

# · AGNEWS ·

EST. 1817

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**Joseph Mallord William *Turner*, RA (1775  
–1851)**

*View from Ehbrenbreitstein*

1817

Body-colour on white paper prepared with a  
grey wash.

7 ¾ x 12 ¼ inches (19.7 x 31.1cm)



## **Provenance:**

Walter Fawkes, and by descent to Revd. Ayscough Fawkes; his sale, Christie's London, 27 June  
1890 lot 23 (where purchased by Agnew's).

CF. Martin, Montreal

## **Literature:**

A. Wilton, *The Life and Work of J.M.W. Turner*, Fribourg and London, 1979. Cat. 657.

Cecilia Powell, *From Ehbrenbreitstein returns from Obscurity*, *The Turner Society News*, issue 119, pg  
18-19.

## **Exhibited:**

Royal Academy Winter Exhibition, 1889, (loaned by Revd. Ayscough Fawkes)

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Most lovers of Turner's art are familiar with at least a few of his depictions of the great fortress of Ehrenbreitstein, which towers over the confluence of the Rhine and the Mosel at the German city of Koblenz; it was the subject of some of his most magical (and in modern times most exhibited) sunset watercolour sketches of the early 1840s. However, until recently few were aware of present work, traditionally known as *From (or View from) Ehrenbreitstein* though perhaps more accurately described as '*from the ascent to Ehrenbreitstein*'.

One of the fifty depictions of the Rhine between Mainz and Cologne inspired by Turner's exploration of that stretch of the river during a period of some two weeks in August 1817, this fine watercolour has been lost to view for many years. Bought with the rest of the series in the autumn of 1817 by Turner's friend and patron Walter Fawkes, it was lent by his descendant Ayscough Fawkes to the Royal Academy Winter Exhibition in 1889 when the catalogue described it thus: 'In the foreground the ruins of a monastery, on the terraces of which some monks are walking; beyond, on the left, is a steep cliff; on the right the river, winding below, with an island in it, bends round a low point and disappears at the foot of a steep hill; misty distance, with sun setting'. An abbreviated version of that description appeared in the checklist of Turner watercolours in Sit Walter Armstrong's monograph on Turner of 1902. In the meantime, with over thirty others of the series, it had been sold by Fawkes at Christies on 27 June 1890, when it fetched £150 guineas. It was listed, without illustration, in Andrew Wilton's *catalogue raisonné* of 1979 where it was described as 'untraced'. In January 2013 it turned up in an auction at the Swann Galleries, New York, catalogued as 'Circle of Turner', but it was not long before it was recognised as the work of the master himself.

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Turner's Rhine series is now widely dispersed throughout the world, the largest single group (seven drawings) belonging to the British Museum<sup>1</sup>. Notable for their sketch-like qualities and unexhibited in Turner's lifetime, the Rhine drawings often give the impression of having been drawn and coloured directly from nature. In some examples, such as those depicting the famous cliff of the Lorelei, this has been convincingly argued to be the case<sup>2</sup>. However, for the most part each drawing can be matched with a pencil sketch (or sketches) that provided Turner with the raw topographical data necessary to produce a larger and more elaborate coloured scene at a later time and in a place that suited his convenience<sup>3</sup>. In the case of *From Ehrenbreitstein* the preparatory sketch can be found in the small Waterloo and Rhine sketchbook (Fig 1). The page (f.52v) contains a little extraneous material at top right (Turner never missing an opportunity to cram in extra detail in a corner) but is otherwise an excellent 'fit'; some of the ingredients also reappear on ff.53v and 56. Characteristically, the most significant development is the addition of appropriate human interest; a single white-robed, black-hooded figure below the wayside shrine on the left; then, centrally in the drawings, a pair of figures dressed entirely in black on a lower grey form virtually merges with the surrounding structures.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kim Sloan, *JMW Turner, Watercolours from the R.W. Lloyd Bequest to the British Museum*, 1998 pp. 60-75. These may also be studied via the BM website.

<sup>2</sup> See David Hill, '*J.M.W. Turner*'. *From the World to Art and Back again*', TSN 95, 2003, p.11

<sup>3</sup> Cecilia Powell, *Turners Rivers of Europe: The Rhine, Meuse and Mosel*, Tate, 1991, pp. 32 – 42 and p. 59, notes 58 – 9. Later – following the suggestion of the late Evelyn Joll, the author revised her opinion on the number of drawings in the series from the traditional fifty-one to the more logical fifty (see *Turner in Germany*, Tate, 1995, p.26 and cat.17) though references to fifty-one drawings still persist in some quarters (e.g the Manton catalogue mentioned on p.14 of this TSN)

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View up the Rhine from Ehrenbreitstein and part of the fortress, pencil sketches in the *Waterloo and Rhine* sketchbook (TB CLX 52v)

In this drawing the steep ascent to Ehrenbreitstein, one of the most impressive and impregnable European fortresses of its day, serves only as a viewing platform. Turner is looking southwards, upriver, past the massive rocks and cliffs on which the fort was built to the dramatic hills lining the river for the next few miles and the 'graceful island of Oberwerth' beneath them, itself the subject of one of the British Museum drawings, *Abbey at Coblenz* (W 672). In that drawing, as in the sketch shown here, some ragged buildings on the island are distinctly shown: the ruins of the island's Benedictine convent for noble ladies, suppressed some thirty years previously on the cession of the left bank of the Rhine to the French. However, in *From Ehrenbreitstein* he shows Oberwerth simple as a long, uninhabited island, concentrating all his religious motifs in the foreground.

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Turner would have been presented with unfamiliar Catholic sights and practices from the earliest days of his 1817 tour when he passed through the great cathedral cities of Bruges and Ghent, Liège and Aachen, and he continued to observe such material as he explored the Rhine south of Cologne over the following fortnight. Since the Reformation the area we now know as Germany (which in Turner's day consisted of hundreds of states, duchies and other autonomous unites) has been divided in its practice of Christianity, with the west (including the Rhineland) and south dominated by Catholicism, the north and east by Protestantism. Turner's visit to Brussels had coincided with one of the major festivals in the Catholic calendar, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on 15<sup>th</sup> August, and evidence of Catholicism would have been visible in every town and village he visited in the days that followed. Cologne had boasted no fewer than 'thirty-nine nunneries...and above twenty convents for men', a 'race' of *abbés*...beyond belief, not to mention 'whole armies' of saints and an inconceivable level of superstition<sup>4</sup>. Koblenz itself would have afforded many glimpses of monks, black-clad Dominicans or white-clad Carmelites, such as those in *From Ehrenbreitstein*. As one British traveller wrote of that town in 1807, 'Before the French revolution there were three parish churches, two colleges a church belonging to the Jesuits, four convents of monks, Dominicans, Franciscans, Carmelites and Capuchins, and three nunneries.' In 1817 Turner recorded no pedestrians on the ascent to Ehrenbreitstein; those seen here derive from his later memories of the Catholic Rhineland as a whole.

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<sup>4</sup> Victor Hugo, *The Rhine*, 1853 edn trans. D.M Aird, p.139.

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We are grateful to Cecilia Powell for the above catalogue entry.