

Joseph Mallord William TURNER (London 1775 - London 1851)

The Lauerzersee with the Ruins of Schwanau and the Mythens

Watercolour over an underdrawing in pencil, with pen and grey ink, heightened with scratching out.

227 x 287 mm. (8 7/8 x 11 1/4 in.)

J. M. W. Turner made a total of six visits to Switzerland; the first time in 1802, at the age of twenty-seven, when he spent some three months in the Alps. He did not, however, return to the country for another thirty-four years, until 1836, when he travelled there with his friend and patron H. A. J. Munro of Novar, although this trip did not result in any finished watercolours. Most significantly, Turner travelled extensively throughout Switzerland towards the end of his life, returning there every year between 1841 and 1844. Each of these trips resulted in numerous drawings, watercolours and sketches of Swiss and Alpine subjects, as well as a handful of large, finished oil paintings. As John Russell has noted of Turner, 'Already on his first Swiss tour in 1802 he marked down as if by instinct precisely the places which would concern him most deeply forty or more years later…they were predominantly scenes which had an unruffled lake - Lucerne, Zurich, Thun, Constance – as their point of departure. Drama they had in abundance, those late Swiss watercolours; but it was as much the drama of Turner's own creativity as of the scenes under discussion…the late Swiss watercolours have a quality which is to be found nowhere else in Turner's work.' As Russell has also written, 'There was nothing that Turner did not know about European landscape; but it was to Switzerland above all that he turned when he had one more great thing to say and very little time left in which to say it. And he said it in terms of the pacific inundations – the swift flooding of the paper with water and colour – of which he was the supreme master.'

The watercolours of Swiss views that Turner produced during his final tours of the country in the first half of the 1840s, of which the present sheet is an especially fine example, have long been recognized as among his most remarkable works on paper. They were unlike any watercolours he had done before, and he chose to have them marketed in a different way as well. In 1842 Turner left fifteen 'sample' watercolour studies, taken from the 'roll' sketchbooks of his Swiss tour the previous year, with his dealer and agent Thomas Griffith. These studies he proposed to make into more finished watercolours on commission, and Griffith was tasked with finding purchasers for them. The same arrangement with Griffith was also undertaken after Turner's Swiss tours of 1843 and 1844, although in the end most of the finished watercolours were acquired by just two collectors, Munro of Novar and John Ruskin. As the latter wrote of Turner's late Swiss tours, 'He made a large number of coloured sketches on this [first] journey, and realised several of them on his return…The perfect repose of his youth had returned to his mind, while the faculties of imagination and execution appeared in renewed strength; all conventionality

being done away with by the force of the impression which he had received from the Alps, after his long separation from them. The drawings are marked by a peculiar largeness and simplicity of thought: most of them by deep serenity, passing into melancholy; all by a richness of colour, such as he had never before conceived. They, and the works done in the following years, bear the same relation to those of the rest of his life that the colours of the sunset do to those of the day; and will ever be recognized, in a few years more, as the noblest landscapes ever yet conceived by human intellect.'

The scholar Andrew Wilton has written that 'Turner's fascination with the landscape of Switzerland in the last decade of his career manifested itself almost exclusively in watercolours: studies briefly noted on the spot and worked up in colour afterwards were transformed, under the stimulus of consciously sought commissions, into a sequence of transcendental visions of mountains and lakes defined by the sweeping, swirling spaces between them…He produced hundreds of colour studies on these Swiss journeys, and was bursting with new responses to the lakes and mountains which needed to find expression in the 'changed' and 'hazy' manner he had newly evolved. But it was hardly in his nature to make finished watercolours without a clear economic purpose like engraving or sale to a collector…He was no doubt conscious that they represented, hazy or not, the culmination of his achievement in the medium…Turner knew these drawings to be his masterpieces.' Not long after the artist's death, his late Swiss watercolours began to be highly prized by collectors, and this has continued to the present day.

In exceptional condition, this luminous watercolour depicts the Lauerzersee, or Lake Lauerz. Situated near the town of Schwyz, the Lauerzersee lies twenty-two kilometres east of the city of Lucerne and not far from the town of Brunnen on Lake Lucerne. Turner had first visited the area on his initial Swiss journey of 1802, and returned there on sketching tours between 1841 and 1844, although it was in 1843 that he explored the Lauerzersee and its surroundings most extensively, from a base at Lucerne. In the summer of that year the sixty-eight year old artist travelled along the northern edge of mountain massif of the Rigi, visiting the villages of Kussnacht, Arth, Goldau, Lauerz and Schwyz before ending at Brunnen.

On these excursions he carried with him one of his 'roll sketchbooks' of Whatman paper, with which he set down scenes that would be the basis of later, more finished watercolours. These 'roll' sketchbooks with soft paper covers, which could be rolled up and carried in a coat pocket, were used by Turner for more comprehensive studies in colour than the rapid pencil sketches which filled his smaller pocket sketchbooks. As Ruskin stated, 'Turner used to walk about a town with a roll of thin paper in his pocket, and make a few scratches upon a sheet or two of it, which were so much shorthand indication of all he wished to remember. When he got to his inn in the evening, he completed the pencilling rapidly, and added as much colour as was needed to record his plan of the picture.'

The present sheet comes from one of the 'roll' sketchbooks that Turner used on his Swiss tours. While the precise location depicted here remained a mystery for early scholars and collectors, it has since been firmly identified as the Lauerzersee. Turner appears to have drawn this atmospheric watercolour from the road along the southern edge of the small lake, about a kilometre or so east of the village of Lauerz. At the left of the composition is the small island of Schwanau with its ruined castle, the Burgruine Schwanau, and at the right are the lower slopes of the Urmiberg mountain, while in the distance rise the distinctive twin peaks of the mountains known as the Grosser and Kleiner Mythen. Drawn in a fine pencil at the far end of the lake is what is probably the prominent 16th century church tower of the Alte Kapelle church in the lakeside village of Seewen, close to Schwyz. The artist may have been inspired to visit Schwyz and the Lauerzersee by the extensive description of the area given in John Murray's guidebook A Hand-Book for Travellers in Switzerland and the Alps of Savoy and Piedmont, published in 1838, which he took with him on his travels.

As Ian Warrell has noted of this watercolour of The Lauerzersee with the Ruins of Schwanau and the Mythens, 'Having defined the structure of the scene so deftly in his under-drawing, Turner added washes of diluted yellow and blue, leaving traces of hasty movements with his brush; or blending them at times to add green, a colour that is surprisingly rare in his works. These overlapping tones are given more tangible substance through the addition of economic penwork, at times as neat as lines of knitting, and elsewhere more freely calligraphic.' Warrell has likened the present sheet, in both stylistic and tonal terms, to a number of other watercolours of c.1842-1843 from the same or a similar roll sketchbook. These include three other 'sample studies', all of identical size to the present sheet, in the Turner Bequest at the Tate in London; Arth, on the Lake of Zug, Early Morning, Küssnacht, Lake of Lucerne, and The Pass of St. Gotthard, near Faido, as well as The Pass of St. Gotthard in the collection of the Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island. Particularly close to this watercolour in tonality and handling is a view of Schwyz, with the Mythens, in the Vaughan Bequest at the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh. Several of these watercolours, including the present sheet, were later developed into more finished works on paper.

It has been suggested that the present sheet may have been part of a group of fifteen watercolour sketches - done as 'sample studies' with a view to obtaining commissions for finished watercolours - seen by Ruskin on the 10th of May 1844 and noted in his diary that day. Two of this group of slightly larger, finished Swiss watercolours are today in the Turner Bequest at the Tate in London and four more are in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, while single sheets are in the Courtauld Gallery and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. This sample watercolour of The Lauerzersee with the Ruins of Schwanau and the Mythens was not, however, used by the artist until several years later, when it served as the basis for one of his final ten finished watercolours of Swiss views, The Lauerzersee with the Mythens of c.1848, which was acquired by Turner's patron Henry Vaughan and today in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The finished watercolour, however, lacks the lightness of the present study, and is somewhat darker in tonality.

The provenance of this superb watercolour can be traced back to Turner himself, since it was given by the artist to his housekeeper and devoted companion Sophia Caroline Booth (1799-1878). Of German descent, Sophia was born in Dover and at the age of twenty married a local fisherman named Henry Pound, who died in 1821, leaving her with an infant son, Daniel Pound. Four years later she married John Booth of Margate, and established a boarding house on the seafront there, where Turner would stay on his visits to Margate. After Mrs. Booth was widowed for a second time in 1833, Turner formed a close relationship with her. In 1846 Sophia Booth and her son Daniel moved from Margate to London, where Turner had bought a house for them in Chelsea, overlooking the Thames. She continued to look after the painter, cleaning his brushes and preparing his palettes, until his death in 1851. Turner presented her with several watercolours, including the present sheet, as well as at least eight oil paintings. The Lauerzersee with the Ruins of Schwanau and the Mythensfirst appeared at auction in 1909 and was purchased by Agnew's. It was acquired from them by the English polo player and cotton broker Walter Henry Jones (1866-1932), a wealthy collector of Turner's watercolours who came to own some twenty works by the artist, notably including both The Blue Rigi and The Red Rigi.

The present sheet is among Turner's most beautiful late Swiss watercolours, with the artist's rapid technique and delicate washes combining to contrast the atmospheric effects of the calm surface of the lake with the mountains in the haze behind. There is a sense of abiding calmness and tranquility in this composition, in which an expansive view has been encapsulated on a small sheet of paper. Indeed, Turner's ability to apply a rapid technique and confident brushstrokes to capture atmospheric effects of light and colour on a relatively modest scale is one of the hallmarks of his genius as a watercolourist. As has been noted, 'watercolour was the logical, indeed the only, medium for this engagement with Swiss light and air…Turner's interpretation of the Swiss atmosphere is so vivid, so strong, and expansive that the broad foundations of his classically-based compositions seem to be disintegrated by it; it is the air

itself that expresses the monumentality of the landscape.'

As Turner's great champion John Ruskin noted of such late Swiss watercolours as this, 'I look upon them as in some respects, more valuable than his finished drawings, or his oil pictures; because they are the simple records of his first impressions and first purposes, and in most instances as true to the character of the places they represent as they are admirable in composition.'

Exhibitions

London, Thos. Agnew and Sons, *Exhibition of Selected Water-Colour Drawings*, 1910, no.184 (as '*On the Rhine*'); London, Thos. Agnew and Sons, *Exhibition of Water-Colour Drawings by Joseph Mallord William Turner R.A.*, 1913, no.117 (as '*View on the Rhine*'); London, Thos. Agnew and Sons, *Exhibition of Water Colour Drawings by Artists of the Early English School*, 1919, no.130; London, Thos. Agnew and Sons, *Centenary Loan Exhibition of Water-Colour Drawings by J. M. W. Turner, R.A.*, 1951, no.96; London, Thos. Agnew and Sons, *Loan Exhibition of Paintings and Watercolours by J. M. W. Turner, R.A.*, 1967, no.80; Zurich, Kunsthaus Zurich, *Turner und die Schweiz*, 1976-1977, no.43; London, Agnew's, T*urner Watercolours: Watercolours by J. M. W. Turner R.A. (1775-1851)*, 1994, no.8.

Literature:

A. J. Finberg, *Early English Water-Colour Drawings by the Great Masters* [Special Number of *The Studio*], London, Paris and New York, 1919, pp.20 and 45, no.130, illustrated in colour pl.XX; Andrew Wilton, *The Life and Work of J. M. W. Turner*, Fribourg and London, 1979, pp.478-479, no.1488 ('The Lowerzersee, with Schwytz and the Mythen', where dated 1843(?); 'News and Sales Record,' *Turner Studies: His Art & Epoch 1775-1851*, Summer 1987 (Vol.7 No.1), p.64; Eric Shanes, 'Picture Notes: 1. The Lauerzer See, with the Mythens (hitherto entitled 'Lake Brienz'), W.1562...Victoria and Albert Museum. 2. The Lauerzer See with Schwytz and the Mythen, W.1488…Private Collection, U.S.A.)', *Turner Studies: His Art & Epoch 1775-1851*, Winter 1987 (Vol.7 No.2), pp.58-59; 'News and Sales Record,' *Turner Studies: His Art & Epoch 1775-1851*, Summer 1991 (Vol.11 No.1), p.60; Robert Upstone, 'Salerooms Report', *Turner Society News*, August 1991, p.5; 'An Evening for the Turner Society at Agnew's', *Turner Society News*, March 1994, p.1; Ian Warrell, *Through Switzerland with Turner: Ruskin's First Selection from the Turner Bequest*, exhibition catalogue, London, 1995, p.71, under no.32, p.152, no.8; Terence Rodrigues, ed., *Christie's Review of the Year 1996*, London, 1996, p.49; 'Salerooms Report', *Turner Society News*, August 1997, p.11; Eric Shanes, *Turner: The Great Watercolours*, exhibition catalogue, London, 2000-2001, p.238, under no.110; Eric Shanes, *The Golden Age of Watercolours: The Hickman Bacon Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Dulwich and New Haven, 2001-2002, p.49, under no.27; Eric Shanes, *La Vie et les chefs d'oeuvre de J.M.W. Turner*, New York, 2008, p.239; J. R. Piggott, 'Salerooms Report',*Turner Society News*, Spring 2016,

p.16; Martin Krause, ‘Mrs. Booth’s Turners’, *The British Art Journal*, 2021, No.1, pp.6 and 8, illustrated p.9, fig.4; Jan Piggott, ‘Salerooms Report’, *Turner Society News*, Autumn 2023, p.30.

Artist description:

Born in Covent Garden in London, the son of a barber, J. M. W. Turner had little formal education. He entered the Royal Academy Schools at the age of fourteen, and exhibited his first watercolour at the RA soon afterwards, in 1790. Around 1794, along with Thomas Girtin, he began to visit the home of Dr. Thomas Monro and attend the informal academy there, copying drawings from Monro’s collection, notably works by John Robert Cozens. Turner was an inveterate traveler, visiting much of Britain in his youth and in later years making several trips to the Continent, notably to France, Italy and Switzerland. On his travels, he filled numerous small sketchbooks with rapidly-drawn pencil sketches. Possessed of an exceptional visual memory, the artist was able to translate these sketchbook studies into finished watercolours or oil paintings, sometimes many months or even years afterwards. By the 1830s Turner’s technical skill and bold sense of colour allowed him to achieve remarkable effects in his watercolours, and his late works in the medium, as well as his oil paintings, found a passionate champion in John Ruskin in his seminal five-volume book Modern Painters, published between 1843 and 1860. Turner produced some eight hundred designs for engravings, which, combined with a steady stream of patrons and clients for his works in watercolour and oil, earned the artist a substantial income. In later left he became something of a recluse, and had few close friends. The artist died of cholera at his home in Chelsea in December 1851, and the contents of his studio – around three hundred paintings and over 19,000 drawings and watercolours – were eventually acquired for the nation.