

The Viewer and the Viewed



(Fig. 1) John Brett, *Study of Warwick Castle*. Warwick, 1860, watercolour on paper, 254 x 355 mm.



(Fig. 2) J. M. W. Turner, *The Chain of the Alps from Grenoble to Chambéri*. London, 1812, etching with mezzotint on paper, 186 x 288 mm.

Transcript

Welcome back to the Barber Institute's online Tuesday Talks, now in its fourth series. My name is Giulia Schirripa and I was the Arts Society Collections Intern from March to July 2021. Today, I'll be introducing to you the Print Bay Display I curated, entitled *The Viewer and the Viewed*. It opened to visitors on Friday the 2nd July and runs until the 19th of September. The display focuses on British landscape art from the mid-18th to the mid-19th century, approaching the subject from a socio-political perspective. The goal is to provide a way of understanding these landscapes not only from an aesthetic point of view, but also as a mode for the artists to reflect on some of the political debates of their time. During the talk, I'll present two works from my display - a vibrant watercolour by John Brett and an atmospheric print by J. M. W. Turner, which will help guide you through the two main arguments of the show.

The decades around 1800 were quite a tumultuous historical period for Britain. Many artists weren't able to travel to continental Europe during the French Revolution (1789-99) and the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15), so they began focusing on the national landscape for inspiration. Alongside this, local tourism developed, which saw upper and middle-class Britons exploring their own nation in search of natural beauty.

Balancing an aesthetic appreciation of British landscapes, and of the works that depict them, with an awareness of their socio-political significance during this particular period is essential. Land was a highly charged subject matter especially within the political debates. Accessibility and appreciation of the national landscape were key aspects of the cultural discourse at the time. Yet, possibly more significantly, land was also at the centre of the British political system. Until the first Reform Act of 1832, only landowners had access to political power and voting rights.

Around the 1980s, art historians began developing a socio-political approach to landscape art made in the previous two centuries. This display, following in the same footsteps, explores how compositional elements of these works, like perspective and the figures inhabiting the scenes, can have political functions. Specifically, they could be a way for artists to reflect on who was given access to land and consequently to political power.

The first theme that we will discuss is the political significance of perspective, for which we will explore one of my favorite works in the display, the watercolour by John Brett, *Warwick Castle*. John Brett was an artist active in England in the 19th century. He was associated with the Pre-Raphaelites Brotherhood and mostly known for his landscape works, both paintings and watercolours. This specific artwork was completed during a visit to the West Midlands in 1860.

The watercolour, together with an earlier sketch, was part of his preparation for a now lost oil painting. The scene shows three young girls picking white waterlilies on the River Avon, with Warwick Castle dominating the sunny, yet cloudy sky. The castle dates back to the Middle Ages, but after a period of neglect and decay, it was turned into a country house in the 17th century and quickly became a prominent tourist attraction. While Warwick Castle is depicted in a monumental way, the scene is also quite intimate with a tender depiction of the three children. The innocence of the three girls is also reflected in the surrounding scene; for example, the waterlilies the girls are picking are a metaphor for their innocence and fragility.

Brett's decision to use a low perspective allows us, the audience, to virtually 'enter' the scene from the perspective of the three children. This underlines the importance of the theme of childhood within the composition, while also linking the watercolour to the tourism industry. In the 18th century, a low perspective became widely used in landscape art. It was thought to best reproduce a tourist's experience, as the audience is given the impression that it would be possible to step into the composition and experience the scene in person. The connection with tourism has a political importance: it reinforced the implied socio-political power of the work's intended audience. Watercolours like this were often part of private collections acquired by the middle and upper-middle classes, the part of society that fuelled the local tourist industry by embarking on

tours of Britain. So, even aspects of the composition that might seem purely technical, like perspective, can have a political function or significance.

The second theme that this display considers is the socio-political significance of figures portrayed within a landscape. Scholars have discussed the ways in which artists used their depictions of these figures to comment on, support or even challenge the social and political hierarchies of their times. These ideas can be explored in Turner's print, *The Chain of the Alps from Grenoble to Chambéri*.

Turner was born in the 18th century and was among the most influential artist of his time. Working with paintings, watercolours and prints, Turner is famous for his emotionally charged landscapes, and his ability and interest in depicting light and other environmental aspects of a scene. This work was part of his *Liber Studiorum*, which was a collection of prints aimed to celebrate the artist's skills in depicting a variety of landscapes. *The Chain of the Alps* was meant to show off his ability to represent mountainous scenes.

The composition shows a view of Grenoble, then a small alpine city in France, which was the first place visited by Turner during his tour of Europe in 1802. That year, Turner was able to travel to the continent thanks to the Peace of Amiens, which gave rise to a 14-month break in the war between France and England before the beginning of the Napoleonic Wars in 1803. It was the first time in

nine years that British people could safely cross the channel. The composition suggests the excitement of the artist's first, real life encounter with the Alps. The vast scene is dramatically lit with scattered shafts of light and is enjoyed by the figures in the foreground. They gaze out from a rolling hill, and because of the perspective, we - the viewers - seem to be vicariously standing on it too. In this way, our eyes are skillfully directed towards the beautiful scene.

While the majestic view might be the focal point of the composition, I chose this print because of Turner's depiction of the figures within the landscape. Often in landscape art from the 18th and 19th centuries, people, especially rural labourers, are included within a scene more as a compositional elements, rather than as people engaging with and enjoying the view like the intended audience of the works. In this way, the figures were often depicted as 'viewed' subjects, and not as 'viewers'. However, this is not the case in Turner's print, *The Chain of the Alps*. In fact, his depiction of the locals as the audience of this beautiful scenery resists the traditional exclusion of rural labourers from any enjoyment of the landscape. This resistance is further emphasised by the location that Turner places the figures in: from where they stand, they are offered the same perspective of the landscape as the audience of the print. It is crucial to note, however, that just because Turner appears to resist

this canonical depiction of figures it does not mean he was in favour of a revolutionary reform of the British political system. More probably, the artist used this print as a way of reflecting on a theme that was so crucial in his period.

Talking about these works from a socio-political perspective would be of interest at any time, but in our current historical moment it seems to gather an urgent relevance and poignancy. The pandemic and consequent travel restrictions have not only made us appreciate our local landscapes, but they also underscore how access to them can still be a privilege. My hope is that this show can function as a reminder of how critical it is to continue understanding land, and our environment, as a politically charged space, both today and in the past.

If you are interested in this topic, or you would like to learn more, this display will be open to the public until the 19th of September 2021, in the Green Gallery Print Bay. You can also find more information on the Barber website or email us at info@barber.org.uk. Thanks to Jack Davies for composing the music that accompanies this talk.

About the speaker:

Giulia Schirripa was the Arts Society Collections Intern at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts from March 2021 to July 2021. Giulia is currently undertaking her PhD at the University of York, focusing on the intersection between art making and feminism in Italy from the 1970s onward. She has previous curatorial experience through her internships at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. The inspiration for this Print Bay Display comes from her interest in socio-political approaches to art history and curatorial practices, and from a module on Turner taught by Dr Richard Johns which she took during her MA at the University of York.

Introductory Bibliography:

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