

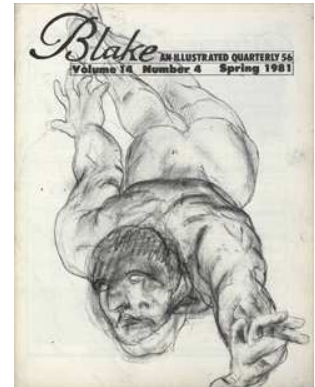
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

R E V I E W

Andrew Wilton, *British Watercolours 1750 to 1850*

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*Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, Volume 14, Issue 4, Spring 1981, pp. 218-219

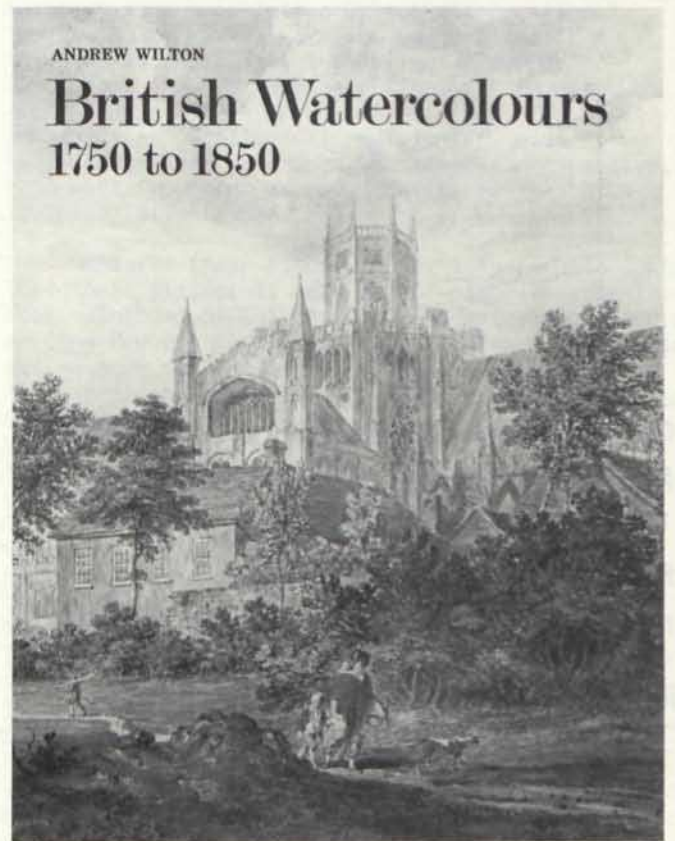


imposed leveling-down tendencies in the Swedish educational system of these latter days. However, as a Swede one feels a slight consolation after having listened to a lecture at the recent I.A.U.P.E. conference in Aberdeen, where Professor George S. Rousseau of UCLA gave his somber view on the lack of

interest taken in eighteenth-century literature by American university students. Some of his colleagues from both sides of the Atlantic chimed in, but all showed determination to do something about it. The academic world everywhere is in sore need of daring enthusiasts; Göran Malmqvist is certainly one of them.

Andrew Wilton. **British Watercolours 1750 to 1850.** Oxford: Phaidon, 1977. 208 pp., 170 plates (53 in color). £12.95.

Reviewed by William Vaughan.



**T**he rise of watercolor painting as an independent art form is intimately connected with the character and fortunes of British art in the decades around 1800. An impressive number of the finest painters of the time--such as John Robert Cozens, Thomas Girtin and John Sell Cotman--chose it as their principal medium. Many other major artists--notably William Blake and J. M. W. Turner--used it frequently and with great originality. In view of this it might be expected that the subject would be given an important place in any study of British Romantic art. Yet on the whole it has tended to be treated as a theme apart, relegated to specialists, most of whom approach it from the viewpoint of the connoisseur. Such commentaries have of course been invaluable in building up our knowledge of the identity of individual practitioners and for charting the history of the organizations that grew up as the practice of watercolor painting expanded. But they have tended to be less informative about the broader context. There is little treatment of the question of why watercolor should step from its modest position as an ancillary sketching medium (as which it had been used by great masters of all

countries since the middle ages) to that of a method suitable for finished pictures. The change involved the development of new attitudes to the study of natural effects, spontaneity and the interest in local scenery, all of which are connected with the emergent Romantic movement. There are social questions as well. Watercolor was a favored medium of amateurs and drawings masters. Not all of these were insignificant figures. John Ruskin is a distinguished example of the former and John Sell Cotman of the latter. But more important than this from a historical point of view is the fact that watercolorists were active in social groups where oil painters had little purchase. Often they cut quite a figure. Thackeray talks of "gay, smart, watercolour painters"; and there are examples in contemporary novels of the impact they could have in the homes of gentlemen.

Andrew Wilton's book--which covers the heyday of the British watercolorists--is to some extent aware of these wider issues. However, he is principally concerned with providing a clear and readable account of the leading lights of the school.

The book is based on a series of lectures, and the chapters appear to follow these closely. Each is centered on a major artist (though incorporating thumbnail sketches of associates) and each is of similar length. There is, of course, nothing remiss in publishing lectures. Some of the most attractive and memorable books have been formed in this way. Mr. Wilton's work has certainly retrained much of the engaging atmosphere of a successful lecture series. But I cannot help wishing that he had made a few more concessions to the more enduring format that his text has now achieved. In particular an introduction would have been welcomed. As it is we are plunged straight into the work of Paul Sandby, "the father of English watercolour," without any preliminaries. At the other end of the book we emerge with Turner and a sharp vertiginous vista of abstractions to come in the twentieth century. An epilogue or conclusion of some kind would, I feel, have been preferable.

Perhaps Mr. Wilton felt that such formalities could be dispensed with because his perspective on the subject was essentially traditional. Certainly his handling of this viewpoint is an accomplished one. His experiences as a museum curator have been put to very good use in his description of the techniques of individual painters--particularly those who produced landscapes. The author is perhaps best known for the studies he has made into the watercolors of Turner, and the essay in this book provides a fine and concise summation of his views on this topic.

Mr. Wilton is less at home when dealing with the figurative tradition, and appears to avoid it where he can. We are not reminded of the attempts to make watercolor a vehicle for history painting, although these--as can be seen in the works of Joshua Cristall--were not always disgraceful. When Bonington is discussed, more interest is shown in his landscapes than in his historical sketches. Most of the figurative work discussed--such as that by Rowlandson and John Frederick Lewis--can be fitted into the general theme of the observation of nature and interest in topography. There is only one who cannot--William Blake.

Blake is hardly likely to fit comfortably into any general survey of British art of the Romantic era. Here he stands out, not only because his subject matter is so radically different from that of the other watercolorists, but also because his view of watercolor itself seems to be different. He certainly used watercolor a lot--more, in fact, than any other painting medium--but he is definitely not within the British watercolor tradition. For him it was principally a designing medium, as it had been for the great European masters before him. He produced many beautiful works treated in a highly original manner, most notably the Dante illustrations with their touches of pure color. But he would rather have been at work on frescos, if circumstances had allowed. Despite this Wilton tries to make watercolor the focus of his career, even going so far as to characterize his color printing as "another manifestation of his inventive use of watercolour."

Blake's position does pinpoint a problem within the book as a whole--the degree of commitment to watercolor as a medium felt by the artists under discussion. Some made it their career, some used it sporadically for convenience or as a means of making preparatory studies. Wilton treats both categories equally without discussing the distinction. Thus Constable--who was no enthusiastic watercolorist--is given the same billing as such masters of the medium as Girtin, Cotman and Turner. This also leads to the discussion of much material that seems extraneous to the history of watercolor in the case of those artists for whom the technique was not a ruling passion.

There is, however, much that is attractive about the book. Apart from the readability of the text, there is also the selection of plates. This is far from being a simple rerun of classics--although some of the most breathtaking examples (such as Girtin's "White House") have properly been included. It brings to light many little known gems--such as W. H. Hunt's "Little Girl Reading." The biographies of the artists and notes on the plates are highly informative. So much so, in fact, that it seems a shame that this section could not have been extended, and a broader introduction provided by the main text.