Panel Discussion: Ravilious & Turner – Watercolours

This event transcript has been edited for clarity.

Emily: Hello everyone. My name is Emily Medd. I'm the Curator of Public Programmes here at Towner Eastbourne. Welcome. I'm just going to do a quick bit of housekeeping and then I'm going to hand-over to my lovely colleague, Sara and she will introduce our speakers. We've got Kim delivering BSL interpretation and Marea O'Brien doing our live captioning. I think that's everything from me. I'm going to hand you over to Sara now.

Sara: Thanks Emily. It is really nice to see you all today. Thanks for joining us. My name is Sara Cooper. I'm the Head of Collections and Exhibitions here at Towner. One thing I should say before we start, we've got the rolling slide images behind us. That's to illustrate as we go rather than be specific to the questions. But if as they roll, you see something you're interested in or want to talk about at the end, please do flag it up with us. I'm going to start with a brief introduction to the context of the exhibitions here and then I'll introduce our speakers in a second.

We have at Towner, as many of you will know, one of the largest holdings of the work by Eric Ravilious and some time ago we decided that we would make our first floor gallery, the Collection Gallery into a permanent offer for that Ravilious collection and show him alongside his friends and Contemporaries. Alongside that we were really keen, on the top floor, to have an exhibition that sort of contextualised that, that enabled us to pull some of those ideas and themes from that the Ravilious Collection, and it was the watercolours that we were really interested in. We had a conversation with the director of the Holburne Museum in Bath who were putting together with Ian, this fantastic Turner Exhibition with so many of the works coming from a single private collection. And bringing it to Towner enabled us to take that core of the exhibition and then grow it by including some of our own watercolours from the permanent collection here. They're some of the works that aren't often shown because we don't have the opportunity or the context to show them in. It has been really nice to highlight those aspects of our collection that people might not be as familiar with. I think the two shows together, and hopefully, most of you have had the opportunity to see them now and if not, there will be time afterwards. What they let us do is tell a story and look at watercolour from about 1800 through to the 1950s essentially by going from one exhibition to the other and we'll pull out some of those ideas and themes in the talk today. So, I'm delighted to welcome our two speakers, both experts on each of the artists.

Firstly, Dr Ella Ravilious is a Curator in Architecture & Design at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Her book about her grandfather's artistic career, *Eric Ravilious: Landscapes and Nature* was published by Thames and Hudson and hopefully some of you have seen and read that. Her next book, which will be co-authored with Gill Saunders, will be a global history of linocuts which will be published in September 2026, and I'm sure will feature many artists we're familiar with. Ella has curated displays at the V&A and exhibitions for the Fry Art Gallery. Ian Warrell, to my far left, is an independent art historian, specialising in British art of the 18th and 19th century. He was a curator at Tate Britain for more than 25 years and is a leading authority on the life and work of Turner. He has created numerous exhibitions and written several books on Turner and his art, including Turner's Sketchbooks and the publication that accompanies our exhibition, *Turner and his Contemporaries*, both available in the Towner shop.

So we'll start with a look at the lives of each of the artists that we are talking about, Ravilious and Turner. So perhaps in turn, you could each give us a brief overview of the life and work of the artists. Maybe focusing on what attracted them to watercolour as a medium, Ian, do you want to make a start with Turner?

Ian: It is lovely to see you all here. I hope you didn't get wet on the way. It is Turner weather. He claimed he had been lashed in a storm. Turner tried to make the weather part of his pictures from an early age. He grew up in Covent Garden where his father was a barber. His father had as clients people who were artists at the Royal Academy and many professions in that area, so I think he was able to move on successfully from that. Turner exhibited his watercolours in his father's window and that attracted the royal Academicians to see that. He was at the Royal Academy, where they began by copying plaster casts and then moved on to the living models, but they didn't have an instruction in how to use oil paints. Watercolour was his instinctive practice. He had been using that since he was about ten or twelve years old and even then he was beginning to innovate and use techniques that he created for himself. He scratched the paper and grew his thumbnail and could introduce highlights, but he liked to introduce an air of mystique about his methods and he wouldn't let people see him at work.

Sara: What about Eric?

Ella: Eric was born in Acton in 1903. He moved to Eastbourne when he was a young boy. His parents like Turner's, were of modest means. His mother had been in service. So she had been a maid and his father had sort of held down various jobs, but there were always financial struggles hanging over the family while they were at Eastbourne. He developed a talent for drawing and was allowed to go to Eastbourne School of Art and then got a scholarship to the Royal College of Art in London. That was amazing for him. That was transformative because he was able to see all the art one can see in London for the first time. So, it was this huge change for him, but at the time, when you joined the Royal College of Art, you couldn't choose which type of art you specialised in. You had an interview with the principal and they would say, "Right, you're going here." Eric was put in the Design School and for book illustration. He meekly went there and got on with it and made amazing friends, particularly Edward Bawden. Students could just go down a corridor and pop out in the galleries of the V&A and Eric made full use of this. He absolutely rinsed the V&A's collection. He focused on looking at 18th and 19th century watercolourists. He noted in the library visiting books coming to see John Robert Cousins, Thomas Gilpin, David Cox. So he was seeing all these watercolours, but because he was in the Design School and because he was a bit insecure about his place in the art world, he was still only at that time training as a designer. He was doing book illustration and printmaking and it was only after he met and married Tirzah Garwood, my grandmother, and after he established himself more as a designer, that he had the confidence to try watercolour and a big impetus in this was his tutor, at the Royal College for Art, Paul Nash. It took him a while to develop the confidence to say, "I'm an artist".

Ian: Did he make copies of specific paintings by older artists?

Ella: I've seen actually, his early watercolours definitely have a strong influence of Paul Nash, and his early prints do too. He's definitely learning elements and copying elements from his teacher. After that, there is no straight copies as it were, but what is wonderful is that lots of his scrapbooks survive. There was a craze for making scrapbooks in the 20s and 30s and there are several scrapbooks by

Eric and Bawden. There are postcards at the V&A so you get a wonderful insight into what he's looking. He uses newspaper cuttings a lot for different elements that he's trying to convey in pictures. So you can look into his influences.

Ian: That's like Turner, the collections we have [in the UK] are in the Tate, but bar two or three, he visited the Louvre and he copied specific paintings, but not by Claude. Claude was a great influence on him, but he didn't make any copies of the Claudes that they had there. He wanted to drink in the old master paintings because these were the standard he wanted to equal in his own painting, but like Eric, he was really into the earlier artists, John Robert Cozens was the benchmark and the first work in the exhibition is the John Robert Cozens, which demonstrates the way he had pushed through and made watercolour an expressive rather than descriptive medium.

Sara: Turner and Ravilious both enjoyed making work early in their lives. How early is it when they come to the influences is it through being at college or art school? How do they find those influences?

Ian: In Turner's case, it was before he got into the Royal Academy, he was commercially minded and his father was encouraging him to be professional. He did a lot of work colouring other people's prints and painting skies for architects and doing architectural drawings, so he was really steeped in that tradition before his approach became more academic.

Ella: For Eric, aside from this huge moment when he was at art school. I have been wondering whether he was influenced by - at one point is father is running an antique shop here so would have been seeing, you know, certainly Thomas Bewick. He would have been seeing prints and watercolours coming through the shop. Also his grandfather had been a coach-builder and that craft is very - it is a real skill that's now obviously lost. I also wonder if he'd come across - I don't know how familiar you are with the kind of coach painting that used to be on 19th century wooden coaches, they would be beautifully painted by coach painters. It was like a specific skill and they had specialist tools including really long, thin paintbrushes because they would do free-hand straight lines around this curving coach and all these kind of free-hand kind of cartouches. It was a practical art that relied on the hand-skill and paint with the brush.

Ian: Gainsborough also painted with a very long brush. For Turner and that generation, there was a change between the skills and the influence of the Royal Academy which was more official. There the emphasis of the studies was towards idealised representations. Until 1768, there wasn't any other teaching academy in Britain, and no National Gallery until 1824. To learn from earlier paintings, Turner would have gone to country houses.

Sara: Maybe thinking a little bit about materials and what they had available to them this terms of paints and the papers, how much did their preferences and also, what was available to them, have a bearing on each of their work? On Turner's perhaps to start.

Ian: In Turner's era, there was a lot of development of new pigments. Watercolour was having a boom phase. Turner had joined the Royal Academy. So many artists were painting watercolour, they formed their own society. Turner couldn't join the old watercolour society. So, he was a huge influence on that generation of artists who were painting there, but all of them were able to use the new watercolour paints which were being introduced with a huge range of yellows in the 1810s and 20s. Other notable colours, were the introduction of cobalt blue in 1802, and veridian comes in the

1830s. Because of his partiality for bright yellows, one of his paintings is described as looking like the inside a mustard pot!

It was interesting that he was so keen and excited about using new paints and trying new things rather than just sticking to what he had before and what he could have carried on doing. He had curiosity for anything that was new, not just in art, but life in general. He hoovered up anything he could see and when he was out and about, the way he decides on a subject, he doesn't decide which is the best angle, he stalks it and comes around to what the best process.

Sara: What about Eric, in terms of his choices of paints and paper and sketchbooks - how did he work?

Ella: He chose quite a relatively smooth watercolour paper. You can get quite textured ones, but he liked a smooth one. He'd paint right up to the edge of the paper, if he decided the design needed more, he'd add extra bits of paper on to the edge! And watercolour paints were much more commercially available. So, I know that he got his print-making blocks from a shop called Laurence's in Red Lion Street in London. I think by that point, it started off making wood blocks, selling wood blocks for painters, but by the time Eric was shopping there, it had broadened into more general artist supplies. So I think he was getting his paints from there. One thing to remember about both these artists, behind every lovely landscape with dramatic weather is a very cold artist sat on a camp stool of some sort in a big jumper! Eric often talks about, you know, thanking people for gifts of woolly jumpers. He gets a leather second-hand coat and he says it was fantastic for painting. His wife, Tirzah made him a nap sack for taking his pads and paper because it is very difficult to paint the kind of watercolours they were both painting without getting them rained on. There are all these practical challenges, but Eric always said he always enjoyed mild hardships! Sitting for long periods in unclement British weather.

Ian: In Turner's sketchbooks, sometimes you find the rain drops. There was a volcanic eruption in Indonesia in 1815, it was the biggest volcanic eruption that we know about. As a result there were so much particulates in the atmosphere that it changed the clilmate and disrupted the usual seasons, so that Britain did not enjoy the usual summer weather in 1816. Travelling in the North that year Turner said his feet were turning into a duck's webbed feet as a result of trudging through the Yorkshire hillsides.

Sara: In terms of techniques, I feel like Turner and Ravilious were quite ground-breaking in changing the way that watercolour was seen at their particular moments. I wonder if they kind of knew that? If they were working within that or kind of - I mean, if you could say something about how they were using watercolour and really pushing the boundaries of what it could do?

Ian: I think with the Turners you see in the exhibition, they're the private unfinished things that he was doing for himself. You think a musician practices by doing exercises and that was what Turner was doing. After Turner died, watercolour became fussier, and more detailed. By the time Eric comes along, artists were refreshing the idea of what watercolour could be, do you think that's...

Ella: It certainly didn't happen in a vacuum. Paul Nash had a huge hand in it and Eric was using techniques like scratching, you know, that Turner had used, scratching through to get the white or masking areas so you could preserve white areas or letting the white paper show through in areas. I always say Eric's are hard to forge. They're very particular. There is a couple of things that make his

style distinct and one of the nice things again about seeing his scrapbooks, you can see the sheets where he's just playing with patterns in watercolour. This is where, I think, his design training comes in because he's making these - I had people call them tartans. Little grids or splashes of trying what different marks and different colours look over-laid with each other so they're very abstract little practise sheets and that really shows how he's using the paint. You think of watercolours as very wet. His watercolours are actually quite dry and precise. He learnt the starved-brush technique from Paul Nash, where your brush doesn't have very much watercolour paint on, but he would wet the back of the paper as he was working to keep the paints malleable. There are always tricks. He wasn't the first to invent these, but he was making use of them, but I think the sense of pattern in his watercolours is one of the things that yeah, really marks out his work. It is a weird thing to do in watercolour. It is definitely his design training coming through and one of the things I love about his work is, he would often go to a place and draw. He's got a precise drawing style. They're not sketches. They're drawings. He was very good at conveying machinery and man-made things in nature. So he had an eye for being able to convey, you know, a ship propeller. The geometry of man-made shapes which is really hard to draw. He was able to do that. I think yeah, this kind of design training also meant that he would write notes on the picture. If you look at the painting of Cuckmere Haven, up if the Ravilious Gallery, he's written the names of colours in various areas and he does this when he can't finish the painting on the spot. So he's often, you know, drawing the drawing and maybe doing under-layers and finishing the rest from memory where he's staying at or back at home. So you get colour notes and that tells me that's one he finished later, but it also gives this sense of the hand of the artist. I like he didn't mind that these show through, but it is something that you can only really see if you're looking at the work in person. They never show up in reproductions of his work. It is one of the things I'm always looking at when I get to see a work by my grandfather, right up close, trying to see what he's written underneath.

Sara: As Ella said, there are some in the Collection gallery. One work has colour notes in the sky and they're really helpful in a way. On one hand, it is a shame that the works didn't get finished, but on the other, for us, all these years later to get a sense of his working practice, and his choices of colours and what he was thinking about while he was out, you know, painting, I think is fascinating and invaluable to have those.

Ella: But it also shows that he planned his works.

Sara: Yes.

Ella: They're quite intentional and controlled. I think of Turner as more emotional, is that fair?

Ian: If you look at Turner's sketchbooks, they're initially very precise pencil sketches, particularly things like the cathedrals or picturesque ruins that he would visit. Sometimes he was sketching in pencil and watercolour on the spot. He wanted to keep going and see more things. So he increasingly just did a pencil outline and as time went by that will get more and more cursory, he'd just put down the essentials that he needed. When he went to Venice for the first time, he was sketching the buildings in St Mark's Square and he realised the pattern was regular and he wrote, "Six arches." When notating a sunset he would write red, green, blue. The act of making these notes helped fix the images in his mind, so that when he was staying in Yorkshire, with the collector Walter Fawkes, he conjured up a big man of war. Had a visual database in his head.

Ella: I think for Eric this way of working when you sketch and draw and work it out later, really helped him when the Second World War started, he was assigned to the barracks and he was able to go into them as a War Artist to draw and paint, but he couldn't ask the Naval officers, the military men to stop what they were doing. He had to work incredibly quickly and at the mercy of whatever they were doing or whatever the weather was. So this ability to draw quickly and accurately and then finish the work later, really stood him in good stead for that work. That's where his career ended because he was sent on a mission to Iceland and a plane that he was in on a reconnaissance mission never returned. He died in 1942, but really at the height of his career and his excitement about watercolour.

Sara: Thinking about when we opened the Ravilious Gallery and Ravilious' daughter Anne was here and thinking about the way we talk about him being out in the landscape and recording things. Her different take on it was funny. She imagined him working as an artist, getting in everyone's way! She said, "I can't imagine all these people running around and trying to do their jobs on the boats and Eric was there painting." She had a different slant which was funny and charming and as his daughter, it was very interesting.

We've touched on place and you talk about Turner in Venice and we said Ravilious was very much based in Sussex and later in Essex. I wonder if we could talk about what those places meant to each of the artists and how they were inspired by their landscapes, that they particularly worked in or were drawn to.

Ian: Although Turner is born and raised in London, but London doesn't figure that much in his art. Early on, he does some small watercolours, but he didn't really have a consistent approach. It was more events like when the burning of the Houses of Parliament took place in 1832, he recorded that for a couple of oil paintings. One which hasn't been in this country for many years and will be included in the new exhibition at Tate Britain. It is worth seeing just for that painting. I think the places that meant most for Turner were those where he had a personal connection. When he visited Walter Fawkes' home. In Yorskhire, for example. And the same applies to Petworth House over in West Sussex. There are some wonderful drawings inside the house, people gathering for dinner and musical events. If you saw the Mr Turner movie, you get a sense of that there.

Ella: I think for Eric, the Sussex landscape meant a lot to him. He's often described as a particularly English artist and I always think that's not - I mean it is about the landscape, but it is really about the weather! I think it is the way he conveys the kind of changeable British weather that's never too dramatic, but between states. I think the kind of gentle hills of Sussex really spoke to him, but it was also about the colour. There are notes that he didn't like the red of Essex earth. He objected to it and would rather be painting in Sussex and he didn't like too much green! For a landscape artist...

Ian: Turner said he didn't like using green much. When he paints, it is more a yellowy blue, if you know what I mean rather than strong greens.

Sara: From Ravilious too, it is not always a true, it is slightly off, isn't it? You talk about being a khaki or there is a lime in it.

Ella: But it is just circumstance really because he really didn't have a lot of money so unlike Turner, he couldn't travel until war-time. So he might have painted wonderful pictures of Italy. But he couldn't afford to get there and that's why when he's doing his war work and he's getting to travel to Iceland

and to Norway, there is this real sense of excitement in his work. So, he's kind of English by default, but by the fact that he couldn't get anywhere else.

Sara: I understand he was very excited and pushed for some of those postings, didn't he, he wanted to go to Iceland and to see that landscape and work in it?

Ella: That's due to seeing some of the 18th and 19th century artists. He was fond of Francis Towne who painted amazing pictures of icy landscapes, there is one that Eric would have seen at the V&A of Swiss glaciers and he was asking to be posted to Iceland because he wanted to have a go at the landscapes that Francis Towne painted.

Ian: You mentioned how he'd add strips to his paintings and that's a tendency of the late eighteenth century artist Francis Towne. Sometimes he has very many different sheets stuck together to build up his images.

Ella: I don't know how many of you have tried painting in watercolour, but it is an unforgiving medium. I think of it as a game of Jenga. You can't rescue watercolours. Eric used to tear up four out of five of his works because he wasn't happy with them. It is unforgiving.

Sara: Like you say, once it is done, it is on and you can't wipe it off maybe like you can with oils. I understand there was quite a high destruction rate! We have one at Towner which was torn up by Ravilious and rescued by Peggy Angus, his friend. It helped shape that story and tell the story about his kind of relationship to that, to his practice in that way which is quite interesting and says a lot about Peggy Angus as much as about Ravilious. Bringing it through to now. Just thinking about how we receive their work and their numerous shows now for each of these artists. They're very celebrated. At the time they were working, what was the response, Turner was doing very well and became famous in his lifetime.

Ian: Turner gets huge success early on. By the time he's 25, in 1800, he was a member of the Royal Academy. He's sold many pictures. He got more commissions that he can handle. And at that point he'd invested £1,000 in Bank of England shares which is the equivalent of £1 million. His position was essentially equivalent to a prominent contemporary artist like Damien Hirst. He set up his own gallery, where he could show things which weren't as conventional, and he could be more daring in his own context. He produced over 800 images based on his images as prints and engravings and lithographs. That's where his money came from. He didn't necessarily mind if the oil paintings that were more progressive didn't sell. In fact between 1820 and the end of his life, only a third of his pictures sold. The critics increasingly objected to his pictures because they said the images were too indistinct and he didn't resolve details. When he exhibited his painting *Rain, Steam and Speed*, of 1844, people admired it, because they understood it showed the innovations of their technical age. Some of his pictures, such as the celebrated *Fighting Temeraire*, he simply wouldn't sell even though he had several offers…..I've forgotten the question now!

Sara: We were talking about reception of their work and their lifetimes.

Ian: Since Turner died, all the pictures he didn't sell, came to the nation after a protracted series of five years where his family had objected to the terms of his will. We benefited from a period of neglect because the National Gallery received these things, but they couldn't show them. So, initially they only put on display 100 of the paintings - there were in total 300 oil paintings, 30,000 works of paper including sketchbooks. It is only in the 20th century really that everything has been catalogued and

given accession numbers and shown. For example in 1975, there were some works that were only discovered in a portfolio for the first time after all this time. And in the Second World War, Kenneth Clarke as the director of the National Gallery was clearing space in the basement to make an air raid shelter and they were about to throw out old rolls of canvas. He said, "Let's have a look." And it transpired they had discovered 70 previously uncatalogued Turners. Some are figurative subjects. All of this has shaped and contributed to the way each generation has found its own Turner.

Ella: I think for Eric, his work was fairly popular during his life-time, but he under-cut himself a bit by being a designer as well as an artist because he needed to pay the bills and yet when his war work was particularly successful and they had an exhibition during of the work of the war artists and Eric was embarrassed because there were so many of his paintings on show, compared to the others! But then he died and then the post-war period in art was really so different. So he did really disappear off the map after that point. It was really not until a big show at the imperial war Museum and another at the Dulwich Picture Gallery and his work coming out of copyright meant he had a resurgence, but because he worked across paint-making and ceramics, at different points those works have been more or less popular. It has been quite an up and down reception of his work.

Sara: I think that's absolutely true and it is interesting for Towner and the relationship to Eric Ravilious to have charted that in a way because there are works that came into the Towner Collection during his life-time from those solo exhibitions that he had. So, you know, he was always in the Collection and then more came in and ceramics and the wood engravings that have enabled at different points Towner to talk about his work. It is only recently as well - I mean relatively recently - that we have seen it increase in popularity and people are incredibly passionate and feel very strongly about his work. Rightfully. But, it has been really interesting as an organisation that holds an artist's work as it is for Tate with the Turners, to have that as what you're known for in some ways, but that responsibility is really an interesting one.

Ian: At the Tate we did an exhibition in conjunction with David Dimbleby and Ravilious was identified as representative of the Sussex landscape.

Ella: I worked at the V&A for 20 years and I'm still - I'm thinking back to the first job interview I had there for a job in the library fetching books and the person who hired me is still also at the V&A. We had a chat about it years later and she said she never heard of Eric Ravilious, so I knew I wasn't hired for that reason!. Similarly, my dad [photographer James Ravilious] when he went to art school, he studied art, he joined at first under an assumed name because he was worried about the connection because in the art schools they would at least have heard of Eric even though he was less popular then, but they soon twigged!

Sara: There is quite a family resemblance. If they'd seen any photos they would have known!