LOT 44
PROPERTY FROM THE COLLECTION FORMED BY THE 5TH EARL OF ROSEBERY
JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER, R.A.
LONDON 1775 - 1851
ROME, FROM MOUNT AVENTINE
oil on canvas, unlined
92.7 by 125.7 cm.; 36 1/2 by 49 1/2 in.

ESTIMATE 15,000,000-20,000,000 GBP
Lot Sold: 30,322,500 GBP

PROVENANCE
Commissioned by Hugh Andrew Johnstone Munro of Novar (1797-1864);
By family descent until sold ('The Novar Collection formed by that distinguished amateur, the late Hugh A.J. Munro, Esq. The intimate friend and Executor of JMW Turner RA.'), London, Christie’s, 6 April 1878, lot 98, to Davis for 5850 guineas (on behalf of the 5th Earl of Rosebery and his wife Hannah Rothschild);
Archibald Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery (1847-1929), Prime Minister of Great Britain (1894-1895);
Thence by family descent.

EXHIBITED
London, Royal Academy, 1836, no. 144;
London, Royal Academy, Winter Exhibition, 1896, no. 8 (lent by the 5th Earl of Rosebery);
London, Whitechapel, JMW Turner, RA., 1953, no. 89;
London, Tate Gallery and Royal Academy, Turner, 1974-5, no. 515;
Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland, Turner and Italy, 27 March – 7 June 2009, no. 93;
Budapest, Museum of Fine Art, Turner and Italy, 15 July – 15 August 2009, no. 93;

LITERATURE
J. Ruskin, Modern Painters, vol. I, 1843;
J. Ruskin, Praeterita, 1886-9;
J. Burnet and P. Cunningham, Turner and his Works, London 1852, pp. 29 & 117, no. 188;
W. Frost, A.R.A. (revised by H. Reeve), A Complete Catalogue of the Paintings, Water-Colour Drawings, Drawings and Prints in the Collection of the late Hugh Andrew Johnstone Munro Esq of Novar, at the time of his Death deposited in his House No. 6 Hamilton Place London with some Additional Paintings at Novar, privately printed 1865, p. 95, no. 121;
C. F. Bell, A List of the Works contributed to Public Exhibitions by J.M.W. Turner, R.A., London 1901, p. 130, no. 201;
Sir W. Armstrong, Turner, London and New York 1902, pp. 120 & 228;
J. Hamilton, et al., Turner & Italy, Edinburgh 2009, pp. 87, 89 & 129-134, reproduced in colour, pl. 93, and details pls. 143-148, and p. 78;
Appreciation
by Julian Gascoigne

Turner is one of those conspicuous figures that mark the pages of history – like da Vinci, Darwin, Picasso or Einstein – who changed the way we see and think about the world. An artist rooted in the aesthetic philosophy and culture of his time, who perpetually engaged with the art of both his predecessors and contemporaries, he was at the same time possibly the first ‘modern’ painter; who directly inspired the impressionism of the nineteenth century, and presaged the abstract expressionism of the twentieth. Turner had no pupils; he left no school of followers. He was, in many ways, a highly individual artist, seemingly running against the current of the artistic taste of his age. Yet the development of his art, particularly in the last fifteen years of his life, with its bold application of colour, its treatment of light and the deconstruction of form, revolutionised the way we perceive the painted image, and the way we think about what a painting is, or should be. By applying the techniques of a water-colourist to the use of oils, with successive layering of translucent colour thinly applied to the surface, that imbues his canvases with rich, hazy light, he gave his works a poignancy and power that had never been achieved before, and has seldom since. Every artist who has held a brush in the last 160 years owes a debt to Turner. His influence is immeasurable.

Turner’s late works – the pictures he produced from the late 1820s and 30s until his death in 1851 – are considered by many to be the artist’s supreme achievement. It is upon these pictures, particularly in the eyes of the modern era, that his artistic significance ultimately rests. Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1836, when Turner was 61 years old, this magnificent painting is one of the few remaining major works by Turner left in private hands. Of that group, which numbers no more than half a dozen at most, none can be said to be in better condition than this picture. Based on detailed sketches he made during his second trip to Rome in 1828 it was commissioned by one of his most important patrons, the artist’s close friend and executor Hugh Andrew Johnstone Munro of Novar (1797-1864). An amateur artist himself, who travelled on sketching tours with Turner, Munro was one of the greatest collectors of his generation. The painting was later acquired in 1878, following Munro’s death, by the 5th Earl of Rosebery, later Prime Minister of Great Britain, to celebrate his marriage to Hannah Rothschild, the greatest heiress of her generation. It has since remained undisturbed in the Rosebery collection to this day. This exceptional and distinguished provenance also accounts for its excellent condition, with every flick of the artist’s brush, every scrape of his palette knife preserved in immaculate detail. So well preserved is the picture, in fact, that the artist’s fingerprints can still clearly be seen in the paint along the canvas edges. Moreover, it is arguably the greatest and most important view of Rome ever painted. It is hard to overstate the importance of this picture.

Topography

The subject of the work – the city of Rome – is one that held a particularly personal resonance for Turner. Rome in Turner’s day was the cradle of western civilisation and the centre of the European art world from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. It was the Holy Grail for artists in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and, as both a subject and source of inspiration, the city captivated him for over twenty years. As early as the 1790s, when he was in his early twenties, Turner had copied views of Rome by John Robert Cozens in the collection of his early patron Dr Thomas Monro (see fig. 1). His interest in the landscape of Italy had been fired by his study of the great works by Claude which were to be seen in many British collections. In 1818-19 he had worked on illustrations for James Hakewill’s Picturesque Tour of Italy, which included many of Italy’s most famous sites, based on sketches made by the author, as well as producing views from drawings made in Rome by another early patron, Sir Richard Colt Hoare. Despite this Turner was only able to visit the city twice during the course of his life. He had glimpsed Italy briefly in 1802 during the short-lived Peace of Amiens, but was forced to turn back following the resumption of hostilities between Britain and France, and it was not until 1819 that he finally made it to the Eternal City – firmly labelling his sketchbook for the journey ‘Route to Rome’. On his return to England Turner produced a number of topographical
watercolours of the city, such as the luminous Rome from Monte Mario (Private Collection, fig. 2), based on the many sketches he had made on his journey. These works constitute his first production of Roman subjects based on actual, first-hand experience of the city, and significantly they eschew the obvious views along the Tiber and vignettes of the Forum. Instead Turner re-invents the topography of Rome, with sweeping panoramas of the city.

This picture is based on a series of five detailed sketches made on consecutive pages in Turner’s sketchbook during his second trip to Rome in 1828 (see figs 5, 6 and 7). Few paintings by his hand capture the city so precisely or magically as this picture – indeed it is unique in his œuvre. Recalling the sweeping panoramas of his earlier watercolours, the view depicts the city as seen from the Aventine Hill, looking north across the ancient ruins towards the distant Vatican. It is without question Turner’s most serene and beguiling vision of the Eternal City, composed with a Claudian grandeur and nobility that is powerfully evocative. Like Claude, an artist with whom Turner maintained a dialogue in his work throughout his career, the brilliancy of the view is ‘blended and subdued by an almost visible atmosphere¹ that heightens the splendour of the whole. With infinite subtlety he captures the first cool rays of morning light as they dispel the rising mist from the Tiber and bathe the architecture in a soft golden glow. With thin, wetly applied glazes of translucent paint he blurs the boundaries of river, bank and city, bleeding the forms together in the haze of light and air. It is an enduring, timeless image, as if something from a dream, and yet every detail of the city is meticulously and accurately portrayed. The soft sunlight picks out a column here, a portico there, rounded domes shimmering above the haze and the glow of innumerable marbled facades. In the foreground the view is dominated on the left by the busy waterfront of Trastevere – the Ripa Grande – animated by the bustling comings and goings of the dockyards in the early morning and backed by the imposing façade of the Ospizio di San Michele, which gleams white in the soft sunlight. In Turner’s day this whole area was an important and busy port. Known as the Porto di Ripa it was one of the main arteries of the city, servicing the shipping and goods which came up from the port of Ostia on the Mediterranean. Behind the hospice rises the Janiculum Hill and the colossal mass of St Peter’s Basilica silhouetted against the skyline; a monumental symbol of Christianity casting its shadow across the ruins of pagan antiquity. As the eye sweeps to the right across the picture the view takes in the Villa Madama, with its loggia by Raphael twinkling in the distance atop Monte Mario. Closer to the viewer the domes of the Basilica of Santa Maria del Popolo can clearly be seen standing proud of the densely packed city, whilst the centre of the composition is dominated by the Ponte Emilio, today known as the Ponte Rotto, jutting out into the river, its broken span blending into the mist and the reflections on the water as it disappears like an eerie ghost of glories past (see fig. 9).

To the right of the bridge the Capitoline Hill and the Campidoglio pierce the horizon, whilst the view sweeps round with the curve of the river to incorporate the ruins of the ancient Forum Romanum, with the distinctive twelfth-century Romanesque campanile of Santa Francesca Romana in its midst, the Palatine Hill and the Circus Maximus. Close to the bank the circular Temple of Hercules Victor is clearly defined, whilst on the far right, faintly outlined through shards of light piercing the mist, the arches of the Colosseum can just be seen peeking out from behind the dark foliage of the near foreground. From the lower right, close to the picture plane, soars a high rising umbrella pine, one of the classic sights of the Roman landscape. Breaking the skyline it gives added height to the composition and allows the viewer’s eye to rise with the aerial perspective. Found in their hundreds in the Borghese Gardens, and on both the Pincian and the Aventine hills, these ubiquitous symbols of the Roman Campagna feature heavily in Turner’s work from this period and are used to similar effect in works such as Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage – Italy, of 1832 (fig. 3), and Palastrina - Composition, painted in Italy in 1828 (fig. 4). Here the tree is given added significance, working as a subtle piece of misdirection, an artistic sleight of hand. Turner has elevated his viewpoint such that it is not the foreground figures, or even the line of the horizon, which are at the eye level of the viewer, but the small broken branch two-thirds of the way up the trunk of the pine. The tree also anchors the composition, counterbalancing the long line of the façade of the hospice which thrusts its way into the picture, leading the
eye ‘to where it should go – the matchless distance’. Through all this sweeps the ethereal Tiber itself – the life force of Rome – with reflected dawn light dispelling the mist from the river and infusing the atmosphere with a hazy golden glow. It is as if the Eternal City itself is waking from slumber, coming to life and emerging, vibrant and alive, into the dawn of a new era. In the foreground Turner’s inclusion of a small figure group adds a humanity so typical of his work. A bustling priest hurrying to early morning service encounters a young girl, possibly a servant from one of the great palazzi in town who has risen early to bring in fresh produce from beyond the city limits; she drops to her knees as he passes. It is a small but beautiful little action, and lends a sense of reality to the pictorial metaphor.

This concept of an awakening, or rebirth, was important for Turner. Like Byron he was deeply concerned with the liberty of ancient civilizations and their emancipation from the tyranny of foreign oppression. It was a theme that he had explored in the pair of paintings he showed at the Royal Academy in 1816, The Temple of Jupiter Panellenius, with the Greek national dance of the Romaika (Northumberland Collection, Alnwick Castle) and The Temple of Jupiter Panellenius Restored (Private Collection), which addressed the rising contemporary concern over the occupation of Greece by the Ottoman Empire. During Turner’s own lifetime Rome had twice been invaded and subjugated by foreign rulers. First in 1798, during the French Revolutionary War, when the Papal States had been defeated by an invading French army and subjected to French Rule; and between 1808 and 1814 when the French had again invaded and this time annexed Rome as part of the French Empire. The Napoleonic Wars had cut off access to Italy for foreign travellers and restricted the flow of cultural tourism that was the city’s life blood. It was not until 1819 that Turner was finally able to travel there, and by the time of his second visit to Rome in 1828 the city once again hummed with the busy and lucrative activity of artisans, dealers and merchants. As David Gilmour explores below, artists from across Europe and Scandinavia flocked to the city, be they painters, sculptors, musicians, poets or writers. Turner was invigorated by the atmosphere he found there in the late 1820s, and it is this rejuvenation amidst the crumbling ruins of antiquity that he depicts so beautifully in this painting.

With this in mind Turner’s viewpoint in significant. The Aventine Hill had long held an association with liberty in ancient Roman history. According to Livy, it was on the Pons Sublicus, which bridged the Tiber at the base of the Aventine, that Horatius Cocles in the sixth century BC stood alone in defence of the city against the invading Etruscan army. It was also here, at the summit of the hill, that the first Roman temple to the goddess Libertas was constructed during the second century BC, following Rome’s victory over the Carthaginians in the Second Punic War. It is no coincidence therefore that the artist chose to portray the city seen from this particular spot, and it lends import to the account of Sir Charles Eastlake, Turner’s friend and fellow artist with whom he stayed in Rome, that he took such particular care to select the view.3

Commission and Critical Reception

Unusually for a late work by Turner this painting appears to have been a direct commission from his close friend and patron, Hugh Andrew Johnstone Munro of Novar (1797-1864). An amateur artist himself, who travelled on sketching tours with Turner, Munro was one of the greatest collectors of his generation, and would later become Turner’s executor. Munro wanted a picture of ‘modern Rome from a fine point that included the Tiber and some of the chief antiquities’4 to add to his outstanding collection of Old Masters and contemporary British paintings. Exactly when the picture was painted is difficult to know. The general consensus among art historians, however, seems to be that the picture was at least conceived, mapped out and the design committed to canvas in Italy. Turner’s second trip to Rome was very different to his 1819 sketching tour, when he had filled his sketchbooks with quick topographical scenes and studies from the antique, and he returned to the city with the definite intention of painting oils. Leaving London in August 1828 he stopped in Paris, from where he wrote to Charles Eastlake requesting that he prepare several large canvases with ‘the best of all possible grounds and canvas’5 ahead of his arrival. Working from Eastlake’s
studio at 12 Piazza Mignanelli, near the Spanish Steps, soon after his arrival Turner began work on a painting intended for Lord Egremont, believed to be Palestrina-Composition (Tate Britain, London, fig. 4). He also showed three oils executed in Rome at a small exhibition on the Quirinal Hill. Recent analysis of the stretcher of the present painting, as discussed below by Simon Howell, suggest that it is of Italian manufacture, supporting the theory that the picture was begun in Rome in 1828, and completed back in London some time later.

The canvas, however, appears to be of a finer weave than that normally associated with Italian paintings of this date and certainly very different from that found on a painting such as Regulus (Tate Britain, London), which is known definitely to have been produced in Rome in 1828 and was shown at the Quirinal exhibition. The same, never-the-less, can be said of the canvas support for Palestrina – Composition, previously discussed, which is equally on a relatively fine weave canvas but thought to have been painted in Rome. Perhaps Turner’s specific demand to Eastlake regarding the quality of canvas supplied might be significant. However, as Rome, from Mount Aventine was not exhibited at the Royal Academy until 1836, it seems clear that the gestation of the painting took several years. This method of working was not at all unusual for Turner, who often held onto pictures and re-worked them over extended periods of time. Between 1828 and 1836, working on and off on the picture in his studio alongside other masterpieces such as Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage – Italy (1832, Tate Britain, London, fig. 3) and Staffa, Fingal’s Cave (1832, Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven), Turner worked gradually towards the picture’s glorious conclusion at the Academy, applying successive layers of colour and transforming what had been a fairly straightforward commission into something infinitely more sublime. Indeed these years produced some of the artist’s most celebrated works. Turner would have been actively working on this picture in his studio alongside paintings such as Ulysses deriding Polyphemus – Homer’s Odyssey (1829, National Gallery, London), Caligula’s Palace and Bridge (1831, Tate Britain, London), Venice: The Dogana and San Giorgio Maggiore (1834, National Gallery of Art, Washington), Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight (1835, National Gallery of Art, Washington), Ehrenbreitstein (1835, Private Collection), Venice from the Porch of the Madonna della Salute (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), and The Burning of the Houses of Parliament (1835, Philadelphia Museum of Art).

The Academy exhibition of 1836 was an important milestone in Turner’s career. It marks a crucial moment in the critical reception of his work and was to have significant repercussions. Turner exhibited three paintings at the Royal Academy’s summer exhibition that year – Rome, from Mount Aventine (the present picture), Mercury and Argus (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, fig. 8) and Juliet and her Nurse (Colección de Arte Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat, Buenos Aires, fig. 17). The exhibition divided opinion, and although some critics responded positively to what they saw, all three pictures, and the last in particular, came under scathing attack from the Rev. John Eagles in a review published by Blackwood’s Magazine. Of this picture Eagles commented; ‘A most unpleasant mixture, wherein white gambouge [sic] and raw sienna are, with childish execution, daubed together’. It was this attack, and the glib superficiality of Eagles’ response to the works, which fired the young John Ruskin’s impassioned defence of Turner’s art; a defence which would later be expanded into his great magnum opus, published in five volumes between 1843 and 1860 – Modern Painters. Although, at Turner’s request, Ruskin’s rebuttal was never published, his prose descriptions of Turner’s canvases were a tour de force that paralleled the pictures themselves, and were justification alone for the artist’s work. Praising Turner’s ‘many coloured mists… such as you might imagine to be aetherial spirits’, which ‘with the beauty of uncertain light… move and mingle’ upon the canvas, whilst ‘the spires of the glorious city rise indistinctly bright into those living mists like pyramids of pale fire… amidst the glory of the dream’ Ruskin’s prose gave the lie to the common misconception among contemporary reviewers that Turner’s bravura handling of paint was the result of affectation rather than feeling; a tendency to ‘fly off into mere eccentricities’. To Turner’s admirers the exhibition was a triumph, and as well as this picture, Munro, who by this stage had become one of the most ardent collectors of his work, also bought Juliet and her Nurse.
– Turner’s dazzling view of Venice – and would have bought all three pictures if he had not been ‘ashamed of taking so large a haul’. Many of the critics responded favourably as well, and of this picture the Morning Post espoused on 3 May ‘this is one of those amazing pictures by which Mr Turner dazzles the imagination and confounds all criticism. It is beyond praise’; whilst the Athenaeum on 14 May called it ‘a gorgeous picture, full of air and sunshine’.

Though Turner’s late works were often misunderstood or unappreciated by contemporaries, and vilified by his detractors and critics during his lifetime, to later generations they have been recognised as the work of a visionary that presage the development of modern art in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And yet, as is currently being elucidated in the exhibition now on show at Tate Britain, Late Turner: Painting Set Free, though he may have been solitary in his style, Turner was not an artist who retreated from an engagement with contemporary events. Indeed he remained fully engaged with developments in aesthetic debate throughout his life, and his art should properly be understood not simply in the pejorative terms of the nineteenth century, as simply some whimsical fantasy, a mad experiment with abstraction, or ‘childish’ daubing, but as a sustained and active effort to communicate certain truths about the world in which we live. Neither are the subjects of his late paintings merely the pretext for some formal experimentation in abstraction, heedless of the demands of patrons or the reaction of critics. Quite the contrary, they were intimately grounded in the artist’s concern for concepts of painting that he had refined over the course of his career – the exploration of visual perception and natural phenomena, the depiction of modern life and the course of history, and the social and ethical contexts that determine the endeavours of mankind – as well as a commitment ‘to present these truths in a highly sophisticated way, handling paint freely and using the resources of light and colour to choreograph the pictorial structure of his work’. The astonishingly well preserved surface of this painting bears all the marks of Turner’s genius, and in very few other works can the techniques, honed over a lifetime of experience working both in oil and in watercolour, be seen to such dazzling effect. Turner’s inimitable technique is discussed below in greater detail by Ian Warrell, suffice to say here that the student hoping to understand the intricate subtleties and expansive range of his skill need look no further than the breathtakingly preserved surface of Rome, from Mount Aventine. A painting which remains as fresh as the day it left the artist’s easel.

Turner’s Late Paintings

As professor Sam Smiles has commented, Turner’s ‘setting free of paint’ should be seen not as some rash reaction to the decrepitude of old age, or the sudden vagaries of an increasingly eccentric visionary, but as a ‘continued development of ideas about painting that he had refined over the course of his career’. The significance of Turner’s achievement was in ‘elaborating a convincing way of representing natural phenomena in all their complexity’. What his critics ‘attacked as incomprehensible or fantastic should properly be understood as a further development of a credo he had adopted throughout his career when attempting to engage with the diversity of material substance and visual perception. Turner’s pictures are multifaceted and their meanings sometimes elusive primarily because he did not use painting to illustrate a subject (as was true of so many of his contemporaries), but instead made the best use of what painting can do as a means of distilling experience and conveying ideas’. The titles of his works and the iconography within them are merely there to prompt chains of thought and associations within the viewer’s mind, however they ‘do not exhaust a picture’s meaning; it is in the texture of the painting, the disposition of forms, the articulation of space, the orchestration of colour and the structures of the painted surface that the meaning is embodied and from which it will emerge when the viewer is fully engaged with the work’. What is apparent in all of Turner’s works is ‘the sense of a highly creative mind grappling with the problem of finding a more adequate way of representing what he knew, drawing on all his technical resources to develop an image rich enough to accommodate what he had discerned’. The world which Turner’s late works inhabit is above all dynamic. They present us with an environment that is mutable, ever changing, ‘where solid forms become tremulous in light, water turns into vapour, diurnal and
seasonal rhythms of light transmogrify the landscape they illuminate. This ever-shifting world is the stage on which humanity plays out its destiny'. There is no sense in Turner’s final works that his brush was ‘free to be autonomous, such that subject matter was merely the excuse for a dazzling display of painterly invention’. Far from it, indeed it was his very understanding of what unrestricted practice would permit which gave him the scope to ‘tackle subjects whose complexity could not have been revealed in any other medium.’ If there is a modernist lineage in these last works, it is based not just on the virtuosity of his brushwork, but on the fact that subsequent generations have recognised in his work an unshakable commitment to the image ‘as an important contributor to the development of knowledge, articulating truths that were inexpressible in any other way’. As the eye travels back and forth over the rich impasto and loaded brushstrokes of this painting, which have been left undisturbed for nearly two hundred years, we are as close to this extraordinary genius as we can ever hope to be.

3. Ibid., pp. 231–32.
4. Ibid.
7. Quoted in Butlin and Joll, op. cit., p. 216.
11. Ibid., pp. 21–2.
Ibid., p. 21.
13. Ibid., p. 23.

H. A. J. Munro of Novar
by Julian Gascoigne
A Scottish landowner, Hugh Andrew Johnstone Munro of Novar (1797-1864) was the son of Sir Alexander Munro, one time Consul-General in Madrid, and his wife Margaret Penelope Johnstone. Born in London on 13 February 1797, in 1809 he succeeded to the vast Novar estates of his uncle, General Sir Hector Munro (1736-1805) who had been Commander-in-Chief of the Army in India, where he had won fame and fortune. Munro’s inheritance made him one of the chief land owners in Ross, Cromarty and Moray, and in 1814 he matriculated as a gentleman commoner at Christ Church College, Oxford. An amateur artist and distinguished collector, Munro first met Turner in 1826, probably during a tour of Northern France and Belgium in August and September of that year. Shy, diffident, and with a somewhat morbid temperament, his character was much like that of the equally morose but more forceful Turner. Despite the disparity in age (Munro was over twenty years Turner’s junior) and social status they mixed on intimate terms and a close friendship fast developed. Together with Elhanan Bicknell, Munro became one of Turner’s most important and influential patrons during the last twenty years of his life. In 1833 he financed Turner’s second journey to Venice, buying the magnificent Venice, from the Porch of Madonna della Salute (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) on the artist’s return, and in 1836 – the year he bought this painting – they travelling together through France, Switzerland and Italy on a sketching tour. Turner is said to have suggested the tour to help alleviate Munro’s depression, and the two painted alongside each other, with Turner assisting Munro by teaching him the technique of sketching in watercolours.
Ruskin records a rather charming incident from this expedition which reflects Turner’s kindness and the almost paternal nature of their relationship: ‘Drawing with one of his best friends [Munro], at the bridge of St Martin’s, the friend got into great difficulty over a coloured sketch. Turner looked over him a little while, then said, in a grumbling way – “I haven’t got any paper I like; let me try yours.” Receiving a block book, he disappeared for an hour and a half. Returning, he threw the book down, with a growl saying – “I can’t make anything of your paper.” There were three sketches on it, in three distinct states of progress, showing the process of colouring from beginning to end, and clearing up every difficulty which his friend had got into.’

Although Turner would not sell Munro any of the Swiss watercolours he had made, he did give him a sketchbook made shortly before at Farnley, and Munro was later able to buy the large oil painting Snow-Storm, Avalanche and Inundation – A Scene in the Valley d’Aosta (Art Institute of Chicago, fig. 11), which was the main fruit of that tour and based on sketches he had made in Munro’s company. In 1844 Munro was made one of the four trustees of Turner’s Charity for the relief of decayed and indigent artists, and it may also have been at about this time that Turner made him one of the three executors of his will. It was in this capacity that, when Turner died in 1851, Munro, along with George Jones and Thomas Griffith was charged with the task of sorting out Turner’s huge collection and bequest to the nation.

Munro inherited just one painting from his father, a Murillo, which Sir Alexander had been given whilst Consul General in Madrid. With this single exception the rest of his wide-ranging and idiosyncratic collection was amassed entirely by himself. In 1838, when the great German art historian Dr Waagen first visited Munro, the collection was still embryonic and Waagen’s comments were cursory, almost dismissive, and made no mention of the Turners – an artist whose work the German doctor did not in any case admire. By 1854, however, Waagen made a second visit to Munro’s collection and was astounded by the transformation, and he praised it in the utmost terms. What impressed Waagen most was not only the quality of the work Munro had collected, which was of the very highest standard, but the obvious enthusiasm with which it had been assembled. ‘In these days, when pictures are too often collected from motives of vanity or ostentation’ he wrote, ‘it is refreshing to meet with an individual like Mr Munro, in whom the love of art alone is the inducement – a love which the present increase in artistic knowledge in England can only strengthen.’

Munro’s collection was housed both at Novar House, overlooking the Cromarty Firth near Evanton in the north of Scotland, and at his London houses, 6 Hamilton Place, off Piccadilly, and 113 Park Street, near Grosvenor Square, where this picture was hung in the main parlour. His first recorded purchase of an oil painting by Turner was in 1830, when he bought Venus and Adonis (Private Collection, USA), originally painted circa 1803-5, for 85 guineas at the sale of the collection of John Green of Blackheath, held by Christie’s on 26 April 1830, lot 82. Further purchases soon followed, and in all he owned some dozen oil paintings by Turner, as well as twenty or so large scale watercolours and a further fifty-five vignettes. So extensive was the collection, and so highly regarded, that in 1847 the Art Union Magazine declared ‘Mr Munro possesses a considerable number of Turner’s finest works – indeed, to such an extent, that it is here, perhaps, he can best be studied, with the exception of his own gallery.’

Singling out this picture for praise amongst the collection, the anonymous critic enthused ‘if we would sour [sic] into the regions of mystery, if we would involve ourselves in the radiations of esthetics [sic], if we would discard all the coarse clay and solid matter of humanity, let us enter the lists with this earthly giant, and seek to probe the ill-understood or uninvestigated motives of Turner’s art… to this marvellous achievement of chiaroscuro, senzaseuro, he has united a knowledge of aerial perspective such as no previous painter ever imagined or dreamed of.’ In addition to works by Turner, Munro was also an avid collector of other contemporary British artists and owned at least four paintings by Richard Parkes Bonington, six by John Constable, twelve by William Etty, four by Joshua Reynolds and five by Richard Wilson, among others. Landseer stayed with him at Novar, and painted in the deer forest, and Munro owned Stubbs’ Eclipse (Royal Veterinary College, London). Unlike
Elhanan Bicknell, however, Munro also formed a large and important collection of Old Masters in addition to the work of Turner and his contemporary British artists. Primarily consisting of a distinguished group of sixteenth and seventeenth-century works, as well as French and Italian Rococo pictures, his collection included Raphael’s celebrated Madonna dei candelabra (Walters Art Museum, Baltimore), which he acquired at the sale of the Duke of Lucca’s pictures after 1841; a personification of Charity by Andrea del Sarto (National Gallery of Art, Washington); Veronese’s Vision of St Helena (National Gallery, London); and Rembrandt’s Lucretia (National Gallery of Art, Washington). He also owned Tiepolo’s The Martyrdom of St Agatha (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin) and Titian’s Adoration of the Magi (Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio), as well as works by, or attributed to Parmigianino, Giulio Romano, Guido Reni, Annibale Carracci, Claude Lorraine, Nicolas Poussin, Rubens, Jan Steen, and many others.

At his death the whole collection numbered some two and a half thousand works and seven sales held by Christie’s between 1860 and 1878 to disperse the pictures aroused great public interest. His collection of Turners were of paramount importance. The catalogue for the sale of his modern pictures on 6 April 1878 lists thirty two works on paper by Turner, as well as eight oil paintings, including: lot 96, Ancient Italy, Ovid banished from Rome, which he bought directly from the Royal Academy in 1838, and was purchased by Agnew’s for 5,200 guineas (Private Collection); lot 97, Modern Italy – The Pifferari, also exhibited at the Academy in 1838 and bought by Agnew’s for 5,000 guineas (Glasgow Art Gallery, fig. 12); lot 99, Modern Rome – Campo Vaccino, exhibited in 1839 and bought by Davis on behalf of the Earl of Rosebery for 4,450 guineas (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles); lot 100, Juliet and her Nurse, which Munro had bought along with this picture and also went to Agnew’s for 5,200 guineas (Colección de Arte Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat, Buenos Aires, fig. 17); lot 101, The Rotterdam Ferry Boat, exhibited at the Academy in 1831 and again bought by Agnew’s for 5,200 guineas (National Gallery of Art, Washington, fig. 10); lot 102, Snow-Storm, Avalanche and Inundation – A Scene in the Valley d’Aosta (previously mentioned), which was purchased by an unknown buyer for 910 guineas (Art Institute of Chicago, fig. 11); and lot 103, Venus and Adonis, bought by Fletcher for 3,400 guineas (Private Collection, USA). Of all the pictures in the sale the highest price achieved was the staggering 5,850 guineas paid for this picture: lot 98, Rome, from Mount Aventine, which was bought by Davis on behalf of Lord Rosebery. He and his new wife, Hannah Rothschild, had interrupted their honeymoon to be in London for the sale.

5. Ibid.

THE HISTORY OF THE PAINTING
by Richard Charlton Jones
The quite astonishing state of preservation of Rome from Mount Aventine - unharmed by the vicissitudes of time or infelicitous restoration - which permits us to look upon it almost as if we were ourselves visitors to the Royal academy exhibition of 1836, is fitting testament to its remarkable and unbroken provenance. For in its 186 year history, this painting has changed hands only once. This was in 1878 when it was sold by the heirs of the man who had originally commissioned it, Hugh Munro of Novar, one of Turner’s closest friends and patrons. It was then bought by Archibald Philip, 5th Earl of Rosebery, later Prime Minister of Great Britain, to celebrate his marriage with Hannah Rothschild, and it has remained in the possession of his descendants ever since. It would be hard indeed to find a more distinguished provenance than this, let alone one more intact.
Rome from Mount Aventine was originally commissioned from Turner by Hugh Andrew Johnstone Munro of Novar (1797-1864). Munro was enormously wealthy, the heir to the vast Ross-shire estates and Indian fortune of his uncle General Sir Hector Munro, who had died in 1806. Although Turner was a famously difficult character, and Munro was over twenty years younger, the latter established a relationship with the painter that few if any contemporary patrons, save perhaps Lord Egremont at Petworth or Walter Fawkes at Farnley Hall could match. The two men had certainly met by 1826, when Turner famously remarked in a letter that Munro had ‘lost a great deal of his hesitation in manner and speech and does not blush so often as heretofore’. By 1830 Turner had visited him at Novar in Scotland, and Munro was swiftly to become one of his most fervent patrons, buying many of the most important paintings Turner showed at the Royal Academy between 1836 and 1844, including the present canvas.

Although we do not know the precise date of the commission for this painting, Walter Thornbury in his Life of Turner, first published in 1862, records that ‘Mr. Munro gave Turner a commission for a view of modern Rome from a fine point that included the Tiber and some of the chief antiquities’. He (Turner) had been particularly anxious as to what Mr. Munro wanted – ‘a copy or an ideal picture. A ‘copy’ was asked for, and a copy he did’. By ‘copy’ Munro meant that he desired a view of Rome that was topographically true, rather than an idealised classical panorama in the tradition of Claude Lorrain. The commission no doubt dated from shortly before Turner’s second trip to Rome in 1828. When Turner was in Rome, the painter Sir Charles Eastlake noted the care which he took to find the correct spot from which to paint this view. Several sketches today in the Tate Gallery endorse Eastlake’s recollections, and indeed in the catalogue of Munro’s collection compiled later in 1865, it was written that the picture was ‘Painted for Mr. Munro on the spot’. Though not literally painted en plein air, the painting was probably conceived and begun in Italy, for its stretcher is of Italian make. The extraordinary survival of Turner’s fingerprints on the canvas show that he had carried it at times while the paint was still not quite dry.

If from Turner’s letter of 1826 we can glean that Munro was a shy man, then the long gap of eight years between sketches and the exhibited work of 1836 show that he was also a very patient one. His purchase of the Rome from Mount Aventine was finally secured following its exhibition at the Royal Academy in London. According to Thornbury, ‘...it was for this picture that Mr. Munro gave the artist his own price only £300; Turner refusing to raise the price beyond that of some other picture Mr. Munro had had. He was full of these punctilious notions of justice’. From the same exhibition, Munro also purchased another of Turner’s undisputed masterpieces, Juliet and her Nurse (Colección de Arte Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat, Buenos Aires, fig. 17), and indeed he would have added a third – the Mercury and Argus now in Ottawa – had he not felt that he was acting too greedily. Both paintings were taken to Munro’s London house at 113 Park Street, near Grosvenor Square. Turner’s evocation of the Eternal City and the light of Italy must have moved him greatly, for only two years later he had acquired his Modern Italy and Ancient Italy from the 1838 Royal Academy exhibition, and a year later in 1839 Modern Rome, a group of Italian views unparalleled by any collector before or since.

By the end of his life Munro had owned no less than fifteen oils by Turner, and one hundred and nine watercolours, mostly of Swiss and German subjects and some Scottish views. By any standards such a collection was extraordinary, and although his patronage of contemporary painters, including Bonington and Constable, was remarkable and his collection of Old Masters famous, it was this core of the collection that has since come to define Munro’s life as a collector. When his sister Isabella and her son Henry consigned the collection for sale in a series of seven auctions at Christie’s between 1860 and 1878, Rome from Mount Aventine was among the group of Turners sold on the 8 April 1878. It had been famously difficult to acquire paintings from Turner while he was alive, so there was extraordinary public interest in the sale. It was viewed by an estimated twelve thousand people or more, and anticipation rivalled or even exceeded the interest shown in his equally famous collection of Old Masters. In the event, as detailed elsewhere in this catalogue, even Veronese’s Vision of the Cross, bought for the National Gallery when it was sold at Christie’s the
following month, could not compete in price with the Turners. Rome from Mount Aventine, wrote the Times, ‘drew forth long and loud applause’ when it appeared in the room as lot 98, and it fetched the highest price of all at 5,850 guineas. The buyer was Frederick Davis, acting as agent for the painting’s new owner, Archibald Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery (1847-1929).

Davis stayed on his feet to secure the following lot, the canvas of Modern Rome (fig. 18), for which he successfully bid 4,450 guineas. Both paintings were bought by Rosebery to celebrate his recent marriage on 20th March to Hannah Rothschild. Remarkably, the young couple broke their honeymoon in order to come down from the family seat at Dalmeny in Scotland to London on 4th April in order to view the Turners prior to the auction. As Hannah wrote to her sister-in-law Constance, Lady Leconfield, four days after the sale: ‘Dearest Connie, No doubt you are surprised to hear of our return from the north; but Archie wanted to see the Turners & hear the debate, so I naturally preferred accompanying him to remaining in northern solitude & we came to London by the night mail on Thursday.’

The two paintings thus secured, the couple left for the Continent to renew their honeymoon. Rosebery’s motives for acquiring these magnificent paintings were probably varied. It may well be that their purchase had been in part inspired by the young couple beginning their honeymoon at Petworth House in Sussex, the home of Lord Rosebery’s sister, Lady Leconfield, where they would have seen one of the finest of all collections of Turner’s work. At a stroke Rosebery had acquired two Turners to match those in his brother-in-law’s collection. No doubt a love of Italy played an important part in this, for they had already planned to spend part of their honeymoon in Rome. Later, from their mooring aboard the yacht Czarina in the Bay of Naples, they admired the Villa Delahante at Posilippo, so much so that Rosebery would later acquire it in 1897 and rename it the Villa Rosebery.

It is said, probably apocryphally, that as an Eton schoolboy, Rosebery claimed that his three principal objectives in life were to become Prime Minster, to win the Derby and to marry an heiress. Whether true or not, there can be no doubt that his marriage in 1878 to Hannah, the orphan daughter and heiress of Baron Mayer Amschel de Rothschild, provided him with the material means to achieve his ambitions. At her father’s death Hannah became the wealthiest heiress of her generation, having been left a fortune estimated at 2 million pounds, including the spectacular house her father had built and lavishly furnished at Mentmore in Buckinghamshire. Although already wealthy in his own right, Rosebery was thus now possessed of an immense fortune – the greatest ever accumulated by a Prime Minster of this country – as well as one of the most outstanding art collections of its kind anywhere in the world at that time. As Lady Eastlake famously remarked after a visit to Mentmore, ‘I do not believe that the Medici were ever so lodged at the height of their glory’.

After the sale Rome from Mount Aventine was hung in the London residence of Lady Rosebery’s family at 107 Piccadilly, together with Modern Rome, their other purchase from the sale. Both this painting and Modern Rome were subsequently moved with the rest of the London collection in 1888 from Piccadilly to the Roseberys’ new residence at 38 Berkeley Square. Both paintings were among the nine works lent by Lord Rosebery to the exhibition of Works by the Old Masters and by deceased Masters of the British School held at the Royal Academy in 1896. In 1938 Rome, from Mount Aventine was moved to Mentmore, where together with Modern Rome, it was hung in the Green Drawing Room, the principal room on the ground floor. There the painting stayed until 1978, when it was placed on loan to the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh following the famous Mentmore sale of the previous year, and there it has remained until now.

Understandably Rosebery did not again purchase another Turner of such stature, although he did buy watercolours by the artist which remain in the family collection. A discerning collector of works of art and rare books in particular, much in the mould of J. Pierpont Morgan or Henry Frick, he added considerably to the works of art assembled at Mentmore by Baron Mayer de Rothschild, as well as to the family houses in Berkeley Square in London, at Dalmeny in Scotland and The Durdans in Surrey, and later at his villa near Naples. For the Dining Room in the former he bought a series of portraits of the Prime Ministers of England,
and two fine views of London by Samuel Scott for the Drawing Room. The Durdans, close to Epsom, naturally housed his collection of sporting art, including notable works by Stubbs, Herring and Marshall. His interest in painting also followed or combined with his own historical and literary interests. This took the form, for example, of a remarkable series of portraits of famous men of history. In the winter of 1896 he had sent to the Royal Academy Gilbert Stuart’s celebrated full-length Portrait of George Washington (1796, Smithsonian Institute, Washington) and Jacques Louis David’s portrait of Napoleon in his study (1812, National Gallery of Art, Washington), which formed the centrepiece of a collection of Bonaparte family portraits and Napoleonic material today still kept at Dalmeny. He also owned Stubbs’ Equestrian portrait of Warren Hastings (1791), and Thomas Philips’ famous likeness of Lord Byron (1841), both also still in Scotland. He did not fail to support contemporary painters, notably Sir John Everett Millais, from whom he commissioned his own portrait. Rome, from Mount Aventine undoubtedly remains one of his most perceptive and distinguished acquisitions, but strangely, it was not the most expensive. This distinction belongs to his Portrait of Lord Newton by Sir Henry Raeburn at Dalmeny, for which he paid Wertheimer a staggering £7,854 in 1912.

Rosebery’s was a complex personality, never better reflected than by his political life. A Whig by background and upbringing, but perhaps not by inclination, as a politician he enjoyed a long and distinguished career on the Liberal benches. Although always considered ‘the man of the future’ under Gladstone, either out of vanity or calculation he refused a remarkable string of offers of office until he was finally appointed Foreign Minister in the administration of 1886. ‘Was there ever such a complex person?’ asked the perplexed Lord Crewe. It had been at the introduction of Disraeli in 1868 that he met his future wife, and though little inclined to politics, Hannah proved well suited to the role and provided him with a constant source of encouragement and support. This was timely, for rather like Munro of Novar, Rosebery suffered from melancholy and what has been described as ‘a haunting sense of transience’. When Hannah died of typhoid in 1890 at the age of only thirty nine, he was distraught and withdrew from public life for eighteen months. Although reluctant to return to office he became Foreign Secretary again in 1892, and finally Prime Minister in 1894. His failure to build on his earlier foreign policy successes, a weak Budget and the collapse of his initiative for the reform of what he described as ‘the gilded prison’ of the House of Lords meant that his premiership was largely ineffective and lasted only until 1895. It may have been of some consolation when, having achieved two of his youthful life’s ambitions, he added the third when he won the Derby twice in the same period with Ladas II in 1894 and Sir Visto in 1895.

Rome, from Mount Aventine, since its exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1896, was not seen again in public until the Coronation Exhibition of Turner’s works held in 1953. In 1974 it was exhibited again in the largest retrospective of Turner’s work yet held, both at the Tate Gallery and the Royal Academy in London. It has most recently been seen in the Turner in Italy exhibition held in Edinburgh, Ferrara and Budapest. Since 1978 it has been placed on loan to the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh, a fitting tribute to its two remarkable Scottish owners.

1. Letter to James Holworthy, dated 4 December 1826.

ROME IN TURNER’S DAY
by David Gilmour

Few cities have experienced such fluctuating levels of fortune as Rome. Italian nationalists of the nineteenth century used to speak of successive eras of its glory: the Rome of the Consuls and the Caesars, the Rome of the Renaissance popes, and then the Rome of their day, capital of united Italy, an emerging Great Power. The city that Turner visited in the 1820s and 1830s was in contrast a city in decline, its buildings in generally poor state of repair and its streets badly maintained. However, even in its decadence Rome remained one of the most beautiful places in the world: a city still of villas and gardens, of undisturbed convents and rarely-pillaged ruins, a harmony of classical and Baroque in warm, lightly-ochred travertine stone. No wonder it
entranced Shelley as well as Byron, for whom it was both the ‘city of the soul’ and ‘the Niobe of nations’. No wonder that Keats went there to die, or that his travelling companion, Joseph Severn, stayed on for decades and even became the British consul in 1861.

The great French writer Stendhal too could not keep away. Although in 1830 he was sent as French consul to Civitavecchia, a lustreless port in the Papal States, he contrived to spend much of his time in Rome, enjoying dinners and dances and admiring the beauty of the city’s women. Civitavecchia, he moaned, was such a ‘miserable hole’ - so cut off that he might as well be living in Borneo - that he felt justified in skiving in Rome and trying to hoodwink his superiors in Paris by heading his dispatches ‘Civitavecchia’.

Northern painters naturally flocked to the Eternal City in even greater numbers than the writers. Many had been influenced by Claude’s Virgilian landscapes of the Campagna; others had been inspired by David’s massive canvases of Lictors and Horatii. In 1810 a group of German Romantic painters known as the Nazarenes settled in Rome and received regular reinforcements from Germany over the following decades. In 1819, the year of Turner’s first visit, Thomas Lawrence arrived to paint Pope Pius VII and later to found the British Academy of Arts in Rome. Shortly afterwards Corot came to the city for three of his happiest and most productive years, painting the Coliseum and the surrounding landscape.

When Turner arrived in 1819 he found a city also full of English visitors. These included not only members of the aristocracy such as the celebrated William Cavendish 6th Duke of Devonshire busy amassing works of art for Chatsworth, but also painters such as Charles Eastlake and John Jackson, poets such as Thomas Moore and sculptors such as Francis Chantrey. By the time Turner visited Rome a second time Chantrey had left, but Turner kept in touch with his friend, giving him news and gossip about the artists in the city. The great sculptor Canova who lived in Rome had died in 1822, but his place had been taken by Bertel Thorvaldsen from Denmark. Thorvaldsen, now regarded as Rome’s finest sculptor, had a studio in Piazza Barberini. Other sculptors who had been attracted to Rome by Canova’s presence included Richard Westmacott and John Gibson.

The Congress of Vienna had restored much of the pre-Napoleonic Italian order, and the pope was now back not only as bishop of Rome but also as ruler of the Papal States, a wide band of central Italy that included Umbria, Bologna and much of the Adriatic littoral. Not all the states of Restoration Italy had returned to a reactionary ‘Dark Age’, but Rome had, literally at night because the papal regime regarded street lighting as the work of the devil. Similar obscurantism ruled out vaccination and railways: Gregory VIII, the pope of the 1830s, made the equation ‘Chemin de fer, chemin d’Enfer’ and banned railway construction in his territories. Now divided into nine states Italy, as a whole, was going through a period of artistic decline. Massimo d’Azeglio, an artistic nobleman who later became prime minister of Piedmont, studied art in Rome and enjoyed sketching in the hill villages of the Castelli Romani. Yet like many of his contemporaries who felt ashamed to be Italian in that era of poverty and foreign occupation, he saw his primary artistic task in terms of propaganda and morale-boosting, specifically in the depiction of an heroic historical past on canvas. Much of Italian painting in this period thus consists of vast representations of events such as the Battle of Legnano (the Lombard League’s defeat of Frederick Barbarossa in 1176), the Sicilian Vespers (a massacre of French troops by Sicilians in 1282) and the Challenge of Barletta (a much mythologised event from the sixteenth century in which thirteen Italian knights challenged thirteen French knights to a duel and were victorious). These and similar incidents enthused writers and musicians as well. I lombardi alla prima crociata (‘The Lombards of the First Crusade’) was an epic poem by Tommaso Grossi, an early opera by Verdi and the subject of several pictures by the Milanese artist Francesco Hayez.

Giuseppe di Lampedusa, the Sicilian prince and author of The Leopard, ascribed the cultural wasteland of nineteenth century Italy to his countrymen’s obsessive pursuit of opera which, he claimed, ‘absorbed all the artistic energies of the nation’. Even painters ‘neglected their noble canvases to throw themselves headlong into designing the prisons of Don Carlos or the sacred groves of Norma’. Italy’s opera crowds presumably felt the sacrifice was worthwhile. In 1829 Rossini composed Guillaume Tell, in 1830 Donizetti triumphed with
Anna Bolena, and in the following year Bellini produced the twin miracles of Norma and La sonnambula. At the end of the decade Verdi’s first opera (Oberto) was performed at La Scala in Milan.

A first-night failure, known as a ‘fiasco’, was quite common in a world where the fans of a rival composer often used to turn up and jeer. Rossini had experienced it in Rome with the première of Il barbiere di Siviglia (then known as Almaviva) at the Teatro Argentina. On 20 February 1816 a claque supporting Paisiello (who had written his own version of Il barbiere as far back as 1782) arrived, whistling and brawling and hooting with laughter so that nobody could hear Figaro’s famous cavatina ‘Largo al factotum’. Although the audience on the second night was more appreciative, Rossini was not mollified. From that time he preferred to have his premières at the San Carlo, the Bourbons’ beautiful opera house in Naples, until he achieved entry to the Mecca for all Italian composers, the Opéra in Paris.

Rome possessed three theatres for opera, but none of them attracted the fashionable composers with the exception of the prolific Donizetti, whose premières were held in the city’s Teatro Valle as well as in Naples, Venice, Florence and Milan (and later in Paris and Vienna). One reason was the squalor and discomfort of the theatres’ interiors; another was the ignorance of the Roman public. Visiting the city separately in 1830, both Berlioz and Mendelssohn were shocked by what they saw and heard: the former discovered that hardly anyone knew of Weber or Beethoven, while the latter was left stupefied by the poor quality of musicianship. ‘The orchestras,’ reported the young German composer, ‘are worse than anyone could believe’: the musicians had little idea of either timing or tuning or even ‘a proper feeling for music’.

Patriotic Italians of the period such as Azeglio - men whose ancestors had been for centuries the most prosperous and civilised people in Europe - were morbidly sensitive to the condescension of foreigners. They particularly disliked the way that northern Europeans loved their homeland for qualities which they in their new martial mood despised. Some even resented the French writer Stendhal for coming over the Alps with Napoleon’s army and simultaneously falling in love with Italy, opera and love itself. But one cannot tell foreigners what to like about one’s country, and many other visitors sought music, beauty and romance in a landscape where few armies marched and fewer factories roared.

No painter in Rome found himself at a loss for subjects. In the 1820s and 1830s the city may have been at its poorest and politically most benighted, but it was also at its most picturesque. Yet change was on the way. In the revolutionary turmoil of 1848-9, when the pope abandoned his dominions, Giuseppe Mazzini led a Roman republic that was defended with such valour by Garibaldi that Punch magazine hailed the soldier in Shakespeare’s words as ‘the noblest Roman of them all’. Although this enterprise was soon defeated by the combined armies of Austria, France and Naples, Rome remained the goal of patriotic ambitions, and in 1870 it became capital of the new kingdom of Italy. Alas its new rulers’ determination to make it a rival of Paris and Vienna required the destruction of villas and convents and their replacement by spacious streets and grandiose public buildings. The Villa Ludovisi and its gardens disappeared under an avalanche of masonry, to be in due course reincarnated as the Via Veneto of Doney’s Caffé, Fellini’s films and the American Embassy. The travel writer Augustus Hare may have exaggerated when he compared these changes to the devastation wreaked by the Goths, but the city that Turner had known had been very violently transformed.


The Market for Turner
by David Moore-Gwyn

When Rome from Mount Aventine was offered for sale in 1878 it formed part of one of the most remarkable sales of works by Turner ever to have taken place. As the Times critic commented on 4th April “Since the memorable Bicknell sale in 1864 there has been no such display of Turner pictures”. His enthusiastic report on the sale itself ran to several columns and it is clear that the collection attracted quite exceptional interest – “It has been calculated that from twelve to fifteen thousand persons must have passed before the pictures...”.

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Rome, from Mount Aventine is particularly singled out – “Rome from Mount Aventine painted for Mr Munro and exhibited in 1836… when placed before the audience drew forth long and loud applause and its great beauty was testified by its bringing the highest price £6142.10s to Mr Davis”. This exceptional price had only been exceeded once, in April 1875, when The Grand Canal Venice (Metropolitan Museum, New York) was sold from the Manley Hall collection, formed by the cotton manufacturer Sam Mendel, for £7,350. This had also been a Munro of Novar picture, sold by him in March 1860 for £2,520, a clear indication of the increasing demand for Turner’s work. Munro’s sale also included 155 Old Master paintings offered on 10th June, not one of which came near the prices achieved for the six finest Turners in the collection. A striking example of this was the sale of Veronese’s Vision of the Cross, which was bought for the National Gallery for £3,465, whilst six oil paintings by Turner each sold for over £4,000. A number of paintings appeared at auction in Turner’s lifetime, and five sold for prices in excess of £500. However following his death the market improved significantly. James Wadmore had bought three important oils by Turner in 1828 for £700 and in his sale in May 1854 they sold for a total of £3,548, Cologne the Arrival of a Packet Boat (Frick Collection, New York) selling for £2,100, the first painting to exceed £2,000. It is interesting to note that this picture, together with Harbour of Dieppe, was eventually bought directly from Mrs Naylor, widow of the great collector, for £42,000 early in the twentieth century before being sold on to the Frick Collection in 1914.

In the 1860s and 1870s there had been a notable change in the type of collector of Turner’s work. Instead of his old friends Fawkes and Egremont he dealt increasingly with newly rich industrialists. Elhanan Bicknell from Herne Hill who had made a fortune in the whaling business was a typical example. He bought no fewer than eight paintings by Turner in 1844 and his sale in April 1863 created considerable interest. The Star of 28th April succinctly described this new breed of Turner collector – “a man not even pretending to resemble a Genoese or Florentine merchant prince but simply and absolutely a Londoner of the middle class actively occupied in business”. Another similar collector was Joseph Gillott, who had made a fortune with his invention of the steel pen. His sale in April 1872 included a number of paintings by Turner notably Walton Bridges (Loyd Collection) which sold for £5,250 (it had fetched £703.10 in a sale in June 1845), and The Junction of the Thames and Medway (National Gallery of Art, Washington) which sold for £4,567 – The Times commented in particular on the latter price, noting that 25 years earlier the same picture had sold for 1200 guineas “then an unheard-of price for any English painter’s work”. In fact the nineteenth century saw a marked increase in prices for major works by Turner and Turner’s dominance is emphasized by the fact that until the 1890s no work by his great contemporary John Constable had fetched in excess of £2,000 at auction. In May 1870 the Birmingham iron founder Edwin Bullock sold Venice, The Dogana and Santa Maria della Salute (National Gallery of Art, Washington) for £2,688 having bought it at the Royal Academy in 1843 for 200 guineas, and the same picture was sold in May 1899 by the important coal engineer John Fowler for £8,610. In the early twentieth century there was enthusiastic buying for Turner’s work in America, and Venice, The Dogana and Santa Maria della Salute was sold again in July 1927 from the estate of James Ross of Montreal for an astonishing £30,450. The buyer was the American collector Alvan Fuller, Governor of Massachusetts, in whose memory it was given to the National Gallery in Washington.

Pictures from the celebrated Bicknell sale of April 1863 proved excellent investments – Van Goyen, looking out for a subject (Frick Collection), which had sold then for £2,635 was sold from John Graham’s collection in April 1887 for £6,825, Helvoetsluys (Fuji Art Museum, Tokyo) which made £1,680 then was sold from the collection of the Devon collector James Price in June 1895 for £6,720 and Wreckers (Yale Centre for British Art) which made £1,984 was sold in May 1897 from the collection of the Scottish telegraph entrepreneur Sir John Pender for £7,980. The early years of the twentieth century saw further spectacular prices – Mortlake Terrace (Frick Collection) which had been sold from James Price’s collection in June 1895 for £5,460 fetched £13,230 in the sale in June 1908 of the collection of Stephen Holland. The Lancashire chemical manufacturer Holbrook Gaskell had a remarkable collection of watercolours, but he also owned a remarkable painting by Turner, Burning of the House of Lords and Commons (Philadelphia Museum of Art) which had been sold back
in May 1868 for £1,527 and in 1909 fetched an amazing £13,123, matching the record price from the previous year. The effect that the American market could have at this period was illustrated by two great sales. The first was the sale of Rockets and Blue Lights (Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown) in New York in April 1910 from the collection of Charles Yerkes. The picture had been included in Henry McConnell’s sale in March 1886 (together with Campo Santo, Venice) where it sold to Agnew for £745.10. It was now bought by Duveen for £25,800. The second was the sale of East Cowes Castle (Indianapolis Museum, Indiana) also in New York in February 1913 as part of the collection of Matthew C. B. Borden, ‘The Calico King’. In July 1835 it had been sold for £283.10, and in the E.W. Parker sale in July 1909 it fetched £6,825. Now only four years later it was sold for £21,700, an astonishing increase. These sales, and that in 1927 of Venice, The Dogana and Santa Maria della Salute, moved the market for Turner paintings to a new level. In addition, in July 1912 the twelve day sale of the collection of the Newspaper proprietor J.E. Taylor established new records for Turner watercolours, including such great works as Blue Rigi.

It is not surprising that the period covering the two World Wars saw a dearth of great works by Turner appearing on the market. However there were some notable highlights, in particular the sale on July 5th 1927 of a remarkable group of 127 paintings from the collection of James Ross of Montreal. The Telegraph reported “the triumph… was shared by those paramount masters in the hierarchy of art Rembrandt and Turner’. The price of £30,450 for Venice, The Dogana and Santa Maria della Salute achieved in that sale was not only a record price for Turner but also only very slightly lower than the price the Rembrandt portrait and greatly in excess of prices for other Old Masters such as Rubens. The second Turner in the collection, Helvoetsluys, sold for £8,925, a reasonable increase over the price it had fetched in 1895 in the James Price sale. The price obtained for Venice, The Dogana and Santa Maria della Salute remained the record until 1966. Another notable sale was the Yarborough sale on 12th July 1929. Festival of Macon (Sheffield City Art Gallery) had been bought directly from the artist in 1803 so when it was offered for sale by his descendent there was plenty of interest. The Telegraph referred to “the warmth of the auction welcome given to a magnificent early picture by Turner” and noted that Agnew won the picture “at the goodly bid of 8,600 guineas”.

Two pictures sold in the 1960s can be seen as heralding the spectacular resurgence in prices for Turner’s paintings. It is significant that the highest price by far was for a painting which had first been sold in one of the great nineteenth century sales, that of Elhanan Bicknell. The picture in question was Ehrenbreitstein (Private Collection) which was sold by Lord Allendale in July 1965 for £88,000, a price far in excess of the previous record established in 1927. The other high price was for the previously mentioned Helvoetsluys, another picture from the Bicknell sale, which was sold in November 1969 for £62,000. This lower price is explained by the picture’s appearance in 1954 when it was sold from the Coats collection for £9,240, though the price achieved fifteen years later does still show a very marked increase. It is generally considered that 1975 marks a watershed for the study of Turner’s work with the great exhibition at the Tate Gallery followed two years later by the publication of the catalogue raisonné of his paintings. The Bridgewater Seapiece (Private Collection), painted for the Duke of Bridgewater in 1801 and sold by his descendants in June 1976 for £320,000 was further evidence that when a great work by the artist came onto the market there was a very strong market but compared with the nineteenth century such pictures appeared only rarely. It was a masterpiece originally from that great Munro sale in 1878 which suddenly transformed the market for Turner’s paintings. Juliet and Her Nurse (Coleccion de Arte Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat, Buenos Aires, fig. 17) was sold in New York in May 1980 from the Whitney Collection for $6,400,000, a record for any painting at the time. Only four years later this price was overtaken by the appearance in July 1984 of Seascape: Folkstone (Private Collection) in the sale of works from Lord Clark’s collection. It was a great rarity, a very late work and one of only very few not forming part of the Turner Bequest, and it sold for £6,700,000 (Private Collection). It was these two sales which gave collectors the confidence to look out for the appearance of major works by Turner and two such opportunities have presented themselves in the last ten years. The two pictures in question were both late works of Italian subjects and significantly had originally appeared in great nineteenth century
sales, one from Elhanan Bicknell and one from Munro of Novar. The first was the sale in April 2006 of Guidecca, la Donna della Salute and San Giorgio (Private Collection) for $32,000,000. It had originally been sold by Bicknell and was later owned by the great collector Sir Donald Currie. Even this price was overtaken four years later when Modern Rome – Campo Vaccino, one of the highlights of the great Munro sale in 1878, was sold from the Rosebery collection in July 2010 to the Getty Museum for £26,500,000 ($45,101,996). Turner took a keen interest in the prices fetched for his paintings and in July 1827, when the first significant dispersal at auction took place of any of his pictures (Lord Tabley’s sale) he very publicly bought Sun Rising through Vapour himself for the significant price of £514.10.0, higher that any auction price for any of his paintings in his lifetime. He bequeathed to the National Gallery. He would certainly have been proud that two great pictures belonging to two of his loyalist collectors should have fetched such enormous prices and that Modern Rome remains the highest price achieved at auction for any painting by an English artist.

From Pencil to Paint: Turner’s Rome from Mount Aventine
by Ian Warrell

Turner’s paintings of Italy generally appealed to romantic ideas of the country, conflating its ancient history with the continuing charms of its verdant landscapes. In creating these works he produced an idealised version of Italy that was, in effect, an echo of the pastorals of the great seventeenth-century painter, Claude Lorrain. What makes Turner’s Rome from Mount Aventine so remarkable and exceptional is that it is a much more literal transcription of an area of central Rome as Turner saw it during his second stay in the city between October 1828 and January 1829.

His modus operandi on that occasion was quite unlike the intensive sketching activities that characterised his time in Rome in 1819, when he covered hundreds of pages in his sketchbooks with detailed pencil outlines of the buildings, monuments, paintings and sculptures he diligently surveyed across the city. His aim on that trip had been to compile a comprehensive body of reference material to utilize back in London. By contrast, in 1828 his topographical studies were at best perfunctory, and of secondary importance to the work he undertook in oil on canvas prior to an exhibition in hired rooms in the Palazzo Trulli on the Quirinal Hill. The display of just three paintings – now all at Tate Britain - was well attended, though many of the visitors were apparently shocked by Turner’s radical use of vivid colour and the unavoidable presence of tangible (as opposed to the academically sanctioned smooth) passages of paint on his canvases.

Analysis by Stephen Hackney and Dr Joyce Townsend of the canvases and stretchers that Turner adopted in Rome has revealed that they were relatively coarsely woven and of a heavier weight than those he habitually selected. Most of the pictures dating from the 1828 visit possess small metal pins known as sprigs that secure the canvas to its wooden stretcher. These distinctive sprigs are not otherwise a feature on Turner’s canvases, and were also found by Dr Jacqueline Ridge on the edges of Rome from Mount Aventine, when she was examining the painting for the exhibition Turner & Italy at the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh in 2009. This is an important discovery, for it implies that Turner almost certainly began work on the picture while in Rome.

This theory is further supported by an anecdote proposing that the picture was commissioned by H.A.J. Munro of Novar, its first owner, who allegedly wanted a ‘view of modern Rome from a fine point that included the Tiber and some of the chief antiquities’. The wealthy Scott would subsequently become the most important collector of Turner’s later works, but is not otherwise known to have acquired anything prior to 1830. However, the existence of sketches specifically for the picture, a circumstance that is rare in itself during the 1828 tour, lends further weight to the idea of a commission.

There is also a comment in the catalogue of Munro’s collection, produced shortly after his death, claiming that Rome from Mount Aventine was ‘Painted for Mr Munro on the spot’. Although there may be substance to this point in the broader sense that the picture was probably among the group of canvases that Turner shipped home at the end of his Roman sojourn, it seems highly doubtful that he painted such a large work en
plein air. Rome had long been host to the practice of making oil sketches directly from the motif, whether of picturesque fragments or studies of larger viewpoints. It is, furthermore, interesting to note that the top edge of the canvas retains fingerprints made by moving it while the paint was still wet. But these marks are more likely to have been made in the studio, because Turner had emphatically resisted the pressure to succumb to the norm of sketching out of doors in and around Rome.

Instead, as Cecilia Powell demonstrated in her book Turner in the South, the composition is actually derived from a series of pencil sketches in a notebook now entitled ‘Rome to Rimini’ (Tate: Turner Bequest CLXXVIII). These preliminary notes fall over several spreads of the book, and overlap to form a detailed panorama of the view north from the slopes above the present-day Piazzale d’Emporio. In her examination of the painting Dr Ridge used infrared reflectography which revealed slight adjustments to the placing of the composition, which must have taken place as Turner transposed the complicated observations in his very small pocketbook onto a piece of canvas cut to his preferred format of 3 by 4 feet. These dimensions were the same as those he adopted for Regulus and View of Orvieto, two of the Roman exhibits. As in the Aventine picture, the View of Orvieto was conceived as a ‘copy’, or transcription of a specific place, rather than an imagined or composite scene.

Having established the essence of the design on the white ground, that was the fundamental starting point for all his later pictures, Turner would have built up the image by applying areas of colour – blue for the sky and river, and a ruddy brown for the foreground. The process used thinned washes of oil colour and was similar to the way he experimented in watercolour from the 1820s onwards, where he define his ideas loosely through ‘colour beginnings’ before deciding which images merited further development. A sense of how the images evolved at a more advanced stage can be seen in an unfinished painting of The Arch of Constantine (Tate Britain, London) that Turner abandoned close to its full resolution. There the forms of architecture and trees are broadly established, along with a human presence; and it would not have involved a great deal more work by Turner to have transformed this blurred impression into something definite, more akin to a factual representation.

From the 1820s onwards Turner acquired the habit of finishing some of his pictures during the Varnishing Days at the Royal Academy, or the British Institution. While other artists merely adjusted details or applied a layer of varnish, Turner worked much more extensively, bringing details into focus. Most famously, in 1837, he dramatically reworked the sky of Regulus, one of those canvases first exhibited in 1828. Rome, from Mount Aventine was exhibited a year earlier, and may have been subject to very slight modification before the exhibition opened, though no coat of varnish was added. Dr Ridge has suggested that some of the very fine details, painted in brown using a fine brush, could have been done at this time. The pervasive warmth of the zesty sunrise would have been a fairly late addition, applied over white paint to give it greater luminosity. But this defining feature is very similar in character to the skies Turner painted in the later 1820s, such as the views of Mortlake Terrace on the Thames (now at the Frick Collection and the National Gallery of Art in Washington), when his use of yellow first became the subject of critical outrage. What such critics were not aware of was that Turner was making use of new pigments, such as Lemon Chrome, which extended his palette range, enabling him to intensify his effects and create the kind of ‘golden visions’ for which he is best known. Miraculously, these innovations in Turner’s techniques have been much better preserved in this picture than many celebrated works in museum collections because it has never been lined – a conservation technique that can flatten impasto and other details. It is, in fact, one of only a handful of Turner’s works to remain more or less as the artist left it.

The Frame

By Lynn Roberts

The present frame is in revival Louis XV-Rococo style, dating from the mid-third of the 19th century, in the manner of frames chosen by Turner for his own work.

The painting of Rome, from Mount Aventine is held in the style of frame which conforms to one of the designs
chosen by Turner to present his paintings, notably for those on a grand scale intended for exhibition in the Royal Academy (his ‘grand machines’). This revival Rococo style, with its swept rails and floral sprays, echoes the original Louis XV-style frame still in place on Admiral Van Tromp’s barge at the entrance of the Texel, 1645, RA 1831, (Sir John Soane’s Museum, London), and the revival Rococo frame on Modern Rome: Campo Vaccino, RA 1839 (Sotheby’s, 2010). The latter painting hung with Rome, from Mount Aventine in both the collections of Munro of Novar and the Earl of Rosebery. The present frame may similarly be Turner’s original exhibition choice – it shares decorative features such as the striated hollow and flaring asymmetric centres with the frame of Modern Rome – but may equally be a collector’s frame, commissioned either by Munro or by Rosebery in compliment to Turner’s own preference.

The ‘Rosbery Turners’ and their frames
The two views of Rome by J. M. W. Turner known to art historians as the ‘Rosebery Turners’, were painted roughly three years apart, and owned in tandem – first by Hugh Munro of Novar and later by the Earl and Countess of Rosebery. They are also natural pendants to each other in their subject and composition, and are almost identical size. It might be expected that, given their history, they would also have been framed identically; but the frames, although related, interestingly differ in their appearance and effect. Whilst both are Rococo variants of Turner’s preferred choice of Louis XV-style frames for his grand exhibition subjects, the frame of Modern Rome – Campo Vaccino (J. Paul Getty Museum, San Marino) has a much simpler profile and lacks the wide slip at the sight edge seen on Rome, from Mount Aventine (this slip also appears on the painting of Admiral Van Tromp’s Barge in the Soane Museum, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1831). Both frames share a striated hollow frieze, asymmetric centre ornaments and trailing floral sprigs, but Rome, from Mount Aventine has a comparatively narrow hollow or scotia, filled with relatively deeply-modelled floral sprays which reach from centre to corner, whilst on Modern Rome – Campo Vaccino the shallow sprigs are sited on a much wider space. They are bounded at the sight edge by one small moulding, whilst the frame on Rome, from Mount Aventine, as well as the wide slip, has a small sanded frieze and a band of pressed leaf and strapwork ornament.

These differences are as puzzling as the similarities, and indicate various possibilities: first, that Turner chose both styles as exhibition frames, but went to a different frame maker for the later style; second, that he framed the earlier painting in the linear acanthus frame he also favoured, and it was reframed by Munro of Novar to match, as nearly as possible, Modern Rome – Campo Vaccino when he acquired that picture three years later (or vice versa); third, that Rome, from Mount Aventine was reframed after 1878 when it was acquired by the Roseberys, and that the paintings did not hang as a pair in their house so that the differing frames were not noticeable.

Both frames being in the Louis XV-Rococo idiom which Turner used, and their histories being identically undisturbed, it is probable that these are indeed the original two exhibition frames; however, other possibilities should be borne in mind.

Fig. 1
J. M. W. Turner, R.A., after John Robert Cozens, Rome: The Tiber with the Aventine on the left © National Galleries of Scotland
Fig. 2
J.M.W. Turner, R.A., Rome from Monte Mario © Sotheby's

Fig. 3
J.M.W. Turner, R.A., Childe Harold's Pilgrimage - Italy, exhibited 1832, oil paint on canvas, 1422 x 2483 mm © Tate, London 2014

Fig. 4
J.M.W. Turner, R.A., Palestrina - Composition, 1828, exhibited 1830, Oil paint on canvas, 1403 x 2489 mm © Tate, London 2014

Fig. 5
J.M.W. Turner, R.A., from Rimini to Rome Sketchbook [Finberg CLXXVIII], Rome, from Mount Aventine, 1828-9, Graphite on paper, 97 x 132 mm © Tate, London 2014

Fig. 6
J.M.W. Turner, R.A., from Rimini to Rome Sketchbook [Finberg CLXXVIII], Rome, from Mount Aventine, 1828-9, Graphite on paper, 97 x 132 mm © Tate, London 2014

Fig. 7
J.M.W. Turner, R.A., from Rimini to Rome Sketchbook [Finberg CLXXVIII], Rome, from Mount Aventine, 1828-9, Graphite on paper, 97 x 132 mm © Tate, London 2014

Fig. 8
James T. Willmore after J. M. W. Turner, Mercury and Argus, 1841, etching and engraving, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, USA / Bridgeman Images
Claude Joseph Vernet, The Ponte Rotto, Rome, oil on canvas, Louvre, Paris, France, Giraudon / Bridgeman Images

J. M. W. Turner, R. A., Rotterdam Ferry-Boat, oil on canvas, 92.3 x 122.5 cm, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection, 1970.17.135

J.M.W. Turner, Valley of Aosta: Snowstorm, Avalanche, and Thunderstorm, Oil on canvas, 92.2 x 123 cm, Frederick T. Haskell Collection, 1947.513, The Art Institute of Chicago

J.M.W. Turner, R.A., Modern Italy - The Pifferari, oil on canvas, Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove, Glasgow, Scotland © Culture and Sport Glasgow (Museums) / Bridgeman Images

Annotated page from the 1878 Munro of Novar sale, showing Rome, from Mount Aventine as lot 98

Mentmore Towers © Country Life

Frederic, Lord Leighton, Hannah, Countess of Rosebery © Private Collection
Fig. 16

Sir John Everett Millais, Archibald Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery © Private Collection

Fig. 17

J.M.W. Turner, R.A., Juliet and her Nurse © Colección de Arte Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat

Fig. 18

J.M.W. Turner, R.A., Modern Rome - Campo Vaccino, Oil on canvas (unlined), 90.2 by 122 cm., J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles © Sotheby's

Fig. 19

J.M.W. Turner, The Arch of Constantine, Rome, c.1835, oil on canvas, 914 x 1219 mm © Tate, London 2014

Fig. 20

J. M. W. Turner, R.A., Rome, from Mount Aventine. Detail of one of the sprigs on the side of the canvas, with a hair from the artist’s brush trapped beneath and drips of liquid paint running down the canvas edge

Fig. 21

J. M. W. Turner, R.A., Rome, from Mount Aventine (detail)