

ART & MUSEUM

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Turner's 1831 visit to the Borders celebrated in new exhibition

Abbotsford, the home of Sir Walter Scott, dedicated an exhibition which opened earlier this year, to the relationship between the great English painter JMW Turner (1775-1851) and the hugely influential Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832).¹

J.M.W. Turner is a regular cornerstone of British art exhibitions but rarely does an exhibition focus on his personal relationships and interactions with his contemporaries. Turner's collaborative work with the celebrity author Sir Walter Scott resulted in some of the most beautiful watercolour illustrations ever produced.

Highlights of the exhibition include Turner's personal painting effects, including his travelling cabinet, spectacles, palette and paint box loaned from the Tate and the Ashmolean Museum. These treasures have not been on display in Scotland for over a decade. The Abbotsford Trust is also delighted to be displaying Turner's 'Abbotsford' sketchbook, one of the three hundred or so that the artist used throughout his life.

This is the first time that the Abbotsford sketchbook has returned to Scott's home since it was carried by Turner himself in August 1831. In it, Turner recorded his visual impressions of Scott's home, both inside and out, making it one of the most precious visual sources in Abbotsford's history, allowing the staff to place features, objects in their collections and even planting schemes just as they were during Sir Walter Scott's lifetime.

An interactive version of the sketchbook also allows visitors to explore Turner's sketches of other sites in the region, from Dryburgh and Melrose Abbey to Smailholm Tower, Kelso and Berwick upon Tweed.

Visitors will also be able to see three original Turner watercolours produced in association with Sir Walter Scott's work and his posthumous biography.

The exhibition will run until the 30th November 2017. Entry is included in the admission ticket to the house. Due to the light-sensitive nature of some of the display items, light levels in the exhibition room will be low.

The display showcases material from the collections of the Tate, The Ashmolean, The Abbotsford Trust, the Faculty of Advocates Abbotsford Collection Trust and private lenders. Kirsty Archer-Thompson, Collections and Interpretation Manager for the Abbotsford Trust and curator of the exhibition commented: "I think that interactions between the famous figures of our past remind us how dynamic that past was. Regarding collaboration and marketing coups, the partnership between Turner and Scott was revolutionary in the history of the book. But on a human level, their relationship was more interesting still, plagued by the suspicion, anxiety and miscommunication between two men desperate to make their mark and cement their legacy.

"This is a story about the vulnerabilities of artists as people, but also about how those people find a way forwards to reconciliation - and perhaps even friendship. I think that, for that reason, it's still a very relevant story to the world of today."

THE RELATIONSHIP

The business partnership of two cultural giants began in 1818 when Scott was Britain's premier novelist and culminated in the publication of Turner's illustrated editions of Scott's poetry and prose works after the author's death in 1832. This sometimes strained and frosty relationship between artist and author had as many twists and turns as a novel, from accusations of 'slurring' and palms 'itchy' for money to the warm welcome Turner received in 1831 as he arrived at Scott's family home in the Scottish Borders. During his stay at Abbotsford, he was tasked with getting to know the man behind the writing and sketching and exploring a landscape that Scott had helped to put on the map.

Turner and Scott were from very different social backgrounds, with very different characters and political leanings. They were both the pre-eminent artists of their day and their journey to the top had involved no small degree of reinvention, skill and mastery of their respective markets. Both men were protective of their art, and, increasingly with their advancing years, subject to wounded pride. They were also prone to fits of anxiety and depression, held in check by their love of the great outdoors and of the escapism and inner peace it could provide. Scott was a communicator and a collaborator, whereas Turner had grown up in a marketplace where trade and commerce was the language of interaction. This had made him cautious, protective and renowned as a man who drove a hard bargain. Charting their lives and careers side by side, the exhibition explains how and why the sparks flew but also reveals that there was a great deal of common ground between Scott and Turner, perhaps more than either man appreciated.

THE ARTWORK

Two of the original Turner watercolours form part of an original set of twenty-four paintings commissioned in 1831 to illustrate a lavish new edition of Scott's poetry. Some of the scenes in the Borders closest to Sir Walter Scott's heart were worked up by Turner from sketches that he made during his stay at Abbotsford in August of that year. They include watercolours of Newark Tower on the Bowhill estate, and Abbotsford itself, framed by the outline of the Eildon hills. Both original artworks were acquired by the Abbotsford Trust in 2011 with the kind support of the Art Fund. This is the first time these watercolours have been on display at Abbotsford and represents a once in a generation opportunity to see these exquisite pieces.

For more information about Abbotsford, visit www.scottsabbotsford.com