



JOHN MARTIN

1789 Haydon Bridge, Northumberland - Douglas, Isle of Man 1854

The Thames at Twickenham

Watercolour, gouache and graphite with scratching out on paper; executed in the mid-1840s.
280 x 699 mm

PROVENANCE: Agnew's, London, 2004 – Andrew Wyld, London, up to 2011 – Thence by descend

EXHIBITED: London, W/S Fine Art Ltd., *Watercolours and Drawings 1750-1950, The Annual Exhibition*, 7 June - 7 July 2006, no. 44

Between 1840 and the early 1850's, John Martin produced a number of watercolours of landscape views in the vicinity of London. These works display a delicacy and quietude that has little in common with his earlier works. In May 1854, after the artist's death, a sale was held by Christie's of sixty watercolours, predominantly later landscape views, most of them comparable to our sheet. The *Athenaeum* reviewed the auction at length, and commented that *These works, beautiful in execution, finished with all the dainty minuteness . . . , and deep and bright in colour, presented us with a new view of the artist's character. Marvelling at Martin's understanding of nature and considering these works as a form of escapism from the wildness of his imagination, the critic wrote: He could go out and watch, it seems, with a poet's love, the pool where water-lilies lie asleep, the golden waves of the ripe corn rippling into furrows of exceeding lustre, the pale shadows that trees cast on sunless days, and rivers winding 'at their own sweet will' calm and child-like under the benediction of the sun . . . as if in these drawings a reaction from the wildness of his imagination had let Mr. Martin to display his tenderest feelings . . . The scenes he selected seem to have been of the most quiet and most pastoral character: – such as Leith Hill, Richmond Park, Views of the Thames (Runnymede, Twickenham), the Brighton Downs, Hanger Hill, Wimbledon Common, and the Valley of the Wandle, etc.*"¹

¹ Cited after Martin Myrone (ed.), *John Martin: Apocalypse*, exhib. cat., Tate Britain, London 2011-12, p. 185, and pp. 190-92.

The present watercolour depicts a stretch of the river Thames near Twickenham, where the famous writer Alexander Pope built a villa and a grotto in the early eighteenth century. Despite the villa having since belonged to a number of owners and eventually being pulled down, in the early nineteenth century it was still affectionately named after Pope and was a much visited and cherished spot on the river. In 1841 a writer of the *Saturday Magazine* noted in an article on “*The banks of the Thames*”: “*Of the Thames in the vicinity of Twickenham, it has been remarked by writers of all grades, poets, painters, and topographers, that it presents scenes of extraordinary beauty. The river rolls on through meadows of the richest verdure, while its banks are adorned with the contrasted beauty of the villa and the cottage.*”²

Beyond that John Martin had an abiding interest in the Thames, having devoted much time and energy to a scheme for *Improving the Air and Water of the Metropolis* in the 1830s.³ He planned to extend the embanked and tideless reach of water to below the Tower in order to create “*a beautiful calm sheet of water navigable at all times up to Teddington.*”⁴ His vision of a planned urban riverside broken up with “*terraces and beautiful gardens*” was declared impracticable for inner London and never became a reality. Regular visits to the genuinely calm and clean stretch of river at Richmond and beyond may have gone some way to assuage his disappointment.

In 1851 Martin exhibited at the Royal Academy a watercolour *The Banks of the Thames opposite Pope's Villa at Twickenham*, a view looking west towards the site of the poet's famous riverside retreat (fig. 1). In the Yale picture Martin depicts Lady Howe's Villa and the Tudor style lodge that had been built on the site of Pope's Villa. The present watercolour is of similar proportions and size, and is probably a work of the mid-1840s. In the somewhat idealised view Martin has shown the river banks lined with large classical villas, well spaced along the water and surrounded by rich vegetation. The meadow on the right bank is animated by a herd of cows and sheep, and a reclining pair on the slope to the river is enjoying the view. In both compositions the landscape is softened into haze around the margins. Through this technique of a vignette the artist invites the onlooker to become absorbed, by almost imperceptible degrees, into the central and fully formulated area of the composition.⁵

² *Saturday Magazine*, 13 Nov, 1841, p. 186. Cited after Martin Myrone, op. cit., p. 190.

³ see William Feaver, *The Art of John Martin*, Oxford 1975, p. 122 ff.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 123.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 154.

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Fig. 1: *The Banks of the Thames opposite Pope's Villa at Twickenham, 1850*,
watercolour, gouache and graphite on paper, 302 x 603 mm.
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven