

**Publication:** Turner Society News No. 104

**Date:** December 2006/January 2007

## *Glimpses of a Lost Turner*

by Lara Wilson

Turner's 1811 painting, *Mercury and Herse*, was sold at Sotheby's at the beginning of this year. Before it was shipped to its new owner however, the painting came to Simon Gillespie's Studio for conservation treatment. Turner is notorious amongst conservators for his experimentation with materials and his habit of reworking paintings years after they were first completed. His paintings often pose complex technical and ethical problems, and *Mercury and Herse* proved to be no exception and presented a challenging job for Simon and his team.

Turner's early years were influenced by Claude Lorrain, one of the great French Academicians of the seventeenth century. Initially, Turner followed Lorrain's classical style of painting which ensured his early success and election to the Royal Academy. As time went on however, Turner's style and method of painting evolved. Experiments previously confined to his watercolours began to creep onto his oil canvases and his experimentation with paint to achieve the contrasted effects of light and the atmospheric effects created by storms and rainbows, for example, came to the fore.

Hand in hand with his innovative style came Turner's pioneering experimentation with materials which, as time has elapsed, presented a great number of challenges for today's conservator.

Turner used bitumen to produce transparent, rich, brown glazes, which through time resulted in a darkening and cracking under the heat of the liner's iron. Spermaceti wax mixed in with oil to give his paint translucence and a beautifully smooth texture, melted at low temperatures and caused the thick impasto to collapse; water altered the flow properties of the paint that systematically prevented the bonding of the paint layers and resulted in flaking. To compound these problems, Turner stored his completed paintings in such damp conditions that mould grew on the canvas and preparation layers, dislodging paint.

*Mercury and Herse* is a relatively early example of Turner's work and, as such, was not expected to present too many difficulties. It was first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1811,

alongside *Apollo and Python* (now in the Tate Britain) and *Chryses*, and caused a sensation. One review gushed,

'...we decidedly think this very fine (we were near saying, perfect,) work of art, is the result of an unwearied observation of nature, a discriminating eye, and a happy facility of communicating the creations of a vivid imagination to canvas. In the romantic fascination of its component parts, Mr. Turner's poetic fancy has even risen above its usual sphere.' (*Ackermann's Repository*, vol. V, June 1811, p. 339)

After an initial misunderstanding, which Turner found very embarrassing, with false rumours circulating to the effect that the Prince of Wales wished to buy the painting, *Mercury and Herse* found a string of prestigious owners. These included the eccentric Sir John Swinburne, who bought the picture for 550 guineas, Sir John Pender, a prominent industrialist and collector, and the philanthropist, Samuel Montagu, later Lord Swaythling.

The subject was taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which tells the story of how Mercury, the messenger of the gods, while flying over Athens caught sight of the princess Herse, returning with her companions from a religious ceremony. At the Royal Academy the painting was accompanied by these lines, translated from Ovid,

'Close by the sacred walls in wide Munichia's plain,  
The god well pleas'd beheld the virgin train.'

The story (which ends badly, with Mercury turning Herse's jealous sister to stone) had been treated by artists before. Turner may have been brought to it by the Veronese painting of the same name which is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, but was then in the collection of Earl Fitzwilliam at Richmond.

During treatment of *Mercury and Herse* to remove a dirty varnish and some old, discoloured restorations, Simon and his team discovered that the composition, which had been so admired by contemporary audiences, was not Turner's first attempt to treat the subject; in fact, an earlier painting lay hidden beneath.

When the painting arrived in the studio, the sky appeared heavy and ponderous, stifling any sense of recession in the composition. The brushstrokes were ungainly and the use of colour uninteresting. It was obvious that there had been at least partial over-painting in a previous treatment, and possibly wholesale repainting of the sky.

## *Conservation and Restoration of Fine Art Press Cuttings*

A tiny sample was taken from the upper layer of paint in the sky, and the blue pigment identified. This was found to be Prussian blue, which had been available to artists since the first half of the eighteenth century, and was not unusual in Turner's paintings. However, Joyce Townsend of the Tate Gallery, who has investigated Turner's materials extensively, informed us that, while he used Prussian blue for draperies or to mix with yellows to create green landscapes, he did not use it in his skies. For these he preferred the blue glass pigment, smalt, and, when it became available in the early nineteenth century, cobalt blue. This indicated to us that the upper paint layers in the sky, as we had suspected, were not applied by Turner.

Armed with this information we removed a small test area of the upper paint layer and discovered another, perfectly preserved sky beneath. We proceeded to remove all of the overpaint to reveal skilled brushwork and subtle use of unexpected colour, much more in harmony with Turner's technique as observed in other paintings. Once the sky was clear of overpaint, the three-dimensional qualities of the painting returned and it was once again possible to understand why the picture had caused such a stir when first exhibited.

A puzzle remained however. Why had this beautiful and highly finished sky been overpainted by previous restorers to give an entirely different composition? We consulted old photographs of the painting, going back to the late nineteenth century, and also examined a print, made after the painting at Turner's instigation in 1842. The sky in all of these images was similar to the composition of the overpaint, not the newly revealed sky.

Investigations in other regions of the painting showed that there was also a different composition beneath the train of people and the ruins in the lower left. This was, for the most part, well preserved, but had sustained some large losses, which had been concealed by the upper paint layer. Once again, it was the upper paint layer (this time consistent with Turner's usual style and materials), which was shown in the historic photographs and the print after the painting.

At this point, a number of sketches came to light in the Tate's collection, which had always been thought to relate to *Mercury and Herse*. It was very clear to us, however, that these sketches bore a much stronger resemblance to the hidden, lower paint layer than they did to the visible layers of paint. In particular, almost all of the sketches showed an arch-shaped relief on the ruins in the lower left. In the hidden composition the relief was, indeed, arch-shaped, but in the upper layers the relief had been changed to a rectangle. An arch-shaped relief does not feature in any of Turner's paintings apart from the hidden composition

beneath the *Mercury and Herse*. This convinced us that the sketches, which date from 1805, had been made to support the hidden painting.

This was the final piece of evidence which allowed us to reconstruct the history of this fascinating picture. Turner had produced a painting in 1805 (or shortly after) based on the sketches in the Tate's collection. Either he had not been satisfied with the composition or he had not been able to sell the painting, and it lingered in his studio for several years. As we know, the conditions in which Turner kept his paintings were very poor, and this painting must have become damaged, sustaining the losses that were noticed in the underlying composition. In 1811 Turner returned to the same canvas (as we know was his habit with other pictures) and reworked the sky, the train of figures and the ruins to produce the *Mercury and Herse* which went to the Royal Academy exhibition.

As it changed hands and aged the painting underwent a number of conservation and restoration campaigns. The various restorers involved were confused by the two superimposed paintings and removed and, when they realised their mistake, replaced all the paint in the sky. Small areas of the ruins also suffered the same treatment, although here Turner's own reworking survived much better.

The situation where one painting covers another comes up from time to time in conservation studios and poses an ethical dilemma; should the upper painting be sacrificed for the lower, or should the lower painting remain forever hidden, even if what covers it is of poor quality or damaged? Each case has to be judged on its own merits, and interested parties, such as the painting's owner, must be consulted. However, where the upper layer was applied by the artist, the answer would almost always be to preserve it. Non-destructive techniques, such as x-radiography and infra-red reflectography, can sometimes then be used to satisfy curiosity about the composition of the hidden painting.

In the case of *Mercury and Herse* a split approach was taken. In the sky, the second composition was not applied by the artist, was of poor quality and was also damaged. The sky beneath, on the other hand, was in excellent condition and was by Turner's own hand. Although the overpaint better represented the composition which Turner had intended for the 1811 version of the painting, its appearance detracted from the pleasure which could be taken in viewing the painting, which was evidently great when it was first exhibited. After some deliberation, and a visit from the owner to see the work in progress, it was decided that the spirit of the painting was better served by revealing the earlier version of the sky than by preserving the dull and unsightly overpaint.

In the architecture and the train of figures, however, much of Turner's own paint survived in the upper layer, while the earlier composition was dotted with large losses. The new owner of the painting was naturally curious to discover exactly what lay beneath the upper layer. Here, however, it was eventually agreed by all parties that the most ethical course would be to preserve the upper layer and simply replace any ugly patches of restorers' overpaint with more sympathetic retouching. The exact nature of the lower composition would have to remain a mystery.

No treatment could have turned back time and restored *Mercury and Herse* to its appearance at the 1811 Royal Academy exhibition. Our solution does mean, however, that what is now visible reflects the interesting history of the painting and is an honest representation of its condition.

Simon Gillespie and his team of conservators restore pictures from all periods in the history of art.

Pictures courtesy of Simon Gillespie Studio LLP

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