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watercolor

Watercolor painting ("aquarelle" in French) uses paints made of pigments suspended in a water soluble vehicle. The traditional and most common support for watercolor paintings is paper; other supports include papyrus, bark papers, plastics, vellum or leather, fabric, wood, and canvas. In East Asia, watercolor painting with inks is referred to as "brush painting" or "scroll painting". In Chinese and Japanese painting, watercolor has been the dominant medium, often in monochrome black or browns. India, Ethiopia, and other countries also have long traditions. Fingerpainting with watercolor paints originated in China.

Watercolor painting is extremely old, dating perhaps to the cave paintings of paleolithic Europe. It has been used for manuscript illumination since at least Egyptian times, but especially in the European Middle Ages. However, its continuous history as an art medium begins in the Renaissance. The German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) who painted several fine botanical, wildlife and landscape watercolors, is generally considered among the earliest exponents of the medium. An important school of watercolor painting in Germany as part of the Dürer Renaissance was led by Hans Bol (1534-1593)

Despite this early start, watercolors were generally used by Baroque easel painters only for sketches, copies or cartoons (large scale design drawings). Among notable early practitioners of watercolor painting were Van Dyck (during his stay in England), Claude Lorrain, Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, and many Dutch and Flemish artists. However, botanical and wildlife illustrations are perhaps the oldest and most important tradition in watercolor painting.

Botanical illustrations became popular in the Renaissance, both as hand tinted woodblock illustrations in books or broadsheets, and as tinted ink drawings on vellum or paper. Botanical artists have always been among the most exacting and accomplished watercolor painters, and even today watercolors -- with their unique ability to summarize, clarify and idealize in full color -- are used to illustrate scientific and museum

publications. Wildlife illustration reached its peak in the 19th Century with artists such as John James Audubon, and today many naturalist field guides are still illustrated with watercolor paintings.

Several factors contributed to the diffusion of watercolor painting during the 18th Century, particularly in England. Among the elite and aristocratic classes, watercolor painting was one of the incidental adornments of a good education, especially for women. By contrast, watercoloring was also valued by surveyors, mapmakers, military officers and engineers for its usefulness in depicting properties, terrain, fortifications or geology in the field and for illustrating public works or commissioned projects. Watercolor artists were commonly brought with the geological or archaeological expeditions funded by the Society of Dilettanti (founded in 1733) to document discoveries in the Mediterranean, Asia and the New World. These stimulated the demand for topographical painters who churned out memento paintings of famous sites (and sights) along the Grand Tour to Italy that was traveled by every fashionable young man or woman of the time. In the late 18th century, the English cleric William Gilpin wrote a series of hugely popular books describing his "picturesque" journeys throughout rural England and illustrated with his own sentimentalized monochrome watercolors of river valleys, ancient castles and abandoned churches; his example popularized watercolors as a form of personal tourist journal. The confluence of these cultural, engineering, scientific, tourist and amateur interests culminated in the celebration and promotion of watercolor as a distinctly English "national art". Among the many significant watercolor artists of this period were Thomas Gainsborough, John Robert Cozens, Francis Towne, Michelangelo Rooker, William Pars, Thomas Hearne and John Warwick Smith. William Blake published several books of hand-tinted engraved poetry, and illustrations to Dante's Inferno, and also experimented with large monotype works in watercolor.

From the late 18th century through the 19th century, the market for printed books and domestic art contributed substantially to the growth of the medium. Watercolors were the basic document from which collectible landscape or tourist engravings were developed, and handpainted watercolor originals or copies of famous paintings contributed to many upper class art portfolios. Satirical broadsides by Thomas Rowlandson, many published by Rudolph Ackermann, were also extremely popular.

The three English artists credited with establishing watercolor as an independent, mature painting medium are Paul Sandby (1730-1809), often called "the father of the English watercolor", Thomas Girtin (1775-1802), who pioneered its use for large format, romantic or picturesque landscape painting, and Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), who brought watercolor painting to the highest pitch of power and refinement and created with it hundreds of superb historical, topographical, architectural and mythological paintings. His method of developing the watercolor painting in stages, starting with large, vague color areas established on wet paper, then refining the image through a sequence of washes and glazes, permitted him to produce large numbers of paintings with workshop efficiency and made him a multimillionaire in part through sales from his personal art gallery, the first of its kind. Among the important and highly talented contemporaries of Turner and Girtin were John Varley, John Sell Cotman, Anthony Copley Fielding, Samuel Palmer, William Havell and Samuel Prout. The Swiss painter Louis Ducros was also widely known for his large format, romantic paintings in watercolor.

The confluence of amateur activity, publishing markets, middle class art collecting, and 19th century painting technique led to the formation of English watercolor painting societies: the Society of Painters in Water Colours (1804, now known as the Royal Watercolour Society), and the New Water Colour Society (1832). (A Scottish Society of Painters in Water Colour was founded in 1878.) These societies provided annual exhibitions and buyer referrals for many artists, and also engaged in petty status rivalries and esthetic debates, particularly between advocates of traditional ("transparent") watercolor and the early adopters of the denser color possible with bodycolor or gouache ("opaque" watercolor). The late Georgian and Victorian periods produced the zenith of the British watercolor, among the most impressive 19th century works on paper, by Turner, Varley, Cotman, David Cox, Peter de Wint, William Henry Hunt, John Frederick Lewis, Myles Birket Foster, Frederick Walker, Thomas Collier and many others. In particular, the graceful, lapidary and atmospheric genre paintings by Richard Parkes Bonington created an international fad for watercolor painting, especially in England and France, in the 1820's. Watercolor painting also became popular in the

United States during the middle 19th Century; the American Society of Painters in Watercolor (now the American Watercolor Society) was founded in 1866. Major 19th Century American exponents of the medium included William Trost Richards, Fidelia Bridges, Thomas Moran, Thomas Eakins, Henry Roderick Newman, John LaFarge and, preeminently, Winslow Homer. Watercolor was less popular on the Continent, though many fine examples were produced by French painters, including Eugene Delacroix, Francois-Marius Granet, Henri-Joseph Harpignies and the satirist Honore Daumier.

The popularity of watercolors stimulated many innovations, including heavier and more heavily sized wove papers and brushes (called "pencils") manufactured expressly for watercolor painting. Watercolor tutorials were first published in this period by Varley, Cox and others, innovating the step-by-step painting instructions that still characterizes the genre today. ("The Elements of Drawing", a watercolor tutorial by the English art critic John Ruskin, has been out of print only once since it was first published in 1857.) Commercial paintmaking brands appeared, and paints were packaged in metal tubes or as dry cakes that could be "rubbed out" (dissolved) in studio porcelain or used in portable metal paint boxes in the field. Contemporary breakthroughs in chemistry made many new pigments available, including prussian blue, ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, viridian, cobalt violet, cadmium yellow, aureolin (potassium cobaltinitrite), zinc white, and a wide range of carmine and madder lakes. These in turn stimulated a greater use of color throughout all painting media, but in English watercolors particularly by the Pre-Raphaelite painters.

Unfortunately, the careless and excessive adoption of brightly colored, petroleum derived aniline dyes (and pigments compounded from them), which all fade rapidly on exposure to light, and the efforts to properly conserve the twenty-thousand Turner paintings inherited by the British Museum in 1857, led to an examination and negative re-evaluation of the permanence of pigments in watercolor. This caused a sharp decline in their status and market value. Nevertheless, isolated exponents continued to prefer and develop the medium into the 20th Century. In Europe, gorgeous landscape and maritime watercolors were produced by Paul Signac; and Paul Cezanne developed a watercolor painting style consisting entirely of overlapping small glazes of pure color. In America, the most famous watercolor painters from this period include Maurice Prendergast, Frederick Childe Hassam, Charles Webster Hawthorne and John Singer Sargent, considered by many the finest watercolor painter of all time.

Among the many 20th Century artists who produced important works in watercolor, mention must be made of Wassily Kandinsky, Emil Nolde, Paul Klee, Egon Schiele and Raoul Dufy. In America the major exponents included Charles Burchfield, Edward Hopper, Charles Demuth, Elliot O'Hara, and above all John Marin, 80% of whose total output is in watercolor. In this period, American watercolor (and oil) painting was often imitative of European Impressionism and Post-Impressionism; but significant individualism flourished within "regional" styles of watercolor painting in the 1920's to 1940's, in particular the "Ohio School" of painters centered around the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the "California Scene" painters, many of them associated with Hollywood animation studios or the Chouinard School of Art (now CalArts Academy). The California painters exploited their state's varied geography, Mediterranean climate, and "automobility" to reinvigorate the outdoor or "plein air" tradition. Among the most influential were Phil Dike, Millard Sheets, Rex Brandt, Dong Kingman, and Milford Zornes. The California Water Color Society, founded in 1921 and later renamed the National Watercolor Society, sponsored important exhibitions of their work.

Although the rise of abstract expressionism, and the trivializing influence of amateur painters and advertising-influenced or workshop-influenced painting styles, led to a general decline in the popularity of watercolor painting after about 1950, watercolors continue to be utilized by important artists such as Joseph Raffael, Andrew Wyeth, Philip Pearlstein, Eric Fischl, Gerard Richter and Francesco Clemente. Modern watercolor paints are now as durable and colorful as oil or acrylic paints, and the recent renewed interest in drawing and multimedia art has also stimulated demand for fine works in watercolor. As art markets continue to expand, painting societies continue to add members, and aging Baby Boomers increasingly retire to more contemplative hobbies, watercolors seem poised to enter yet another "golden age".