

A New Poetry

Contrary to prevailing critical belief, watercolour played a significant role in the development of modernist art. In England, the medium was promoted by the Modern English Watercolour Society, whose members included Paul Nash – among the greatest of 20th-century practitioners

WRITER DAVID BOYD HAYCOCK

I find [oil] painting so appealing that I'll have to make a great effort not to paint all the time,' Vincent van Gogh told a friend in 1882: 'It's rather more manly than watercolours, and has more poetry to it.'¹¹ It is perhaps that first qualification of Van Gogh's that best captures why watercolours have not received quite the attention they deserve in the story of modernism. The watercolour, it might seem, is simply too 'feminine' for the modern artist – too redolent of aristocratic ladies, of refined Georgian or Victorian gentlemen, or of enthusiastic amateurs and Sunday artists.

When in 2011 Tate Britain staged 'Watercolour', its first ever exhibition devoted solely to the medium, it was felt by many critics that this largely chronological show lost direction once it reached the modern era.

'As the show moves into the 20th century,' Richard Dorment suggested in the *Daily Telegraph*, 'it hurtles into chaos. It is an inarguable fact that the great tradition that began in the 18th century died out at the beginning of the 20th. Few major artists painted in watercolour and those that did used it only occasionally.'¹² This 'inarguable fact' reveals a common misconception. There is of course a long and distinguished history of the watercolour in British art, and it is widely considered a peculiarly British medium whose golden age began in the 18th century, peaked in the mid 19th century and dwindled towards its end. An article in the *Burlington Magazine* in 1905 complained of 'the failure of our water-colour tradition', lamenting, '[h]ow many works of the so-called English School of Water-Colour could be hung by the side

of an old Japanese print without looking either weak or garish?'¹³ Yet watercolour did play a significant role in the modern movement of the early 20th century, both in Britain and abroad. That history is worth closer examination.

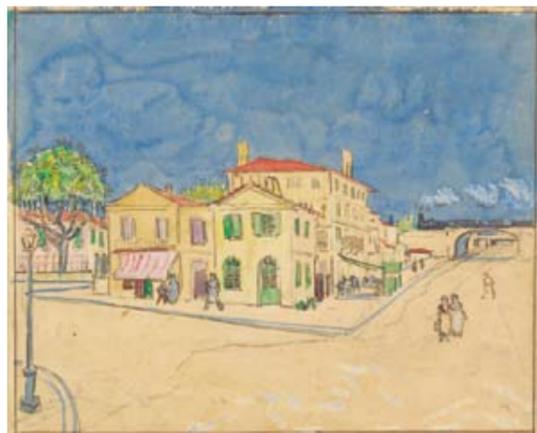
Despite his criticism of its 'unmanly' aspect, Van Gogh was a keen watercolourist. 'How marvellous watercolour is for expressing space and airiness,' he told his brother rapturously in 1881, 'allowing the figure to be part of the atmosphere and life to enter it.'¹⁴ He continued to use watercolour (often in combination with pen and ink, oil or gouache) intermittently until his death in 1890, often with remarkable results (Fig. 2). Another godfather of modernism who used watercolour both to develop his ideas and as an end in itself was Paul Cézanne. 'It is



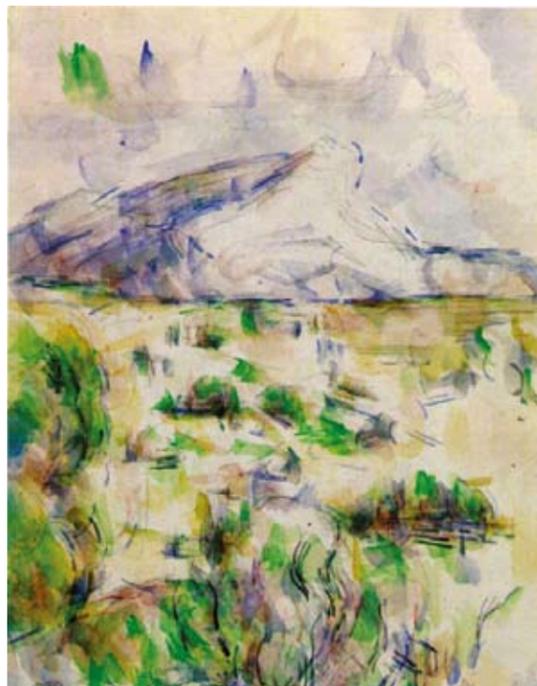
Cézanne who was the precursor and illuminator of Cubism,' wrote the French modernist Robert Delaunay, who saw revelatory exhibitions of the recently deceased artist's watercolours in Paris in 1909 and 1910: 'Cézanne's watercolours: the investigation of coloured planes...or rather luminous planes which destroy the subject' (Fig. 3).⁵

Modernism was thus not born free of the watercolour, and works on paper that incorporated watercolour by Van Gogh and Cézanne were included in Roger Fry's category defining Post-Impressionist exhibitions of 1910 and 1912. It is perhaps not surprising that it is to this same date that the critic and curator Frank Rutter placed the 'increasingly conspicuous' appearance in London exhibitions of 'watercolour drawings, based upon the definite line and decorative composition of the early topographical draughtsmen of Great Britain'.⁶ Rutter was a leading champion of the modern movement in Britain. In 1908, with the support of friends in the Fitzroy Street Group, he formed the Allied Artists' Association with a view to bringing artists working in France to the attention of British audiences, and in 1913 he curated an influential Post-Impressionist and Futurist exhibition at the Doré Gallery in London's Bond Street. The Italian Futurists inspired the foundation of the British modernist movement, Vorticism. Like the Futurists, the Vorticists advocated a break with the past and a modern art that embraced the industrial, the urban, the mechanical and the abstract. Yet even they did not eschew watercolour. Percy Wyndham Lewis, the movement's founder, and Edward Wadsworth, one of its more talented artists, produced numerous works in what might have been taken as a rather old-fashioned medium for such a forward-looking movement (Figs. 4 & 5). At the same time, many other significant European modernists – Raoul Dufy, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Egon Schiele – were keen and adept watercolourists.

When Paul Nash, who would become one of Britain's leading figures of the avant-garde,



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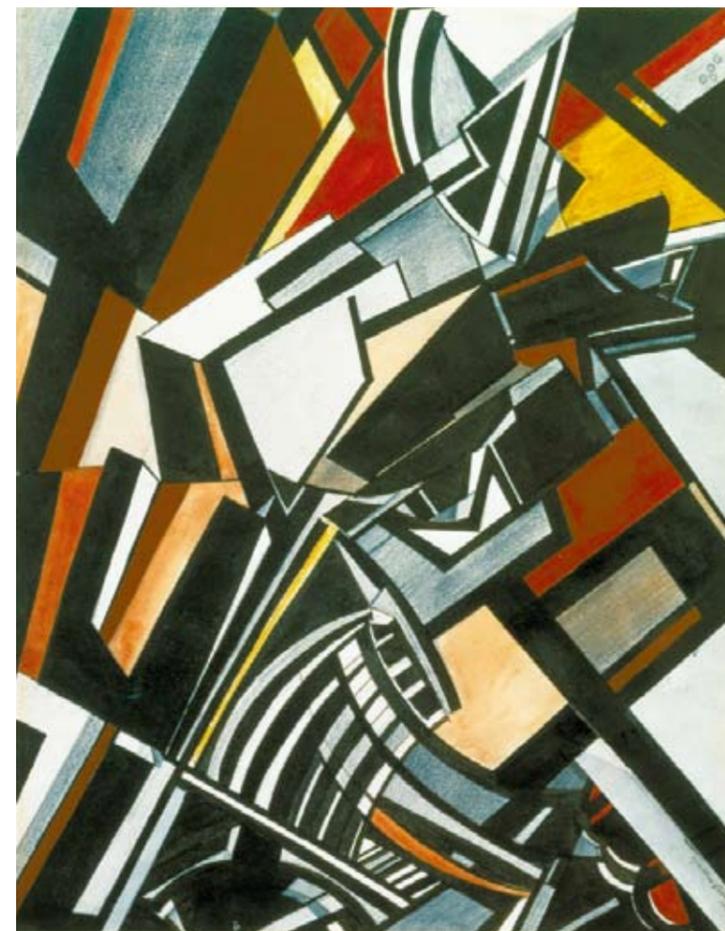
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arrived at the Slade School of Art in 1910 he was happy to advance his career solely as a watercolourist. His remarkable paintings undertaken as an Official War Artist on the Ypres Salient in November and December 1917 were all on paper. According to his wife, 'Some of these watercolours...actually had mud spattered upon them from nearby exploding shells, which he at times worked in to help with the colour of the drawing.'⁷ The grandiosity of the subject did not defy the medium: they were drawings made in a frenzy of passion, images that would endure as among the most sublime, terrifying and beautiful representations ever made of the First World War. They were also very modern, for in the trenches Nash had embraced the techniques (if not the tenets) of Vorticism. 'I know of no works of art made by any artist working there

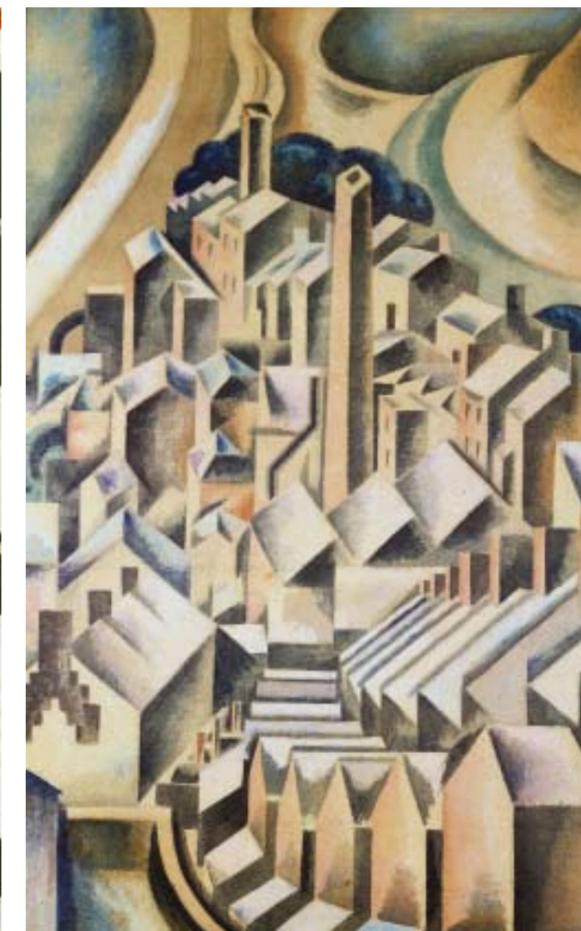
who saw the splendours and miseries of the greatest of all theatres of war so grandly', wrote John Rothenstein in 1955. 'Out of infinite horror [Nash] distilled a new poetry. The best of them will take their place among the finest imaginative works of our time' (Fig. 6 & 7).⁸

Of course, the situation in which Nash worked demanded a portable medium that could be used rapidly under fire: other Official War Artists, including William Orpen and John Singer Sargent, worked in watercolour at the Front; they could hardly have carried easels on to the battlefield. And in due course Nash realised that the immensity of his subject – as well as the need for permanent, large-scale records – almost demanded that he advance into oil painting; yet it was only in early 1918, as he approached his 29th birthday, that he completed his first work in

- 1 *Tench Pond in a Gale*, 1921–22
Paul Nash (1889–1946)
Ink, graphite and watercolour on paper
57.7×39.9cm
Tate Collection
© Tate, London 2014
- 2 *The Yellow House (The Street)*, 1888
Vincent van Gogh (1853–90)
Pencil, reed pen and pen and ink,
watercolour, on paper, 25.7×32cm
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)
- 3 *Mont Sainte Victoire from les Lauves*
1902–06
Paul Cézanne (1839–1906)
Watercolour and pencil on paper
48×31cm
Private Collection
Bridgeman Images
- 4 *Composition*, 1913
Percy Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957)
Pen, watercolour and pencil on paper
34.3×26.7cm
Tate Collection
© Tate, London 2014
© The Wyndham Lewis Estate/
Bridgeman Images
- 5 *Fortune's Well, Portland*, 1921
Edward Wadsworth (1889–1949)
Watercolour, 55.2×79.5cm
Mayor Gallery, London
Bridgeman Images
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the medium. As he told his friend Gordon Bottomley, these first attempts had been 'a complete experiment you know – a piece of towering audacity I suppose as I had never painted before...'⁹ Almost inevitably, one of his first and most famous oil paintings, *We Are Making a New World* (1918) was a direct interpretation of an original drawing, whilst his epic canvas, *The Menin Road* (1919), now in the Imperial War Museum, was rendered first in watercolour (Fig. 6).

By 1926 Frank Rutter was suggesting in his book *Evolution in Modern Art* that any frequenter of art exhibitions in London and Paris over the past 30 years:

must have observed that the greatest difference between the pictures of the past and of the present is that there is less and

less of the 'foggy' Impressionist type of picture, in which 'atmosphere' was the goal, and more and more of a clear, clean-hewn type of picture in which the accent is laid on design. This tendency, visible in pictures of all descriptions in Paris as in London, has become most pronounced in the modern water-colour. From it has arisen a new school of water-colour, which is perhaps the most rich in promise of any contemporary British movement.¹⁰

Rutter considered one of the most exciting manifestations of this new contemporary movement was the recent establishment of the Modern English Watercolour Society. The founders, who included Paul Nash and his brother John, Edward Wadsworth, Robert Bevan, Charles Ginner, Lucien Pissarro,

Ethelbert White and Randolph Schwabe, all felt that their watercolours were not receiving a fair chance of being properly seen at mixed shows. As both the Royal Watercolour Society and the Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours already offered exhibition opportunities exclusively devoted to the medium, these artists clearly wished to distinguish themselves from their fellow practitioners, perhaps most obviously in their use of the word 'Modern'. 'The quality of the work shown justifies the formation of the new society,' the *Burlington Magazine* observed in a brief notice of Nash and his colleagues' first exhibition in May 1923, 'and it is a great comfort to be able to study a moderate number of good drawings by themselves.'¹¹

For the next five or six years the Modern English Watercolour Society held exhibitions,



8 *Landscape of the Wittenham Clumps, 1946*
Paul Nash
Pencil and grey wash on paper
17×25cm
British Council Collection
Photo: Rodney Todd-White & Son
© Tate, London 2014

6 with catalogues prefaced by Rutter. The modern watercolour was also championed by organisations such as the Contemporary Art Society, which acquired Paul Nash's watercolour *Tench Pond in a Gale* (1921–22; Fig. 1) and presented it to the Tate Gallery in 1924. There it would be an important influence on young artists such as Nash's pupil at the Royal College of Art, Eric Ravilious.¹² Ravilious would be one of the chief artists from the younger generation to carry forward the English school of watercolours, but other significant practitioners would include John Piper, Edward Burra, David Jones, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Graham Sutherland, John Tunnard, John Minton and Keith Vaughan.

As well as exhibiting with the Modern English Watercolour Society, Nash contributed works to various other group exhibitions devoted exclusively to watercolours, and he held a number of solo shows in this medium. From 1918 until his death in 1946 he continued to paint both in watercolour and oils. He was actually working on a watercolour on the day of his death, and his late works in the medium reveal a more fluid handling and the possibilities of exciting new avenues (Fig. 8). Though his works in oil are his most well



6 *Study for The Menin Road, 1918*
Paul Nash
Watercolour, ink and chalk
10.8×58cm
Image: courtesy Piano Nobile
© IWM

7 *A Farm, Wyltschaete, 1917*
Paul Nash
Ink, chalk and watercolour on paper, 25.7×35.9cm
Image: courtesy Piano Nobile

7 known today, it would be wrong to suggest that they eclipsed his watercolours in the eyes of contemporaries. In 1929, the prominent critic R.H. Wilenski called Nash 'the John Sell Cotman of to-day' – putting him on a par with another artist who painted in both media (though Cotman is more famous today for his watercolours).¹³ A solo exhibition of Nash's watercolours held in London in 1932 was particularly successful: 'Certainly Mr. Paul Nash is one of our most interesting artists,' *The Times* observed, 'particularly when...he works in water-colour.'¹⁴ An exhibition of 60

new watercolours three years later elicited the response in the same newspaper that 'water-colour seems more apt for his purposes than oil, in which he sometimes gives the impression of subjecting the fatter medium to the restrictions of fresco.'¹⁵

Nevertheless, many admirers today of Nash's most famous works such as *Totes Meer* (1940–41) or *We Are Making a New World* may not be aware that he painted in watercolour at all. Though I was 16 when I first discovered his work, it was not until I was in my 30s that I realised the full extent of his work as a



8 watercolourist. Partly this was (and remains) the fault of the public museums and galleries that hold his work: put simply, with the exception of retrospectives and special exhibitions, his works on paper are so rarely hung. Tate Britain's 2013 rehang of its collection in chronological order was well-received, but was almost entirely devoted to oil paintings, as if works on paper did not play a significant role in that history. The extensive recent rebuilding of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford did not incorporate a space devoted to its extraordinary collection of works on paper; and despite the supposed significance of the 'English School of Watercolour', there is still no permanent venue where this school can be studied in its entirety.

This criticism is not exclusive to the Tate or the Ashmolean, and attention might be drawn to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, or even the Victoria and Albert Museum. Of course, this absence is partly due to the nature of the medium itself: watercolours simply cannot be exposed to light for long periods of time, a factor that has always (literally) diminished their public

exposure, and which has also played a significant part in their ongoing underappreciation. These collections are, however, available to be seen: all the aforementioned institutions have excellent prints and drawings rooms open to the public, offering the most intimate opportunity to view almost any of their works at first hand.

Yet by removing their works on paper to what is ostensibly a private sphere, the average visitor or tourist is deprived of easily seeing what are often extraordinary collections, and may spend a lifetime unaware of the place or significance of the watercolour drawing in the history of art. This limitation could be alleviated by dedicated exhibition spaces with a rotating display taken from the permanent collection. To the best of my knowledge, the only British institutions offering such spaces are the British Museum and Tate Britain (which has rooms devoted to works on paper by Turner and Blake, as well as the recent welcome addition of a large space devoted to displaying material from their archive collection). Perversely, given that there are no issues of conservation or

additional cost, the more general art-historical publications tend to reproduce the (more famous) oil works at the expense of works on paper, thus perpetuating the art-historical imbalance. A look at any general book on Cézanne or Van Gogh will confirm this.

When Paul Nash neared the end of his life and was struggling to complete his autobiography, it was to his earliest works on paper that he returned. 'When I came to look into the early drawings I lived again that wonderful hour,' he told Gordon Bottomley. 'I could feel myself making those drawings – in some ways the best I ever did to this day. And because of this I suddenly saw the way to finish my "life"...I feel I could make a complete thing by taking it up to 1914 – just up to the war. After that it was another life, another world.'¹⁶ In examining the career of an artist like Paul Nash, or those of his colleagues in the Modern English Watercolour Society, or their precursors such as Van Gogh and Cézanne, let us not overlook the extent to which they worked with water-based media as well as oil. **A**

David Boyd Haycock is the curator of 'Paul Nash: Watercolours, 1910–1946' at Piano Nobile, London (9 October–22 November). Visit www.piano-nobile.com for more information.

1/ Vincent van Gogh to Anthon van Rappard, 13 August 1882, in Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker (eds.), *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters*, Amsterdam and The Hague, 2009; www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let256/letter.html (accessed 9 September 2014).
2/ *Daily Telegraph*, 15 February 2011.
3/ P.A., 'The Failure of our Water-colour Tradition', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. VII, no. 26 (May 1905), pp. 112–15.
4/ Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, c. 18 December 1881 in op. cit. in n. 1; www.vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let192/letter.html (accessed 9 September 2014).
5/ Robert Delaunay, *The New Art of Color: The Writings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay*, ed. Arthur A. Cohen, New York, 1978, p. 20.
6/ Frank Rutter, *Evolution in Modern Art: A Study of Modern Painting, 1870–1925*, London, 1926, p. 146.
7/ Margaret Nash, 'Memoirs of Paul Nash, 1913–1946', unpublished MS, 1951, Tate Gallery Archive, London, TGA 769.2.6., f.16–17.
8/ John Rothenstein, *Modern English Painters, Sickert to Moore*, London, 1957, pp. 347–48.
9/ Paul Nash to Gordon Bottomley, 16 July 1918, in Claude Colleer Abbott and Anthony Bertram (eds.), *Poet & Painter: Being the Correspondence Between Gordon Bottomley and Paul Nash, 1910–1946*, London, 1955, p. 98.
10/ Op. cit. in n. 6, p. 145.
11/ *Burlington Magazine*, vol. XLII, no. 242 (May 1923), p. 261.
12/ Alan Power, *Eric Ravilious: Imagined Realities*, London, 2004, p. 37.
13/ *The Observer*, 13 October 1929.
14/ *The Times*, 4 November 1932.
15/ *The Times*, 15 April 1935.
16/ Paul Nash to Gordon Bottomley, op. cit. in n. 9, p. 219.