

Watercolour and Weather, 1750–1850 (Lausanne, 5–6 Jun 25)

Lausanne, MCBA Museum, Jun 5–06, 2025

Deadline: Jun 15, 2024

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Simultaneously with a resurgence of landscape painting, the period 1750–1850 in European art witnessed an increased interest in the weather, not only as concerns its momentary states (clouded skies, lightning), but also the broader study of meteorological phenomena and of their unfolding over time. Besides the more radical events – such as storms – that were frequently represented, this period thus developed a keen observation of subtle moments of changing weather, allowing artists to combine varied effects of light. This is true not only of the most famous British painters (Joseph Mallord William Turner, John Constable, Alexander and John Robert Cozens) but also of figures from further afield, such as Giovanni Battista Lusieri, Caspar David Friedrich, and Abraham Louis Rodolphe Ducros.

In close connection to this artistic evolution, the period under scrutiny also witnessed the development of meteorology and climatology as scientific disciplines. This led both to Luke Howard's classification of clouds (1804) that remains in use to this day, and to the theorisation of the greenhouse effect by Joseph Fourier in 1824. A new consciousness of the atmosphere and of its complexities, leading directly to present concerns regarding climate change, can thus be traced back to this cultural environment.

Luke Howard's study of clouds rested partly upon watercolour sketches representing nebulous formations, revealing that the multiplication of weather-related images extended beyond the professional field of landscape painting to encompass works by scientists. Likewise, architects were not to be excluded: Pierre François Léonard Fontaine, chiefly known for his role in Napoleon I's ambitious construction projects, chose to cover his design for a monumental cemetery on Montmartre with a stormy sky (Paris, ENSBA, PC 82161); whereas in Joseph Gandy's cutaway view of Sir John Soane's Bank of England (London, Sir John Soane's Museum, P267), rays of sunlight part the clouds to illuminate the sprawling structure. These works confirm that watercolour, together with closely related techniques such as wash drawing, gouache, and hand-coloured etching, constituted the chief medium for the pictorial exploration of weather conditions by figures hailing from varied disciplinary horizons. As a water-based technique, comparatively rapid in uptake and highly adapted to outdoor use, it was particularly suitable for capturing fleeting atmospheric variations on the spot. Professional painters' preparatory watercolour sketches for oil paintings also ensured that a strong connexion was maintained with this more highly specialised technique. More generally, parallels emerge between representations of the weather in watercolour and in other media such as oil and pastel, each technique furthermore being used to produce both studies and finished works.

While considerable attention has been paid to representations of meteorological conditions by the most famous British landscape painters, the broader development of this phenomenon remains to be studied, both in British, Continental, and non-Western art: how can Swiss painter Abraham Louis Rodolphe Ducros's sudden interest in increasingly dramatic skies around 1790 be explained, and what impact did his work exert on his younger contemporaries? Likewise, what interactions emerge between the works of Indian artist Sita Ram and the evolving British watercolour? What role was performed by the exchange of ideas and artworks in connection with the Grand Tour or other travels?

This conference will attempt to elucidate some of these questions, along axes of enquiry that might include – but are not limited to – the following:

- The evolving concern for the representation of weather conditions in watercolour painting (or wash drawing, gouache, or hand-coloured etching) between 1750 and 1850.
- Convergences or divergences between the practice of watercolour painting and the development of meteorology as a science.
- Watercolour representations of weather conditions outside the field of professional landscape painting; for instance in works by amateurs, architects, scientists or their draughtsmen.
- Individual painters' evolving engagement with the weather, including their affinity or familiarity with specific meteorological phenomena.
- Interactions between representations of the weather in watercolour and in other pictorial techniques (including oil painting, oil studies, and pastel), and between open-air and workshop-based practice.
- Weather conditions and (traces of) human presence in a landscape.
- Reflections in watercolour painting of broader cultural (including literary) pairings between weather and emotion.
- Continuities and/or distinctions between topographical representation (including the veduta tradition) and the integration of weather conditions in the image, particularly as regards historical perceptions of the 'objectivity' or 'subjectivity' of these representations.
- Women artists' contributions to the pictorial exploration of meteorological phenomena.
- The possible impact on watercolour painting of maritime knowledge and of seafarers' preoccupations regarding weather conditions.

This conference forms part of a broader research and teaching project at the Universities of Lausanne and Geneva concerning Swiss watercolour artist Abraham Louis Rodolphe Ducros, whose personal collection forms the original nucleus of the Lausanne MCBA Museum. The conference will include a viewing of a selection of his works.

The conference will be held on 5 and 6 June 2025 at the Lausanne MCBA Museum. We look forward to receiving proposals (max. 400 words) for 20-minute papers until 15 June 2024 at the following addresses: berangere.poulain@unige.ch and desmond-bryan.kraege@unil.ch.

Accommodation in Lausanne will be provided, as well as reimbursement of travel expenses within Europe. The primary conference language is English, however proposals in French will also be accepted. A collective publication is planned.

Organisers

- Bérangère Poulain (University of Geneva)

- Desmond Kraege (University of Lausanne)

Scientific Committee

- Basile Baudez (Princeton University)
- Jan Blanc (University of Geneva)
- Werner Busch (Freie Universität Berlin)
- Ketty Gottardo (The Courtauld Gallery, London)
- Catherine Lepdor (Lausanne MCBA Museum)
- Camille Lévêque-Claudet (Lausanne MCBA Museum)
- Constance McPhee (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)
- Christian Michel (University of Lausanne)
- Perrin Stein (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)
- Victor Plahte Tschudi (AHO Oslo School of Architecture and Design)

Reference:

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