



# THE WATERCOLOUR WORLD

The Known World Before Photography

# About

Prior to the arrival in 1900 of the mass-produced camera, watercolour was the medium we used to record the world we encountered. A consequent legacy is hundreds of thousands of watercolour paintings from the years 1750 to 1900 that together constitute a unique and extraordinary visual record of the birth of the modern world. The Watercolour World's mission is to collect together all these documentary works — from private and public collections from across the globe — into a free, geolocated online database, for the whole World to see.

With the arrival of the mass-produced camera, the watercolour era came to an abrupt end and the record it had created, where it survived, went largely into storage. Rarely publicly displayed, it disappeared and was forgotten.

Perversely, their being stored away in darkness means that thousands of these paintings have survived, often in excellent condition.

In parallel, the technical world changed. Today, digitising allows us to record these images electronically and display them on screens, without any physical risk to the original, and with a clarity and access to detail significantly beyond the reach of the normal eye. As importantly, digitising conserves this record and allows it to be available to the public without interfering with its ownership.

The Watercolour World (TWW) is a registered UK charity that is supported by the patronage of the former Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall. Though UK-originated, the project is entirely global and our hope is that this record will help Mankind to gain a clearer understanding of the origins of the modern world, how to conserve the virtues of our past and how to remedy those errors that so concern us today.



*The Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris (1836) by Thomas Shutter Boys. Victoria & Albert Museum, London/  
Bridgeman Images*

# The Documentary Watercolour

Humans all over the world have used watercolours to paint what they have seen since the beginnings of Time. The exact purpose of these paintings can now only be guessed at but for us they are a record of our past. These paintings are Documentary.

In the UK and Europe generally, oil painting's association with the Church, the Aristocracy and the Wealthy led to the view that watercolour was an inferior form of painting. In terms of skill, that was never true. But its military origins and its escape from the sanctuary of the studio allowed the documentary watercolour to become a popular art form, with its own purpose — to make an accurate visual record. This purpose was far more significant than the glorification of the rich and the powerful, oil painting's enduring habitat.

For documentary watercolour in the UK, the period 1750-1900 begins essentially with the formal decision by the Army leadership after 1746 to set up a school of military drawing at Stirling Castle to meet the intelligence needs of the Georgian military, army and navy. This decision and the widespread popularity of watercolour that followed ended almost exactly 150 years later in 1900 with the arrival of the pocket camera. By that time a vast visual record of the world had been created.

By chance, this period happened to coincide with the end of the Agrarian period in the West, the expansion of the British and many other empires across the globe, and the whole of the first Industrial Revolution. In so doing, it includes the beginnings of environmental pollution and climate change, the culture clash between the Industrial powers and the societies and peoples of an unexplored world, and the height of the slave trade. The consequences of all this, good and bad, are with us today just as, by chance, is much of that watercolour record.



*Spinning (1881) by Thomas Eakins. Christie's, London/Bridgeman Images*

# The Documentary Watercolour

The formal military origins of the documentary watercolour would not alone have generated the popularity of watercolour witnessed in the 19th C. Towards the end of the 18thC, technical advances led to the manufacture of ready-made watercolour paint (which quickly led to the pocket-size black tin paint box with which we remain familiar today), as well as the the invention of Whatman paper for watercolour artists. These were key inventions that allowed watercolour painting to escape from the studio into the outside world. Painting was democratised. This new freedom inspired the widespread training in watercolour of non-military professionals and amateur artists, particularly women. Huge numbers of watercolours resulted, some skilfully done, others less so.

Many of these images still exist in public and private collections around the world. Global in its reach, this record can provide us today with accurate and reliable visual information essential for the informed conservation and restoration of our natural and man-made environments. It is this unique legacy that TWW now seeks to recover.

In 1900, Eastman Kodak's spooled film and cheap camera killed the documentary watercolour. Its role was reduced virtually to that of a leisurely pastime. Gradually, the accumulated watercolours of the past 150 years were donated to public collections, stored away in folios, and boxes, pasted into scrapbooks or framed and hung in private houses till they faded away to nothing.

Over the past few decades, though, the threats of environmental pollution and global warming have compelled the world to attempt to define on good evidence what has been lost, how and why. The visual record seemed only to date back to the camera, and the majority of those images were in black and white. Then scientists like Robin McInnes, appointed by the Crown Estate to create an evidence-based record of coastal erosion in the UK, discovered that watercolours took the visual record, unevenly but uniquely, back a further 150 years.

Recognising the enormous importance to Human society today of this source material, and to help conserve it for future generations, The Watercolour World project was set up to rediscover and aggregate the pre-1900 global watercolour collection, and make this unique resource freely available to all.



*Passage d'une Crevasse du Glacier de la Côte (c.1800), print after Johann Philipp Linck, British Museum*

# Digitising Private and Public Collections

- In partnership with PFU, a Fujitsu Company, TWW offers a digitisation service for both public and private collections of watercolours, on site and in high resolution. TWW uses PFU's ScanSnap SV600 to digitise all watercolour paintings in a collection on site in high resolution. A complete set of digital images is returned to the owners to use as they wish.
- The digitisation of private collections can be anonymous, if preferred.
- We use portable scanners that emit no heat or UV and can scan through glass. Images glued into albums can be scanned safely, without straining bindings.
- TWW is a charity. It has no plans to monetise its website, nor does it seek any copyright of images it digitises or loads onto its website.
- Images on TWW website are non-downloadable.
- For public collections that have already digitised their watercolours, we can work with their teams to compile all relevant metadata to share the images on the TWW site.



*Bombax heptaphylla* Willd (1795-1804) by unknown artist. Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew: The Roxburgh Collection

# Who We Are

## Patrons

TM King Charles III and Queen Camilla

## Founders

Fred Hohler  
Javad Marandi, OBE

## Trustees

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Fred Hohler (Founder Chairman)  
Algernon Percy  
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## The Team

Adrian Gibbs- Project Development Director  
Oliver Wooley - Data and Technology  
Ambrose Robertson - Volunteers and Digitisation  
Prasanna Ramachandran - Chief Finance Officer

# Get In Touch

If you would like to participate in the TWW project by sharing your own watercolours, by volunteering or by donating funds please contact our founder, Fred Hohler, at [fred@fredericksplace.org.uk](mailto:fred@fredericksplace.org.uk)

Visit [www.watercolourworld.org](http://www.watercolourworld.org) to find out more.

