

For the Love of Painting

It is not at all possible to pack more swaggering dramatic energy and human pathos into a picture of five inches by seven and a half than what James Mallord William Turner has accomplished in his astonishing 1820s watercolor, *The Storm* (or, *The Shipwreck*), showing tortured ships and their panicked survivors struggling to make it to shore past toothy jutting rocks amidst a deadly churning tempest.

The modest-scaled masterwork is a version of a much larger watercolour Turner created as the basis for an engraving (as with many of his highly finished watercolours). The present smaller version is, unexpectedly, richer, more detailed and grittier in effect – and therefore more intense – than its counterpart. Turner scholar Eric Shane has described the larger version as “undoubtedly the most ferocious seascape Turner ever created in watercolour.” But the brilliant miniature version on exhibit manages to go one notch up in ferocity.



Joseph Mallord William Turner, British, 1775–1851, *The Storm* (or *Shipwreck*), Watercolour and bodycolour on a three-ply London or Bristol board, 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 7 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (125 x 189 mm)

Turner’s *Storm* is the current highlight of the approximately two hundred artworks shown at the elegantly homey rooms of Mark Murray Fine Paintings on Sixty-third Street in Manhattan.

The *Storm* is a singular gem among gems on exhibit in a gallery sporting European, British and American oil paintings, drawings, watercolours, bronzes, dating from the 1830s through the 1930s – with some contemporary works of harmonious

character judiciously added in. The sampling of pictures reproduced here offers but a hint of the range of subjects and styles: interiors, equestrians, canines, portraits, seascapes, landscapes, oriental themes, nudes, genre scenes.

Turner’s romanticist marine subject, suffused with atmosphere and tumultuous nature, is contrasted by the stately ships at sea depicted by the twentieth-century master of marine paintings, Montague Dawson, a favourite artist of American presidents and British royals. Dawson, the modern era’s most accomplished marine painter, specialized in historical deepwater ships and yachts. The *Southern Cross*, seen here, Boston clipper built in 1851 and burned by Confederate forces in 1863.



Montague Dawson, British, 1895-1973, *Westerly Trade Wind – The Boston Clipper “The Southern Cross,”* Oil on canvas, 20 x 30 inches (50.8 x 76.2 cm)

Mark Murray specializes in Orientalist paintings and gives particular focus to one of the masters of the genre, Frederick Arthur Bridgman (1847-1928), a celebrated painter of exotic North African subjects.

The landscape shown here, *Along the Nile at Sunset*, a small oil on panel by mid-1900s French artist Charles Théodore Frère is a magically calm vision of sunset yellow and velvety purplish shadows, as rich a scene as any nineteenth traveler could ever hope to see, with its minarets, soaring palms, dusty lozenge clouds, camel and water carrier.



Charles Théodore Frère, French, 1814–1888, *Along the Nile at Sunset*, Oil on panel, 9¼ x 13 inches (23.5 x 33 cm)

Another small orientalist piece is the powerful oil on paper study by Charles Bargue, a French painter whose works not often found on the market but are in the collections of major museums. This highly developed oil sketch from life, *Study of Arnaut*, is an example of a character study that conveys a compelling vitality that finished paintings, no matter how beautiful, cannot deliver.



Charles Bargue, French, 1825–1883, *Study of Arnaut*, Oil on paper, 8 x 6 inches (20.4 x 15.4 cm)

Among the fine animal paintings in the gallery, is another oil sketch that proves this point is the animated study of a pair of tail-waving foxhounds— one in an alert posture, the other with tongue out and head drooping – by British specialist in highly polished portrayals of hunting dogs, John Martin Tracy. The brushy vitality is “impressionist” in its freshness, yet the animals are portrayed with a surplus of animal personality.



John Martin Tracy, 1844-1893, *American Study of Two Foxhounds*, Oil on canvas 11 x 15 inches (28 x 38 cm)

Walter Gay, the British master of the genre of the unpopulated interior, is another specialization of Murray's gallery. The *Salon, Château du Bréau*, is somewhat of an exception to the typical Gay composition in that the sumptuous eighteenth-century terra cotta bust of a grand lady positioned at the centre of the painting is so full of character she might as well be a living person inhabiting the otherwise empty salon. The whispering of sunlight passing through the blinds and playing softly across the room gives the scene a sense of unexplainable intimacy.



Walter Gay, American 1856-1937, *The Salon, Château du Bréau*, Oil on canvas 22 x 18 inches (56 x 46 cm),

Mark Murray, a former paintings expert at Sotheby's, recently celebrated 25 years of business as a gallerist. He is a seasoned picture hunter with the discerning eye of the professional connoisseur, having discovered in art sales such finds as a misattributed Constable and a fine landscape by Dutch impressionist Bernhard Klène (plein air painting partner of French master Alfred Sisely) that had been placed on sale as an unattributed work.

by Richard K. Stephens