Case 8 2010-11 : A watercolour by JMW Turner, Virginia Water

Expert Adviser’s Statement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Brief Description of item(s)

Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851)

Virginia Water circa 1828-9

Watercolour with scratching out on paper

11 ¾ x 17 ½ in (29.8 x 44.7 cm)

Condition: good

2. Context

Provenance:
Benjamin Godfrey Windus by 1847; C. Pemberton; W.J. Houldsworth; with Agnew’s, London, by 1881; Daniel Thwaites, before 1913; private Scottish collection and by descent; Sotheby’s, London, 8 July 2010 (48), estimate £500–700,000, bt for £881,250 by Alan Howard, London and Switzerland

Exhibited:
Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, London 1829
Manchester Art Treasures, Manchester 1857 (321)
Turning Watercolours, Gerson Galleries, New York 1960 (22)
Zwei Jahrhunderte der englische Malerei, British Council, 1969 (51)
Turning 1775-1851, Royal Academy, London 1974 (258, reproduced)
J.M.W. Turner, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra and National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne 1996 (62, reproduced)

Engraved:
By R. Wallis for The Keepsake, 1830 (Rawlinson no.323), and reprinted in 1836 in Heath’s Gallery of British Engraving

Literature:
Walter Armstrong, Turner, 1902, p.283
Selby Whittingham, ‘The Turner Collector: Benjamin Godfrey Windus 1790–
3. **Waverley criteria**

- **Waverley 1**: It is so closely connected with our history and national life that its departure would be a misfortune on the following grounds: its depiction of a royal fishing expedition aboard a barge on Virginia Water near Windsor Castle, with the presence of George IV indicated by the royal standard; the presence of a buoy decorated with the Cross of St George, indicating St George’s Day, 23 April, the official birthday of the King and also Turner’s birthday; and the likelihood that Turner offered the work to the king for the Royal Collection.

- **Waverley 3**: It qualifies as of outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art, learning or history through its combination of style and subject-matter calculated to appeal to royal patronage and particularly to the taste of George IV; and at the same time designed for reproduction in the popular *Keepsake Annual* (1830).
DETAILED CASE

1. Detailed description of item(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.

*Virginia Water* depicts the lake seen from the east, near the road, looking towards the Chinese Pavilion (demolished 1936). The surface of the lake is dead calm, and the air is still and warm, sparkling with spring sunshine. On the right is a barge flying the royal standard, indicating that King George IV is on board, along with a military band. The barge is being towed by a smaller rowing boat. In the foreground, the larger of two buoys is decorated with the Cross of St George and, towards the left, two mallards skim low over the water, away towards the shelter of the wooded banks of the lake.

The watercolour is one of two made by Turner in the late 1820s, which were engraved for *The Keepsake Annual* in 1830. Evidently conceived as a pair, both depict the lake and the Chinese Pavilion and include mallards in flight, in the case of the companion, escaping from an aggressive royal swan. The mallards are Turner’s metaphorical signature, suggested by his name ‘Mallord’, but in these compositions they suggest an ambivalent, or perhaps ironic or humorous, relationship to the monarch whose presence, estates, property, interests and taste are otherwise represented in respectful or flattering terms. Indeed both watercolours, according to tradition, were offered to the King, reportedly for 80 guineas, but rejected by him, leading one to wonder whether Turner added the birds afterwards, prior to exhibition or perhaps to the engraving of the works for the *Keepsake*. Of the two watercolours, only the present one is known today. The other, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1886, is recorded in the engraving by Robert Wallis.

If intended for the George IV, *Virginia Water* was well-calculated to appeal to his taste for the decorative and fanciful, and to his current revival of interest in Windsor Castle and its surroundings having recently withdrawn his enthusiasm for his Pavilion at Brighton. His presence in the picture is indicated by the standard, and the barge on the lake alludes to his fondness for fishing, as does the Chinese Pavilion which he used ‘for the amusement of angling’ (*Handbook to Berkshire*, John Murray, London 1882). Turner was himself a keen angler, and shared his birthday, 23 April, with the monarch’s official birthday and with St George’s Day, acknowledged by the marking on the foreground buoy and surely indicating that this is the day depicted. Evidently, the King has embarked for a musical party on the lake to mark the event.

If Turner made his watercolour with royal patronage in mind, it is also striking how far its decorative charm fits the more popular or even sentimental aesthetic of the *Keepsake*, as if Turner envisaged another market to fall back on. In the event, its first public appearance was in the exhibition organised by the engraver Charles Heath, mainly to promote his series of *Picturesque Views in England and Wales* after Turner, at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly. It is
likely that Heath had considered including this subject in the series, but in fact he later (1830) recycled Wallis’s print in his own *Gallery of British Engraving*.

That the subject may have been intended initially for *England and Wales* is made more probable since preliminary, related drawings of Virginia Water and the Chinese Pavilion, including one for the left half of the composition, are in the *Kenilworth* sketchbook of circa 1828-9 (Tate, Turner Bequest CCXXXVIII) which Turner used for drawings for the series. Other comparable works by Turner (aside from the untraced companion subject) should thus comprise both those related to or directed towards royal patronage, and engraved subjects of popular or patriotic topography. Closest in spirit, if not in medium or size, is the very large *England, Richmond Hill, on the Prince Regent’s Birthday*, 1818 (Tate), showing festivities taking place overlooking the famous prospect of the Thames from Richmond Hill; again, there is a flag or royal standard, this time slung from a tree. There is a watercolour of Richmond Hill, similar in size to *Virginia Water* and of circa 1825 (Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight) and later, circa 1836, Turner made a watercolour of the view from ‘Richmond Terrace’ (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool) for *England and Wales*.

Large in scale and classically noble in composition, it seems inconceivable that Turner did not paint *England, Richmond Hill* with royal patronage in mind, especially as, whether as Prince of Wales, Regent or King, George was a lavish collector and enthusiast of British art. In 1811, at the Royal Academy dinner, he had probably alluded to Turner by praising ‘landscapes that Claude would have admired’. If the King spurned his picture of Richmond, Turner nevertheless seems to have planned pictures of his official visit to Scotland in 1822 (the unfinished canvases are at Tate). He did paint *HMS VICTORY at the Battle of Trafalgar* for the King in 1824 (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich) but it was not approved by the monarch or his advisers, especially naval men, and it may have been their adverse reaction that spoiled Turner’s chances of further support from the royal household, even for more modest watercolours. The two views of Virginia Water represent his last, frustrated efforts in that direction while in retrospect they, or rather the present documented example, represent a lost opportunity for the Royal Collection.

2. **Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item**

As will be seen from Part 1, the significance of *Virginia Water* resides in its allusive content and themes, which elevate the topographical subject; and in the artist’s efforts to associate – or ingratiate – himself with his subject and potential patron, the King. The shared birthdays and the mallards speak of Turner himself, and in the case of the birds, probably also of his rejection by or enforced withdrawal from royal support. The work is significant not only in Turner’s professional and stylistic development and for his ambition, but in the larger story of George IV’s patronage and taste. Since these elements are so closely bound up with the subject matter, it is difficult to isolate them and they are discussed mainly in Part 1.
Here, aspects of the later history of the work should be mentioned. In the event of the King’s rejection of it, *Virginia Water* reached a different and wider audience, firstly in the Egyptian Hall exhibition and then in the *Keepsake* and Heath’s selection of British engravings, as an image of a royal beauty spot and of popular patriotism. The watercolour entered another important collection, that of B.G. Windus, probably the largest collection of Turner watercolours in Britain, and was among the works by Turner shown at the Manchester Art Treasures exhibition in 1857. It has also been seen in important modern exhibitions in the UK, Germany and Australia. These factors also support its national significance, which runs in parallel with the more specific local interest of the place depicted.

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