

J.M.W. Turner's Exhibits at the 1793 Royal Academy Exhibition - Two Oils

The Royal Academy catalogue for 1793 shows three exhibits by 'W. Turner, Hand-court, Maiden-lane, Covent-garden - 263, 316, 323". These are:

- In the Anti-Room, No. 263; 'View on the River Avon, near St. Vincent's Rock, Bristol'
- In the Library, No. 316; 'Gate of St. Augustine's monastery, Canterbury'
- In the Library, No. 323; 'The rising squall, hot wells, from St. Vincent's Rock, Bristol'

In late 2018 when I started this study all three of these exhibits were described as drawings or watercolour-drawings. The main reference consulted was, naturally, the Tate Gallery and following on from that, Wilton, 'J.M.W. Turner - His Art and Life'. In 2018/19 I confirmed that 'Gate of St. Augustine's monastery, Canterbury' remained in the Paul Mellon collection at Yale. There are two versions in the Mellon collection and the larger one is thought to be the exhibit and is indeed a watercolour-drawing.

'View on the River Avon, near St. Vincent's Rock, Bristol' and 'The rising squall, hot wells, from St. Vincent's Rock, Bristol' however, were completely lost. It soon became clear that 'The rising squall, hot wells, from St. Vincent's Rock, Bristol' was an oil painting and much of my presentation shows that this is so. Throughout 2020 to 2024 I spent considerable time and effort obtaining evidence for this to the point where I referred to 'The rising squall, hot wells, from St. Vincent's Rock, Bristol' as 'J.M.W. Turner's First Exhibited Oil'. In doing so I had put aside, or indeed failed to recognise the significance of evidence recovered at an early stage of my inquiry. The Royal Academy were most helpful regarding the matter of the Anti-Room. Much commentary is to be found about the Academy's practice of placing only oils in the Great Room and Anti-Room. Oils were also placed elsewhere but essentially watercolours and drawings were not displayed in either the Great Room or Anti-Room. There were a few notable exceptions and in 1793 one of those exceptions was for the work of John Russell R.A. However, these were pastels, or crayons as they were then called, and Russell was a well established and important member of the Royal Academy.

Not so, Turner who was only eighteen and was not an R.A., but a student, and whose exhibited works starting 1790 were all watercolour drawings. There was no prerogative for placing a Turner watercolour in the Anti-Room. So in 1793 there was one Turner exhibit in the Anti-Room and two in the Library. Having determined that 'The rising squall, hot wells, from St. Vincent's Rock, Bristol' was an oil it appeared to be a logical conclusion that this was the picture in the Anti-Room and that the very similar titles in the catalogue had been transposed.

In May 2025 I re-examined that conclusion, primarily looking at the earliest references (*taking a 'mistake in the RA catalogue' out of the equation in which case 'View on the River Avon, near St. Vincent's Rock, Bristol' was exhibited in the Anti-Room*):

- Catalogue of the 1793 RA Exhibition, the Anderdon/Bell copy from the Royal Academy.
- Catalogues of the Hobart Town Exhibitions of 1845 and 1858.
- Christie's Auction Sale Catalogue for 27th April 1864 (The Huskinson Sale);
- Christie's Auction Sale Catalogue for 9th July 1864 (The Hogarth Sale);
- 'Art Sales' by George Redford, published 1888.
- Finberg, 'The Life of J.M.W. Turner'; His examination of the Royal Academy attendance registers.

In respect of 'View on the River Avon, near St. Vincent's Rock, Bristol' and 'The rising squall, hot wells, from St. Vincent's Rock, Bristol':

- 'View on the River Avon, near St. Vincent's Rock, Bristol'
 - was exhibited in the Anti-Room at No. 263 and as such is likely to have been an oil.
 - It was not marked as 'drawing' or 'crayon' in the Anderdon/Bell copy of the 1793 catalogue; (*the Russells were marked*)
 - It appeared in the Huskinson sale where Christies recorded it as 'exhibited RA 1793'.
 - Redford recorded its presence in the Huskinson sale as an oil.
- 'The rising squall, hot wells, from St. Vincent's Rock, Bristol'
 - was exhibited in the Library at No. 323 amongst watercolours but not exclusively so (*eg: No. 331, Garrard 'Portrait of Saltram' is an oil on canvas*)
 - In the Hogarth sale Christies gave a literary reference which implied that this lot (152) was the exhibited picture and recorded its origin as the Rev. Nixon and the Bishop of Tasmania.
 - The Bishop of Tasmania recorded it as an oil (as 'Landscape') in Hobart Town Exhibitions.
 - Redford recorded it as an oil.

Based on these records alone it appears that J.M.W. Turner exhibited at least two oils at the Royal academy in 1793. Herein they are referred to as Turner's St. Vincent's Rock oils. The third exhibit, 'Gate of St. Augustine's monastery, Canterbury', has not been definitively identified and in the light of the above one cannot be completely certain that it was not an oil.