

JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER

1775–1851

**EVENING - LOOKING ACROSS A DISTANT LAKE
TO MOUNTAINS**



Watercolour on paper
11 ½ x 18 ½ inches; 292 by 470 mm.
Painted c.1831

Collections:

David Croal Thompson (1855-1930);
Walter Henry Jones (1912-1982) acquired from the above;
Sotheby's, London, 26 March 1975, lot 216, as 'A Mountain Lake';
C. Curtis, bought at the above;
Hinderton Trust, Wirral, Cheshire, by 1979;
Hinderton Trust sale, Sotheby's, New York 24 October 1987, lot 27;
Agnew's, London;
Private collection;
Christie's, London, 8 April 1997, lot 66;
Private collection USA, to 2023

Literature:

Andrew Wilton, *The Life and Work of J.M.W. Turner*, Fribourg, 1979, p. 482, no. 1517
(as Looking towards Brunnen and the Seelisberg from Lake Zug)

Exhibited:

London, Agnew's, *115th Annual Exhibition of Watercolours and Drawings*, February-March 1988,
no. 73 (as *A View from a Height Looking Across a Distant Lake to Mountains Beyond*)

This exceptional mature landscape work by JMW Turner was almost certainly made in the 1830s on one of his visits to the Lake District. Boldly worked in pure watercolour, with no preliminary pencil under drawing, it represents an important essay in the motifs which most engaged Turner: the confluence of earth, water, and sky, in this case animated by evening light. As with other colour studies of the mid-1830s, Turner omits all extraneous detail or narrative content, concentrating solely on the landscape and elements. As such, it points to an important shift of focus in Turner's career that took place in the mid-1830s, as he developed what would become his late style and working methods. Formally, as the decade progressed, Turner became increasingly preoccupied by the sensation of being in the landscape he sought to depict, remarking to John Ruskin in 1844 that 'atmosphere is my style'. Although not intended as a preliminary study for a more finished work, this rich, evocative watercolour almost certainly served to aid Turner in the process of observation, intensifying his experience of shifting light and weather on the dramatic terrain of the Lake District. As such, it can be viewed as anticipating Turner's great sequence of watercolours depicting lakes in

Switzerland made in the following decade. Preserved in exceptional condition, this large sheet has not been on the market for over quarter of a century.

The 1830s was a hugely productive decade for Turner as his work for publishers increasingly drove his career; some seventy engravings on copper and over 300 on steel after his watercolours were published over the course of the decade. Most of Turner's travel in this period was directed towards collecting material for these engravings and it was largely through them that the artist's fame spread in Europe and America. The sixth and seven parts of the *Picturesque Views in England and Wales* series were published in 1829, and a further seventeen parts with sixty-eight copper-engravings in the 1830s, the twenty-fourth and final part in 1838. The present watercolour was possibly made in connection with this great graphic project. Andrew Wilton had assumed that the present atmospheric study dated from the early 1840s and had been made on one of Turner's Continental tours. He published the watercolour as *Looking towards Brunnen and the Seelisberg from Lake Zug*.¹ When the watercolour appeared on the market in the 1990s a watermark in the paper for the year 1828 was discovered, this suggested a date in the 1830s. It has subsequently been associated by Ian Warrell with a trip to the north of England that Turner made in 1831.

The trip in question was prompted by yet another book project. In late February 1831 Turner was approached by the Edinburgh publisher Robert Cadell with a proposal to paint twenty-four watercolours to be engraved as illustrations to a new edition of Sir Walter Scott's *Poetical Works*. Initially reluctant, a personal invitation from Scott to stay with him at Abbotsford, convinced Turner to make the trip. Turner left London shortly after the Royal Academy General Assembly meeting on 18th July. In the twelve sketchbooks he used during the trip, it is possible to plot his route north via Worcester, Bridgnorth, Shrewsbury and Chester. Cadell recorded in his diary that Turner had reached Manchester by 22nd July and Penrith by 28th July. Passing through Preston, he reached Kendal in the Lake District before continuing to Keswick and Derwentwater, where he sketched Skiddaw for the frontispiece of Walter Scott's narrative poem *The Bridal of Triermain*. Ian Warrell specifically links the present watercolour to an opening in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border Sketchbook*. The rapid pencil sketch has been identified as depicting Bassenthwaite from near Keswick, the hill on the left resembles the western shoulder of Skiddaw as seen from this point looking north. The lake itself is not included in the sketch, but may be visible in a rapid drawing on the opposite page.² We know that Turner was collecting material for multiple projects on the trip, a finished watercolour of *Keswick Lake, Cumberland* for the *Picturesque Views of England and Wales* probably results from Turner's 1831 visit to the Lake District.

As with all Turner's most beguiling works, the present watercolour was unlikely to have been made on the spot and should be read as an essay on his memories of the Lake District. Warrell has associated this richly worked, dramatic study with at least one other colour study made as a result of the 1831 trip, *Norham Castle at Sunrise*. A densely worked watercolour showing Norham Castle

¹ Andrew Wilton, *The Life and Work of J.M.W. Turner*, Fribourg, 1979, p. 482, no. 1517.

² TB CCLXVI 23a/ D25806 and TB CCLXVI 24/D25807.

silhouetted against a pink toned sky, it shares a similar palette, approach and atmosphere to the present watercolour. Eric Shanes identified *Norham Castle at Sunrise* as an undeveloped composition for Turner's *Picturesque Views in England and Wales* raising the likelihood that the present watercolour should also be considered as belonging to this project. As Eric Shanes has noted of the sequence, the finished watercolours are 'often superimposed over extremely spontaneous underpaintings. A mark of Turner's lofty conceptual and creative intentions for the project are the unusually large number of watercolour studies and sketches he elaborated in connection with it.'³ The purpose of these large watercolour studies was to establish the composition and mood in terms of light and weather effects of each view.

Whilst the present watercolour is not associated with a more finished composition, the concentrated power of Turner's use of washes recall the boldest of the *England and Wales* colour beginnings. Turner has built up the landscape in multiple layers of dense watercolour wash, some of these layers were laid in and then blotted off, with a subsequent layer of colour applied to create area of rich and complex colour. Turner's habit of working on wet paper imparts a remarkably vaporous quality to the present view, the distant range of Cumbrian hills bleed into the sky, whilst the sky itself is created with fluid washes of blue, brown and most evocatively violet which dissolves into a golden horizon. Preserved in spectacular condition, this grand, panoramic watercolour gives an exceptional summation of Turner's mature watercolour technique.



Joseph Mallord William Turner
Norham Castle at Sunrise
Watercolour
12 ¹/₈ x 19 ¹/₈ inches; 308 x 488 mm
c.1830
Tate, Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest
1856
Photo: Tate

³ Eric Shanes, *The Golden Age of Watercolours*, London, 2001, p.88.