LOT 21
PROPERTY FROM AN ENGLISH PRIVATE COLLECTION
JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER, R.A.
LONDON 1775 - 1851
EHRENBREITSTEIN, OR THE BRIGHT STONE OF HONOUR AND THE TOMB OF MARCEAU,
FROM BYRON’S CHILDE HAROLD
oil on canvas
93 x 123 cm.; 36 1/4 x 48 1/2 in.

ESTIMATE $17,000,000-25,000,000 GBP
Lot Sold: 18,533,750 GBP

PROVENANCE
Sold directly by the artist, in 1844, to one of his most important patrons, Elhanan Bicknell (1788–1861), Carlton House, Herne Hill, Dulwich;
His sale, London, Christie’s, 25 April 1863, lot 118, to Agnew’s on behalf of Ralph Brocklebank;
Ralph Brocklebank (1803–1892), Childwall Hall, Liverpool;
By descent to his second son, Thomas Brocklebank (1841–1919);
By descent to his third son, Captain Henry Cyril Royds Brocklebank, CBE, RN (1874–1957);
Sold by his trustees through Agnew’s in 1942 to Wentworth Beaumont, 2nd Viscount Allendale (1890–1956);
By descent to his son, Wentworth Hubert Charles Beaumont, 3rd Viscount Allendale (1922–2002);
By whom sold (The Property of the Rt. Hon. The Viscount Allendale), London, Sotheby’s, 7 July 1965, lot 90, to
Agnew’s, acting on behalf of an English private collector;
Thence by descent.

EXHIBITED
London, Royal Academy of Arts, 1835, no. 74;
Liverpool, Arts Club, Loan Collection of Oil Paintings by British Artists born before 1801, 1881, no. 38;
London, Royal Academy, Works by Old Masters, 1883, no. 211;
London, Guildhall Art Gallery, Loan Collection of Pictures and Drawings by J.M.W. Turner..., 1899, no. 33 (lent by Thomas Brocklebank);
King’s Lynn, The Fermoy Art Gallery, A Collection of the Nineteen-Sixties, 22 July – 5 August 1972, no. 11;
Paris, Petit Palais, Le Peinture romantique anglaise et les Preraphaelites, 1972, no. 266;
Berlin, Nationalgalerie Staattliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, William Turner 1775–1851, 1972, no. 19;
London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Byron, 1974, no. 538;
London, Royal Academy, Turner 1775–1851, 1974–75, no. 514;
Hamburg, Kunsthalle, William Turner und die Landschaft seiner Zeit, 1976, no. 106;
London, Tate Gallery, Late Turner: Painting Set Free, 10 September 2014 – 25 January 2015, no. 88;
Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, Late Turner: Painting Set Free, 24 February – 24 May 2015, no. 88;

LITERATURE
P. Cunningham, 'The Memoir', in J. Burnet, Turner and his Works, London 1852, p. 117, no. 183;
C. F. Bell, A List of Works contributed to Public Exhibitions by J.M.W. Turner, London 1901, p. 126, no. 195;
Sir W. Armstrong, Turner, London 1902, pp. 120, 221, reproduced opposite p. 146;
J. Evans and J. Howard Whitehouse (eds), The Diaries of John Ruskin 1835–1847, Oxford 1956, pp. 268 and 270;
G. Reynolds, Turner, London 1969, no. 81;
CATALOGUE NOTE

The only oil painting by Turner of a German subject left in private hands, this magnificent picture is one of the artist’s great late masterpieces. Painted to enable his close friend, the engraver John Pye, to produce a large single plate engraving – one of the important select series of large prints by which the artist established his contemporary celebrity – it is based on a series of on the spot pencil sketches made during Turner’s third tour of the Rhine in 1833. When it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1835 Ehrenbreitstein elicited huge critical acclaim and it has been considered one of the artist’s most celebrated masterpieces ever since. In 1844 the painting was bought directly from Turner’s studio by a man who would become one of his greatest and most important late patrons, Elhanan Bicknell. Bicknell’s collection included some of Turner’s finest late paintings, as well as many of his most important watercolours, chief among them being the great Blue Rigi (Tate Britain, London). Later owned by another great 19th century collector, the shipping magnate Ralph Brocklebank of Liverpool, Ehrenbreitstein has had a distinguished provenance to this day and has only been sold at auction twice in over one hundred and eighty years.

More than a landscape, the painting brings together two of the most romantic figures of the nineteenth century – Turner and Lord Byron – as it directly evokes a passage from Canto III of Byron’s epic poem Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage. The view is that of the great fortress of Ehrenbreitstein, perched atop its eponymous craggy rock, above Coblenz at the confluence of the Rhine and the Mosel. Though Turner would return to this much loved Rhineland subject many times throughout his career – notably in a series of luminous watercolours from the early 1840s – only on this one occasion did he capture Ehrenbreitstein with the full expressive power of oil paint, and on such a grand scale. It represents the pinnacle of Turner’s emotional and creative engagement with both the place and with the issues evoked in Byron’s verse: the complexity of peace after war, the resilience of mankind, and the joys of freedom.

Turner is one of those preeminent 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, 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 he perfected in watercolour to the use of oil, with successive layering of translucent colour thinly applied to the surface, which imbue his canvases with a rich, hazy light, he gave his works a potency and power that had never been achieved before, and 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 1830s until his death in 1851 – are considered to be the artist’s supreme achievement. It is upon these pictures that his artistic significance ultimately rests. Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1835, when Turner was 60 years old, this spectacular painting is a magnificent example of the artist’s mature handling of oil, distinguished by a rich, warm palette and diaphanous effects of brilliant light. It is one of only six major works by Turner left in private hands and when it last appeared on the market, over half a century ago, it set the record price for the artist.

The Subject – Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage

An epic narrative poem published between 1812 and 1818, Byron’s Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage describes the travels and reflections of a world-weary young man – the semi-autobiographical eponymous hero Harold – disillusioned with a life of pleasure and revelry and looking for distraction in foreign lands. The term Childe in the title of the poem derives from the Old English Cild, or Young Lord, and was the medieval title given to the son of a nobleman who had not yet ‘won his spurs’ and attained knighthood. At its heart the poem is an expression of Byron’s own personal philosophy and the melancholy and disillusionment felt by a generation weary of the wars that had ravaged Europe in the post-Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras. Exhibiting the painting at the Royal Academy with the following lines from the poem, Turner realises the vision of Byron’s hero as he travels down the ‘wide and winding Rhine’, ‘between banks which bear the vine, and hills all rich with blossom’d trees’ with scattered cities ‘whose far white walls along them shine’:

“By Coblenz, on a rise of gentle ground, There is a small and simple pyramid, Crowning the summit of the verdant mound; Beneath its base are heroes’ ashes hid, Our enemy’s – but let that not forbid Honour to Marceau – he was freedom’s champion! Here Ehrenbreitstein, with her shattered wall, Yet shows of what she was...”

‘Freedom’s champion’, General François-Sévérine Marceau-Desgraviers (1769–1796) had been a great hero of the French Revolutionary Army, and took part in the sieges of Ehrenbreitstein in 1795 and 1796 (fig. 1). Noted equally for his bravery and his humanity, Marceau’s meteoric rise and early celebrity were much like that of the young Napoleon Bonaparte. As a twenty-year-old sergeant on leave in Paris he had taken part in the storming of the Bastille and by twenty four he was a General. Later given command of the First Division of the Armée de Sambre-et-Meuse, he was killed by the bullet of an Austrian sniper whilst covering the French retreat at the Battle of Altenkirchen. His body was escorted back to the Rhine and buried with full military honours north of Coblenz, where the French army were headquartered. Marceau was so respected by his adversaries that a delegation from the Austrian Army was sent to attend the funeral on the orders of their commander, Archduke Charles. His burial was saluted by a discharge of artillery from both armies and a stone obelisk, designed by Marceau’s friend Jean-Baptiste Kléber (1753-1800), a German born general in the French revolutionary army (who had studied architecture in Paris before becoming a soldier), was erected above his grave. His early death, at the age of just twenty-seven, the dramatic circumstances of his funeral and the many stories concerning his bravery gave widespread appeal to his image as a Romantic hero. As is so often the case with Turner’s Byronic landscapes the poet’s reflections on the history and associations of European scenery were amplified by the painter’s own sentiments. Like the Maid of Saragossa – the heroine from Canto I of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage – Marceau was one of those heroes and exemplars through whom both artist and poet could express their wider European sympathies and historic impartiality. In this picture, more than almost any other, Turner is in the unique position of painting a picture which combines both an allusion to the poet whose work inspired him increasingly during the 1830s with a subject in nature which fascinated him to an unusual degree.

Turner’s Coblenz and the Fortress of Ehrenbreitstein

The painting depicts the great German fortress of Ehrenbreitstein – the ‘Broad Stone of Honour’ – once
impregnable but now ruined and decayed with time, perched high atop its eponymous rock, bathed in the
tender pink light of late afternoon sun. Based on a series of sketches made on a single large sheet, folded
into sixteen sections, produced on Turner’s third trip to the Rhine in 1833 (figs 2–4),³ the view is taken from
the West, with the river Mosel running up from the lower right foreground to meet the mighty Rhine, which
flows from right to left across the picture, between the bank of trees in the middle distance and the mountain
beyond. At its confluence, visible in the centre right of the composition, is the site of the present day
Deutsches Eck (‘German Corner’ – where a monumental equestrian statue of William I, the first German
Emperor, was erected in 1897).
Before the mountain, beyond the grassy foreground and bestriding all three banks of the intersection of the
two rivers, the city of Coblenz shimmers in the hazy light. On the right the Balduinbrücke, the oldest bridge in
the city dating back to the 14th century, connects the old town in the south (on the far right) with the district
of Lützel – famous for its viticulture – with the vineyards covering the northern bank of the Mosel in the lower
right. In the near foreground local peasants returning from their vines with woven baskets full of grapes on
their backs – Byron’s ‘peasant girls, with deep blue eyes’ that ‘walk smiling o’er this paradise’⁴ – mingle, side
by side in tranquill harmony with Austrian troops on the site of what is now the modern day Volkspark. On the
left a spring fed fountain trickles cool water into a stone basin – refreshment for the labourers coming up
from the vineyards – amplifying the calm serenity of the scene.
Beyond the immediate foreground, illuminated against the evening dusk by the glow of the setting sun, is the
tomb of Marceau, silhouetted against a bank of tall trees, with the troops of both the Austrian Empire and the
French Revolutionary Army encamped around its base – come to honour a noble foe and comrade alike.
Formed up in ceremonial ranks, their bright uniforms and tall bearskins dulled by the diminishing light, the
soldiers loom out of the mist like some ghastly vision of events past. Long shadows cast across the picture,
submerging bygone events; whilst a warm evening light bathes the realities of the present in glorious
sunshine as a cool evening mist rises off the river – the whole blended and subdued by an almost visible
atmosphere of subtle effects of hazy light. At the far left a small fox looks on, stopping to survey the folly of
human ambition.
From the lower right, close to the picture plane, soars a high rising avenue of ivy clad trees which break the
skyline – a classically Turnerian compositional device which balances the mass of the mountain on the left
and allows the viewer’s eye to rise with the aerial perspective. A path runs diagonally through the foreground
and the curve of the river leads up from the lower right, drawing the eye into the landscape and creating an
extraordinarily sophisticated sense of recession. More than in almost any other work by the artist the viewer
is left with a very real sense of being able to step right into the painting; the atmosphere of which is blended
by the warm light of the setting sun, which sinks into the distant horizon and melts into the mighty river in a
diaphanous display of soft light and translucent forms. To the left, behind the luminous mountain, the moon
rises in the vaporous sky. This is yet another layering of Byronic reference, inspired by two lines from Canto
IV of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage: ‘The moon is up, and yet it is not night, / Sunset divides the sky with her’.
Turner would quote these lines directly when he exhibited both Modern Rome – Campo Vaccino (1839, The
Getty, Los Angeles) and Approach to Venice (1844, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.) at the Royal
Academy, and here it shows how deeply the poet’s imagery had penetrated his subconscious and influenced
the artist’s own emotional response to the scene.
Turner’s conscious mis-translation of ‘broad stone’ for ‘bright’ in the painting’s title reflects his fascination
with the changing colours of Ehrenbreitstein at different times of day - for Turner is the definitive painter of
light. As with all Turner’s greatest late paintings, it is the artist’s treatment of light and the deconstruction of
form which give the painting its emotional power. The infinite subtlety with which he captures the last warm
rays of evening sun filtering through the mist, picking out the architectural detail of the city in soft reflected
light, with here and there the occasional dash of brilliant white. With thin, wetly applied glazes of translucent
paint Turner blurs the boundaries of river, bank and mountain, bleeding the forms together as they are seen
through the haze of light and air. It is this richness of colour and the subtle effects of light and atmosphere, with no recourse to incidental detail, that underpin the genius of his late masterpieces. Turner had first visited the great fortress of Ehrenbreitstein on his tour of the Rhine in 1817, in connection with a projected series of engravings of German rivers, and made numerous sketches of the castle and surrounding town of Coblenz. He would revisit the Rhineland many times during the course of his career, in 1824, 1833, 1835, and annually from 1839 to 1844 in an unbroken series of summer sketching tours. Of all the many sublime spots along the river – the scenic highway of Northern Europe – it was the craggy splendour of Ehrenbreitstein that most captured the artist’s imagination and he would return to the subject again and again in watercolour throughout his career. A series of superb drawings from the early 1840s in the Turner Bequest at the Tate, showing the fortress under differing conditions of light and at different times of day, represent one of the high points of the artist’s late work on paper (fig. 5), matched only in his own work by his celebrated series of drawings of the Rigi on Lake Lucerne (fig. 6), another luminous rocky massif. His determination to capture such transient natural phenomena is directly comparable with Monet’s repetitive studies of Haystacks, or his endless fascination with the façade of Rouen Cathedral (figs. 7 & 8). Indeed the latter were often compared by Monet’s contemporaries to Turner’s own views of the same structure, and the younger artist maintained a dialogue with Turner’s work throughout his career, particularly in his late London series. Recognising Monet’s debt to Turner, when the former exhibited his thirty-seven London views of the Thames at Durand-Ruel’s gallery in Paris in 1904 the art critic Gustave Kahn commented: ‘If it is true that Turner liked to compare certain of his works to certain of Claude Lorrain’s, then one might place certain Monets beside certain Turners. One would thereby compare two branches, two moments of Impressionism, or rather... integrate two moments in a history of visual sensitivity.’ Look closely at Turner’s treatment of the architecture of Coblenz, in the lower right of this painting, and you see precisely where Monet’s cityscapes of Venice or London come from.

Though Turner would depict Ehrenbreitstein many times in watercolour and pencil, this is his only oil painting of the subject. Indeed it is one of only half a dozen oil paintings that the artist ever did of Germany. Combining a quintessentially Turnerian and Byronic mingling of beauty and pathos, it represents the pinnacle of Turner’s emotional and creative engagement with the Rhine.

Turner & Germany

Although to some Turner is best remembered for his quintessentially British paintings of industrial progress, such as The Fighting Temeraire and Rain, Steam, Speed – The Great Western Railway (both National Gallery, London), in his latter years Turner travelled extensively throughout Europe; setting out every summer on sketching tours that lasted several months and returning to his studio in the winter to prepare for the following years’ Academy exhibitions. By the time of his death he was the most travelled British artist of the 19th century and views of European landscape – be they cityscapes of Venice and Rome, the rivers of France, or picturesque mountain scenery in Switzerland – feature heavily among his Royal Academy exhibition entries in the last twenty years of his life. Germany, in particular, played a very important part in his working life for nearly thirty years and between 1817 and 1844 he travelled the length and breadth of the country, from the Baltic to the Alps and from Aachen in the west to Dresden in the east. His most frequent visits, however, were to the Rhineland which he visited both as a picturesque destination in its own right and, increasingly in the 1840s, as his preferred route to the Swiss Alps and Italy. However, whilst Turner produced a large number of German watercolours, particularly of the Rhine (Wilton lists over two hundred watercolour views of Germany by Turner, over seventy of which are Rhineland subjects, see figs 11–13), his oil paintings of Germany are surprisingly few in number. Indeed only six German oil paintings by his brush exist. The earliest of these is the monumental Cologne, the arrival of the Packet Boat (The Frick Collection, New York), painted as a pendant to the Harbour of Dieppe (also Frick Collection, New York). In addition to Ehrenbreitstein, the rest of his German oil paintings consist of two versions of Schloss Rosenau (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool & Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven); a
painting of Heidelberg that was left unfinished in his studio at the artist’s death (Turner Bequest, Tate, London, fig. 9); and Turner’s great tribute to King Ludwig I of Bavaria, The Opening of the Wallhalla (Turner Bequest, Tate, London, fig. 10), which he sent to the Congress of European Art in Munich in 1845. Of the watercolours the vast majority are also in major museums, particularly his views of Ehrenbreitstein, which include those at Bury Art Gallery, the Yale Centre for British Art, the National Museum of Wales and the Fogg Art Museum.

The Significance of Ehrenbreitstein

The Rhineland is an area of enormous historic and cultural significance. For much of its length the ancient boarder between France and Germany, both the Rhine and the Mosel had been vital conduits for trade for centuries and by the 1820s the area was well established as a popular tourist destination. The rock upon which the castle of Ehrenbreitstein stands, guarding the confluence of these two important rivers, was first settled in the 4th millennium BC and has been home to a fortified structure since the 10th century BC. A Roman military fort existed there from the 3rd to 5th centuries AD and it was a strategically significant site under Charlemagne. The earliest extant documentary reference to the castle itself dates to 1139, in which it is referred to as the property of the Archbishop of Trier, and during the Middle Ages Ehrenbreitstein gained enormous spiritual significance for its role in guarding the most valuable relic of the Trier See: the Holy Tunic – the seamless robe said to have been worn by Christ during his crucifixion. Commanding a position of enormous strategic importance, the fortress was used by successive Archbishops to consolidate their power through countless turbulent upheavals and Ehrenbreitstein was besieged many times over the centuries. During the Thirty Years’ War it was occupied first by the French, in 1632, and then by Imperial troops of the Holy Roman Empire in 1637. In 1636 the Earl of Arundel had travelled up the Rhine on his embassy to Germany in the company of the artist Wenceslaus Hollar, who provides one of the earliest visual records of the castle of Ehrenbreitstein. Travelling up river by horse drawn boat, much as Turner would have done almost two hundred years later, they arrived at Coblenz just as Imperial troops were in the midst of besieging the fortress. Renowned for its impregnability, perched high atop its natural sheer sided rock, in 1688 the fortress successfully withstood another French siege, this time by the forces of Louis XIV, and when French revolutionary troops captured Coblenz in 1794 the Prussian defenders managed to withstand three assaults upon the fort. It was not until 1799, following a yearlong blockade which brought the defenders to starvation, that the French finally managed to take the fortress. In 1801, as they retreated from the right bank of the Rhine following the Treaty of Lunéville, French forces blew it up and it was in this state that Turner first encountered the castle. He would depict it as such in almost all his views of Ehrenbreitstein, even after reconstruction had begun in the 1820s; the romantic ruin with “her shattered wall” – “But piece destroyed what war could never blight, / And laid those proud roofs bare to Summer’s rain – / On which the iron shower for years had pour’d in vain’.

Turner & Byron: The First Romantics

Turner and Byron are arguably the greatest two figures of the Romantic era, and they had a great deal in common. Both were tireless travellers and both had the same strong emotional reaction to nature and to the strongly contrasting appearance of landscapes all over Europe. They stirred up controversy and had to face fierce criticism often couched in similar language, and were intolerant of any lack of inspiration in their contemporaries. Both were often angry and believed that their genius was not properly appreciated. Though the younger of the two, Byron died in 1824 aged only thirty-six – Turner was then forty-nine and was still to paint some of this greatest work in the remaining twenty-seven years of his life. It is unclear whether the two men ever met; though they were both in Venice in 1819 (Byron was away during the brief period of Turner’s visit in September and returned the day after Turner left). In view of their independent characters it is unlikely that they would have got on however. Byron certainly showed no great interest in art, though he did admire Canova and Fuseli, befriended Lawrence and commissioned his own portrait from Westall. Turner by contrast loved poetry and lost little opportunity to add quotations from poems, often his own, to his Royal Academy
In 1812, Byron published the first two cantos of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, a poem describing the thoughts and travels of a pilgrim who seeks distraction from his life of dissipation in foreign travel. The poem was an enormous success, and made Byron famous throughout Europe. There has been speculation as to when Turner was first introduced to Byron’s poetry, particularly to Childe Harold. He certainly would have been aware of the numerous reviews of the work, and his friend George Jones made a number of illustrations based on Childe Harold in the year it was published. However, the most likely link was with Turner’s friend and patron, Walter Fawkes, a patriotic liberal with a notable library who was later to commission from the artist his first direct illustration to Byron’s work in watercolour The Acropolis, Athens (The Vouros - Eutaxias Museum of the City of Athens) as well as the dramatic watercolour version of The Field of Waterloo (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge). This latter subject was the first of six paintings by Turner exhibited between 1818 and 1844 with quotations from Byron’s Childe Harold.

When the oil of The Field of Waterloo (Tate Gallery) was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1818 it was accompanied by nine lines from the recently published third canto of Childe Harold, the last line reading “Rider and horse – friend, foe, – in one red burial blent”. Byron had visited the battlefield in 1816 on a Cossack horse and steadfastly refused to take a triumphalist view to Napoleon’s defeat. Turner visited a year later, filling seventeen pages of his notebook with studies. The resulting picture was certainly not what his contemporaries would have expected, following as it does Byron’s grimly realistic view of the battle as expressed in his poem rather than one of the many celebratory verses written at the time. Poet and artist were at one in their determination to make no distinction between the two sides, and to depict not the triumphant victory but the tragic carnage. It is significant that Turner travelled on from Waterloo to the Rhine only a year after the publication of the third canto of Childe Harold, and he must have been inspired by its vivid description of the river and its picturesque castles.

Byron’s spirit continued to fire Turner’s inspiration but it was not until 1832 that he exhibited the next picture with specific quotations from Childe Harold. The picture was entitled Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage – Italy (Tate Gallery, London, fig. 14), and is a tribute to the splendour of Italy as a whole rather than to any particular location. Byron had written of a country full of ruins from its great past but redeemed by the beauty of the countryside. This was a concept close to Turner’s heart which was to imbue many of his great paintings of Italy and he certainly felt at one with Byron. The picture can be seen as the artist’s tribute to the great poet.

Three years later, Turner exhibited Ehrenbreitstein, a place which he had visited in his 1817 Rhine tour and which Byron had also seen and admired. The tragic General Marceau, killed in 1796 at the age of only twenty-seven, was at the time a true Byronic hero, and as with the fallen French at Waterloo, he was to be honoured as a champion of freedom. The splendour of the composition with its dazzling light shows how vividly Turner has reacted to the poignant beauty of the still ruined castle in this romantic setting, and how closely he felt in tune with Byron’s poem. The next three of Turner’s compositions with quotations from Byron were of two great Italian cities. In 1839, Turner exhibited Modern Rome – Campo Vaccino (Getty Museum, Los Angeles, fig. 15) with two lines adapted from the fourth canto of Childe Harold. Painted as a companion piece to Ancient Rome, the picture shows Turner employing one of his favourite themes, the contrast between ancient and modern civilisation, the modern city shown in all its beauty but a beauty tinged with sadness at its decay. The idea of an ironic contrast between the past and the present was a common theme in Byron’s works, and in relation to Rome both Byron and Turner believed strongly that despite the tyranny of Austria and the corruption of the papacy the city would be redeemed by the beauty of nature. The next two paintings directly linked to Byron were of Venice. Venice, the Bridge of Sighs (Tate Gallery) was exhibited the next year and The Approach to Venice (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.) in 1844, both with quotations from the fourth canto of Childe Harold. Byron lived for some time in Venice, and this fourth canto has a memorable image of the great city rising from the waters like an Eastern goddess. The quotation chosen in respect to the first picture emphasizes the contrast between the splendour of the palace to the left and the grim prison to
the right, emblematic of the tyranny of Austrian rule. In the latter painting Turner chose a favourite quotation from Byron which described the approach of night, both beautiful and ominous, the sun disputing the day with the moon. Turner also added a quotation from Childe Harold to the engraving by Hollis of his celebrated Juliet and Her Nurse; Romeo and Juliet transferred to Venice and the composition enlivened by the reference to Byron’s evocation of the city as one of festivity and revels.

1832, the year that Turner exhibited Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage – Italy also saw the publication of Finden’s Landscape Illustrations to Byron and Murray’s edition of Moore’s Life and Works of Byron. Finden’s illustrations were produced in fourteen monthly parts and Turner contributed nine landscape subjects, mostly from Childe Harold but with a number of Greek subjects. Turner had always been deeply interested in Greece with its history and antiquity, and in 1799 almost went to Greece with Lord Elgin. His two great Greek subjects exhibited at the Royal academy in 1816 must certainly have been inspired to some degree by Childe Harold even if when exhibited they did not have quotations from Byron, and Turner was able to use Greek sketches by other artists for Finden’s work in a way that transformed them into his own style. Moore’s Life was republished in 1832 with illustrations by a number of artists. Turner produced seventeen vignettes for this, which included views of places with which he was familiar and places further east which he had never visited. Again such was his empathy with Byron as a traveller that the vignettes could have been painted by Turner from life. The evidence of Byron’s influence is clear from the illustrations which Turner produced for the edition of his works and in the paintings which he exhibited with specific quotations from the poet’s works. However, Byron’s influence can be felt much more widely, in the extraordinary extent of his travels, in his choice of subject matter and in his reaction to the forces of nature. Since he first came into contact with Byron’s poetry, Turner’s life changed and he was inspired to recreate the marvels of nature in his paintings rather as if he was a Byronic hero. In 1969, Kenneth Clarke summed up the aspect of Byron’s poetry which appealed so particularly to Turner – “a self-identification with the great forces of nature: not Wordsworth’s daisies and daffodils, but crags, cataracts and colossal storms; in short, with the sublime”.

Critical reception

The mid-1830s saw the production of some of Turner’s most celebrated paintings. The great Rosebery view of Rome, from Mount Aventine (which recently sold at auction for a record £30 million, fig. 16) would have been nearing competition in the artist’s studio when he set to work on Ehrenbreitstein; and the picture was exhibited at the Academy alongside Keelman heaving coals by night (National Gallery of Art, Washington); Venice, from the Porch of the Madonna della Salute (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, fig. 17); Line Fishing off Hastings (Victoria and Albert Museum, London); and The Burning of the House of Lords and Commons (The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio, fig. 18). Of all five exhibits it was Ehrenbreitstein that the public reacted to most, and that the critics judged the best. The correspondent for The Spectator called it ‘a splendid tribute of genius to one of the champions of freedom’, whilst The Times lauded ‘the force of colour and the admirable harmony of tone [which] are not to be equalled by any living artist’. The editor of Frazer’s Magazine found the painting ‘beautiful’ and thought it superior to Turner’s other exhibits at the Academy, whilst the Athenaeum wrote that ‘imagination and reality strive for mastery in this noble picture’. It was not only the London critics, however, who were full of praise. In Paris the eminent French art critic Gustave Planche wrote in poetic awe of Ehrenbreitstein in the Revue de Deux Mondes:

’il m’est impossible de croire qu’un pareil paysage ait jamais existé ailleurs que dans la royaume des fées;... Est-ce (le montagne) le l’or, de l’acajou, du velours ou du biscuit? La pensé se fatigue en conjectures et ne sait ou s’arrêter. Le ciel où nagent les lignes de l’horizon est lumineux et diaphane. Mais ni L’Espagne, ni L’Italie, ni les rives du Bosphore, n’ont pu servir de type à Turner pour la creation de cette splendid atmosphere...’.

(‘It is impossible for me to believe that such a landscape has ever existed elsewhere than in the kingdom of fairies;... Is the golden mountain made of mahogany, velvet or biscuit? My mind tires in conjectures and I do not know when to stop my reveries. The sky, where the lines of the horizon swim, is luminous and diaphanous. But neither Spain, nor Italy, nor the shores of the Bosphorus, could have served
as examples to Turner for the creation of such a splendid atmosphere.’) 11

Ruskin, who saw the picture in 1844 at the studio of the engraver John Pye, probably expressed it most succinctly, noting in his diary for 2 May that year: ‘visited Pye where I saw the finest Turner I have come across for many a day – the Ehrenbreitstein.’

In a foretaste of the reception with which the traditional art establishment would greet the arrival of Impressionism almost half a century later, however, not all Turner’s contemporaries were quite as appreciative of the artist’s daring originality. The classically minded German art historian Gustav Waagen, on his first trip to England, visited the Royal Academy with the particular intention of seeking out the paintings by Turner; an artist whose work he knew and had much admired from the small steel engravings in popular circulation in Germany at the time. Confronted with Turner in the original, however, in the full magnificence of his late style, the Renaissance scholar wrote ‘but I could scarcely trust my eyes when, in a view of Ehrenbreitstein... I found such a looseness, such a total want of truth, as i had ever before met with. He has here succeeded in combining a crude, painted medley with a general foggy appearance’ – a criticism he also directed at The Burning of the House of Lords and Commons. The Reverend John Eagles, reviewing the exhibition for Blackwood’s Magazine, was as harsh as usual, criticising the picture’s ‘raw white and unharmonising blue’ and declaring Ehrenbreitstein to have ‘no more poetry than the pairing of a toe nail’. Eagles had long been critical of Turner’s increasingly ethereal style of painting, his avant-garde handling of colour and the deconstruction of form. In was at the following year’s Academy exhibition, in 1836, that matters would come to a head. Following a particularly scathing attack on Turner’s Juliet and her Nurse – a dazzling view of Venice – the young John Ruskin, who was to become one of the artist’s most ardent champions, was driven to write an impassioned defence of Turner’s art against the glib superficiality of Eagles’ criticism. Although, at Turner’s request, Ruskin’s rebuttal was never published, it would later find full expression in Modern Painters – Ruskin’s greatest contribution to nineteenth century art history, published in five volumes between 1843 and 1860. A tour de force of contemporary art criticism, Ruskin’s prose descriptions of Turner’s paintings paralleled the pictures themselves and were justification alone for the artist’s work. Praising his ‘many coloured mists... such as you might imagine to be ethereal spirits’, which ‘with the beauty of uncertain light... move and mingle’ upon the canvas, 12 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’. 13

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 rightly recognised as the work of a visionary that presaged the development of modern art in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When this picture was exhibited at Tate Britain in 2014, in the seminal show Late Turner: Painting Set Free, the curator, Professor Sam Smiles, demonstrated that, 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. His art should properly be understood not 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 concerns about 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’. 14 It is in such great masterpieces as Ehrenbrietstein that we witness this great artist at the height of his powers, using techniques mastered over a lifetime of experimentation in both oil and watercolour, exhibited to such dazzling
Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Turner did not merely see pictures as a means of illustrating a single subject, but used painting as a means of distilling experiences and conveying multifaceted ideas about nature, history and the world in which he lived. It is precisely for this reason that the meaning of his work is sometimes elusive, for the titles of his paintings and the iconography within them are principally there to prompt chains of thought and associations within the viewer’s mind. They do not exhaust the 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’. If there is mystery in Turner’s work, it is because there is mystery in nature; if poetry overwhelms prose, it is because nature and painting are essentially poetic. 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’.

The History of the Painting
Ehrenbreitstein has a highly distinguished provenance, which can be traced right back to its original commission and conception. Painted to enable John Pye, one of the leading engravers of his generation, to produce a large scale print, it was always the intention that the painting itself should return to Turner’s gallery; from whence it was sold by the artist to the distinguished collector Elhanan Bicknell, one of Turner’s most important patrons. It has only appeared at auction twice in the one hundred and eighty two years since it was painted, and it is largely as a result of this that the picture has remained in such exceptionally good condition. On the few occasions that it has appeared on the open market, Ehrenbreitstein has rightly been recognised as one of Turner’s greatest masterpieces.

Turner’s large scale prints and the genesis of Ehrenbreitstein
The majority of Turner’s works that were engraved were produced on a small scale; to be published in topographical or literary series. However a small number of his celebrated oil paintings and more substantial exhibition watercolours were specifically chosen by the artist to be published as large single plate engravings. In the days before public art galleries it was through these large engravings that Turner established his contemporary celebrity and the artist devoted much time and energy into supervising their production, demanding an exacting standard from the stable of engravers he used. Ehrenbreitstein was one such picture; painted specifically for the engraver John Pye, a close friend and collaborator of the artist, who had engraved one of Turner’s earlier watercolour views of Ehrenbreitstein for The Literary Souvenir in 1828. As early as 1809 Pye had worked on the plate for Turner’s Pope’s Villa at Twickenham and the artist had particularly praised his superior skill in capturing the luminosity of the original, especially in the sky. On seeing the first proof for the print Turner is said to have exclaimed; ‘This will do! You can see the lights; had I known that there was a man who could do that, I would have had it done before’; and each had a strong reciprocal appreciation for the other’s work.

Pye had originally anticipated another watercolour, and had planned to work on the plate whilst he was abroad educating his daughter, but, as Cecilia Powell discusses at greater length elsewhere in this catalogue, what he received instead was this magnificent oil painting; one of the artist’s great late masterpieces, with all its inherent depth of colour and complexity of light. The engraver’s original proposal of carrying out the work abroad proved unworkable on account of the picture’s size and complexity and in the end the print took eleven years to materialise. Evidence of the mutual frustration of both artist and engraver can be found in the Pye manuscripts at the Victoria and Albert Museum, which give some detail of the painting’s genesis. On 19 August 1835, after the painting had been exhibited at the Royal Academy, Pye wrote to Turner: “Dear Sir – I beg to subjoin a brief memorandum of the terms on which you were led to paint the picture of
Ehrenbreitstein; and to assure you that I am fully prepared to carry my part of it into effect – I have carefully looked at the different propositions made since the picture has been painted, for Engraving the plate on a large scale, for you to pay half the price of Engraving it &c.; but they all appear objectionable, and throw me back to the original one in which we started, and which led you to offer to paint the picture instead of making a Drawing."

On the back of the letter Pye included a memorandum outlining the original agreement between himself and the artist, in which he makes it clear that: “The picture of Ehrenbreitstein was painted to be lent to Mr Pye for the purpose of a plate being Engraved from it about the size of a work Box, i.e. the size of Mr G. Cookes plate of Rotterdam,” and that, once the print was completed the picture was “to be returned to Mr Turner within the space of five years.”19 At the beginning of 1842, however, the print was still not ready and an exasperated Turner wrote to Pye:

“My dear Sir – Year after year rolls on and no proof of Ehrenbreitstein appears – I do request you to proceed (pray state your own time) or let me have the Picture.”20

By 1844, however, progress had clearly been made. The painting returned that year to Turner’s gallery from where he sold it to his friend and patron Elhanan Bicknell. Despite this the engraving was clearly still not complete and Turner would not actually hand the picture over to Bicknell until he was completely satisfied that everything had been done to finish the plate to his exacting standards. On 23 June 1845 it was Bicknell’s turn to apply pressure on Pye, and he wrote to the engraver saying:

“My getting the painting appears as distant now as it was in March 1844. I thought I had only to send to Queen Anne Street to have it – but the grim master of the Castle Giant Grimbo shakes his head and says he and you must first agree that all is done to the plate that is necessary, and the picture will be wanted to refer to. Now as I know he goes out a good deal fishing at this season – & then leaves town for some months tour in the Autumn I hope you will do what is required while he is still in town. He is at home today & tomorrow, for he is to dine with me tomorrow – he said he would then get off after the fish, Pray fasten your strongest hook into him before he fairly takes water again or he may get so far and so deep down than even a harpoon will not reach him.”21

The engraving was finally published on 2 March 1846 (fig. 19), with a dedication to Bicknell. One of only twenty two such large scale prints after Turner’s work, it immediately established the painting’s status as one of the artist’s most celebrated works.

As Sir Nicholas Serota has commented, during his own lifetime Turner’s primary means of communication with the public at large was through engravings.22 Whilst his paintings were seen by those who visited the exhibitions of the British Institution and the Royal Academy – royalty, the aristocracy, connoisseurs and wealthy collectors – and the private gallery he set up in Marylebone was frequented by a close knit group of patrons and friends, by means of the illustrated topographical tour or souvenir Annual he could reach everyone with access to a library. As such, Turner’s work and his celebrated status as Europe’s greatest landscape painter were best known to the contemporary public through engraved reproductions of his pictures, rather than the works themselves. From very early on in his career he had been well aware of the role engravings could play in popularising his work. Indeed, with the level of skill among English engravers of the period and the pioneering techniques that were being perfected in London at the time, Turner recognised print making as one of the greatest channels of communication available to the British artist – both as a way of increasing his celebrity and as a vehicle for communicating his ideas about landscape painting. That he selected this picture to be one of just twelve oil paintings engraved as large scale single plates indicates the importance he placed upon it.

Elhanan Bicknell

Listed by Paul Oppé, alongside John Sheepshanks, William Wells of Redleaf, Robert Vernon, Benjamin Godfrey Windus and Sir Isaac Lowthian Bell, as one of the six leading nineteenth-century collectors of modern art, Elhanan Bicknell, was one of Turner’s greatest patrons.23 Born, in 1788, into a prosperous
middle class family and brought up in the liberal, nonconformist atmosphere of Unitarianism, Bicknell was a successful merchant and ship owner who was heavily involved in the South Sea whaling industry. His uncle, John Walton Langton had invented a process for refining spermaceti ‘which, figuratively speaking, turned into gold what had previously been regarded as mere waste and a nuisance’, and in 1808 he had gone into partnership with his cousin, John Bicknell Langton, as an oil merchant at Newington Butts, near Elephant and Castle. The firm of Langton and Bicknell grew rapidly and at one point was said to own a fleet of more than thirty ships, with a complete monopoly of the Pacific sperm-whale fishery. By 1835, when the introduction of petroleum oil and coal gas begun to undercut the whale oil market, Bicknell had already made the fortune that would put together his remarkable collection of modern British paintings. A champion of free trade, such was his enlightened approach to business that, despite the injurious consequences to his own business, in the 1840s he supported the repeal of the Navigation Acts – Britain’s restrictions on colonial trade – and served as economic adviser to the governments of both Disraeli and Gladstone.

In 1810 Bicknell had married his partner’s sister, Hannah Langton, who bore him the first three of his thirteen children before she died in 1815. A second wife died in 1825 and the following year he married his third wife, Lucinda Browne, the 28 year old sister of Hablot Knight Browne, ‘Phiz’, Dickens’ illustrator. The Bicknells lived at Carlton House, Herne Hill, near Dulwich, an elegant late Georgian house set in generous park-like grounds in south London where the family established a model farm. Referred to in Elhanan’s day simply as ‘Herne Hill’, the house was extended and developed over more than forty years of residence with the addition of stuccoed wings, each larger than the existing building, as well as a splendid conservatory (fig. 21). The principal interior space consisted of three large rooms entirely given up to the display of pictures; the central room of which was a large drawing room lined with Rococo panelling in white and gold with Bicknell’s extensive collection of watercolours inset into the mouldings. On either side of this the dining room and another large drawing room were devoted to the display of oil paintings. A passionate Whig and a generous host, here Elhanan regularly entertained both artists and connoisseurs, and the Bicknells were close neighbours and family friends of John Ruskin, who lived just opposite. Other regular guest included David Roberts and Sir Edwin Landseer, as well as Turner and many other members of the Royal Academy, and his nephew Edgar Browne found the atmosphere at Herne Hill delightful ‘not only on account of the profusion and excellence of its art treasures, but for the certainty of meeting, especially on Sundays, a number of men occupying distinguished positions in the world of art.’ The children that were raised in the stimulating atmosphere of Herne Hill were, according to their cousin, ‘all above the average in personal appearance and intelligence.’

Henry, Bicknell’s eldest surviving son became an eminent collector in his own right and married the only daughter of the artist David Roberts, one of his father’s closest friends. Herman Bicknell, a noted oriental scholar, became an adventurous traveller and the first European to make the pilgrimage to Mecca undisguised; whilst their youngest brother, Clarence, was a talented amateur artist, botanist and archaeologist who founded the Museo Bicknell at Bordighera in Italy (now the Institute of Ligurian Studies).

On returning from a tour of Italy for the express purpose of seeing the great works of the Old Masters’ Elhanan is said to have announced that he had seen nothing he would ‘give a damn for,’ and this would be a guiding mantra in the formation of his collection, which was exclusively dedicated to the work of contemporary British artists. Remarkably for a man of his generation Bicknell did not acquire a single Old Master and though Gainsborough was represented in the collection, Reynolds and his school were not. More peculiarly he did not possess any work by Constable, despite the fact that the artist’s wife Maria Bicknell was a relative and C.R. Leslie, Constable’s biographer, was one of the Herne Hill circle. However this may well have had something to do with Ruskin’s influence. The artists whose work he did collect were those he entertained at Herne Hill, buying pictures directly from the artists themselves or at auction, but never through dealers. Preferring landscape and seascapes to other forms of painting, those best represented in the collection were his great friends Roberts and Landseer, as well as Clarkson Stansfield, Calcott, Thomas Webster and William Edward Frost in oils; and in watercolours Copley Fielding, Samuel Prout, de Wint,
Gastineau and William James Muller. His magnificent collection of paintings and watercolours by Turner were the pride of the collection however.

Bicknell’s serious awareness of Turner appears to have started in about 1835 and the earliest record of his interest in the artist’s work can be found in the dairy of another Royal Academician, E. W. Cooke, who noted on 16 January of that year: ‘Bicknell called and brought an extraordinary dog. He came to see the Turner pictures...’. Three years later he made his first foray into the market, acquiring two watercolours at Christie’s in 1838 – two views of Himalayan Mountains for White’s Views of India – but was soon buying on a much more ambitious scale. In 1841 he bought his first oil painting by the artist – Venice: the Giudecca, la Donna della Salute and San Georgio (previously on loan to the Art Institute of Chicago) from the Royal Academy for 250 guineas; followed in 1842 by another view of Venice, The Campo Santo (Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, fig. 22) for the same price, also at the Academy. It was in March 1844, however, that he made his biggest purchase, acquiring six major oil paintings by Turner in one go directly from the artist’s gallery, including the celebrated Palestrina – Composition (Tate Britain, London, fig. 23); two smaller oils of English landscapes, including Calder Bridge, Cumberland (Koriyama Municipal Art Museum, Japan); and three late masterpieces; Port Ruysdael (Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven), Wreckers – Coast of Northumberland (Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven) and the celebrated Ehrenbreitstein, for which he paid £401.1.9 (one of the two most expensive pictures he bought). Bicknell had clearly been keeping a close eye on the progress of Pye’s engraving and snapped up the painting as soon as he could, for Ruskin had recorded seeing Ehrenbreitstein in the print maker’s studio on 2 March and it can only just have returned to Turner’s gallery when he bought it.

Later that year he acquired two more oils directly from Turner, Helvoetsluys (Fuji Art Museum, Tokyo) and Van Goyen, looking out for a Subject (The Frick Collection, New York), and in June 1851 he bought a further two paintings at Christie’s, including Saltash with Water Ferry (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), though he later sold these on. As well as the ten oil paintings by Turner that were the jewel in the crown of Bicknell’s collection he also owned a large number of watercolours by the artist. Chief among these was the famous Blue Rigi (Tate Britain, London, fig. 6), but other Swiss views were commissioned directly from sketches the artist brought back from his 1841 trip to the Alps. A series of further sets of watercolours were acquired to decorate the panelled drawing room at Herne Hill and in 1854 Bicknell bought an important set of four early drawings of Yorkshire from the sale of the print seller Joseph Hogarth’s possessions, now in the Wallace Collection. As well as commissioning works from the artists he favoured and buying their paintings from the Royal Academy exhibitions, Bicknell also encouraged them by generously funding prints of their work and in 1845 financed the engraving of The Fighting Temeraire, another of the select pictures Turner chose to represent his work in large single plates.

Bicknell had intended his great collection to be left to the nation. For family reasons, however, following his death the pictures were sold in a series of sales at Christie’s in April 1863 that lasted over six days. Before the collection went to King Street it was on view at Herne Hill and so great was the excitement among connoisseurs, artists and amateurs alike that a line of visitors stretched for more than a mile around the house. The public were staggered that such a treasure-trove of modern art could have been amassed by one man and the Star compared Bicknell to ‘a Lorenzo the Magnificent’. The auction itself generated huge excitement and anticipation, and contemporary accounts describe how ‘strangers from all parts... artists, dealers, nobles, merchants, cognoscenti and literati filled the great room at Christie’s to overflowing: and even half way down the stairs they pressed.’ (see fig. 24) Bidding started quietly, with lots by Gainsborough and Lawrence being knocked down for less than forty guineas, but it soon picked up as works by Roberts, Clarkson Stansfield and Landseer started to come up. The real excitement began with lot 97, the first of the Turners, and ‘a shout of acclamation proclaimed how perfectly the long-humbled painter, the barber’s son of Maiden Lane had taken possession of the public mind.’ As each successive lot by the great artist was produced ‘a buzz of applause resounded throughout the multitude before even a single bidding was made,'
and sensational prices were achieved. This painting, lot 118 in the sale, was bought by Agnew’s for £1890 on behalf of Ralph Brocklebank of Liverpool. Bicknell had spent roughly £25,000 putting the collection together. After six days and five hundred and sixty six lots the auction had made £75,000.8s and all records had been broken.

Ralph Brocklebank

Ralph Brocklebank (1803–1892), of Childwall Hall near Liverpool, was the scion of an important shipping family who rose to become chairman of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board from 1863 to 1869. Founded in 1801, Brocklebank’s is one of the oldest merchant shipping companies in the world, having been started by Daniel Brocklebank, a successful master mariner and shipbuilder originally from Sheepscutt, near Portland, Maine, who had returned to Whitehaven following the American War of Independence. With lucrative trading routes to India, China and South America, in 1819 the firm moved to Liverpool where, in 1843, Ralph Brocklebank became a partner in the company with his cousin Thomas. Another prominent collector of contemporary British paintings, Brocklebank assembled one of the most celebrated art collections of the late nineteenth century in Britain. Copley Fielding, Birket Foster, Wilkie, Barret and Cox were all represented in the collection. So too were a large number of works by both John and Thomas Faed, including the latter’s In Time of War (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool); a portrait of the artist’s children by Sir John Everett Millais, playfully called The Wolf’s Den; and John Phillip’s La Bomba (Aberdeen Art Gallery). Of his collection of pictures by Turner the two highlights of the collection were Ehrenbreitstein and The Grand Canal, Venice (Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino), known then as The Marriage of the Adriatic, which he bought from Agnew’s in 1874 and had been one of the star lots at the sale of Ruskin’s collection. He also owned four further oils by Turner, including the early View of Somer-Hill near Tunbridge (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh) and a late seascape called The Beacon Light (National Museum of Wales, Cardiff); in addition to which he owned eight watercolour illustrations to Sir Walter Scott’s works which had belonged to the great novelist himself and hung for many years in the drawing room at Abbotsford; a series of spectacular northern watercolour views including Tantallon Castle (Manchester City Art Gallery); and two exceptionally beautiful watercolours by Turner of Lake Thun in Switzerland (recently sold in New York at Sotheby’s, 25 January 2017, lots 82 and 83).

Designed in the gothic style by John Nash and situated in a wooded park a few miles from Liverpool, Childwall Hall had been built by Bamber Gascoyne, Member of Parliament for Liverpool from 1780 to 1796, and was leased by Brocklebank from Gascoyne’s son-in-law, the Marquess of Salisbury (fig. 25). His extensive collection was scattered throughout the various apartments of the house, but the finest oil paintings were hung in the dining room, with smaller cabinet oils and the better watercolours in the library. As E. Rimbault Dibdin commented in his 1891 article on the Brocklebank collection at Childwall, during the late nineteenth-century there were probably few cities in England so rich in picture collections as Liverpool. Collecting art had been deep-rooted in the culture of the city’s rich mercantile elite for over a hundred years by the time Brocklebank started buying. As early as 1769, just one year after the foundation of the Royal Academy, the Liverpool Society of Artists had been established for the promotion of the fine arts in the city (a forerunner to the Liverpool Academy) and in 1774 the first loan exhibition of paintings outside of London had been held in Liverpool. The famous picture dealers Thos. Agnew & Sons had a gallery there from the 1860s and the city was home to such great collectors as Henry Blundell (1724–1810); William Roscoe (1753–1831); Holbrook Gaskell (1813–1909), who’s celebrated collection included Turner’s The Burning of the Houses of Parliament; George Holt (1824–1896), many of whose pictures are now in the Walker Art Gallery; Thomas Henry Ismay (1837–1899), owner of the White Star Line; David Jardine (1827–1911), Chairman of Cunard; John Miller (1798–1876), President of the Council of the Liverpool Academy in the 1850s; and Sir Henry Tate (1819–1899), who’s collection formed the foundation of the Tate Gallery.

Following his death in 1893 a portion of Brocklebank’s collection was sold by his executors at Christie’s, including a sizable group of both watercolours and oil paintings by Constable, Wilkie, David Roberts, Millais,
Thomas Faed, William Powell Frith and others. The rest of the collection was split between his two sons, Ralph Brocklebank Jnr (1840–1921), who lived at Haughton Hall, near Tarporley in Cheshire, and Thomas Brocklebank (1841–1919), who lived at Wateringbury Place, in Kent (fig. 26), both of whom were prominent collectors in their own right. This picture descended to the younger of the two, Thomas who, as well as contemporary works of art from the British School, owned a significant collection of European Old Masters. In 1919 Ehrenbreitstein was inherited by his third son Captain Henry Cyril Royds Brocklebank, CBE, RN (1874–1957), who sold the picture in 1942, again through Agnew’s, to Viscount Allendale. Henry’s elder brother, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hugh Royds Brocklebank, bequeathed his share of his father’s collection to Magdalen College, Oxford in the 1970s. The bequest included more than forty paintings, ranging from Italian Old Masters, including works by Pietro Lorenzetti and Sassoferrato, to Poussin, Richard Wilson and the modern British school, such as Augustus John, as well as a large number of etchings by Turner.

Viscount Allendale

Wentworth Beaumont, 2nd Viscount Allendale (1890–1956) was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge, before serving in the First World War with the Guards Machine Gun Regiment. Later a Government whip in the House of Lords during Ramsay MacDonald’s ministry, Allendale came from a long line of distinguished collectors. The family seats were Bretton Hall in West Yorkshire (fig. 27), which was extensively remodelled by Sir Jeffrey Wyatville in the early nineteenth century and is now the site of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, and Bywell Hall, in Northumberland. The collection, which The Daily Telegraph described in 1956 as ‘one of the most outstanding private art holdings in the country,’ was particularly strong in Old Masters, the most important of which was the Allendale Nativity – Giorgione’s great Adoration of the Shepherds now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington. Other highlights included Claude Lorrain’s Landscape with St Philip baptising the Eunuch (National Gallery of Wales, Cardiff) and Jan Steen’s The Effects of Intemperance (National Gallery, London), as well as works by Raphael, Jan Weenix, and Cuyp. Unlike this painting’s previous owners, however, Ehrenbreitstein stood out as one of the few great works of the British school in the collection, though Gainsborough and Bonington were both represented. In 1947 Bretton Hall was sold and the painting later passed to Allendale’s son, also called Wentworth Beaumont, 3rd Viscount Allendale (1922–2002). A Spitfire pilot who, as a prisoner of war, was involved in The Great Escape, in 1965 the 3rd Viscount put the picture up for auction for a second time, now at Sotheby’s. It sold for the record price of £88,000 – far in excess of the previous record which had been established in 1927 when Venice, The Dogana and Santa Maria della Salute (National Gallery of Art, Washington) had been sold from the Ross collection for £30,450. Indeed this price was not exceeded until 1976, when The Bridgewater Seapiece (National Gallery, London) was sold for £320,000, and thus began the transformation of the Turner market.

Once again the picture was bought by Agnew’s, this time on behalf of an English private collector whose descendants are now offering it for sale. Ehrenbreitstein was one of the first paintings this collector acquired, and remained the chef d’oeuvre of his collection. However he bought a number of other fine works, all of them either from or through Agnew’s, and added to the collection over a number of years, including another painting by Turner, The Grand Junction Canal at Southall Mill (which had also belonged to Bicknell). The collection was the subject of a celebrated exhibition at King’s Lynn in 1972, which revealed a number of works by other great masters of nineteenth century landscape painting; including Richard Parkes Bonington, Eugene Boudin, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, and Alfred Sisley; a rare work by Jean-Barthold Jongkind; and an exceptional drawing by Degas bought from Lord Sandwich’s collection, La Sortie du Bain. The Old Masters were represented by the likes of Sir Peter Paul Rubens’ A Woman and a Boy by Candlelight (sold at Sotheby’s, 7 July 2004, lot 30); Bachiacca’s Baptism of Christ; Francesco Guardi; and a rare and important work by Sano di Pietro, St Donatus and the Dragon.

Exhibition History

Ehrenbreitstein has an unusually varied and distinguished exhibition history. Since its first appearance in
public at the Royal Academy in 1835, it has been chosen to reflect the changing tastes and perceptions of individuals, periods, cities and even nations. The fulsome praise accorded it by critics from the first gave an early indication of its widespread appeal, and since then its importance in terms of travel, poetry, history and atmosphere in Turner’s work has been fully recognised. In 1881 it was lent to the Liverpool Arts Club by Ralph Brocklebank, whose wealthy background in shipping reflected the importance of England’s second city and the purchasing power of new a generation of collectors. Brocklebank’s generosity in lending was typical of this new breed of collector and the painting appeared twice in London at the Guildhall and the Royal Academy before the century had closed. After a period spent in relative seclusion in Viscount Allendale’s collection, the appearance of the picture at auction at Sotheby’s in 1965 brought its qualities to a new and more international audience. In 1972 Ehrenbreitstein was one of nineteen oils and thirty four watercolours by Turner selected for the ground-breaking exhibition of English Romanticism and the Pre-Raphaelites in Paris, the first time a large selection of his work had been exhibited in that country. That same year it was also shown in the first monographic exhibition of Turner in Germany in Berlin and Dresden, which highlighted the very great rarity of Turner oils of German subjects. Such was its reception that it returned to Germany for a second time in another exhibition show in Hamburg only four years later. Ehrenbreitstein also returned to Paris in 1983-4, this time as part of the first exhibition dedicated to Turner to be held in France since 1948. It was Turner’s use of colour and its ‘splendide atmosphère’ that the French art critic Gustave Planche had so admired in this canvas at the Royal Academy in 1835, and it has underpinned French admiration for his work since the 1820s. Since 2004 the painting has been on permanent display at the Ashmolean Museum, in Oxford, however it has continued to be represented in major international exhibitions by the artist. In 2014 Turner’s interest in colour was explored once more in Margate, where this painting spoke to our contemporary artistic fascination with colour abstraction by being boldly hung alongside the work of the American abstract painter Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011) at Turner Contemporary, an astonishing juxtaposition for a work of 1835. Fittingly it was these very same qualities that inspired the painting’s first visit to America in 2015, when it followed on from the Tate’s highly successful Late Turner: Painting Set Free show to travel to the Getty in Los Angeles and the de Young Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco, as one of the first of a choice group of thirty five oils examining the development of Turner’s later work. That Ehrenbreitstein has successfully sustained its appeal across more than one hundred and eighty years, and that after more than a century of exhibitions it continuously has something fresh to say to us is remarkable indeed.

Footnotes:
2. The lines are mainly taken from verse LVI, with additions from LVII and LVIII.
3. Turner Bequest CCCXLIV nos. 1-16, especially nos. 1, 3 and 6, (Tate Gallery, London).
8. The Spectator, 9 May 1835.
10. Frazer’s Magazine, 1835, vol. XII, no. LXVII, p. 52; and Athenaeum, 23 May 1835.
12. Quoted in Butlin and Joll, p. 216.
14. S. Smiles, ‘Turner in and Out of Time’, in Late Turner – Painting Set Free, Tate exhibition catalogue,
15. Ibid. p. 23
20. Ibid. p. 182.
26. E. Brown, Phiz and Dickens, London 1913, chapter IV, ‘Mr Bicknell and his Friends’.
30. Ibid.

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Fig. 1
Bretton Hall, West Yorkshire ©Country Life

Fig. 2
J.M.W. Turner, Ehrenbreitstein (Turner Bequest, CCCXLIV, 1). ©Tate

Fig. 3
J.M.W. Turner, Heidelberg, 1844-45 ©Tate

Fig. 4
J.M.W. Turner, The Opening of the Wallhalla, 1843 ©Tate
Fig. 5
Carlton House, Herne Hill, Dulwich, the residence of Elhanan Bicknell Esq.

Fig. 6
Charles Baugniet, Portrait of Elhanan Bicknell, lithograph, 1864

Fig. 7
J.M.W. Turner, Ehrenbreitstein with the Tomb of Marceau (Turner Bequest, CCCXLIV, 3). ©Tate

Fig. 8
J.M.W. Turner, Ehrenbreitstein (Turner Bequest, CCCXLIV, 6). ©Tate

Fig. 9
untitled

Fig. 10
J.M.W. Turner, Palestrina – Composition, 1828 ©Tate

Fig. 11
J.M.W. Turner, Ehrenbreitstein, 1841 ©Tate

Fig. 12
J.M.W. Turner, Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Italy, 1832 ©Tate
Fig. 13
J.M.W. Turner, The Blue Rigi, Sunrise, 1842 ©Tate

Fig. 14
Claude Monet, Rouen Cathedral, Blue Harmony, Morning Sunlight, 1894, Musee d'Orsay, Paris, ©Bridgeman Images

Fig. 15
John Pye, after J.M.W. Turner, Ehrenbreitstein, print, National Gallery of Art, Washington

Fig. 16
untitled

Fig. 17

Fig. 18
J. M. W. Turner, Rome, from Mount Aventin, sold Sotheby's, 3 December 2014, lot 44

Fig. 19
J.M.W. Turner, Ehrenbreitstein, watercolour, c.1832, Bury Art Gallery and Museum, Lancashire ©Bridgeman Images

Fig. 20
J.M.W. Turner, The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, 16 October 1834, Cleveland Museum of Art ©Bridgeman Images
Fig. 21

Claude Monet, Grainstack (Sunset) 1891, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston ©Bridgeman Images

Fig. 22


Fig. 23


Fig. 24

J.M.W. Turner, Ehrenbreitstein, watercolour, 1841 ©Tate

Fig. 25

Wateringbury Place, Kent © Robin Webster

Fig. 26

J.M.W. Turner, From Ehrenbreitstein, pencil, watercolour, to be sold in the Old Master and British Work on Paper sale, Sotheby's, London, 5 July 2017, lot 182

Fig. 27

General François-Sévérine Marceau-Desgraviers (1769-1796)
Fig. 28
The sale of the Bicknell Collection

Fig. 29
View of Childwall Hall, Liverpool