

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Joseph Mallord William Turner
(London 1775 – 1851)

The Brenva Glacier from Notre Dame de la Guerison, above Courmayeur, Val d'Aosta, 1836.

Watercolour with scratching out.
19 x 30.2 cm (7 1/2 x 11 7/8 in.)

Provenance:

Possibly in the collection of John Edward Taylor (1872-1912?);
Possibly Christie's, London, 5 July 1912, lot 86 (sold for 350gns);
Private collection, UK;
with Agnew's, London by 1999;
Private collection.

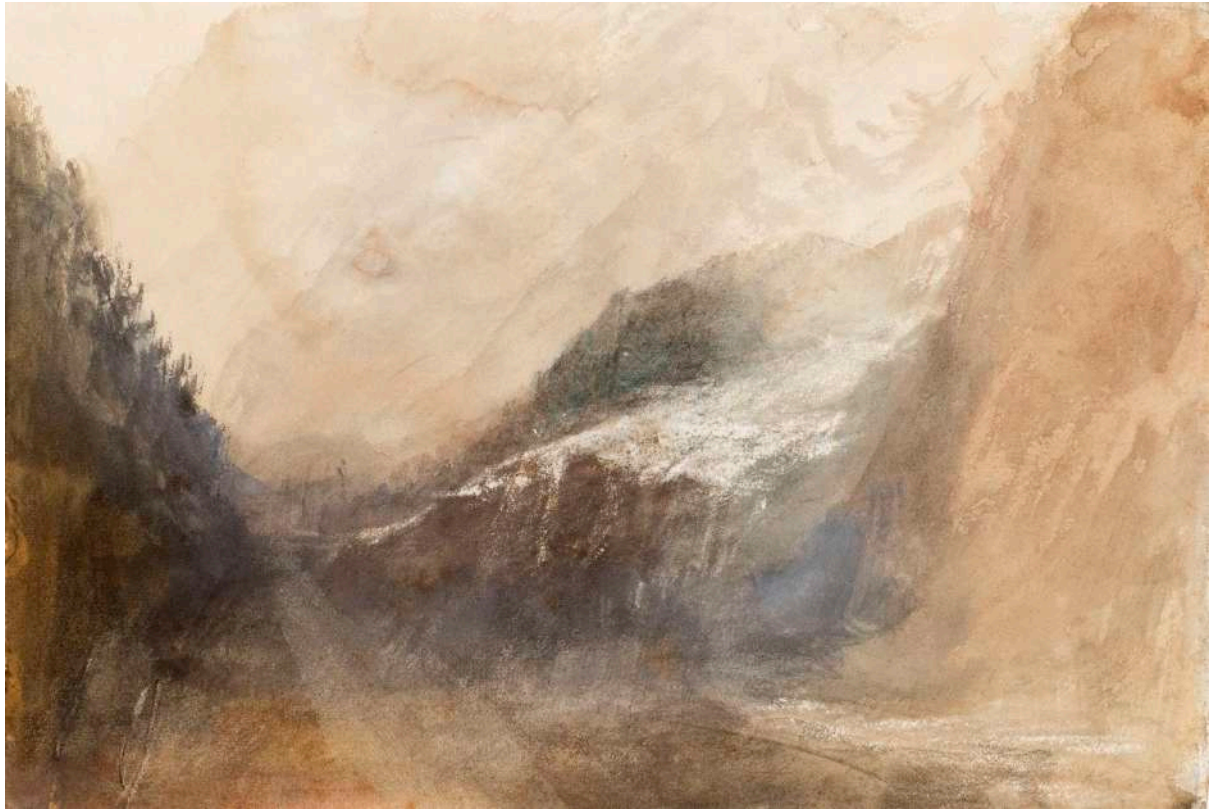
Literature:

D. Hill, *Joseph Mallord William Turner: Le Mont-Blanc et La Vallée d'Aoste*, exh. cat., Museo Archeologico Regionale Aosta 2000, p. 151 and p. 277, no. 28.

Exhibitions:

London, Agnew's Gallery, *English Watercolours and Drawings*, 1999, no. 57, illustrated in colour, as 'A Glacier in the Alps'.

Aosta, Museo Archeologico Regionale, *Joseph Mallord William Turner: Le Mont-Blanc et la Vallée d'Aoste*, 2000, no. 28, illustrated in colour, as 'The Brenva Glacier from Notre Dame de la Guerison, above Courmayeur, Val d'Aosta, 1836'.



This luminous and contemplative Alpine scene captures what is presumably a sunset view in the Mont Blanc massif, with the Brenva Glacier sweeping down into Val Veny, near Courmayeur. Turner's handling of watercolour is extraordinarily subtle: transparent washes of warm ochre and sepia define sunlit rock faces, contrasting with cool blue-grey shadows in the valley depths and scratching out highlights the glacier's rugged ice and the glint of fresh snow. The left foreground is obscured by a dark slope of firs plunging into shadow, while the right is dominated by a towering mountainside bathed in diffused golden light. Between these flanks, the valley opens to a distant, ethereal summit touched by the pale warm light. The palette is reduced and harmonious: earthy browns and muted greens for the lower terrain, blue and mauve tones for receding forms. The resulting impression is one of vast scale and stillness, consistent with Turner's late-Romantic *Sublime* style. Turner's brushwork is suggestive of mountain form and light, with details presented sparingly, imparting an immediacy that captures the stillness and grandeur of the scene.

This watercolour was born of Turner's extensive Alpine tour in the late summer of 1836, undertaken in the company of his close friend and patron Hugh Andrew Johnstone Munro of Novar (1797–1864). At 61, Turner was an artist at the height of his powers, revisiting the Alps decades after his first youthful tour of 1802. The 1836 journey was not merely a professional expedition but also a personal endeavour: according to later accounts, Turner proposed the tour to help alleviate Munro's melancholy, diverting his friend's mind by sketching the grandeur of the mountains. The pair travelled from Paris across Savoy to Geneva and Chamonix, then crossed the Col de la Seigne to enter the Val d'Aosta, in the Italian Alps. Turner had long yearned to behold Mont Blanc from the southern side, and the itinerary indeed brought them to Courmayeur, in the shadow of Mont Blanc's immense precipices.¹

The present view depicts the Brenva Glacier – a principal glacier of Mont Blanc's southern flank – as observed in the evening light from near the mountainside sanctuary of Notre Dame de la Guérison. Turner's daily practice on this tour combined intrepid exploration with rapid artistic response. He typically worked *in situ* at a slight remove from his companion, often climbing higher to obtain a broader "bird's-eye view" of the scene.² For the present work, Turner might have stayed at La Guérison or nearby L'Arp Vieille to greet the dawn from a suitable vantage point in the vesper's calm. The scholar David Hill, author of the 2000 exhibition catalogue "Joseph Mallord William Turner: Le Mont-Blanc et la Vallée d'Aoste" commented on the exceptionality of our watercolour as follows: "The sketch is probably one of the most rapid that Turner made on the tour of 1836, made against the fading and it is impressive that he can have managed to achieve such grandiloquence with such economy. Turner can perhaps be indulged the licence to have imagined his exertions in such epic terms. The crossing can be counted a considerable achievement for a man of sixty-one years of age".³

Turner's 1836 tour of the Mont Blanc region inspired a remarkable group of sketches and watercolours, many of which are now housed in major collections. These works trace his route

¹ W. Thornbury, *The Life of J. M. W. Turner, R.A.: Founded on Letters and Papers Furnished by His Friends and Fellow Academicians*, London 1862, p. 229.

² *Ibid.* p. 230.

³ D. Hill, *Joseph Mallord William Turner: Le Mont-Blanc et La Vallée d'Aoste*, exh. cat., Museo Archeologico Regionale Aosta 2000, p. 277.

through the Val d'Aosta, recording both broad panoramas and specific sites of historical or pictorial interest. In pencil, Turner filled the *Val d'Aosta Sketchbook* (Tate, Turner Bequest CCXCIII) with rapid notations of peaks, glaciers, and town (see for example Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Mont Blanc Massif, Le Chetif and Courmayeur from above Dolonne in the Val d'Aosta*, 1836, pencil on white wove paper, Folio 83 Verso. London, Tate Gallery.

He subsequently elaborated some of these into more developed watercolour studies. A clear example of this practice is *Aosta*, now at the Museum of Fine Arts at Boston: a scene focusing on the ancient city of Aosta in the broad valley below, where sunlit white houses contrast with blue-green Alpine shadows (Fig. 2). This work, also dated 1836 and executed in transparent and opaque watercolour, shares a similar size and technique to the Brenva subject, and likewise originated from this tour.



Fig. 2. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Aosta*, 1836, transparent and opaque watercolour. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

Many of Turner's Val d'Aosta studies remained in his personal possession for years, only later entering collections through patrons and sales. A number went to Henry Vaughan, an important collector of Turner watercolours, who eventually bequeathed them to the National Galleries of Scotland in 1900. Among these is *From Chambave, looking down the Val d'Aosta towards Ussel* (1836, NGS, Edinburgh), an expansive valley vista seen from a vine-covered slope near Chambave (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *From Chambave looking down the Val D'Aosta towards Ussel*, 1836, watercolour and bodycolour on paper. Edinburgh, National Galleries of Scotland.

The British Museum acquired several 1836 Aosta watercolours as well, notably through the Wyndham Fund and Wylie Lloyd Bequest in the early 20th century. The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge preserves another finished watercolour from the same tour: *From Sarre looking towards Aymavilles, Val d'Aosta* (1836, watercolour and bodycolour with scratching out, acc. num. 1612). Through these works, one can track Turner's itinerary: from Mont Blanc's foot to the medieval Châtel-Argent tower above Villeneuve (a subject now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, dated 1836), onward to Aosta's Roman monuments (sketched *in situ* and later worked up in colour), and further down to fortresses like Bard at the mouth of the valley (documented through several pencil views in the sketchbooks, and the aforementioned watercolour in Cambridge).

Together with other works from the series,⁴ these watercolours constitute a coherent visual diary of the 1836 alpine tour, underscoring how *The Brenva Glacier from La Guérison* fits into a broader project – Turner's attempt to capture the sublime spectacle of nature in the high Alps, what Ruskin would call "the truth of cloud and mountain peace" – distinct from the tumultuous sublime of Turner's storm scenes.

⁴ See A. Wilton, *The Life and Work of J.M.W. Turner*, Fribourg 1979, nos. 1430-1456.

Studies such as our *View of the Brenva Glacier* would have also provided Turner with essential information during the painting of major oils of the period, such as *Valley of Aosta: Snowstorm, Avalanche, and Thunderstorm*, exhibited in 1837 and now at the Art Institute of Chicago (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Valley of Aosta: Snowstorm, Avalanche, and Thunderstorm*, 1836-1837, oil on canvas. Art Institute of Chicago.

The provenance history of the present watercolour is currently the focus of scholarly investigation. Two 'sketches', described as *Alps with Glacier*', are listed by Armstrong as the property of J.E. Taylor, whose gift in 1892 provided the foundation for the collection at the newly instated Whitworth Art Gallery at Manchester University.⁵ One of these works was evidently sold after Taylor's death, at Christie's on 5 July 1912 (lot 86, bought by a Mr. Baker for 350gns). The catalogue description for the Christie's sale was '*The Alps - A View looking up a valley, with a glacier on the left*'. Its stated dimensions (7¼ x 10½ inches, as for one of the works listed by Armstrong) and the position in the composition of the glacier are slightly at odds with those of the present watercolour; there are, nevertheless, good historical reasons for supposing that our watercolour is the one sold at Christie's in 1912. The watercolour later reached Agnew's Gallery in London, and it was loaned to a major exhibition in Aosta, Italy: "*Turner, Mont Blanc and La Vallée d'Aoste*" at the Museo Archeologico Regionale (June–September 2000).

Ruskin, the great Victorian critic and Turner's ardent champion, was especially enthusiastic about these Alpine subjects. He praised Turner for conveying the majesty of the Alps with a precision and feeling no "Old Master" had achieved – depicting not generic mountains, but *these* mountains, in their actual complexity and atmosphere: "I look upon them as in some respects more valuable than his finished drawings, or his oil pictures, because they are the simple records of his first impressions and first purposes, and in most instances as true to the character of the places they represent as they are admirable in composition".⁶

⁵ W. Armstrong, *Turner*, London: Thomas Agnew 1902, p. 239.

⁶ E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, *The Works of John Ruskin*, London 1904, vol. XIII, pp. 189-190.