

Thomas Girtin

The Grey Castle, 1795-1796

watercolour on paper
24.8 cm x 20.7 cm

Vancouver Art Gallery,
Founders' Fund
VAG 31.40



Photo: Tomas Svab, Vancouver Art Gallery

Thomas Girtin

The Grey Castle, 1795-1796



Image source: Reproduced in Smith, Greg.
Thomas Girtin: The Art of Watercolour.
London: Tate Publishing, 2002.

Artist's Biography

Nationality: British

Born: 1775-02-18, Southwark, England

Died: 1802-09-09

Thomas Girtin, water-colour painter, was born in Southwark, Feb. 18, 1775. His family was of French Huguenot origin, the name being Englished from 'Guertin.' He was apprenticed to Edward Dayes, and afterwards coloured prints for John Raphael Smith. As a boy he was a close comrade of Turner, the two sketching together Thames side scenes, and copying old masters at Dr. Monro's. He exhibited at the Royal Academy from 1794 to 1801. In the latter year he sent an oil picture, 'Bolton Bridge,' which seems to have disappeared; his other exhibited works were all in water-colour. Beginning with the topographical drawing then so much in demand with publishers, Girtin soon developed a powerful, free, and masterly style which was the admiration of his contemporaries. His practice was founded less on his predecessors in water-colour art, Sandby, Hearne, and Dayes, than on the paintings of Canaletto, Rubens, and Wilson. Many copies, chiefly of Canaletto, made by him in boyhood for John Henderson, who, like Dr. Monro, was an early patron and friend, are now in the British Museum. Girtin drew in many parts of England, his favourite subjects being the ruined castles and abbeys, moorlands and mountains of Yorkshire, Northumberland, and Wales.

About 1798 he painted a semicircular panorama of the Thames from Lambeth and Westminster to the City; and in 1802 he made a number of views of Paris, twenty of which were etched by him in outline and afterwards aquatinted by other artists. He had gone to Paris in search of health; but the visit failed to improve his rapidly-declining condition, and he died on November 9 of the same year. He was only twenty-seven. At the time of his death Girtin had admittedly gone farther and shown more original power in art than Turner, who once said, 'If Tom Girtin had lived, I should have starved.' Many of Girtin's finest works, such as the beautiful 'White House at Chelsea,' or 'Battersea Reach,' are in private hands; but there are more than a hundred of his drawings in the British Museum, including some of his best, a few in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and some fine examples in the Whitworth Institute, Manchester. Reynolds engraved in mezzotint on a small scale a set of Girtin's drawings, which was published under the title of 'Liber Natures,' and David Lucas made a larger mezzotint from his 'Ouse Bridge, York,' with greater sympathy and skill.

Source: George C. Williamson. "Thomas Girtin," *Bryan's Dictionary of Painters and Engravers.* London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1927.

Artistic Context

Nationality: British

Training: Royal Academy, London; apprenticed to Edward Dayes

Peers: Edward Dayes; Thomas Hearne; J.M.W. Turner; John Sell Cotman

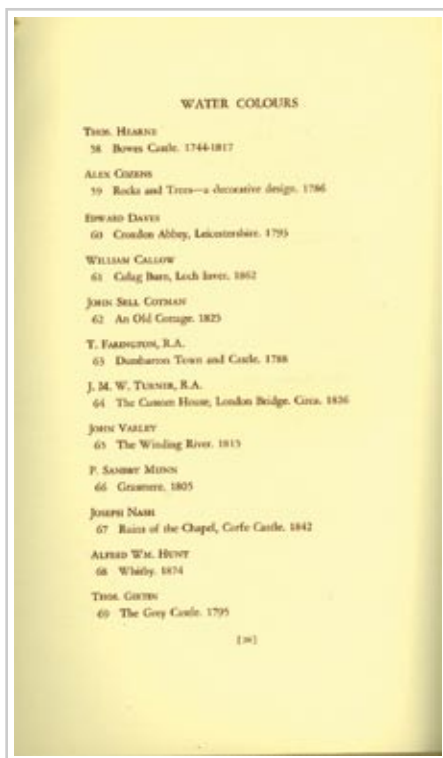
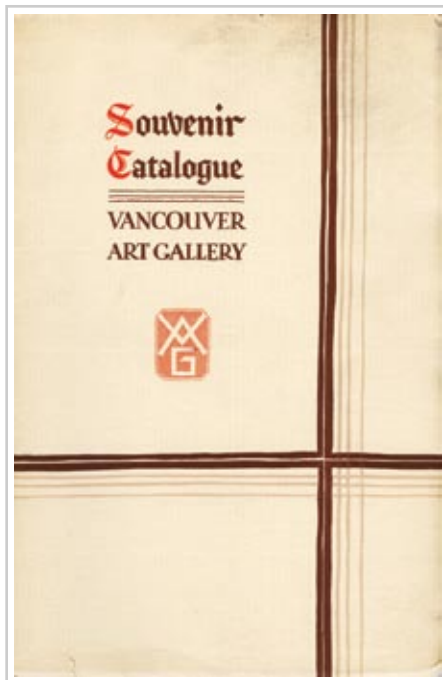
Group: Romanticism; British Watercolours; 18th century

Provenance: purchased from Cotswold Gallery by Charles Scott and Henry Stone on behalf of the Founders in 1931

Subject: landscape; castles

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Bibliography

Souvenir Catalogue: Vancouver Art Gallery

Publication
1931-10-5

[transcription]

Water Colours

Thos. Girtin
69 The Grey Castle. 1795

Notes on English Water Colours

WHEN STUDYING the early English water colours it is important to bear in mind the date when the artist was born, as well as the date when any particular work was produced, for artists often continue to work all their lives in the manner acquired in their youth. For instance, the drawing of "Margam Abbey" was made in 1796, and Hearne's drawing of "Bowes Castle" was probably still later in date, yet they both belong to an earlier manner of working than that of "Croxden Abbey" by Edward Dayes and Girtin's "Grey Castle", although "Croxden Abbey" was painted in 1793 and the "Grey Castle" in 1795. The difference of manner is accounted for by the fact that Rooker and Hearne belonged to an earlier generation of water colourists than Dayes and Girtin; Hearne having been born in 1744, and Rooker in 1746, while Dayes was born in 1763 and Girtin in 1775.

The earlier men generally worked upon a monochrome foundation--i.e. pencil outlines, with pale washes of Indian ink for the shadows. Sometimes, when the drawings were intended to be engraved, they were completed in monochrome, as in Hearne's "View of Bowes Castle". At other times, the monochrome foundation was tinted with washes of pure colour, as in Rooker's "Chapter House at Margam".

"Dumbarton Town and Castle", by Joseph Farington (born 1747), which is dated 1788, is worked on the same principle. Alexander Cozens (born about 1740, or earlier) seldom used colour, being generally content with a few washes of Indian ink or sepia.

Edward Dayes, who was born in 1763, introduced a slight variation on the earlier methods, by using washes of Prussian blue for the sky and distances, while he retained Indian ink for the foreground and middle distance. His drawing of "Croxden Abbey" evidently begun in this way and completed with simple washes of red and yellow.

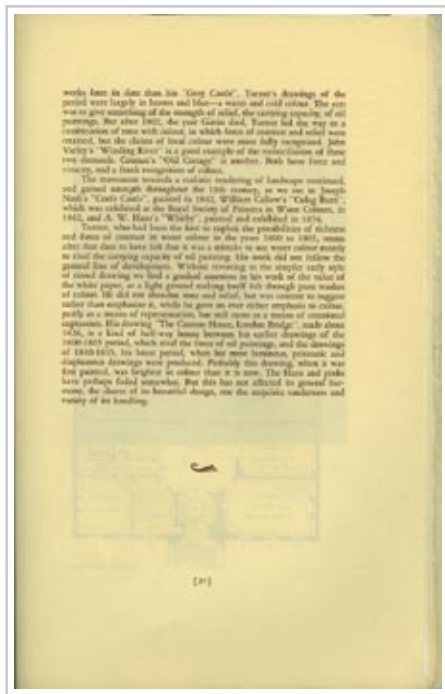
Thomas Girtin (born 1775) was apprenticed to Dayes and he produced a number of drawings in blue and grey. This sort of foundation is traceable in his drawing of "The Grey Castle", but it was produced after his apprenticeship, when he was beginning to strike out for himself. Although the methods are similar to those of Dayes, the handling is bolder, the colour more vigorous and the general effect more masculine.

Paul Sandby Munn (born 1773) was a member of Girtin's sketch-club and was influenced by Girtin's work. His drawing of "Grasmere", though it was produced after Girtin's death, is worked largely in Indian ink, with a sparing use of colour.

The works of the earlier men, like Cozens, Hearne and Rooker, were generally described as "tinted drawings", not as water colours. But with Girtin, in the two

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or three years before he died (in 1802), and with Turner, in his works produced between 1797 and 1802, the earlier "tinted" manner was abandoned, and water-colour painting, in the modern use of the term, was introduced. A fuller tonality was used, but the earlier drawings tended towards monochrome, like Munn's "Grasmere", or Girtin's.

works later in date than his "Grey Castle". Turner's drawings of the period were largely in brown and blue—a warm and cold colour. The aim was to give something of the strength of relief, the carrying capacity, of oil paintings. But after 1802, the year Girtin died, Turner led the way to a combination of tone with colour, in which force of contrast and relief were retained, but the claims of local colour were more fully recognized. John Varley's "Winding River" is a good example of the reconciliation of these two demands. Cotman's "Old Cottage" is another. Both have force and vivacity, and a frank recognition of colour.

The movement towards a realistic rendering of landscape continued, and gained strength throughout the 19th century, as we see in Joseph Nash's "Corfe Castle", painted in 1842, William Callow's "Culag Burn", which was exhibited at the Royal Society of Painters in Water Colours, in 1862, and A. W. Hunt's "Whitby", painted and exhibited in 1874.

Turner, who had been the first to exploit the possibilities of richness and force of contrast in water colour in the years 1800 to 1805, seems after that date to have felt that it was a mistake to use water colour merely to rival the carrying capacity of oil painting. His work did not follow the general line of development. Without reverting to the simpler early style of tinted drawing we find a gradual, assertion in his work of the value of the white paper, as a light ground making itself felt through pure washes of colour. He did not abandon tone and relief, but was content to suggest rather than emphasize it, while he gave an ever richer emphasis to colour, partly as a means of representation, but still more as a means of emotional expression. His drawing "The Custom House, London Bridge", made about 1826, is a kind of halfway house between his earlier drawings of the 1800-1805 period, which rival the force of oil paintings, and the drawings of 1840-1845, his latest period, when his most luminous, prismatic and diaphanous drawings were produced. Probably this drawing, when it was first painted, was brighter in colour than it is now. The blues and pinks have perhaps faded somewhat. But this has not affected its general harmony, the charm of its beautiful design, nor the exquisite tenderness and variety of its handling.

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Souvenir Catalogue: Opening the New Vancouver Art Gallery, 1951.

Publication
1951-09-26

[transcription]

STUDIO "A"

WATERCOLOURS FROM OUR PERMANENT COLLECTION

During the eighteenth century in England a school of artists developed who recorded the beauties of famous houses and landscape views, mostly in monochrome drawings tinted in water-colour. Some of them became extremely skilful and their work surpassed the merely topographical aspect.

Of these the earliest was Paul Sandby (No. 2), who was also a good figure painter. Other outstanding members of this school represented in our collection are Michael Angelo Rooker (No. 6), a pupil of Sandby; Thomas Hearne (No. 3); Joseph Farington (No. 17), a pupil of Richard Wilson and Edward Dayes (No. 4), whose work is often difficult to distinguish from early Turners.

Carrying forward this style into the nineteenth century, we have examples by P. Sandby Munn (No. 13) and John Varley (No. 10) who was for a time influenced by Girtin to a broader and more sober style.

In addition to this native school, mostly concerned with making a pictorial record, were other artists whose visits to Italy had brought them in contact with a more classic conception of landscape composition. Among these were Francis Towne, Alexander Cozens (No. 1), and John Robert Cozens.

It was in the topographic school that Girtin (No. 5) and Turner (No. 15) had their foundation. They were both employed in their youth making copies of water-colours in the collection of Dr. Monro. Girtin died at the age of 27, but in that short time he achieved a breadth of style which has had a great influence on other artists, including Turner.

Slightly younger than Girtin was Cotman (Nos 18, 19, 21) who was not so much concerned with a naturalistic rendering as in achieving a rhythmic design. He had masterly grasp of structure, evident in his architectural drawings.

Turner meanwhile had passed beyond the topographical stage, beyond the Girtin influence, to a final mastery of light never before achieved. Our example probably belongs to his middle period when he was engaged on the numerous series of elaborate water-colours for reproduction by engraving.

David Cox (No. 12), had a few lessons from Varley, but was mostly self-taught. He also became a drawing master for a livelihood. W. J. Muller (No. 11), a painter of extraordinary skill, produced a mass of work before his early death at the age of 33. Joseph Nash (No. 14), is best known for his architectural interiors. Evans of Bristol (No. 16) lived for many years in North Wales and excelled in depicting its rough scenery.

The artists of the second half of the nineteenth century developed a greater complexity of technique as can be readily seen from our examples. But many of them, in a vain effort to imitate the solidity of oil paintings, sacrificed the freshness and luminosity which are the chief attraction of the water-colour medium.

J. A. MORRIS,
Curator.

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British and Canadian Watercolours

Publication
1992-07-11

[transcription of excerpt]

BRITISH AND CANADIAN WATERCOLOURS
July 11 -October 4

Introduction

This exhibition of watercolours from the permanent collection provides an opportunity for viewers to study the work of leading British artists from the height of the watercolour tradition, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, alongside early Canadian-colourists. This comparison reveals not only the debt of the Canadians to their British inheritance, but also the ways in which the Romantic tradition of picturesque representations of the landscape functioned historically at two different times. During the Industrial Revolution, artists such as John Varley, J M.W. Turner and John Sell Cotman developed a range of technical skills, now considered classic, to depict nostalgic, idealized views of rural life. In Canada, Lucius O'Brien, John Arthur Fraser, Frederic Marlett Bell-Smith and Charles John Collins, among others, applied the same techniques to idealize a colonized North American landscape. Today, while these paintings provide us with a compendium of technical excellence, their pictorial content is historically ironic.

The Development of Watercolour Materials in Britain

Watercolour painting came about as a way of tinting prints and drawings with washes of colour. It was not until the late eighteenth-century that it came to be used as a medium in its own right. This was aided by new inventions in paper-making and colour pigments. Watercolour paper was invented by James Whatman in the 1780s. He produced a paper with a smooth surface suitable for washes, by using a finely woven wire-cloth to mould the paper pulp. At the same time, William Reeves was producing water-colour in dry cakes, saving artists the chore of grinding their own pigments. Some years later, moist colours in porcelain pans were available, and by 1846 Windsor and Newton sold colours in metal tubes.

The new art products allowed a revolution in painting--for both the professional artist and the amateur. Fast-drying watercolour could be used easily outdoors, allowing artists to produce finished paintings on-the spot. This introduced freshness, spontaneity and accuracy to landscape painting. Furthermore, the ease and rapidity of watercolour painting, in comparison with oil painting, encouraged its development into a socially-approved past-time, providing travel souvenirs, and diversion on Sunday outings to the country.

British Watercolours, 1775-1875

The landscape tradition was highly developed in England around 1800. Watercolour was first used to make military records of topography, and archaeological records of monuments and ruins. Paul Sandby (1731-1809), considered the "father" of British watercolour painting, perfected

topographical and architectural views, and exerted wide influence as a drawing instructor at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich. He taught several of the

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The increasing number of amateur artists provided support for professional artists as collectors, art students, and also provided artists with travel and the chance to see the work of others. Professional success was, however, precarious for even the best watercolourists. Most relied upon teaching, and some on speculative publishing ventures, to obtain an income. The success of J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) was unusual, and was alternately a source of inspiration and envy to his contemporaries. Turner began his career making watercolour views of landscape and architecture for an architect, and tinting prints for an engraver. He was encouraged by Dr. Thomas Monro, the physician and patron of several young artists — including J.R. Cozens, Thomas Girtin, J.S. Cotman, and John Varley. A collector, Monro had the artists copy prints and drawings for him, providing a small fee and the opportunity to meet and learn from each other. The Custom House, London Bridge, shows Turner's ability in topographical views and may have been done for publication as an engraving.



John Sell Cotman, *Cottage at Hobbs*, watercolour, Collection of the V&A


Another protégé of Dr. Monro, John Sell Cotman (1782-1842) had several patrons to whom he was friend, teacher, adviser and collaborator. One such relationship was with the Reverend James Bulwer. Bulwer was a rector, amateur artist, and a student of Cotman. He collected Cotman's work and experimented with his techniques. Cotman's *Point Lorenzo, Madeira*, is based on a view which Cotman had never seen, but knew from a drawing made by Bulwer in Portugal. A number of other Cotman works come from Bulwer's collection. Cotman's *The Escort, Normandy*, comes from a series of works based on medieval Norman history for reproduction as folios of prints for sale by subscription. Cotman's *Cottage at Hob-*

land represents another attempt to earn income. Its subject and the number in the lower right corner indicate that it belongs to the series of watercolours which Cotman advertised as a "lending library" for art students.

Canadian Watercolours, 1800-1925

British officers trained in drawing and painting at military college, together with their wives, were among the earliest Canadian artists. They typically combined topographical accuracy with the picturesque vision in landscape views made as souvenirs. The scenery of Niagara Falls and the Rocky Mountains, in particular, provided the untouched "wildness" and grandeur which appealed to the picturesque imagination. As Canada was developed, and expanded westward, forestry, mining, agriculture, and industrialization transformed the landscape. Many artists, however, continued to depict the land as an untouched, picturesque wilderness.

George Heriot (1759-1839) was one of the earliest artists in Canada, a Scotsman who studied with Paul Sandby at Woodwich. Deputy postmaster general in British North America from 1792 to 1816, Heriot travelled frequently to inspect postal stations, making sketches along the way. The picturesque, arcadian image of the Canadian landscape evident in Colonel Nairne's Settlement at Adair Bay recalls John Varley. Many of his watercolour scenes appeared as prints in *Travels through Canada*, 1807.



Frederic, Marie-Belle Smith, *The Glacier of the Veveur*, watercolour, Collection of the V&A

Frederic Mariett Bell-Smith (1846-1923) created some of the first images of the Canadian West. Born in England, he applied his British training to work as a photographer and illustrator in Toronto and Montreal. He arrived in the West in 1887 as part of a Canadian Pacific Railway scheme to

artists in this exhibition, including Hearne, Dayes, and Rooker, and his own adoptive son, Munn, and these artists in turn were important to the next generation (Girtin and Turner). Sandby and members of his family taught the British officers who traveled abroad, many to Canada, and used drawing and watercolour not only to survey colonial territories, but also to record their impressions of new lands.

The artistic case for landscape in this period is known as the "picturesque." This was a codified view of nature as an idyllic setting of beauty and splendour unaffected by human events. The picturesque was based on Italian landscape paintings of seventeenth-century artist, Claude Lorrain, which were widely known in prints. In Lorrain's arcadian scenes, the composition is organized into a measured recession of spatial planes framed by trees or cliffs. Foreground, middle and far distance are linked by visual devices such as lakes and bridges and small figures or distant ruins provide a foil for the immensity of nature. This formula is evident in many of the paintings on display, such as John Varley's *The Winding River*, where the mountains of Wales are transformed into an Italian scene.

This ideal view of landscape masked the radical transformation of the English countryside that took place between 1750 and 1815. Increased city populations together with the French wars, created a demand for agricultural production and hence for arable land. A grid-like order was imposed on open land to enclose it into large holdings. The picturesque denied social and economic realities, screening out the signs of ownership and production in the real countryside and showing man in a harmonious and subordinate relationship to an unreal nature.

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Further Reading

Girtin, Thomas. and David Loshak. *The Art of Thomas Girtin*. London: A. and C. Black, 1954.

Hawcroft, F. *Thomas Girtin*. London, University of Manchester Press, 1975.

Morris, S. *Thomas Girtin*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

Smith, Greg. *Thomas Girtin: The Art of Watercolour*. London: Tate Publishing, 2002.

Exhibition History

Exhibitions at The Vancouver Art Gallery

Inaugural Exhibition. October 5, 1931.

Opening the New Vancouver Art Gallery, 1951: Watercolours from our Permanent Collection. September 26 - October 14, 1951.

British and Canadian Watercolours. July 11 - October 4, 1992.

Paper Buildings: Architecture as Subject. January 8, 1994 - May 15, 1994.

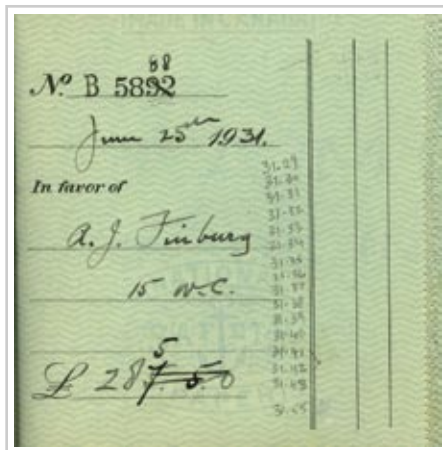
Long Time: Selections from the Permanent Collection. May 19, 2001 - Feb 10, 2002.

75 Years of Collecting: British Masters, Group of Seven and Pop Icons. February 4, 2006 - May 14, 2006.

Selected Exhibitions Outside of the Vancouver Art Gallery

University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery, Vancouver. *The Motley Collection, Vancouver Art Gallery*. October 7 - November 15, 1973.

Thomas Girtin
The Grey Castle, 1795-1796



Archival History

Cheque Stub
Acquisition Record
1931-06-25

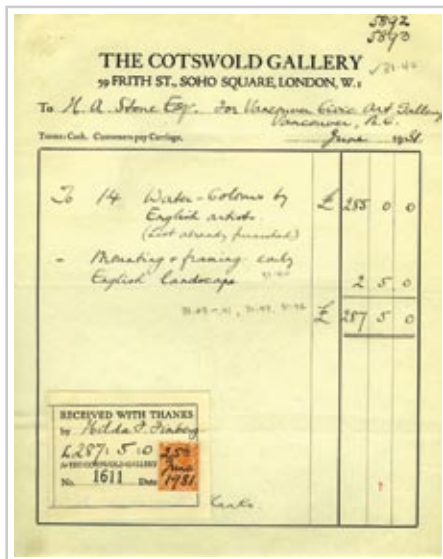
[transcription of excerpt]

No. B5888

June 25th 1931

In favor of
A.J. Finburg
15 W.C.
£285.5.0

[31.35 in pencil]



Bill of Sale
Acquisition Record
1931-06-25

[transcription]

THE COTSWOLD GALLERY
59 FRITH ST., SOHO SQUARE, LONDON, W.1

To H.A. Stone Esq. For Vancouver Art Gallery Vancouver, B.C.

June 1931

To 14 Water-Colours by English Artists (list already published) £285.0.0
Mounting and Framing Early English Landscape 2.5.0
£287.5.0

RECEIVED WITH THANKS
by Hilda F. Finberg
£287.5.0
for THE COTSWOLD GALLERY
No. 1611 Date 25th June 1931

[31.40 in pencil]

Thomas Girtin

The Grey Castle, 1795-1796

No.	Description	Price
241	"Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00
242	"Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00
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245	"Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00
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290	"Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00
291	"Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00
292	"Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00

Accession Record
Acquisition Record
1931-08-06

[transcription of excerpt]

92 15 Watercolours. Finburg. 285.0.0

[31.35 in pencil]

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2	"The Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00
3	"The Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00
4	"The Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00
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11	"The Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00
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14	"The Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00
15	"The Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00
16	"The Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00
17	"The Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00
18	"The Grey Castle" - 1/2 view	40.00

Accession Record
Acquisition Record
1931-08-06

[transcription of excerpt]

Framed Water Colors

6 "The Grey Castle" Thomas Girtin 1795. 1775-1802 35.0.0

[31.40 in pencil]

Thomas Girtin

The Grey Castle, 1795-1796

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