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**AN EYE FOR BEAUTY:**

**COLLECTORS AND THE HISTORY OF BRITISH WATERCOLOR**

*New Huntington exhibition explores the beauty of British watercolors and the medium's history, as well as the changing taste of collectors and connoisseurs*

*Feb. 12 – May 15, 2005*

SAN MARINO, Calif. – The history of British watercolor takes center stage at The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens when more than 100 watercolors by the greatest 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century British masters, including J.M.W. Turner, John Constable, John Robert Cozens, and Thomas Girtin go on exhibition next February. The show, focusing on the role of collectors in shaping our understanding of this medium and its history, will boast supreme achievements of this delicate art form, many of which have never before been exhibited in the United States. The exhibition will be mounted in the MaryLou and George Boone Gallery and will run from Feb. 12 through May 15, 2005.

“The art of watercolor has always had a special significance in Britain,” says John Murdoch, director of art collections at The Huntington. “Around 1800 watercolor was established there as virtually an independent artistic medium with its own institutions, its own professional disciplines, and its own market. It is virtually impossible to think about British art at this time without considering watercolor.”

The show in particular explores the history of British watercolor as it was defined by early 20th-century connoisseurs and collectors, from its beginnings in 16th-century portrait and topographical drawings, through what often has been called its “golden age,” the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century, when emotive works by Romantic artists such as Turner, Girtin,

Peter De Wint, and David Cox defined the standard of excellence that continues to be upheld. Scholar-collectors wrote articles and books about the art of watercolor and its history, often gaining understanding by studying the objects that they were adding to their own collections.

The core of the exhibition comes from a collection -- now at the Courtauld Institute Gallery in London and never before shown in America -- which was assembled in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century by British art collector William Spooner. A selection from The Huntington's own extensive holdings will also be on view. (The Huntington's acquisition from Britain of the Gilbert Davis collection in 1955 established the institution as one of the greatest repositories of British watercolor outside the United Kingdom.) While most objects in the exhibition come from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century through the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, it will also include early 18<sup>th</sup>-century examples as well as several 20<sup>th</sup>-century works.

Collectors such as Spooner and Davis and their predecessors sought to define the fundamental aesthetic qualities of the medium, and argued that watercolor seemed to have provided an essential means of expression for the Romantic imagination in communion with Nature. The medium of watercolor allowed artists to capture images of the world around them more quickly and spontaneously than was possible with oil paint. The transparent, luminous quality of watercolor lent itself as well to the special effects of light across English hillsides and moorlands as to the bright sunlight of the southern European landscape or the melodramatic effects of Alpine scenery. The exhibition highlights this diversity of subject matter. For example, rather than focus on the different landscapes he passed through in his travels, Scottish artist David Wilkie (1785-1841) used watercolor to create on-the-spot portraits of the people he encountered, as he did in *Portrait of Madame Josephine*, *Landlady of the Hotel Constantinople* (Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery). Peter De Wint (1784-1849) captured the feeling of a vast space bathed in golden light with a few careful brushstrokes in his image of *Chichester* (Huntington Art Collections). And John Warwick Smith pictures the sublimity of nature in his watercolor of the mountainous landscape near Italy's Lake Lugano in *On the Side of Lake Lugano* (Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery).

As with other works on paper, watercolors are extremely vulnerable and sensitive to light. They are usually only shown for short periods in reduced and dimmed light as prolonged exposure can cause fading and discoloration. “The exhibition therefore presents a special opportunity to view rarely seen objects both from abroad and from the Huntington’s holdings,” Murdoch says.

After The Huntington, the Spooner collection travels to the Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere, England, and will then be exhibited at the Courtauld in London in fall 2005. A new scholarly catalogue of the Courtauld’s William Spooner Collection, which includes an essay on the aesthetics of watercolor by John Murdoch, accompanies the exhibition.

*The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens is a collections-based research and educational institution serving scholars and the general public.*

VISITOR INFORMATION: Hours: Tuesday through Friday from 12 noon to 4:30 p.m., Saturday and Sunday from 10:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Admission: \$15 adults, \$11 seniors, \$10 students (ages 12-18), \$6 youth (ages 5-11), free for children under 5. Members are admitted free. Information: (626) 405-2100, or visit online at [www.huntington.org](http://www.huntington.org).

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**[EDITOR’S NOTE: High-resolution digital images are available upon request for publicity use.]**