A MODERN ARTIST OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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English water-color painting is almost as hard to see away from home as German romantic painting. A few English artists like Rowlandson and Blake are familiar figures, and we know Turner almost as well as our parents did. But even big comprehensive exhibitions of English painting rarely include so much as the chief men of the various local schools of English water color. There seems to be a prejudice against water colors in general. This was expressed by the old father in Brideshead Revisited when he said to his art-student son: "I presume you intend to do the thing thoroughly and use oil paint?"

Water color is certainly England's instinctive art. From about 1750 to 1850 all educated Englishmen and Englishwomen learned to paint in water color as naturally as they learned to write lively, graphic letters. Army and navy officers had to become at least competent enough to make recognizable sketches of battle grounds and harbor mouths. Amateur work often differed from professional work only in the matter of payment, not in skill. Such a broad basis of practice acted like the technical dexterity of the Florentine craftsmen of the Renaissance in providing a nursery for growing real artists. The keen and expert English amateurs understood every trick of Turner's virtuosity, and some of these amateurs, like Francis Towne, themselves originated exquisite, fresh effects.

An eighteenth-century Englishman would certainly have said that the most daring water-colorist of his time was Alexander Cozens. Though Cozens' experiments made his contemporaries talk, his work may suit our taste today better than it did theirs. He was probably born about 1717 in Russia, where his English father built ships for Peter the Great. There seems to be no truth in the story that he was one of the Czar's many bastards, but the legend of a noble stain came to interest nineteenth-century historians more than his art. After studying painting in Rome he settled in London, where he worked until his death in 1786. He exhibited little but taught wealthy amateurs, who bought his paintings.

He also wrote and illustrated several books, which have become rare, sometimes to the point of vanishing altogether. A year or two before his death he published the work that interests us most today, A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape. In it Cozens explains how he stumbled on his method of stimulating the imagination: "Reflecting one day in company with a pupil of great natural capacity, on original composition of landscape, in contradistinction to copying, I lamented the want of a mechanical method sufficiently expeditious and extensive to draw forth the ideas of an ingenious mind. . . . Happening to have a piece of soiled paper under my hand, and casting my eyes on it slightly, I sketched something like a landscape on it, with a pencil. . . . The stains, though extremely faint, appeared upon revival to have influenced me, insensibly, in expressing the general appearance of a landscape. This circumstance was sufficiently striking: I mixed a tint with ink and water . . . and having hastily made some rude forms with it . . . I laid it . . . before the pupil, who instantly improved the blot, as it may be called, into an intelligible sketch."

After Cozens developed this chance discovery into a practice of teaching, he directed his pupils as follows: "Possess your mind strongly with the subject. Take a camel's hair brush, as large as can conveniently be used . . . and with the swiftest hand make all pos-
A Storm, wash drawing by Alexander Cozens (d. 1786). The Gulf of Salerno, water color by his son John Robert Cozens (1752-1799). Rogers Fund, 1907
ON THESE PAGES: Aquatints from "A New Method" (1784-1785), by Alexander Cozens. The one above was retouched with ink wash. Dick Fund, 1930
sible variety of shapes and strokes upon your paper . . . For the surest means of producing a great variety of the smaller accidental shapes, the paper on which you are going to make the blot, may be crumpled up in the hand, and then stretched out again.”

Cozens usually “improved” the accidents into a finished water color by laying a blank thin paper over the blot and painting from the suggestions seen through the translucence. He added or omitted parts to the blot as he gave “meaning and coherence to the rude shapes, and aerial keeping [unity] to the casual light and dark masses of the blot.” Any given blot would suggest different pictures to different painters or even to the same painter at different times, as a tune might inspire different composers to endless variations. His blots were a sort of Rohrschach test to be answered in drawings instead of words. The Japanese have for a long time amused themselves with a parlor game in which one person daubs a strong scrawl on a piece of paper for someone else to elaborate into a drawing.

To our eye Cozens’ blots immediately suggest Chinese ink paintings. A. P. Oppé, however, in his excellent recent book on Cozens and his son (Alexander & John Robert Cozens, London, 1952) thinks that Cozens did not know Chinese paintings, which he never mentions. After Cozens had started to blot, a friend told him about Leonardo da Vinci’s observation: “I shall deliver a new method . . . which may help to open the mind and put it on the scent of new thoughts. If you study an old dirty wall or the oddity of some streaked stones, you may discover things like landscapes, battles, clouds, uncommon attitudes, humorous faces, draperies, and so forth. This confusion of objects can furnish the mind with abundance of designs and subjects perfectly new.”

Cozens illustrated his New Method with aquatints of blots which strike our imagination today almost as forcibly as Hercules Seghers’ etchings of lunar cliffs and craters. Cozens did not present his blots as finished products but merely as steps toward works of art, for he could not absolutely flout his age of reason. For us today his blots suggest the wild forces of nature more vividly than his completed paintings because we allow more importance to the play of accident in shaping works of art. Of course accident has played a part in the artistic creation of every age. In the peak of renaissance intellectualism itself, accident must occasionally have helped even so deliberate a painter as Piero della Francesca. Nowadays some painters rely on accident more than on control and prize a lucky drool above a guided line, because we realize more and more how much we do under the dominance of the irrational. But Cozens’ deliberate exploitation of accident and automatic drawing seems quite out of keeping with what we imagine to be the spirit of the eighteenth century, the spirit of skill, polish, and erudition. The truth is that such contradictions abound in every age. We balk at giving them their due weight because they blur the neat historical diagram that we create.

Cozens’ teaching methods broke ground for romantic painting. He also influenced the romantic school directly through his son John Robert Cozens, who seems to have had no instructor save his father. John Robert was born in 1752, went twice to Italy with wealthy patrons, and died at the age of forty-five after several years of paralysis. Father and son worked so closely together that they often borrowed each other’s compositions and ideas. The same boldness of design goes through the father’s imaginary landscapes and the son’s views of actual places. By bringing the grand manner into landscape views the son showed the way for Turner and the great English landscape painting of the nineteenth century.

It is odd that we Americans should know the growth of art in France and Italy much better than we know it in England. One of the reasons for our ignorance is that Englishmen have only recently begun to write about their own art as ably as Continentals have done for many years. Another reason is that English artists have achieved some of their best results in forms that are not valued elsewhere, such as water color. Englishmen have long and rightly regarded this medium as their freshest and liveliest way of painting.