

★ QUARTERDECK ★

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British Marine Watercolors

A brief guide for collectors

BY JAMES MITCHELL

All images courtesy of John Mitchell Fine Paintings in London

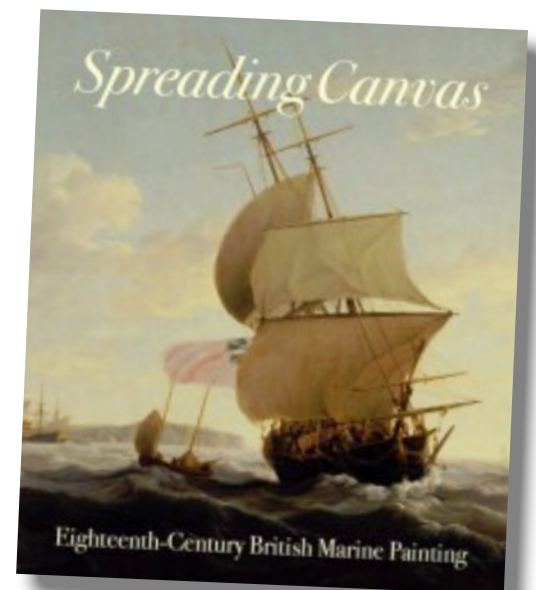
ABOVE Detail from “A Frigate and a Yacht becalmed in the Solent,” oil on canvas, 25” x 29”, by English marine artist Charles Brooking (1723-1759).

James Mitchell is the co-proprietor of John Mitchell Fine Paintings which has been associated with traditional British and European paintings for ninety years. With a gallery just off Brook Street in the heart of London’s Mayfair, the business is now run by James and William Mitchell, the grandsons of John Mitchell who began the dealership in 1931, and their colleague James Astley Birtwistle.

Over the centuries, “the silver sea,” of which Shakespeare wrote, shaped Britain’s island home and deepest identity. Britons, many believed, had saltwater running in their veins.

However, in modern Britain, our extraordinary history as a seafaring nation is not nearly as familiar as it once was. The great Age of Sail has become the esoteric province of historians and enthusiasts sustained by regular doses of *Quarterdeck* and the latest gripping novels of our favorite naval authors.

Similarly, English marine painting no longer receives the attention it deserves, and its subject matter thought too specialized, even among



collectors of pictures from the same period.

Once-acclaimed sea painters – Brooking, Serres, Cleveley, Swaine, Pocock, among others – aren’t a common currency in the way they were, say, half a century ago. Collectors no ▶



"Deptford Creek, River Thames"
by William Anderson (1757-1837)
pen and ink, and watercolor, 8" x 13", signed and dated 1798

longer purchase their naval engagements, seascapes, and ship portraits to hang in offices and private homes.

Therefore, the marvelous exhibition "Spreading Canvas," a comprehensive survey of the subject, held at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, Connecticut, in the fall of 2016, was timely. The exhibit's accompanying three-hundred-page catalog is a scholarly, richly illustrated, and essential addition to any maritime library.

It is also a vivid reminder that when American philanthropist Paul Mellon was buying up these eighteenth-century marine paintings and watercolors in London in the 1960s and '70s, there was an abundant supply from which to choose. Today it is still possible to own fine originals by these very same artists featured in the "Spreading Canvas" catalog. Although scarce, these treasures are no more costly in real terms than in Mellon's time.

The first painting I bought at auction in the late 1980s was "Deptford Creek, River Thames," a watercolor drawing by William Anderson (above),

who was typical of the many painters working from first-hand knowledge of ships and the sea.

A Scotsman brought up among shipwrights, he came to London in his twenties, where he spent the remainder of his very long career. His first painting to be exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1787 was "A View on the Thames." The river's life remained his favorite subject.

Although he exhibited until 1834, his style belongs to the eighteenth century. His views of shipping are close to those of Brooking and Dominic Serres. A son, Guy, died of wounds at the Battle of Copenhagen in 1807. Anderson's watercolors routinely sell for between \$4,000 and \$7,000.

Although I have mentioned oil paintings above, I will, for this article, concern myself principally with watercolors on paper.

Through a selection from the many hundreds of examples sold by our firm over sixty years, I seek to persuade readers that owning a beautiful English marine watercolor one connects with

the Age of Fighting Sail and begins to appreciate the many rewards of picture collecting.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before looking at the illustrations, it is worth bringing to mind some general thoughts about the rise of marine art in England. The Anglo Dutch Wars of the mid-seventeenth century were the earliest in oceanic sailing ship conflicts that continued up to 1815. As Britain fought its main rivals – France, Spain, and Holland – for dominion of the seas, images of these wars were created by self-em-

ployed entrepreneurial artists who needed to sell their work to earn a living.

Not only were these wars determining their futures, but the artists' depictions of them had to pass the scrutiny of very knowledgeable and discerning patrons. Furthermore, only through these same images of the war at sea, and their wider diffusion as engravings, could the public at large gain any understanding of events.

The value to modern historians of period marine paintings is heightened by the degree of observation that many of the artists brought to their work. A few of them were personally involved in the naval actions they depicted. Some of the work was immediate, and much of it completed at a later date. Still, invariably in the paintings and watercolors, particularly those from before 1815, there is a compelling authenticity that comes from painstaking accuracy based on the first-hand experience, with a balance of artistic flair.

In these respects, English marine painting followed the example of ➤

the renowned Dutch artists, Willem van de Velde the Elder (1611-1693) and his son, Willem van de Velde the Younger (1633-1707), who was, in this writer's opinion, the greatest marine painter of all. Even the most basic of comparisons between eighteenth-century English painters and the Van de Veldes would show the Dutchmen's far-reaching influence.

And they have been described as "at once the glory and the bane of English marine art. Their very excellence set a standard which none of their successors have rivalled but which many have attempted to repeat."

They continued to influence marine artists into the middle of the nineteenth century, most notably J M W Turner, who copied the younger Willem's pictures and attributed his career to him.

"That made me a painter," he is reputed to have said after seeing Van de Velde's famous "Bridgewater Sea-Piece" now in the museum at Toledo, Ohio.

Van de Velde the Elder was himself present at numerous sea battles, furiously sketching away. Once established in England, their clients' list began with the king, his brother, and other grandees. At the same time, their thousands of meticulous drawings of ships, in part and whole, have left an unprecedented record of the Restoration Navy, and its opponents.

In so many ways, therefore, the Van de Veldes inadvertently established the rich tradition of marine painting in England. A century after their time, both Dominic Serres and then his son, John, enjoyed the title "Marine Painter to His Majesty the King."



"The Review of the Fleet, June 1773: His Majesty (George III) saluted by the Fleet at his arrival on board Barfleur at Spithead"
by Dominic Serres, R. A. (1719-1793)
pen and ink, and watercolor, 16" x 30"

"The Review of the Fleet, June 1773: His Majesty (George III) saluted by the Fleet at his arrival on board Barfleur at Spithead" (above) a watercolor by the elder Serres, was painted as a souvenir of the review for John Jervis, Earl of St. Vincent (1735-1823), a future First Lord of the Admiralty.

At the center of two columns of men o' war in line astern, the 90-gun *Barfleur* has just received the king on board. The Royal Standard has just broken at the mainmast, and all the ships are about to fire a twenty-one-gun salute in response; numerous captain's barges and spectator boats add to the liveliness of the scene. Sold by John Mitchell Fine Paintings in 2010, this watercolor is exceptional for the artist, who is better known for his oil paintings.

Good examples of Dominic Serres' work on paper can still be found for under \$10,000. He is perhaps most familiar to readers of *Quarterdeck* as one of the artists (with his son J. T.

Serres) of *Liber Nauticus*, an instruction book of 1805 for budding marine artists, from which a page illustrated the frontispiece of Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey and Maturin novels.

Having had the good fortune to be promoted by Charles Brooking before the latter's untimely death, Dominic Serres became the leading marine painter of his time. A founder member of London's Royal Academy, Serres enjoyed a long and productive career, and the patronage of many leading sea officers.

THE RE-DISCOVERY OF CHARLES BROOKING

Whether eighteenth-century marine artists could rival the Van de Veldes may be disputed. Indeed, none came closer than Charles Brooking (1723-1759), who broke away from their stereotype, at once reappraising the subject and introducing freshness, originality of composition, and a greater emphasis on atmospheric conditions. ▶



"The yacht Mary at anchor, with a royal barge and other small vessels in attendance"
 by Willem van de Velde the Younger (1633-1707)
 pen and ink, and wash, 6 ½" x 9 ¾", signed with initials W.V.V.



"A Frigate and a Yacht becalmed in the Solent"
 by Charles Brooking (1723-1759)
 oil on canvas, 25" x 29"

Brooking's watercolors are very rare today, and as his oil paintings are what he is renowned for, little

space needs to be devoted to him, other than illustrating a superb example of his work, "A Frigate and a Yacht

becalmed in the Solent" (above)). His paintings re-surfaced in the 1960s after more than two centuries in obscurity.

At Christie's in November 1963, a fine Brooking realized a record, far above any previous figure, of 5,200 guineas (equivalent to more than £90,000/\$117,000 today). As very often happens, news of a record price "flushes out" other examples from surprised owners, and within four months, three more Brookings sold at Sotheby's, each for more than twice the previous sum.

Two years later, Mellon bought an excellent pair of paintings by the artist from our firm. From a collecting perspective, it is interesting to consider that today the example here costs less than a recently completed yachting scene by the well-known yachting artist, J. Steven Dews (born 1949), so great has been the shift in tastes.

Lest you now feel discouraged by this talk of heady sums of money, let us return to the article's focus, the artists whose watercolors can still be bought today for more modest sums.

**WILLEM VAN DE VELDE
 THE YOUNGER
 (1633-1707)**

"The Yacht Mary at Anchor" (top left) was recently sold by us to a US collector for \$17,500. This drawing is one of the more costly ones featured in this article.

Van de Velde's finest oil paintings can sell for millions of dollars. Drawings by him and his father are therefore in demand.

Today, good Van de Velde drawings start at around \$7,500. This one shows William of Orange setting off back to Holland following his marriage to Princess Mary in London in November 1677. The artist's father accompanied them. The latter recorded the voyage ▶

in a separate sequence of drawings of his own.

Just over a decade later, the Dutch prince returned to England to depose his father-in-law (and uncle), James II, and become King William III in what is now known as the Glorious Revolution. This drawing would have helped Van de Velde paint his oil of the same subject now in London's National Maritime Museum.

PETER MONAMY (1681-1749)

Peter Monamy was probably largely self-taught, closely following Willem Van de Velde the Younger's style and copying his paintings. He was not an innovative artist but emerged with Samuel Scott as one of the two leading figures in the first generation of British marine painters. "A Calm, with men working on a boat, and larger vessels beyond" (top right) is typical of his style, with figures in a dark foreground and shipping becalmed in the background. We sold it at an art show in New York City in 2012 for \$8,500.

NICHOLAS POCOCK (1740-1821)

A Bristol-born artist, Pocock belongs to the group of marine artists who spent extensive periods at sea. This company included both Dominic and John Serres, the Cleveley family, Samuel Atkins, and numerous others. Pocock headed this group of seafaring painters, in terms of time at sea if not in terms of art. He did not give up his career as a mariner until the age of forty. Throughout his voyages, he created detailed sketches.

Encouraged by Sir Joshua Reynolds, Pocock became a leading figure among the naval artists of his time. He was one of the very few present at a naval



"A Calm, with men working on a boat, and larger vessels beyond"
by Peter Monamy (1681 - 1749)
oil on canvas, 13" x 20¾"



"Shipping in Southampton Water, with Calshot Castle and the Isle of Wight beyond"
by Nicholas Pocock (1740 - 1821)
pen and ink, and watercolor, 11" x 16", signed and dated 1788

battle – the First of June 1794 – a distinction he shared with Van de Velde the Elder.

Pocock's watercolors are characterized by his color scheme of blues, greens, and pale yellows, as shown in "Shipping in Southampton Water, with Calshot Castle and the Isle of

Wight beyond" (above). Our firm sold this watercolor in 1972 and is now back with us for sale.

SAMUEL ATKINS (ACTIVE 1787-1808)

Samuel Atkins began exhibiting at ➤



"An East Indiaman, with men on the yards taking in sail"
 by Samuel Atkins (active 1787 - 1808)
 Pen and ink, and watercolor, 14" x 21", signed

Sold by us in 2011, "An East Indiaman, with men on the yards taking in sail" (above top) is one of the finest watercolors we have ever seen, and compares with his best work which resides in London's Victoria & Albert Museum.

**PHILIPPE-JACQUES
 DE LOUTHERBOURG**
 (1740-1812)

Philippe-Jacques De Louthembourg arrived in England from France (although Swiss-born), and he painted battle-pieces, landscapes, and coastal views.

"His drawings are spirited in line and pleasant in color, frequently with numerous figures well grouped," to quote English art historian Martin Hardie. Among them is "Cowes Castle, Isle of Wight" (see on the next page).

Many of his marine drawings relate to his major battle paintings, which became famous through engravings, for example, his "Battle of Camperdown." The original oil painting is at Tate Britain, London.

JOHN THOMAS SERRES
 (1759-1825)

In 1798 John Thomas Serres succeeded his father Dominic as Marine Painter to George III. He was also appointed Marine Draughtsman to the Admiralty, spending many months at sea in 1801, charting Brittany's coast to help Britain's naval blockade of Brest and the other major French ports.

Serres drew with a vigorous, strong line in a rapid calligraphic manner, which, once you have seen, you would not mistake a second time. Many of his watercolors, both large and small, were painted in a long, panoramic format. His colors and highlights tend to be ➤



"A Launching at Deptford"
 by Samuel Atkins (active 1787 - 1808)
 pen and ink, and watercolor, 11" x 15½", signed

the Royal Academy of Arts in 1787, the same year as William Anderson, and the following year he was advertising his services as a teacher of marine drawing near the Strand in London.

Between 1796 and 1804, he voyaged to the East Indies. Another watercolor by Atkins similar to "A Launching at Deptford" (above) sold in Oxford in October 2018 for \$5,600.

more pronounced than those of artists like Anderson and Cleveley. A good watercolor like the younger Serres' "HMS *Phoebe* off Toulon" (see page 25) would be valued at around \$9000.

"King George III cruising in a captured French Frigate" (bottom right), a delightful drawing of a scene which Serres witnessed: soon after the Battle of the Nile in 1798, a captured French ship (re-named *San Fiorenzo*) arrived at Weymouth on the Dorset coast. On summer holiday with his family, King George III boarded the prize for a sail. The Royal Standard flies from the mainmast, with Portland Bill visible at the extreme left. Serres carefully inscribed the drawing with the title at the bottom.

"The River Thames, London, with St. Paul's Cathedral in the distance" (see page 26), a charming scene was priced at \$3,250.

**JOHN CLEVELEY
THE YOUNGER
(1747-1786)**

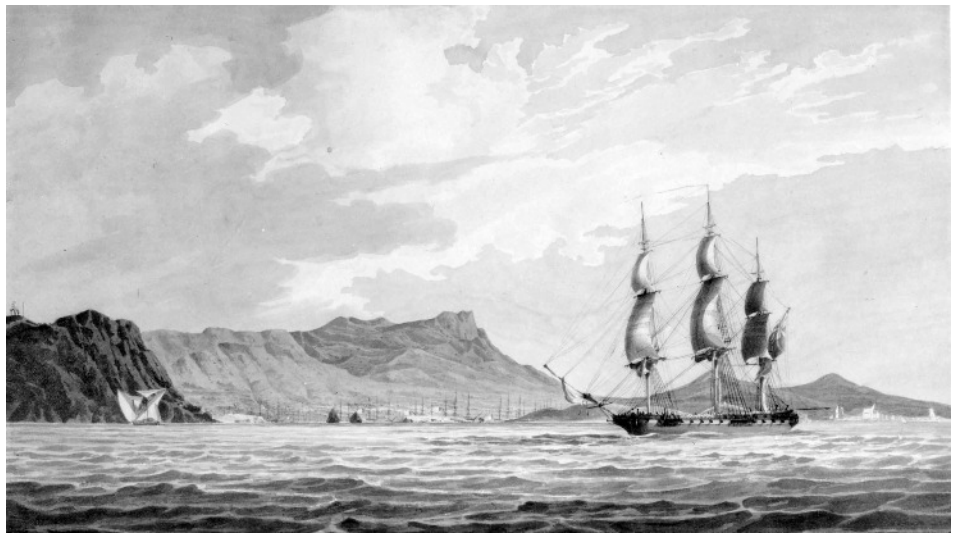
One of twins born to a shipwright and marine painter, John Cleveley the Elder, at Deptford near London, Cleveley followed his father into the royal dockyard and took drawing lessons at the Woolwich academy. He was a skilful draughtsman and could handle naval vessels and small fishing craft with equal proficiency. "A British frigate and other shipping off Tenerife" (see page 26) a breezy little watercolor, costs \$4,500.

**ROBERT CLEVELEY
(1747-1809)**

Robert Cleveley's watercolors are often confused by the "uninitiated" with those of his twin brother, John, but the differences can be detected. Recent research suggests that Robert spent ➤



"Cowes Castle, Isle of Wight"
by Philippe-Jacques de Louthembourg (1740-1812)
pen and ink, and watercolor, 9" x 15", signed



"HMS Phoebe off Toulon"
by John Thomas Serres (1759 - 1825)
watercolor on paper, 8" x 14", signed and dated 1794



"King George III cruising in a captured French Frigate"
by John Thomas Serres (1759 - 1825)
pen and ink, and watercolor, signed

extended periods serving in the navy, which would accord with the expert knowledge shown in an “Admirals’ Conference off the Isle of Wight, 1800” (see page 27) an exceptional watercolor showing British ships-of-the-line at anchor, with a spectacular array of flags and pennants flying. The exquisite detail achieved, merely with the tip of a fine brush, is quite breathtaking.



“The River Thames, London, with St. Paul’s Cathedral in the distance”
by J. T. Serres (1759-1817)
pen and ink, and watercolor, 4½” x 9”, signed and dated 1800

MORE LOOKING AND LEARNING

In a brief introduction to the subject such as this, it is, of course, not possible to encompass as many artists as one would like. Of necessity, I have concentrated on a selection of pictures of which I have personal experience. The school of marine painting in Britain continued to evolve in the early nineteenth century.

In addition to J M W Turner, there were many other painters of ships and the sea whose work lies outside the scope of this article but merits just as much consideration as those I have featured.

Artists such as John Christian Schetky (1778-1874), François Francia (1772-1839), John Sell Cotman (1782-1842), Sir Augustus Wall Callcott (1779-1844), Clarkson Stanfield (1793-1867) and George Chambers (1803-1840) all continued a rich tradition well into Victorian times.

Each left some memorable images of maritime life in the period. I encourage readers to find out more about them and the earlier artists upon whom I have dwelled. Most of one’s research and learning will have to be done online and in libraries. Unless one is fortunate enough to have a neighbor or friend who owns a collection of



“A British frigate and other shipping off Tenerife”
by John Cleveley the Younger (1747-1786)
pen and ink, and watercolor, 7½” x 10”, signed and inscribed Tenerife

English marine watercolors, it is surprisingly hard to study the real thing up close.

Many museums in the United Kingdom and United States have sizeable holdings, but they are seldom on display because of a neurosis in the museum world about the damage caused to them by daylight.

It is worth making an appointment in the Print Room at the Yale Center for British Art to look at the magnificent examples in their print cabinets. Sadly, nowadays it isn't easy to do so at the National Maritime Museum in London, where they have the most excellent collection of its kind in the world. ►

The Victoria and Albert Museum, by contrast, has a welcoming study room in which to admire their many superlative drawings. As one learns more about the history of marine painting, whether in Britain in the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, or indeed in France, one might become familiar with an artist whose work one might like to collect.

Alternatively (and this would be my recommendation), one may wish to try and own a few choice examples representing the school as a whole. How to do so could – and should – be the subject of a book in itself, and, for space considerations, I can only give the briefest outline of advice here.

Whether you are a picture dealer, like myself, or a private buyer of pictures, a “collector,” the knowledge required is the same. Considerations of authenticity, quality, physical condition, and price all come into play in buying pictures, whether it be an important oil from the Renaissance selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars or an English watercolor from the eighteenth century for a few thousand. I recommend the advice of a professional.

One must accept, too, that despite the impression of abundant choice which I may have given earlier, significant examples of the work of some of the artists mentioned are no longer obtainable today. One should always favor a superior painting by a less well-known artist over a weak effort by a famous name.

One may well require a trip to Eng-



“An Admirals’ Conference off the Isle of Wight, 1800”
by Robert Cleveley (1747 - 1809)
watercolor on paper, 11” x 18”, one of a pair

land since there are still a handful of dealers in London, such as myself, who specialize in English marine watercolors and oils, not least because this is where they continue to come on to the open market. Expert advice on the restoration of watercolors is available.

A drawing that appears faded, spotted, or sun-damaged after two hundred and fifty years can be improved modestly, and certainly much more successfully than was possible even thirty years ago. Similarly, the right advice on the mounting and glazing of old watercolors is essential to their long-term wellbeing, and again, these services are all at a specialist dealer's disposal.

Any collector will tell you that the best way to come to an understanding of paintings is through daily contact, which possession brings. This is never more true than enjoying a little group of watercolors painted during the great Age of Fighting Sail in the comfort of one's own home, as I am fortunate enough to do. These are not financial speculations, after all, and should be appreciated solely for what they are: windows into an extraordinary period of history which continues to hold us

enthusiasts in its thrall. ■

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