

## Genius in a dazzling new light

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Sarah Crompton

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**David Hockney's thrilling selection of watercolours by JMW Turner reveals the essence of an extraordinary talent. By Sarah Crompton**

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[In pictures: Hockney on Turner \(javascript:newWindow\('/core/Slideshow/slideshowContentFrameFragXL.jhtml?xml=/arts/slideshows/hockneyturner/pixhockney.xml&site=', 'Slideshow', 'height=570,width=750,resizable'\)\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3665758/Genius-in-a-dazzling-new-light.html#disqus_thread)

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"In my beginning is my end" - T S Eliot's mystic words from "East Coker" ran through my head over and over again as I walked around the Tate's new exhibition of Turner's watercolours.

For, at the heart of the largest ever survey of the artist's career in that medium, curated by various hands, there is a room of "Beginnings" chosen by David Hockney that make you see the work and the man in a different light.

Turner's beginnings were the colour studies he made more or less throughout his career in which he worked most freely with paint, working out tonal perspectives, the effects of light and shade, freeing landscape from specifics. They are like aide-memoires of the very essence of his art.

What Hockney loves about these marks on paper is written on the wall above them.

"They come direct from the heart, down the arm.

They are stunning, beautiful and very fresh because you can see how he has made them."

Indeed you can. In Studies of Skies (1820-30), not one, but many skies come to life on one sheet of paper; a smear of red for a sunset, a curlicued squiggle of blue for a cloud, a rippled smudge of grey for the rain on the way.

The Crimson Clouds is covered in arcs of reds, oranges and yellows; Black Sky Over Water is a study in graduated greys, the highlights raw and ragged, the shape of the waves scratched away.

In works such as these, it is absolutely possible, as Hockney claims, to feel the man holding the brush, to respond to the mastery with which he lays the thin layers of paint on the paper, to feel the movement and speed with which he works as he finds new ways to mimic the world around him.

Hockney groups the studies with love and care, so that they seem to speak to each other. Daybreaks over mountains, the reflections of trees in a river, a line of cliffs, a moonscape, the ghostly grey of castle turrets, or the pink spires of Lincoln Cathedral shimmer and shine from the walls like a dance, the absolute rightness of the line, the control, the colour, making you see a man looking, thinking and painting.

The "beginnings" - so-called because Turner inscribed an 1818 study for his friend and patron Walter Fawkes "begun [or beginning] for dear Fawkes" - have a hint of emotion that is also present in the watercolours of Turner's last years, the daring works he produced after 1840 not as preparatory studies for some commissioned project but for radical admirers and for his own pleasure.

Look at gouaches such as the wonderful Rio San Luca, with its shadowy forms looming from perfectly pencilled shapes, or the extraordinary late views of Switzerland, where the precision of brushstrokes that reveal trees with swift downward motions and a boat with a few loose lines is matched by the glorious freedom of the colour washes that shapes the landscape.

Here Turner was - as Ruskin noted centuries before Hockney - producing work not just with the hand but with the heart.

But the spontaneity is to some extent misleading. It is important to realise that Turner himself never imagined that any of his sketches would be displayed; they were produced, occasionally in situ, but more often from memory and pencil sketches and they were always meant to help him produce finished watercolours, oils or etchings.

Indeed, the Tate holds them in its collection only because the Court of Chancery decided that the Turner bequest should include his works on paper - not just his finished paintings, as he intended. They are part of his thinking, not an end in itself.

This much is clear from the highlight of the entire show, the famous Blue Rigi, bought for the nation by the Tate this year, and one of the most experimental of all Turner's finished watercolours. But it is still different in quality and tone from the sketches that surround it.

It is a conceived painting, every bit of it carefully and magisterially worked, from the shot that scares the birds in the foreground to the wisps of cloud that drift across the subtle blues and greys of the mountain itself.

Elsewhere, every room reveals how Turner used watercolour in different ways, working from the sketched landscape to a finished product. Seeing the "beginnings" helps you to understand the wonder of the technique; when you examine apparently more conventional studies such as Scarborough or Aldborough, you notice the paint,

the absolute assurance of the pencil lines, the translucency of the light, the richness of detail conveyed with economical means.

But these fresh studies, full of incident and character, were made to be converted into topographical mezzotints - not to be admired as watercolours.

On the other hand, the dreamlike depictions of Venice in the early morning, or the more brightly coloured studies of Rome, were conceived entirely as part of a personal directory of scenes and effects, to be used later and in different forms. Hulks on the Tamar, a study in twilight, with the glittering moon scratched out, becomes a theme of later paintings. Kilnsey Crag, a great swerve of yellow and rust lines with blue beyond, has a verve that makes it seem created on the spot, yet it was probably produced in a studio.

Beginnings and ends, in true Eliot fashion, are suddenly not as simple as they seem.

In this, Hockney's exhibition of Turner watercolours comes to seem rather like Lucian Freud's choice of Constables a few years ago. In that show, Freud reasserted Constable's greatness by casting him as a more contemporary painter, placing the emphasis on his studies and drawings rather than the finished oils.

The Tate and its distinguished curator are doing something similar here.

Hockney is currently engaged in painting a great series of East Yorkshire landscapes (see box) and as a result has been thinking a lot about artistic depictions of space and the way a painter responds. He does not claim his working methods and thoughts are the same as Turner's, but they have informed his choices.

In the end, he and his fellow curators shine a modern light on Turner's watercolours by underlining their experimental power rather than their practical purposes. In doing so, they have mounted a hugely enjoyable and very beautiful exhibition. But it represents only a very small part of the Turner story. It is a bit like watching an actor in rehearsal: a revelation but not the finished product.

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'Turner Watercolours' is at Tate Britain, London SW1 (020 7887 8888), until Feb 3, 2008.

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## INTO THE WOODS WITH HOCKNEY

Five of David Hockney's East Yorkshire landscapes hang up the staircase on the way into the Turner Watercolours exhibition.

Despite their rather uncomfortable position - they are hard to appreciate as you walk and perhaps best viewed from the top - the vigour of their execution and conception is immediately obvious.

Consisting of six oil panels per painting, shown together, and painted on the spot, they draw you into the woods they depict, their ferocious sense of design, with the trunks bisecting the canvases remaining constant as the light and the seasons change around them.

The colours are vivid - iridescent green leaves, bright orange paths. The boldness of the way you are led into Woldgate Woods in March by a purple path, marked by a viridian green bark of the tree reveals the breathtaking confidence of these late masterpieces. SC

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