 2001, for the first time, a work containing elements of collage was accepted and even won a prize. Thicker acrylic paint is also allowed now, on the pretext that it is water-based. But half the Singer & Friedlander entries are of the 1880 variety, because half the jury prefers that kind of thing, according to an insider.

Even highly competent watercolourists in Britain find it difficult to break the £1,000 (\$1,450) barrier. Many sell paintings for a third of that. Galleries will take 50% plus 17.5 % value-added tax, which means that watercolourists must sell around 40 paintings a year to scratch a living, or

combine their art with other jobs.

The watercolourist races against time, light and the weather. Turner once had himself lashed to a ship's mast to record a storm first-hand

The British rightly esteem their watercolour tradition. Francis Bowyer, president of the RWS, says it is “a very British medium. It is the one thing we have given the arts.” There is huge interest at an amateur and professional level. The sheer numbers of watercolours in the country by dead and living artists keep prices down. The ranks of the professionals, however, are not very deep. And they are getting thinner, because most art-school graduates are eclectic about materials.

In the early 20th century some English watercolourists were inspired by the French Impressionists, such as Sisley, Cézanne and later Signac, but that was about the first and last time that continental painters directly influenced English watercolour. The last surge of innovation came in the second world war and soon after, when war artists, as in the first world war, found it the ideal medium of instant record. Paul and John Nash, John Piper and Graham Sutherland, for example, developed a stark, symbolic style that allowed watercolour, whose traditional diet is romance and idyll, to handle grim and horrific subjects too.

But since then, British watercolours have continued in glorious isolation, reverting to the 1880 type: “upturned boats in estuaries”, as one British artist complains. Ask most British watercolour experts whose work they rate highest today, and they will probably say that of Leslie Worth, a fine landscape painter, but 78 years old. A handful of Britons have emigrated because of this impasse: notably David Remfry to America, five years ago, and Simon Fletcher to Europe in 1980. What did they discover? In Mr Fletcher's case, a decade—the 1980s—of resurgence in Austrian watercolour.

Beside Turner, Alt

This is not as surprising as it sounds. In 1972, Walter Koschatzky, then director of the graphic collection at the Albertina museum in Vienna, one of the finest collections in the world of contemporary art on paper, was discussing a pan-European exhibition with Edward Croft-Murray, keeper of prints and drawings at the British Museum. Mr Koschatzky said he of course agreed that Turner should have pride of place. “What on earth do you mean?” said an angry Mr Croft-Murray, accusing Koschatzky of Austrian false modesty: “Alt sits right next to Turner.”

The watercolours of Rudolf von Alt (1812-1905), whether pastoral idylls, Vienna cityscapes or bustling markets, have all the qualities that his English contemporaries most revered:

luminosity, spectacle, communion with nature, joy of life. Moreover, Alt was a purist—although, like Turner, he occasionally used bodycolour—creating drama and grandeur from paper and just three pigments, blue, yellow and red, clutched in his left hand. Sadly for the Albertina, but quite correctly says Mr Koschatzky, a large number of Alt watercolours, discovered to have been appropriated during Nazi times, were dispersed last year to the pre-Nazi owners or their descendants.

At the turn of the 20th century the Expressionists of German-speaking Europe, notably Emil Nolde, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, used watercolour to convey more freely and immediately than oils man's unfulfilled yearning in the face of nature. Egon Schiele, an Austrian, used watercolour sparingly to great effect, to flesh out his often harrowing pen-and-ink figures, or he mixed it with paste and scraped it around, to torture his figures or landscapes even further.



Gottfried Salzmänn, “Berlin: Le Ciel de la Porte”, 1997

Those Expressionist elements, and then the *Sturm* movement in Berlin, were assimilated into the Austrian watercolour tradition. The great names were Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980) and Kurt Moldovan (1918-77). But Kurt Absolon, born in 1925, would have been the greatest of his generation, Mr Koschatzky believes, had he not died in a road accident in 1958.

Painting the city

It was an exhibition at the Albertina in 1973, of 100 Viennese watercolours from 1780-1900, including works by Alt, Daffinger, Fendi and Romako, that did much to inspire the next generation of Austrian watercolourists. The best among contemporary Austrians, according to most critics, is Gottfried Salzmänn, born in Salzburg in 1943 and now living in France. Mr Salzmänn was the baby in an Austrian “gang of four” watercolourists who exhibited in Salzburg and Vienna in the late 1960s: the others were Moldovan, Rudolf Hradil and Hans Kruckenhauser. He is a master of cityscapes, which he paints in a free, architecturally sound, spacious style. Americans love his views of Manhattan, sometimes distorted as reflections in plate glass windows or car roofs. He is a master of large skies and the inner landscapes of rock and water.

One of his early admirers was Wolfgang Graninger, a Salzburg music teacher, who bought his first Salzmänn in 1971 and built up a collection of 200 watercolours and etchings, which he gave

to the Albertina in 1982. “I can't stop myself collecting,” says Mr Graninger, who has done the same with other Austrian artists, all on his modest government salary. Mr Koschatzky recently conferred on him the honorary title of professor for his services to Austrian art.

Mr Graninger's latest protégé is another Salzburger, Bernhard Vogel, whose paintings these days dominate the Graninger apartment. Mr Vogel proved long ago, however, that he needs no godfather. He is one of only two Austrian watercolourists—Mr Salzmann is the other—who have found a ready market in London and New York as well as a big following at home. He first showed in London in 1992, at the Waterman Fine Art gallery, and sold everything.

The experience of man in nature should ideally produce new results for each generation. In Britain, lately, it hasn't

He acknowledges his debt to Salzmann, Kokoschka and Moldovan. He paints highly expressionistic land- and cityscapes, usually on the spot, even if that means sitting on a traffic island in the rain. And he is prolific—some critics say too prolific, with too vivid a use of colour to achieve the transparency that is so valued in watercolour. But all acknowledge that the pictures are arresting. His most interesting recent paintings were of the BASF chemical works at Schwarzheide, in eastern Germany, commissioned by the company.

Mr Vogel is a tireless self-publicist. He has a website, with a chat-room for fans; he runs art courses during which he paints, while the students watch or paint too; he has published several books on watercolour technique, and gives away many copies. The books are mostly a vehicle for his powerful cityscapes and flower paintings. But he also describes well how the artist attunes himself to his subject: “I am like a cat, which walks up and down apparently without motive then turns around and around until it sits.” Having picked his spot he acclimatises himself, letting everything—people, cars, light, noise and smell—work on him before picking up his brush. “Apparently trivial details can suddenly become the major theme, the foreground can disappear in favour of the hinterland, or vice versa.” Once the focal point of the painting is achieved, the rest of the surface may be littered with what look like random splashes and mistakes.

Simon Fletcher, the Englishman in voluntary exile, and a friend of Mr Vogel, has embraced the Austrian tradition. Like Mr Vogel he teaches by example, in Austria and Bavaria, and he favours painting on the spot, without preliminary drawing, building up tones with plenty of water, which is not the English way. Mr Fletcher, who is now almost an honorary Austrian although he lives in France, has searched in vain for evidence that watercolour is moving forward in other parts of Europe besides Austria and Germany.

Mr Koschatzky has his own contemporary heroes, although he believes the 1980s were the high point of Austrian watercolour. In his view, even Austrian artists have succumbed now to “aimlessness” [*Zielloigkeit*], because they are under such pressure to produce something new

and original. The computer raises too many possibilities.

He has spent his life in the service of watercolour. In 1955, as director of the Galerie Joanneum in Graz, his home town, he began a state-financed programme to restore 1,600 watercolours in private hands in Steiermark that had been damaged during or just after the war. In 1972 he was one of the pioneers who showed that a large-scale international exhibition of watercolours is possible, if the lighting is carefully adjusted to avoid damaging the paintings.

Mr Koschatzky lives with his wife Gabriela, also an art expert, in a ground-floor apartment in the Schönbrunn palace. It is bristling with paintings. He proudly shows a 70th birthday present from Mr Salzmänn, a framed sheet of paper on which are painted stamp-sized miniatures of 70 Salzmänn paintings. "Each one has the quality of the original," says Mr Koschatzky.

What can other countries learn from the Austrian experience? First, the need to be aware of what is going on elsewhere in Europe. Many British painters know and like the German Expressionists. Mr Bowyer of the RWS is quick to praise Nolde's watercolours as "superb; few English painters would disagree". But that is where the appreciation ends, at around 1950. A European Federation of Watercolour Societies was founded five years ago; Messrs Maddox, Salzmänn and Vogel, among others, are honorary members. But it is having some difficulty putting itself on the map.

If Mr Koschatzky's experience is anything to go by, it will take another big exhibition to inspire a generation. It should be in London, in a major gallery, such as the Royal Academy, showing the best of European and perhaps American contemporary watercolours. But getting even the English contingent together could be a struggle.

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