

**Eric Shanes, *Turner's Rivers, Harbours and Coasts*. London.
Chatto & Windus. 1981. 160 pp., 116 illus., \$44.95 (cloth)**

Hardy George

Volume 13, numéro 1, 1986

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073569ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073569ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

George, H. (1986). Compte rendu de [Eric Shanes, *Turner's Rivers, Harbours and Coasts*. London. Chatto & Windus. 1981. 160 pp., 116 illus., \$44.95 (cloth)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 13(1), 83–85.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1073569ar>

tion of fixed vistas. The spatial confinement created by the meeting of the low point of the roof with the high point of the internal ramp is relieved by its juxtaposition with the most expansive window in the house: sensations encountered in walking through mountain passes are thereby evoked.

'Brilliant' though the analysis of the Errazius project and its comparison to the 1949 MOMA exhibition house of Marcel Breuer may be (as argued Colin Rowe on the dust-jacket), more interesting are the confrontations of institutional designs. A quick look at one of these, involving Lundy's Intermediate School and the 1962-64 London Secondary School of Alan Colquhoun and John Miller, reveals an author who must have felt betrayed by what he perceives to have been the shallowness of the Harvard commitment to humanizing architecture.

Discovered in the English example is a successful recognition of the many functions performed by a school. In contrast to the fortress-like exterior appearance of Lundy's building, the London School offers a formal statement of the accepted connection between educational institution and community. Equally important, it provides an interior articulation that conjures up both the large home and the small city, acknowledging the need of a young student to feel the security of belonging somewhere before s/he can be urged to participate in a larger forum. Interior articulation further addresses itself to the imaginative nature of the child's mind: receding galleries surrounding the assembly hall, taken in conjunction with changing natural light streaming through a coffered ceiling, establish the potential for diverse associational or experimental enrichments of the structure.

Proposing that the emotional needs and imaginative potential of the individual can be reconciled with the demands of society, the Colquhoun/Miller school is an entity responsive to the stated values of democracy. The author of *The Decorated Diagram* tends to favour such propositions. Thus we can well understand his decision to question Walter Gropius, long deemed the major advocate of democratic architecture. Nevertheless, the decision is to be regretted and not just – not even principally – because the case against Gropius is sketchy. The pages devoted to Harvard education might better have been used to develop more systematically Herdeg's notion of an architecture conceived in genuine

relation to the experiences, lived and about to be lived, of those who enter the building's domain. Left unstated, for example, are the means through which the designer selects an appropriate historical or associational paradigm for a given work. Gropius' emphasis on the 'pleasure principle' indeed may have reduced the scope of architectural discourse, but Herdeg's commitment to the possibilities of symbolic and associative design might result too easily in an even more authoritarian discourse, one which forces the individual into an artificial relationship with a bankrupt past or with faulty assumptions about human experience and imagination. To call, as Herdeg does, for a more 'self-conscious' attitude, for an analysis of the nature and rôle of 'creative instinct,' is simply not enough. He must be more specific before the evocative glimpses he permits us of an engaging humane architecture can be translated into a programme – educational or otherwise – which will replace the Gropian way. This reviewer does not doubt Herdeg's abilities to move a long way in such a direction, although she does regret that his abilities were not deployed in greater measure in *The Decorated Diagram*.

CATHERINE MACKENZIE
Concordia University

ERIC SHANES *Turner's Rivers, Harbours and Coasts*. London. Chatto & Windus, 1981. 160 pp., 116 illus., \$44.95 (cloth).

Since A.J. Finberg's important *Life of J.M.W. Turner* appeared in 1961, a number of research monographs have been published to fulfil what appears to be an endless demand for well-crafted recapitulations of the artist's life and work. These publications are always properly seasoned with morsels of new information and liberally garnished with high quality illustrations. Encouraged by these popular monographs, and spurred by the 1975 Turner bicentennial, there have been flurries of scholarly research on various neglected aspects of Turner's work: one of these important but relatively unexplored areas has been Turner's watercolours.

Since Martin Butlin's *Turner Watercolours* (1962), some valuable general studies of this subject have been writ-

ten by Graham Reynolds, Gerald Wilkinson, and more recently, Andrew Wilton. There have been also more specialized works by Adele Holcomb and Gerald Findley on Turner's watercolours for engravings. And now, Eric Shanes has added his contribution with his ambitious and original publications: *Turner's Picturesque Views of England and Wales* and *Turner's Rivers, Harbours and Coasts*. Until now, Turner's watercolours for the series of engravings of England's ports, rivers and coastline have not received the attention they deserve.

In museums, galleries, private collections and auction records, Eric Shanes has located a large number of watercolours used or conceived for engravings in a series of marine and river subjects titled *The Ports of England*, *The Rivers of England*, and *Picturesque Views of the Southern Coast*, which mark an important phase of Turner's development as a watercolourist.

Discussed in the initial part of the text are Turner's first commission from Jack Fuller for watercolours to be used for the engravings *Views of Sussex* and, even more important, his work for William and George Cooke.

In the second part of Shanes' text, titled 'Mr. Turner,' there is a general discussion of the development of Turner's art between 1810 and 1827, and, more specifically, the watercolours associated with the engravings for the *Southern Coast*, *Ports of England*, *Marine Views* and *East Coasts*. This is followed by a catalogue with separate commentaries of each of the watercolours for these various projects, including stylistic characteristics, medium and technique. The subject entries have relevant historical and biographical information which contribute to a clearer understanding of the work. After the 'commentaries' there is a full set of helpful photographs, mostly in colour, of all the watercolours catalogued.

In the third and final portion of the text, titled 'Concordance of Watercolours to their Original Sketches,' Shanes presents a chronological list of the sketchbooks in the Turner bequest pertaining to the watercolours already discussed. The watercolours that can be related to a particular sketchbook are listed under the title (and Finberg number) of the appropriate book. The sketchbooks are listed chronologically with the page number of the related sketch placed next to the title of each

watercolour. Unfortunately there is no index to make all of the useful information readily available.

In 1811, William and George Cooke invited Turner to provide about twenty-four drawings for a collaborative work entitled *Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England* but it was two years before the engravings of the watercolours were published. Part One appeared on January 1st, 1814. It contained engravings after drawings by Turner, Westall, Owen, and Clennel. Later, in the same year, three more parts were published. The *Southern Coast* series turned out to be an important breakthrough for Turner and for the evolving art of line engraving. He played an active rôle not only in correcting the proofs, but at every stage of the process of engraving and printing the plates. Turner became interested in increasing the range and tonality of the print as well as creating texture and depth. This would go beyond merely reproducing original works of art and would lead to the exploration of the possibilities and limitations of a new medium.

It is clear in Eric Shanes' documentation that the demand for engravings of 'picturesque' scenery was increasing; this is evident, for example, in the quoted letter from W.B. Cooke to John Murray (Dec. 21, 1818) concerning the reprinting and publication of the plates for the *Views of Sussex*. Also the reader is given the fullest account thus far of the activities, successes and failures of the enterprising Cooke brothers.

Tellingly, William Cooke employed the engraver Thomas Goff Lupton, who was concerned with the fact that the relatively soft copper plates could produce only a limited number of quality prints. In 1822, Goff was awarded the gold 'Isis' medal by the Society of Arts for finding a way to use successfully steel-reinforced plates. Without showing signs of wear, steel-faced mezzotint-engravings would make it possible to produce many more fine prints.

In view of the advantages offered by this new process, Turner embarked upon a new series for Cooke, entitled *The Rivers of England* (or *River Scenery*). They planned to produce thirty-six plates mezzotinted on steel for various engravers. Turner painted seventeen or more watercolours for this series between 1822 and 1825.

Until now, Turner's complex and varied working relationship with W.B. Cooke has only received scant treat-

ment. In some accounts Turner seems to have been bullied by a coarse and demanding Cooke, yet at other times Turner seems to have been selfish and difficult. Part of the problem with Cooke seems to have been created by the generous amount the publisher, Charles Heath, was paying for Turner's work (double that offered by Cooke), and Heath was quite willing to supply Turner with a considerable number of proofs. But Cooke was obviously better in business matters for he survived while Heath bankrupted himself.

Nevertheless, Turner quarrelled with George Cooke and Cooke's engraver Edward Goodall over 'touched proofs' and finally decided to publish independently the next planned project, *Picturesque Views on the East Coast of England*. This, however, remained as an unrealized project. When the Cooke brothers and Turner ceased relations in 1827 the *Rivers* series ground to a halt; this ended a sixteen-year relationship during which some forty-nine pictures by Turner were engraved.

Throughout the book, Shanes displays a genuine knowledge of nautical terminology. He notes, for example, that the mizzenmast is in the wrong place in the yawl portrayed in the centre foreground of Turner's *Hastings from the Sea*. In fact, without the aid of the 'Glossary of Ships...' and even with an average knowledge of nautical language, the reader might have trouble with the descriptions of the many different types of ships portrayed.

Shanes gives emphasis to the incidental details allegorically related to the history and aspirations of the time, as well as to the particulars of Turner's biography. The author is never too arid or too sublime in his formalist observations and demonstrates a desire to make greater use of sociological and psychological interpretations. Perhaps it is the right time to explore the complex symbolism of Turner's more problematical subjects, at least those which are decipherable, and try to reach a better understanding of passages that were either deliberate or unintended. In the *Southern Coast* watercolour of *Poole, and Distant View of Corfe Castle, Dorsetshire*, the load of timber in the foreground seems to refer to the kind of field-gun used at the time of the Peninsula War. In the watercolour of *Battle Abbey* a mood of aggression is evoked by the depiction of boys stoning an adder. The snake

moving up the bank towards two rabbit burrows seems to refer to the arrow that pierced King Harold's eye during the Battle of Hastings. There appears to be another reference to the iris of Harold's eye in the portrayal of the circular top of the tree stump.

In the ca. 1827 watercolour of *Lowestoffe*, a somber note is created by the darkness of the stormy sea and sky. A streak of lightning can be seen on the horizon illuminating the dark silhouette of a 'Lowestoft Drifter.' In the sky above the bow of the ship a lighter wisp of cloud becomes the ghostly shape of a winged figure.

Turner's marine views and landscapes can no longer be seen as sometimes dramatized, but nonetheless simple and straightforward, portraits of places. In these marine and river views there are constant references to shipping, fishing and other industries particular to the place portrayed. *Dartmouth, on the River Dart*, a watercolour associated with *The Rivers of England*, reveals that shipyards Dartmouth were alive with activity, and 'in 1826 no less than nineteen vessels were built in them' (p. 31). In *Shields on the River Tyne* (ca. 1823) for the same series, Newcastle coal is being transferred from barges into collier-brigs, while a coalwagon stands on an elevated track. A group of men are using a long rope to warp a brig into the harbour in *Bridport, Dorsetshire* (ca. 1813-17). At that time, Bridport was known for its ropemaking, and the town was the principal supplier of cordage to the navy; Turner wrote of its flourishing cordage trade in the poem to accompany the engraving. Turner celebrates the benefits of the new means of sea transportation made possible by the steam engine in the view of *Dover Castle* (ca. 1822). The paddle steamer with numerous passengers on the deck moves effortlessly against the prevailing wind to enter the harbour, while the various fishing smacks, without enough room to tack into the harbour, have been placed in a holding position with reduced sail. A wrecked brig is seen immediately behind the steamer, making a visual comment on the introduction of steam power. Here we have a less nostalgic picture of change and a more positive view of progress than in the later painting of *The Fighting Temeraire*. As early as 1813 Turner made the packet boat the principal subject of his painting of *Calais Pier*, but here the emphasis is placed on the hazards of channel crossing, which could vary in duration from six to

forty-eight hours, depending on the wind and weather.

Along with harbours and shipping there are constant references to fortifications of the past, as well as to modern defence systems constructed during the period of the Napoleonic wars. In *Dover from Shakespeare's Cliff* (ca. 1825), the town is seen from the Western Heights where there are underground fortifications begun in 1793 to resist a potential French invasion. The complex includes a number of deep dry moats, like the one shown in the watercolour, with approaches protected by gun emplacements. In the foreground of *Hythe, Kent* (Southern Coast series, ca. 1823), a cannon points downhill toward the Royal Military Canal, part of a fortification built during the Napoleonic wars as a segment of the defence system against possible French invasion.

It is obvious, therefore, that the very necessary mapping and identification procedures have been given due attention and Shanes' use of descriptive language is quite adequate for the task at hand. At times, however, the more obvious psycho-sexual symbols presented slight hazards. Some part of a landscape, such as a deep lush valley, firm rolling hills, or a domineering rock formation assumed suggestive shapes. Being a very prudent art historian, however, Shanes only occasionally gives these biological and sexual categories recognition, when, for example, an innocent topographical description becomes undeniable self-expression. Even the most modest attempt to explore material of this kind can meet resistance. Fortunately, most of Turner's erotic soliloquies 'beyond expression' are not explicit enough to offend the delicate sensibilities of someone still in search of the picturesque qualities that offered so much satisfaction to critics like John Ruskin.

Eric Shanes' book leaves little doubt that Turner was an important marine painter whose works contain a considerable amount of symbols, allegories and metaphors. Turner can no longer be considered an early impressionist or simply a painter of pleasant views that make few demands on the spectator. The author understands the need to go beyond the structures of a purely formalist approach to understand and appreciate these unique watercolours associated with the burgeoning industry of the engraver.

HARDY GEORGE
Concordia University

ROBERT ROSENBLUM and H.W. JANSON *19th Century Art*. Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1984. 527 pp., 413 illus., 89 colour pl., \$63.00 (cloth).

The publication *19th Century Art*, by Robert Rosenblum and H.W. Janson, is more timely than it first appears. Its topic may be from the past but it is not just dedicated to period specialists, for its approach is rooted in the critical controversies of the present. It is the first real summary of twenty years of revisionist art history and a clear reflection of the critical pluralism of today's artistic scene. Also, as a textbook, it will probably shape the views of the coming generation with as much force as the histories of Venturi, Canaday and Hamilton have the present one.

Today's artistic scene pits sect against sect, methodology against methodology, orthodox modernism against various post-modernisms. No group or approach clearly dominates the scene and there is no clear consensus over whether this pluralism is good or bad, whether it shows a greater historical objectivity or an abdication of critical judgement, a sign of new beginnings or an interregnum. Francis Haskell, for instance, wittily describes pluralism as having 'standards for all, malice towards none' (*The New York Times Book Review*, 22 April 1984, pp. 9-10), while Donald Kuspit comes to the more pessimistic conclusion that it 'is not so wholesome as it seems, but is rather the sign of an identity crisis in modern art, an inner uncertainty of direction inseparable from the rise of postmodernism ... it is not the sign of art's new presence, but of its loss of significant motivating force. It is the sign not of an emerging new order, but of the collapse of an old order, an old basis for the production of art' ('The Emptiness of Pluralism, The End of the New,' *Vanguard*, March 1984, p. 14).

Amid the resulting confusion, Rosenblum and Janson come down firmly on the side of pluralism. After their pioneering works on Neoclassicism, the northern Romantic tradition and nineteenth-century French sculpture, this is not surprising. The modernist history of nineteenth-century art, they see as narrow and 'evangelical,' caught up in a heroic myth of the avant-garde, 'a succession of supremely great artists whose genius separated them from their lesser contemporaries by an unbridgeable gulf ... [who] were con-

cerned first and foremost with purely artistic problems which, if read in the proper way, could provide a kind of genealogical table for the more audacious developments of the early twentieth century.' They aim to 'give the 19th century back to itself, to read it more in its own terms,' to break down modernism's Franco-centric bias and internationalize its perspective. They aim to write a comprehensive history, like those by Richard Muther and Léonce Bénédite, from the turn of this century, before the modernist canon had hardened. In their approach they follow also the example of Fritz Novotny, whose history of the period published by Pelican in 1960 was considered so eccentric in its day. They declare their preference for practice over theory, their distaste for the tyranny of abstract systems yet they claim no transcendent objectivity. They describe their book as a 'work in progress,' which may someday be thought equally biased as the books it is now replacing.

In their concern to emphasize not 'purely artistic problems' but art's 'active involvement with historical events,' they structure their text around five events they see as defining the century: the American Revolution of 1776, the fall of Napoleon and congress of Vienna of 1815, the failed revolutions of 1848, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the Paris World's Fair of 1900. Between these dates they arrange their material not by rigid stylistic categories but by a loose amalgam of individual, national and thematic ones, such as 'Changes in History Painting,' 'Empirical Directions,' 'Poverty and Piety,' and 'Interiors: Domestic and Erotic.' Here they cipher on individual works and are especially good in pointing out the strange ambiguities created when outmoded artistic conventions were adapted to new situations. Another basic, and less successful, division is that between painting and sculpture. Due to the death of Janson before publication and the radical cutting of his massive manuscript, the two sections are not well harmonized and the sculpture section, within itself, is structured less imaginatively, along traditional stylistic and national lines. Whether the two sections could have been completely integrated or whether this would have caused serious organizational problems is far more debatable.

It is important to note that when the authors aim to read the nineteenth