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YCBA Exhibition Explores the Interconnection of Papermaking and Watercolor Painting in Eighteenth-Century England

FEBRUARY 22–JUNE 4, 2006

This February, the Yale Center for British Art will present an exhibition that explores how advances in the technology of papermaking affected the development of watercolor painting in eighteenth-century England. *Mr. Whatman's Mill: Papermaking and the Art of Watercolor in Eighteenth-Century Britain* will be on view February 22–June 4, 2006 and will feature a number of extraordinary works from the Center's holdings, including watercolors by Paul Sandby, J. M. W. Turner, Thomas Gainsborough, John Sell Cotman, and other prominent artists, as well as selected rare books, prints, photographs, and videos.



At the heart of the exhibition will be *A View of Vinters at Boxley, Kent, with Mr. Whatman's Turkey Paper Mills* by Paul Sandby, Royal Academician and one of Britain's foremost watercolor painters. Commissioned in 1794 by the papermaker James Whatman the Younger, the watercolor was painted on a large sheet of "Whatman" paper and recorded Whatman's home and his celebrated paper mill in Kent. Today, the painting documents the important role of the Whatmans and Turkey Mill in the history of papermaking and the development of watercolor painting.



Organized by Yale Center for British Art Chief Conservator Theresa Fairbanks Harris and Scott Wilcox, Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Center, the exhibition includes approximately thirty watercolors and prints (including two loans from the British Museum), along with forty works pertaining to the history of papermaking in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century England.

PAPERMAKING IN KENT

Kent was famous for its papermaking industry. Its numerous rivers provided power to operate the paper mills and transport materials. Whatman's Turkey Mill, located



on the River Len, helped capture the world market for quality white paper in the early eighteenth century, formerly dominated by imports from the continent, especially France and Holland.

The origin of the mill's name remains a mystery. Over its three-hundred-year history, it has had several names, but "Turkey" was first recorded in 1739, in the will of Richard Harris, the mill's owner. Turkey Mill began as a fulling mill for cleansing and thickening wool cloth and was converted to a paper mill in the mid-seventeenth century. James Whatman the Elder (1702–1759), originally a tanner, married the widow of Richard Harris in 1740. Under Whatman's management, the paper mill became one of the most important mills in the country, and Whatman paper gained an international reputation for excellence. Shortly before his death in 1759, Whatman the Elder developed a remarkable wove paper for which Turkey Mill became renowned.

Whatman used a mold of fine woven wire and wood to produce the smooth, uniform surface of wove paper. It was originally developed for John Baskerville, a famous Birmingham printer who had designed a delicate typeface that required a smooth paper surface that would not distort the font. Before the invention of wove paper, laid paper was the standard, and the mold used to create laid paper had a gridwork of laid wires that imparted their texture onto the surface of the paper.

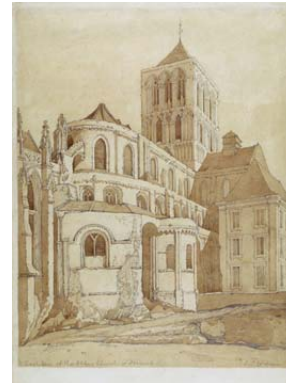
WHATMAN PAPER AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH WATERCOLOR

Whatman's wove paper played a major role in the development of English watercolor painting. Its smooth surface lacked the furrows of traditional laid paper which caused pigment to puddle on the page. In addition, it was soaked in a gelatin bath of hoofs and bones to make it extremely strong and less absorbent. Paint moved easily over its surface and multiple layers could be applied and then wiped, scratched, or scraped away without damaging the paper. These complicated subtractive techniques were brought to the highest level of virtuosity by J. M. W. Turner, who worked regularly on Whatman paper.

Other leading artists of the time, such as John Robert Cozens, John Sell Cotman, and Cornelius Varley also used Whatman paper. Indeed, many of the masterpieces of Romantic watercolor painting of the early nineteenth century are on paper bearing the watermark "J. Whatman" or "J. Whatman/Turkey Mill." The exhibition features a gallery of works by these artists painted on Whatman paper. As early as



the 1760s, when wove paper was not yet widely available to artists, Thomas Gainsborough was anxious to use it for his watercolors. In 1767, he wrote to bookseller James Dodsley in hope of obtaining some: "...it being what I have long been in search of for making wash'd Drawings upon... There is so little impression of the Wires, and those so very fine, that the surface is like vellum." Comparisons of paintings on wove versus laid paper will also be on view, including works by Gainsborough and John "Warwick" Smith.



THE REFINEMENT OF WHATMAN PAPER

James Whatman the Younger (1741–1798) perfected his father's wove paper and made Whatman's Turkey Mill the largest and most influential paper mill in England. He was responsible for many important developments in the field of papermaking, improving the brightness of paper and producing the largest sheet of handmade paper ever created, called Antiquarian. Named for the Society of Antiquaries that commissioned it, Antiquarian measured 53 x 31 inches and required nine men to make it using a lever system. Prior to this development, the size of a piece of paper was limited to the span of a vatman's arms. The Society of Antiquaries needed the paper in order to make a print depicting Henry VIII meeting Francis I at the Field of the Cloth of Gold. This "Field of Gold" print is on view in the exhibition.



Whatman the Younger suffered a stroke in 1790 and his protégé, William Balston, took over managing much of the mill. In 1794, the same year in which he commissioned Sandby's painting, Whatman sold the mill to Thomas and Finch Hollingsworth for £20,000 and retired to Vinters to live the life of a gentleman of leisure. He died four years later.

WHATMAN'S MILL TODAY

Although it no longer functions as a working mill, the complex of buildings at Turkey Mill survives as a conference center and business complex. Today, paper watermarked "Whatman" is produced at the nearby Springfield Mill, owned by Whatman International PLC, which produces a range of machine-made watercolor paper. It also specializes in a variety of scientific filter and forensic papers.



CREDITS

Organized by the Yale Center for British Art, this exhibition is jointly curated by the institution's Chief Conservator, Theresa Fairbanks Harris, and Scott Wilcox, Curator of Prints and Drawings, with assistance from Andrea Wolk, a Ph.D. candidate in Yale University's Department of the History of Art.

PUBLICATION

Papermaking and the Art of Watercolor in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Paul Sandby and the Whatman Paper Mill, published for the Yale Center for British Art by Yale University Press (February 2006). The book includes essays by exhibition curators Theresa Fairbanks Harris and Scott Wilcox, Yale Center for British Art; Stephen Daniels, Professor of Cultural Geography at the University of Nottingham; paper historian Maureen Green; and paper scientist Michael Fuller.

YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

Presented to the university by Paul Mellon (Class of 1929), the Yale Center for British Art (YCBA) houses the largest and most comprehensive collection of British art outside the United Kingdom. The collection of paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints, rare books, and manuscripts reflects the development of British art, life, and thought from the Elizabethan period onward. The Center offers a year-round schedule of exhibitions and educational programs, including films, concerts, lectures, tours, and special events. The YCBA also provides numerous opportunities for scholarly research, such as residential fellowships. Academic resources of the Center include the Reference Library and Photo Archive, Conservation Laboratory, and Study Room for examining prints, drawings, rare books, and manuscripts from the collection. An affiliated institution in London, the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, awards grants and fellowships, publishes academic titles, and sponsors Yale's only credit-granting undergraduate study abroad program, Yale-in-London.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Location: 1080 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut
Phone | Web site: 203 432 2800 | www.yale.edu/ycba
Admission: Free and open to the public
Hours: Tuesday–Saturday, 10 am–5 pm; Sunday, noon–5 pm;
closed Mondays and major holidays
Tours: Introductory tours, Saturdays at 11 am; exhibition tours
Thursdays at 11 am, Saturdays at noon, and Sundays at 2 pm.
Reference Library: Open Tuesday through Friday, 10 am–4:30 pm; Saturdays,
1–4:30 pm (during the academic year); 203 432 2818
Study Room: Tuesday through Friday, 10 am–4:30 pm
Museum Shop: Open during museum hours; 203 432 2828



Aerial view of the Yale Center for British Art, photo by Richard Caspole