

Artwork of the Month April 2025

A York Art Gallery talk on 'The Picturesque in Britain' by Peter Miller, President of the Friends

In this introduction to the 'Picturesque' in Britain I hope satisfactorily to define the term, not only as used in the 18th and 19th centuries but also in its continued usage today. In doing so I will try to place the idea of the Picturesque in its social and artistic context.

So, what is the Picturesque?

The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines it as:

Possessing the elements of a picture especially of a landscape, pleasing or striking in composition or colour. Also, of a route etc affording views of this kind.

I was surprised, incidentally, not to find it in Johnson's Dictionary of 1755 (actually I was using the fifth edition of 1785). It is a pervasive but fluid term to pin down. William Gilpin (1724-1804), one of the leading writers on the Picturesque, defined it in 1768 in his *Essay on Prints* as 'a term expressive of that particular kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture'. Gilpin introduced the term into general English cultural usage in a series of books on Picturesque tours, which instructed the leisured classes to examine 'the face of the country by the rules of Picturesque beauty'. It was part of the emerging Romantic sensibility, shared with ideas like Gothicism and the Sublime and the Beautiful (see *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke, 1757).

The word itself came to the fore in Italy as *pittoresco*, and had a dictionary definition in England as early as 1703. According to Christopher Hussey, who wrote the pioneer study on the Picturesque in 1927, 'while the outstanding qualities of the Sublime were vastness and obscurity ... the characteristics of the Picturesque were roughness and sudden variations joined of irregularity of form, colour, light and even sound'.

So how did I get interested in the Picturesque?

It was through the books that were produced and particularly those of William Gilpin. These formed part of every gentleman's library in the 18th century, and were thus relatively common in the book trade in the 1960s when I started bookselling. The late 18th century was a golden age for book production in the UK, and Gilpin's use of the aquatint for illustration was a particularly happy one. The books supported the aristocracy's ideas of the countryside, and gave a certain romantic glow to memories of the country to the great numbers of people who were moving from there to towns and cities. England was increasingly prosperous in the later 18th century, and London became the largest city in Europe and the largest since imperial Rome, with a population of three quarters of a million people. Amidst all this rapid change the idea of the Picturesque was a comforting prospect.

Landscape painting became increasingly popular in the 18th century in Britain, with Richard Wilson and Thomas Gainsborough leading the field by the 1750s. Travel became increasingly popular as the century progressed, and books on towns and regions of the UK proliferated. With the steady improvement to roads, and to river and canal transport, Picturesque tours became more and more popular, with attendant books and other publications. Four of the most popular tours were:

The Wye Valley Tour

The North Wales Tour

Tour to the Lakes

The Highland Tour

The Picturesque tours helped to shape the development of the physical landscape, which is still in evidence to the present day, especially in the design of gardens. Wordsworth wrote one of his greatest poems on a Wye Valley tour with 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' (1798), and William Gilpin enjoyed his greatest success with *Observations on the River Wye* (1782). Tours of North Wales were hampered by poor roads, but Caernarfon and the coast, Cader Idris and Llangollen were firm favourites with tourists.

‘There is a rage for the Lakes’: so wrote Hester Lynch Piozzi in 1789, a view which was promoted by Thomas West’s *Guide to the Lakes* in 1780. In this he defines ‘stations’, as he termed them, which were points in the Lakes from which their most Picturesque aspects could be enjoyed. These ‘stations’ were subsequently used for large houses which were built in the 19th century by wealthy industrialists from Lancashire and the North of England. Ruskin observed, with some dismay, that Manchester was only 40 miles from his home Brantwood.

Despite Johnson’s strictures in *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775), Scotland gained enthusiasts, not least as a result of the enormous success of Ossian’s poetry, which went through twenty-five editions after its publication in 1761. Its authenticity is now largely doubted, but it fed into the appeal for ancient poetry. There was a long tour following the North-East coast up to Aberdeen and round to Inverness and then down Loch Ness and Ben Nevis, with perhaps an excursion to the Western Isles and back to Glasgow. This was the journey taken by Johnson and Boswell.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the rage for the Picturesque had dimmed. The original freshness had become something of a cliché, and the term was losing its authority. It was becoming a negative term during the 19th century and continues today to have negative connotations, often being seen as a sentimental interpretation of the natural world. However, its importance in describing a series of responses to nature cannot be denied.

A word now on my own response to the Picturesque.

When I was a boy, I lived for three years with my grandparents in Blackpool. My grandfather had all his life been what used to be called a commercial artist. Blackpool in those days was a prosperous place with plenty of work for artists. My grandfather designed posters, painted murals, design illuminations, and was busy at this throughout his life. In 1955, when he was in his mid-seventies, he was commissioned to repaint the ceiling and the stage backdrop of the Tower Ballroom, which had been burnt out in a disastrous fire. I remember going up to see him at work. He had to climb 120 feet of scaffolding before starting his working day, and he had only one helper, who mixed the colours for him. He managed to

recreate 4000 square feet of *The Carnival of Venice* in about a year, and was known locally as 'Michelangelo Miller'.

For recreation from his commercial work, he would go into the villages and countryside of the Fylde of Lancashire and paint watercolours. Here is one which shows him to be an inheritor of the Picturesque tradition!



A Picturesque scene at Larbreck near Poulton-le-Fylde by my grandfather, Peter Miller.

And here is a photograph which includes myself aged about 13. My grandfather ran a group of Fylde artists who were amateur watercolourists, and, on this day, he had chosen to take them to Carnforth, near Lancaster. I remember such excursions with him with great fondness, and I suppose that also makes me part of that same Picturesque tradition!



The Fylde Art Group at Carnforth with my grandfather and me

I would like to record my thanks to Eleanor Jackson, Curator of Paintings, who kindly looked out two paintings from the Gallery's Collection to illustrate this talk and which I have used to illustrate the Picturesque:

George Morland (1763-1804), [*A Gypsy Encampment*](#)

Michelangelo Rooker (1746-1801), [*Layerthorpe Postern, York*](#)

Peter Miller

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