



Reculver Church, 1823, William Daniell, image courtesy of Robin McInnes

## THE WATERCOLOUR WORLD

The Known World before Photography

JOINT PATRONS : TRH THE PRINCE OF WALES & THE DUCHESS OF CORNWALL

### 1. The Project

The Watercolour World is a registered UK charity established to create a visual record of the world before photography by aggregating digital images of watercolours of record from pre-1900 on to a single geographically-indexed website. The primary objectives of TWW are:

- to preserve and make publicly available the documentary information contained in watercolours;
- to collate already-digitised UK and international public and private documentary watercolour collections, to make them available to all via the TWW website;
- to digitise, and encourage the digitisation of documentary watercolours in the UK and internationally;
- to encourage the participation of the public in sharing information and helping identify unrecognised images.

TWW is a British initiative but an entirely international project, designed to make available to all the largely-forgotten documentary record contained in pre-1900 watercolour paintings.



Initially, the majority of pre-1900 images on the TWW website is likely to relate to the British Isles. Increasingly, though, we expect that images covering not Britain itself but the rest of the world will come to dominate, the result of British and of other Powers' naval, military and colonial activity during that period.

From the outset, a key focus of the TWW Project has been to make freely available to all those other territories and societies on whom these activities impacted, the unique visual documentary information and evidence contained in the relevant Watercolour material.

## 2 Background

The origins in Europe of the use of watercolour as a medium of record date back to Dürer and beyond, but its formal use in Britain probably starts with the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century watercolour images of Henry VIII in France and later by John White in the Virginia colony. Dürer recorded hares; John White recorded the Algonquin. Common to both though was what had already become watercolours' almost universal purpose, record making.

It wasn't until the time of George II, the suppression of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 and the work of the two Sandby brother artists in the Highlands of Scotland, that the watercolour became the means of military record in Great Britain. Thereafter, being taught at the Royal Ordnance School, it evolved into the common means of visual record throughout the pre-photographic world, British and non-British. Indeed, prior to the widespread adoption of photography, a competence in watercolour painting was an important qualification for military personnel as well as explorers, architects, naturalists, antiquarians, engineers, medical practitioners, missionaries and the like. A large but unknown number of these images remain in public galleries, private collections and private homes worldwide. Collected together, they will create the largest and most important pre-photographic visual record of the world.

The Watercolour World is a successor to The Public Catalogue Foundation, a charitable project set up to catalogue all oil paintings in public ownership in the UK. It was during this 10 year project that the obscurity into which our watercolour collection had fallen became increasingly apparent, with exhibitions of watercolours anywhere being generally thin in number and content.

There were several reasons for this. Many of the watercolours in the collections were unidentified as to both the image and artist, the majority were unframed, on poor quality paper and not in a state to be displayed, and most collections lacked suitable galleries in which to display them. With virtually no perceived public interest in them, watercolours have become increasingly ignored, although it is hard to generate public interest in something the public doesn't know exists and, even if it does know, in the main cannot see.

There is some urgency behind this project. Watercolours are not physically enduring images. An unknown number will already have been lost or thrown away. The fragility and the vulnerability of the materials involved now means that the task of capturing these images in a more durable, digital form is becoming increasingly urgent. No matter where these images are owned or held, for the common good they need to be accessible to the global public and preserved through digitisation for future generations.

## 3 The Concept

Interesting artistically and aesthetically as so many of these watercolours certainly are, their true importance today may in fact be found in the purpose for which they were originally made, ie in the information they contain - a purpose that has become curiously lost to view of late. Once this is recognised, the objective of the TWW project is self-evident and compelling.



Sharing that information will be achieved by TWW's creation of a geographically-indexed, online archive of documentary watercolours of the known world, pre-1900. This record will be built from topographical, anthropological and botanical images covering observed historic events, people, places, landscapes and seascapes.

Our immediate aim is to collate already-digitised images that fall within the spectrum described above, whilst the longer-term aim is to digitise, and encourage the digitisation of all watercolours of record wherever they may be and aggregate them into the existing database.

Our project ends in 1900, by which time the camera had assumed the role of generating the eye-witness record, especially with the military.

## 4 The Value

From TWW's earliest days, the ease with which its value has been appreciated by collections and the public generally has been striking:

- museum officers in Adelaide, South Australia, swiftly recognised that their collection of images of Naples in the 1820's, made on his honeymoon by the Surveyor General of South Australia, Colonel William Light, were amusing (perhaps) for residents of Adelaide, but would have a quite different and important value for present-day Neapolitans. TWW would enable their collection to be safely shared without its loss or loan to foreign parts. Revealing sources such as these will have a value of its own, but combining and co-locating the totality in an accessible topographically-indexed database is likely to have significant educational and scientific benefits;
- coastal scenes were a popular genre from early watercolour days. Though the accuracy of these works varies by artist, overall they provide a valuable record of coastal conditions over time. Studies undertaken by Professor Robin McInnes over the past few years, funded by The Crown Estate and Historic England, have resulted in a series of reports covering the UK coastline, using the abundance of watercolour (and other visual) records as a tool to improve our understanding of coastal change in the British Isles over the centuries. A unique resource, this work validates the role of historic watercolour collection in contemporary scientific research, especially relating to our environment;
- in London, the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew contain the largest collection (c. 300,000) of watercolour images of flora and associated landscapes in the world. Virtually none of this collection has yet been digitised. The watercolours by Tyneside naturalist George French Angas of flora and fauna in South Australia and now housed in Adelaide, are important and will certainly relate to the British collection. The digitisation and aggregation of similar data of this type on a global scale will contribute significantly to human knowledge about our environment;
- broadly speaking, private collections remain private and inaccessible. TWW will actively encourage individuals to upload private collections of images which they are unwilling to lose but that they are willing to share. Two days after a Christmas card inviting private individuals to get in touch with TWW if they were interested in the project, we received the following: *"My father's Victorian ancestors all served in the Royal Navy and I have what I think is a rather wonderful album of watercolours by one of them dating from the French War and a little beyond. I have fretted over it quite a bit as it serves no good purpose sitting on a shelf in our house, but by the same token I feel rather proprietorial about it."* As a result, some fifty unique images by a competent Naval draughtsman covering the British fleet blockading Toulon during the Napoleonic wars and in other situations are now being made available.



The simple truth is that whilst watercolours are and will remain one of humanity's more delightful art forms, many if not most of the images created before 1900 were documentary in their intent. So until this watercolour record is available to us all in an indexed and searchable form, its ability accurately to illustrate our past, arguably its highest value, will not be recovered.

If you have a pre-1900 documentary watercolour, or know other people who have, please do get in touch with TWW.

Dr Fred Hohler  
12<sup>th</sup> January 2018