



Bright waters



Left:
The White House at Chelsea,
1800, by Thomas Girtin

Revered by his celebrated contemporaries Turner and Constable, the art of Thomas Girtin has since faded from view. Alexandra Harris illuminates his groundbreaking watercolours

Turner has been triumphant at his 250th birthday party. The Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool looks justified in the bold proposition of its autumn show 'Turner: Always Contemporary'. Constable was just a year younger and his anniversary is set to attract similar levels of attention. Tate Britain brings the two together in its major winter exhibition 'Turner and Constable'. But there is another genius of British art who was born 250 years ago. I'd risk the speculation that if Turner and Constable were here today, they'd look round and ask, 'But what about Tom Girtin?'

The art of Thomas Girtin was a defining presence in both their lives. Constable studied a group of drawings by Girtin to such effect that friends reckoned their influence could be traced 'through the whole course of his practice'. We'd expect Constable to be copying old masters, but it's a remarkable tribute that he studied so concertedly the work of a peer. As for Turner, he never forgot the friend and rival of his twenties, his colleague in the great quest to remake the rules and possibilities of landscape painting. Girtin's art lived always in Turner's mind, but Girtin was gone: dead at the age of 27 from asthma, or it might have been tuberculosis.

The picture that most possessed Turner, *The White House at Chelsea* (1800; left), shows a stretch of the Thames in the evening. For a chance moment, the low sun has fallen on a white building and made it blaze. It's an unremarkable house in an ordinary London dusk. Yet the artist has seen it transfigured: a bright reflection thrown onto the calm river, a luminous half-inch of white giving meaning to the whole scene around it and drawing out the rich blues of the clear, cool sky. We're looking from the south bank, near the bend of the river at Battersea. We're looking with the eye of a born Londoner who felt the moods of this place as much as those of lakes and mountains. *The White House at Chelsea* is particular and intimate, yet so simple as to have an abstract and universal quality. It's a secular revelation. Any humble place might suddenly, quietly become for a moment the organising centre of a world.

Girtin's mastery and originality as a watercolourist is in everything he doesn't do here, leaving the foreground bare, holding back from expressive gestures, giving space to the calm. It was as unconventional as Turner's art, eschewing classically orthodox framing and proportion. The two artists watched each other, admiring and diverging. Turner was still marvelling at this picture 40 years later, referring to it in the margins of sketchbooks. It may have been *The White House at Chelsea* that prompted a deeply felt remark to a fellow admirer of Girtin: 'I never in my whole life could make a drawing like that; I would at any time »



» have given one of my little fingers to have made such a one.' I wonder if he was a little haunted, as Virginia Woolf would be haunted by her lost rival Katherine Mansfield, the reader she wanted, the reader who was not there.

Girtin and Turner had spent stretches of their early twenties together. For three years they worked side by side on winter evenings at the house of Thomas Monro, a doctor at Bethlem hospital, a dedicated collector and a friend to artists. They were gainfully employed to make copies from Monro's fine collection, especially drawings by his former patient John Robert Cozens. They worked, too, from drawings of English coastal towns by Monro's neighbour John Henderson, another serious collector and amateur artist. From basic sketches, Turner and Girtin explored alternative compositions and emphases. They worked several hours a night from 6pm, followed by an oyster supper. Each knew the rhythm of the other's hand as well as his own. 'Girtin drew in outlines and Turner washed in the effects,' as the diarist Joseph Farington recorded. We can see the results of that collaborative division of labour in the hundreds of surviving 'Monro School' drawings. Girtin's pencilwork is unmistakable: a dance of brief lines, little 's'-shaped curves, purposeful caesurae.

From the mid-1790s, Girtin was working on increasingly ambitious original watercolours, often repeating a subject in multiple drawings as he fathomed its possibilities. Bamburgh Castle in Northumberland is painted as an outcrop of rock beneath which gulls wing the midway air to vertiginous effect. Peterborough Cathedral changes its character through six iterations of the West Front,

from something like lace, to labyrinths more redolent of the Piranesian structures that were etched in Girtin's mind by long study (*West Front of Peterborough Cathedral, Northamptonshire, 1796-97*; left). Stone arches rise to exhilarating height, seeming almost supernatural, but never does a line simply soar. Dash, dash, dot: the graphite point of a pencilled pause. The rhythm of draughtsmanship captures both vastness and intricate texture. All is cumulative. Girtin builds these buildings mark by mark.

Construction sites lured him with their complex geometries of leaning ladders and scaffolding poles, the chance juxtapositions of things being made. Some of Girtin's drawings could have been from the 1930s, or from yesterday. Paul Nash studied them, learning part of his modernist art from these 18th-century sheets. Here was 'a truly *architectural* use of watercolour painting', Nash wrote in 1937, meaning something more than that Girtin was good at buildings. He was admiring the structural presence and strong design of the paintings themselves, qualities that spoke across centuries and made Girtin contemporary. To illustrate the point, Nash chose *Dover Harbour: A Boat under Repair* (1795-96; below), a little-known image of an ordinary working place. The wash is by Turner, in keeping with the practice of 'Monro School' collaboration, though Nash thought it was all by Girtin. Certainly he was looking at Girtin's inimitable draughtsmanship and sense of form. Girtin might never have been to Dover, but he makes the subject his own. The wooden hull bulks huge in the foreground, its curves met by the rough diagonals of planks and ladders.

'Stone arches rise to exhilarating height, but never does a line simply soar. Dash, dash, dot: the graphite point of a pencilled pause'





Girtin had a keen eye for the compositional potential of bridges, understanding both the drama and the subtlety they could bring to his paper. Often his viewpoint is down by the water's edge, where perhaps someone is pulling up nets or mending a boat near the stone piers that rise into arches above. We glimpse the Yorkshire town of Wetherby from under its bridge, the eye moving between the women washing linens in the river and the figure disappearing up distant steps to some unseen alley (*Wetherby: Looking through the Bridge to the Mills*, c. 1800; above). We scan the rough walls of the building on the far bank, before catching sight of the waterwheel that identifies this as a mill. No wonder Constable was interested. The people of a place, and its workshops, sheds and mills, are not, for Girtin, mere picturesque incidents around the edges of what matters. They are the central fascination and source of visual pleasure.

From the back lanes of Wetherby to the banks of Battersea, Girtin had a feeling for edgelands and unregarded stretches. It showed itself even in the giant 360° panorama of London, installed in the Great Room at Spring Gardens, in St James's: 2,000 square-foot of painted city, seen from a rooftop near Blackfriars Bridge, looking over chimneys and wharves, palaces and St Paul's, each building thrillingly identifiable.

Planned in watercolour but painted in oil on canvas, the panorama was a major departure for Girtin when it opened in August 1802. This was art for a context very different from the rooms at the Royal Academy where he had exhibited regularly since 1794. Girtin was becoming

Opposite page, top:
*West Front of
Peterborough Cathedral,
Northamptonshire,
1796-97*, by Girtin

Opposite page, bottom:
*Dover Harbour: A Boat
Under Repair*, 1795-96,
by Girtin and JMW Turner

This page, above:
*Wetherby: Looking
through the Bridge to the
Mills*, c. 1800, by Girtin

famous, but he was struggling for breath. He died in November. Turner walked behind his coffin.

Almost nothing of Girtin's voice survives: two scraps of letters, a few second-hand reports of things he said. Accounts of his character vary. He was ascetic or he was intemperate; he was a young revolutionary, cropping his hair with the Jacobins, or he kept apart from politics. He was probably all these at different times. As for the art, many of the pigments are fugitive, and some of the papers have browned. A fire at Girtin's brother's house likely burned many sketchbooks and paintings. The great panorama of London disappeared – probably lost to a fire in France.

Despite all this, the body of art that remains is an astonishing legacy from so short a life. This is where Girtin survives, in all his variousness. A superb online catalogue includes more than 1,500 works. Here is his feel for both the ordinary and startling, the humble and grand, for heights and flats, for lonely wilds and city streets. Here is the staccato movement of his pencil and the rich colour washed in with his brush. Turner and Constable never forgot him. Neither should we.

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Alexandra Harris is Professor of English at the University of Birmingham and an author. Her latest book, The Rising Down: Lives in a Landscape (Faber), is out now

● **Turner and Constable** Tate Britain, London, 27 Nov to 12 April 2026 **Turner: Always Contemporary** The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, 25 Oct to 22 Feb 2026

● **Thomas Girtin's catalogue** is available at thomasgirtin.com