

. AGNEWS .

EST. 1817

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Joseph Mallord William Turner, R.A.
(LONDON 1775-1851)

The Splügen pass

Inscribed: 'BAINS/...?' (lower centre)

Pencil and watercolour heightened with body colour and with scratching out on paper

29 x 45 cm (11 7/16 x 17 11/16 in.)



Provenance

Thomas Griffith, by whom sold in 1842 to
H.A.J. Munro of Novar; Christie's, 6th April 1878, lot 83 (1,000 gns to Agnew as 'Baths of Pfeffers').
Alfred William Hunt, by whom given to
John Ruskin, May 1878, by whom bequeathed to
Arthur Severn.

with Agnew's, London.

Alexander T. Hollingsworth, March 1923; Christie's, 19 April 1929, lot 79 (1,800 gns. to Leggatt)

F.J. Nettlefold, and by descent.

with Marlborough Fine Art, London.

with Agnew's, London, where purchased by
James Biddle.

Anonymous sale; Sotheby's New York, 29th February 1984, lot 100.

Anonymous sale; Christie's, London, 14th July 1992, lot 85.

Anonymous sale; Sotheby's, London, 14 June 2001, lot 24, where purchased by Jacqui Safra; until sold in
his sale, Christie's New York, 25 January 2023, lot 69.

Literature

W.E. Frost and H. Reeve, *A Complete Catalogue of Paintings, Water-Colour Drawings, Drawings and Prints in the Collection of the late High Andrew Johnstone Munro, Esq., of Novar*, London 1865, p.121, no.40, 'Pass of the Splügen'

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- London, Guildhall, *Turner Exhibition*, 1899, no. 159.
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Turner's watercolour *The Splügen Pass* is one of the most celebrated of his late views of Switzerland, and is now among the rare handful of that group still in private hands. In the second half of the nineteenth century its fame even eclipsed the artist's views of the Rigi after the art critic John Ruskin proclaimed it both 'the noblest Alpine drawing Turner had ever till then made' and 'the best Swiss landscape yet painted by man' (*Works*, XIII, p.480; and XXXV, p.309).

Curiously, however, despite such fulsome praise, Ruskin was not alone in mistakenly associating the location depicted as the wide valley bordering the Rhine at Bad Ragaz and Maienfeld, to the north of Chur (Coire) in eastern Switzerland, before the river skirts the border of Liechtenstein. This is some sixty kilometres from the actual setting, which is Andeer in the Schams valley, about 10 kilometres from Splügen itself, following the ascent of the valley on to the south-west (fig. 1). Furthermore, while Andeer was in Turner's time was an established coaching stop on the way to the Splügen Pass, it cannot strictly be described as being in the actual crossing, which climbs over the alps from the eponymous village, down to Chiavenna and Lake Como. Perhaps a more accurate title would be *Andeer on the Route to the Splügen Pass*? Whilst in earlier times the pass had been an important trade route, by the last decades of the eighteenth century it was neglected and dilapidated. Consequently, artists like Francis Towne (1739-1816) had to overcome difficult conditions when recording the drama of the pass in his distinctive economic style (see Christie's, April 15, 2021, lot 164, *The Source of the Rhine with Mount Splügen*). By the 1820s work was underway on a greatly improved road, which cut a truly sublime route that twists above and through deep precipices. Thus, by the time of Turner's journeys in the area in the early 1840s the pass was once again an option for northern travellers heading to or from Italy (local brigands permitting).

The muddled identification of the watercolour's location as Bad Ragaz came about because of the inscription in the lower right, reading 'BAINS'. It seems that the first owner of the watercolour, H.A.J. Munro of Novar, assumed this was a reference to the well-known bathing establishment at Bad Ragaz, known as the Pfeffers, unaware of its connection with the more modest and apparently 'not much used' warm mineral baths at Andeer (*Murray's Handbook for Travellers in Switzerland*, 1838, p.208). In recent years, a stylish new facility has opened, built from the Rofia-Gneis granite blocks that Turner features. The potential health benefits of such treatments are also hinted at in his image through the inclusion of a mother and child playing on the edge of a (probably invented) basin into which the waters flow. Although Munro

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knew Turner well, having travelled with him around Mont Blanc and down the Val d'Aosta in 1836, it may be that his confusion about the location arose from wide-ranging discussions with Turner, who likely mentioned a stimulating pause at Bad Ragaz, which is the subject of a couple of his watercolour sketches (see Manchester City Art Gallery, 1920.587; Wilton 1979, no.1496).

Away from the rocky pool in the foreground, Turner's view is composed to draw the viewer's attention deep into the picture plane, towards the village of Zillis, and beyond that to the unseen head of the narrow and tortuous Via Mala, which was an awe-inspiring geological attraction for visitors. The perspective effect is skillfully realized through the overlapping washes of atmospheric colour, suggesting the dwindling light in the enclosed valley accompanying the onset of dusk, possibly with reference to a colour study (TB CCCLXIV 123; Tate, D35966). Fundamentally the design is about the experience of travel, calling attention to the road, down which a pack of sheep are herded, and as was noted by Andrew Wilton (who first identified the scene as Andeer), its structure echoes some of the pictures that resulted from Turner's first tour of the Alps in 1802 in which the influence of Nicholas Poussin was still evident (Russell and Wilton 1976, p.109). A contemporary view of Andeer by an artist named Johann Ulrich Burri, looking in the opposite direction towards the peaks above Splügen, includes the fencing bordering the road that plays such an important role in Turner's picture to contain the fields of vines on either side (fig. 2).

Neither there, nor apparently in any guidebooks of the period, does there seem to be an explanation for the faces carved on these posts. When Turner's watercolour was catalogued as part of Munro's collection, they were described as 'Rows of Busts on Pedestals' (Frost and Reeve, 1865, p.121). Yet as there is no evidence of them in the colour sketch on which the finished work is based (fig. 4), it appears that they were a fancy that evolved as Turner developed the image. Burri's print also reveals the proximity of the Fravi Spa Hotel to Turner's viewpoint, directly below the outcrop supporting the looming Evangelical Reformed church, which he perhaps was alluding to in the indistinct inscription. It is possible that Turner recorded the scene from the windows of his room in the hotel, as he did elsewhere on his travels, most memorably in Venice in 1840.

Another contemporary view, this time by Johann Ludwig Bleuler (fig. 3), gives a clearer sense of how Andeer sits in the crook of the valley, with the Hinterrhein by-passing the village to the west, under the cliffs on which the ruined tower of the former Cagliastscha castle was constructed. The river is barely

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present in Turner's view, but he scratched away the painted surface, just beyond the foreground boulders, to create a couple of horizontal lines that indicate the sparkling light on the fast-flowing water. The twisted forms of the vines were similarly created.

As already mentioned, *The Pass of Splügen* was created as part of Turner's renewed interest in depicting the lakes and mountains of Switzerland at the start of the 1840s. He may initially have hoped to see his watercolours published as a set of line engravings, along the same lines as his *Picturesque Views in England and Wales*, which had come to an end in 1838. However, according to Ruskin, when Turner first proposed the idea of developing finished watercolours from the colour sketches he had made during his 1841 tour, there was some hesitancy among the collectors about what was perceived to be a new style – as well as a new, and significantly higher pricing level for each item - which would have jeopardized any hopes of an engraved Swiss series, despite the intrinsic quality of these innovative watercolours.

Ruskin's account of the process of seeking commissions from the sketches was until comparatively recently assumed to be solid and authoritative, even allowing for the fact that it was not set down until 1878, just at the point when the prominent writer was suffering mental strain in the lead up to the sensational libel trial over his dismissive comments of the works of James Abbott McNeill Whistler (see *Works*, XIII, pp.475-485). In his version of events, Ruskin proposed that in the spring of 1842 Turner's agent, Thomas Griffith, had shown him, and a select group of other collectors, fifteen colour sketches from which they could choose the subjects they preferred; the aim was to generate commissions for 10 works. The sketches (now predominantly in the Turner Bequest at the Tate) were apparently accompanied by four finished watercolours to indicate how the raw material would be transformed. Thirty-six years later, Ruskin's recollection was that *The Pass of Splügen* was one of the four exemplary prototypes. He supported this assertion by stating that he 'saw in an instant' that it was 'the noblest Alpine drawing Turner had ever till then made'; and as a result 'I wrote to my father, saying I would fain have that Splügen Pass, if he were home in time to see it, and give me leave'. Much to Ruskin's regret, however, the watercolour was acquired in the meantime by his rival for Turner's later watercolours, Munro of Novar, causing an enduring resentment between the Ruskins.

Frustratingly, there are no contemporary family letters or diary entries to confirm this perhaps overly neat version. Since the 1990s, however, new light has been shed on the issue by some previously unpublished

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correspondence between Turner and Benjamin Godfrey Windus, owner of one of the best collections of Turner's mature watercolours, and another of the potential patrons of the Swiss project. In one of these letters, dated 18 March 1842, Turner sought to pacify Windus's agitated and confused idea of what he had been offered (as well as his displeasure at the intervention of Griffith as a dealer) by clarifying the difference between the travel sketches and the larger, more resolved watercolours. Typically, Turner's handwriting, syntax, and casual punctuation leave a lingering ambiguity about the details; but it is clear that he originally aimed to create a first batch of 20 watercolours, before acceding to reduce that figure to 10 because each one 'took so much time'. At that date he claims he had 'sold 4', and it appears that 2 of these may have been completed works, 'first thought of to show how far I meant to make them coincide with the original notions' (Whittingham 1993, p.97-99). This is imprecise, but could indicate that only 2 watercolours were displayed as examples. Whether *The Pass of Splügen* was among these remains unclear. And of course, Ruskin's invitation to view the sketches may have come slightly later, involving other options.

Compounding these uncertainties, the location depicted in *The Pass of Splügen* is itself a cause for questioning a date of 1842 for the watercolour, since the bulk of Turner's sketching on the 1841 tour focused on the lakes of Lucerne and Geneva, and the idea of an expedition much further east to Splügen, that returned to Zürich over the much of the same ground, seems at odds with Turner's habits. More certainly, he was in the south-eastern region of Switzerland in 1842 and 1843. Stylistically the colour sketch Turner made of the view at Andeer (fig. 4) has much in common with a sheet from a disbound sketchbook used in 1842, while Turner explored the villages of Kussnacht, Goldau and Lake Zug, in the shadow of the Rigi (fig. 5; see Warrell 1995, nos.27, 28, 29). Although the setting of the latter appears to be one of the natural springs among boulders created at Goldau as a result of the catastrophic landslide from the Rossberg in 1806, the image is built up using the same range of blue, green, purple and warmer tones found in the Andeer view, suggesting the washes may have been applied during the same painting session. The shared focus on the ritual of bathing, and its longer spiritual resonances, underline the aesthetic connections.

Actual proof of Turner's presence at Splügen can be found for the later of the two years, in the form of a florid signature, supplemented with his status as a Royal Academician, in the guest book of the Bodenhaus in an entry for 10 September 1843 (Wanner, p.46, fig. 8). That was also a year in which his travels on nearby Lake Como are documented by William Lake Price (*Photographic News*, 1860, p.407).

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Either of these circumstances may relate to the first contemporary reference to *The Pass of Splügen*, which comes a few months later in Ruskin's diary for 13 April 1844. After what, surprisingly, appears to have been his first viewing of Munro of Novar's collection at his town house at No.6 Hamilton Place, Ruskin picked out two works specifically: 'made myself very unhappy for two of them – the Splügen and Zürich. Would give the world for them; I shall have them some time however if I live'. Ruskin's reaction might well be freighted with the emotions of his frustrated hopes of acquiring these works in 1842, as he claimed. But the intensity of his response could alternatively indicate that the two watercolours were recent creations, new to him.

Indeed, it transpires that Turner was seeking commissions for new works around that time. This supposition is given further weight by a second passionate reference to the watercolours two days later: 'Fine sermon from Melville, and pleasant Sunday; only I want the Splügen and Zürich, and don't know how to get them' (Diaries, I, p.273). Nothing further is mentioned at the time, not least because Ruskin joined his father on his commercial travels to north-western England, a journey that could subsequently have been the seed for the belief that his hopes of getting *The Pass of Splügen* was frustrated by his father's absence on business. Ongoing research, or specific evidence may in time substantiate one or other version of the watercolour's origins.

Transcending such details is Ruskin's enduring appreciation and his sense of anguish at having missed his chance of possessing the watercolour. Ruskin's biographer, Tim Hilton has said that 'Ruskin exaggerated the loss of the 'Splügen'. However, like all his many exaggerations, this one has the truth of being heartfelt. The 'Splügen' meant more than it ought to have done (Hilton 1985, p.67). Looking back in the mid-1880s, while writing *Praeterita*, Ruskin grieved that his petulance about the proverbial 'one that got away' had greatly pained his father: 'As it was, the 'Splügen' was a thorn in both our sides, all our lives. My father was always trying to get it; Mr Munro, aided by dealers, always raising the price on him, till it got up from 80 to 400 guineas. Then we gave it up, - with unspeakable wear and tear of best feelings on both sides' (*Works*, XXXV, pp.309-10).

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He was writing from a happier place, because he was – at long last - the owner of *The Pass of Splügen*. Although Munro of Novar had died in 1864, the best of his unrivalled group of Turner's paintings and watercolours only came to auction in April 1878. Although the *England and Wales* watercolours were then the most highly prized of Turner's works on paper, both *The Pass of Splügen* and *Zürich* achieved two of the highest prices, with the latter setting the bar at auction for works from the Swiss series.

Ruskin was not himself in a position to bid, having succumbed earlier that spring to the mental illness that prevented him from completing his catalogue notes for an exhibition of his Turner watercolours at the Fine Art Society. He was fortunate, nevertheless, to have generated friends and admirers who sought to console and heal him by acquiring the watercolour so that it could be presented as a gift (see Dearden 1996). This campaign, of which Ruskin remained unaware, was led by Jane Simon (a family friend), who united with a parallel endeavour begun by the artist Alfred William Hunt and his wife. The winning bid of 1,000 guineas for the picture was placed through the firm Agnew's, who waived the usual commission as their contribution to the Ruskin fund. During the weeks after the sale, a printed letter seeking financial subscriptions to support the gift, was sent to a wide circle.

Extensive correspondence documenting the enthusiastic responses, which soon matched the target figure, can be found in both the Ruskin Library at Lancaster, and the Morgan Library in New York. These letters reveal the wide geographical and social reach of Ruskin's admirers, as well as his appeal to women as much as to male readers.

Naturally, after such strenuous efforts on his behalf, Ruskin was overwhelmed and could scarcely believe it was the real thing when *The Pass of Splügen* arrived at Brantwood (his home in the Lake District). He wrote on 15 May to thank Jane Simon, saying, "The Splügen Pass – with all its mountains – was moved here by your faith in me and that of other dear friends last night ... I am, however, profoundly thankful both for the sweet gift, and that I have again eyes to see it, - for indeed, I am, as far as I can make out, quite myself again" (Dearden, Op.cit., p.5). Keen, as always, to use his collection for didactic ends, he soon afterwards sent the watercolour back to London so that it could join the exhibition at the Fine Art Society, and his gratitude spilled over into the only first-hand account we have of the origins of the sets of late Swiss watercolours. As implied already, it may be that the events leading up to the triumphant acquisition of *The*

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Pass of Splügen coloured his recollection of exactly what had happened, inducing him to juggle details to give it greater significance in his narrative.

Nevertheless, once it returned to Brantwood, it thereafter occupied a prominent place among the other Turner watercolours, hanging for a few years in his study (fig. 6), until in 1884, shortly before he embarked on the process of setting down his memoirs, the ailing Ruskin chose to move it to his bedroom, where he positioned *The Pass of Splügen* among his other cherished views of Switzerland (fig. 7).

Within a couple of decades of Ruskin's death, Arthur and Joan Severn, who had looked after him in his later years, were struggling to maintain Brantwood. Many of the Turners had already had to be sacrificed to its upkeep, but they steadfastly hung on to *The Pass of Splügen* until March 1923, before arranging with Agnew's for a sale directly to A.T Hollingsworth (c.1848-1929). Resident in Belsize Grove in North London, Hollingsworth was more in tune with the Whistler generation in terms of his collecting taste, but nonetheless acquired a group of representative watercolours by Turner, ranging from topographical scenes for the *Sussex*, *Southern Coast*, and *Ports* series to illustrations of *Florence* and the Miltonic *Temptation on the Mountain*. Compared to these, however, *The Pass of Splügen* was the unquestioned crowning glory of his collection.

After Hollingsworth, the watercolour passed to another notable twentieth-century Turner collection, that of the Nettlefold family. Drawing on their own judicious acquisitions, they were generous benefactors of the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester Art Gallery, and the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, as well as supporting public exhibitions through the loan of their pictures; no doubt following Ruskin's example.

In recent years, *The Pass of Splügen* has enjoyed something of a respite from its former celebrity. But its contributions to British art history, both on its own terms as one of Turner's finest Swiss subjects, and as the subject of Ruskin's veneration, continue to generate interest, conferring on this haunting work a mark of real distinction.

We are grateful to Ian Warrell, former curator, Tate Britain, and independent scholar, for his assistance in preparing this catalogue entry.

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Fig. 1: Map of Eastern Switzerland (from J. Russel and A. Wilton, *Tour in Switzerland*, 1976)



Fig. 2: Lukas Weber after Johann Ulrich Burri, *Andeer, routed Splügen*, c.1830-50, coloured aquatint, 13 x 17.5 cm, published by H.F. Leuthold, Zurich, Rätisches Museum, Chur

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Fig. 3: Johann Ludwig Bleuler, *Vue d'Andeer en venant de Splügen, prise a gauche de Barenburg, c.1831*, Swiss National Library



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Fig. 4: William Mallord Turner, *The Pass of Splügen*, sample study, c.1841-2, Tate



Fig. 5: William Mallord Turner, *The Angel Troubling the Pool*, probably at Goldau, c.1842, Tate



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Fig. 6: Ruskin's study at Brantwood c.1879-1884, *The Splügen pass* hanging above the globe, under the view of Arona produced for the 1829 Keepsake annual



Fig. 7: Arthur Severn, *View of Ruskin's bedroom*, Brantwood, October 1900, Ruskin Library, Lancaster