Turner’s Footsteps in Prague in 1835

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Turner the traveller

Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) is widely known as an extraordinarily imaginative and creative landscape painter working in the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century. While his expressive landscapes represent the widening consciousness of nature at the time of Romanticism and had great impacts upon the next generations, Turner’s canonical style relying on conventional manners and historical subjects can be recognized in his poetical compositions which were exhibited in the annual Royal Academy exhibitions to showcase the academic canon of the institution. Turner’s different personalities show consummate versatility of his genius but we could not understand him completely as an artist of multiple talents without paying attention to his continuing travels. As David Hill always says to me, Turner was a widely travelled artist and was attracted to different areas in Britain in the age of expanding tourism. His amazingly active travelling habit was not limited in the British Isles but he quite frequently travelled to Europe, which provided him with many sources of artistic inspiration. His continental experiences include antiquities of Rome, paintings by great masters in the collection of the Louvre, exotically dressed people in the Normandy, sublime mountains in the Alps, and historical and commercial towns and cities along the rivers of the Loire, Seine and Rhein.

After the 1830s when he was in his 50s and 60s Turner more frequently crossed the English Channel nearly every year until the age of seventy in 1845 and it was around this time when he visited some of the easternmost points he reached in his lifetime including Vienna in 1833 and 1840, Dresden in 1835 and Ljubljana in 1840. Prague was one of those points. He visited the Bohemian capital in 1835 during his tour travelling around Germany.

Turner’s footsteps in Prague

For this Germany tour, Turner left London to Hamburg on 28 August 1835 by taking a regular steamboat service from the Custom House quay near the Tower of London. In Hamburg, Turner walked around streets to draw monumental architecture and local figures as he would do in different cities including Copenhagen, Berlin and Dresden. The painter also studied the fine collection of paintings in Berlin and Dresden.

Turner left Dresden and reached to Bohemia. Before arriving at Prague, Turner made a stop at Teplitz (now Teplice in the Czech Republic), the famous and fashionable spa town, in and around which he made several drawings. Turner probably went through nearly the same routes from Dresden to Teplitz and from Teplitz to Prague via Laun (now Louny) as those introduced in a guidebook published by John Murray in 1837. It was at the end of September when Turner finally arrived at Prague, ‘a city of almost oriental splendour, imposing from its situation and buildings, and full of the most interesting historical associations’, standing ‘in the centre of the kettle’, as the Germans call ‘Bohemia that singular kettle-land’. In the age of Turner, many British travellers had made journeys to the southern area of Germany including Dresden, Teplitz and Prague and some of Turner’s friends visited there as David Wilkie did in 1826. While Wilkie was in Prague in 1826 he wrote about the capital to his brother Thomas on 16 September.
in its situation it resembles both Windsor and Durham; and in the number of its churches and spires, and in the extent of the imperial palace and cathedral, reminded me of Rome and the Vatican. The bridge is the admiration of Germany; and, if I mistake not, is the original of our Waterloo Bridge. It has, too, what would be no small ornament to ours, a series of groups and statues of saints and apostles surmounting the ledging. It is such a place as our friends, Callcott and Turner, might find excellent subject to work upon: it is romantic and picturesque in the highest degree.

Wilkie should have told his great experiences in Prague to his close friend Turner.

As Turner was in Nuremberg which locates more than 180 miles away from Prague on 2 October, his stay in Prague should have been just for several days. However, Turner walked around the city very intensively and used more than 60 pages in two sketchbooks. For this Germany tour, Turner used six sketchbooks now in the Turner Bequest (TB), two of which, Dresden, Teplitz and Prague sketchbook (TB-CCCI) and Prague, Nuremburg, Frankfurt and Rhine sketchbook (TB-CCCIV), he used during his stay in Prague for sketching views, streets, architecture in the Bohemian capital.

Turner should have used the Dresden, Teplitz and Prague sketchbook first because he had used this for a week since he was in Dresden. This book was probably acquired in the German city. The first 24 folios of the sketchbook are dedicated to sketches in Dresden and those on the way to Prague via Teplitz and Louny. While no pages in this sketchbook (hereinafter called ‘the first sketchbook’) are devoted for his use after Prague, Turner kept using the other Prague, Nuremburg, Frankfurt and Rhine sketchbook (hereinafter called 'the second sketchbook') in the cities and towns he would visit later, which suggests the order of using these two books. However, as always, Turner did not use every page of the sketchbooks in order from the beginning to the end.

Several views which can be obtained nearly from the same viewpoint are not on pages in sequence but put separately in different sketchbooks. Then it is difficult to trace exactly how he walked around, but we can find some of his vantage points and follow in his footsteps in different areas of the city.

1. From the heights around the Belvedere

On the pages just after those which Turner had used before arriving at Prague are drawn views of the Bohemian capital from the heights around the Belvedere, the Royal summer palace, on the western bank of the river Vltava. As Turner had gone through Laun which is in the northwest of Prague, he might have entered the city through Sand Thor, one of the gates situated on the northern side of the old walls surrounding the city. The route passing the gate leads to gardens around the heights on which the Belvedere is situated. John Murray’s guidebook writes the gardens around the gate.

The Bastions which surround the Kleinseite have within a year or two been transformed into walks like those on the opposite side of the town, and a new carriage-road has been traced in zigzags up the height, leading to them and to the gate called Sand Thor. Perhaps the finest view of Prague is that obtained from that part of those new gardens (Neue Anlagen) called the Bruska Bastion, a high promontory stretching out over the Moldau. From it the windings of the river, the bridge and islands, the Strahow hill, and the most ancient and picturesque part of the Hradschin, are seen to great advantage.

Turner was around here for a while to draw several views of the city towards east, south and west. The first one on page 25 was taken from the Belvedere. It shows the Old Town on the opposite side of the river. The symbolic Tyn Church dominates the composition in the centre with its highest towers among the area. On the right of the church is seen another church, St Nicholas with its baroque dome and belfries.

★ Turner’s vantage point for TB-CCCI, 26, 26 verso, 27

*Neuester Situations-Plan von Prag*, 1841

The image is obtained from the digital map collection online made by Masaryk University, Brno.
TB-CCCI, 25, 25v, Tate, London

View from the garden next to the Belvedere looking towards the Old Town
Photograph by Takashi Izuha on 7 March 2020

TB-CCCI, 26, 26 verso, 27, Tate, London

Panorama from the hill of Letná
Photograph by Takashi Izuha on 7 March 2020
The next sketch on page 25 verso is also taken from the Belvedere with the tower of the Old Town Hall on the left edge of the composition and the dome of St Francis on the right edge, which stands along the Vltava on the foot of the Charles Bridge. The two pages 25 and 25 verso compose a wide panorama of the Old Town.

It is suggested that the following drawings on the successive pages 26, 26 verso and 27 are three instalments to make a panorama. Besides, they could be connected to the previous two pages to compose a wider panorama but the viewpoint for these three is different from that for the previous two. This is because it is impossible from the Belvedere to face the beautiful arches of the Charles Bridge. But on page 26 Turner depicted the side view of the bridge with eight arches seen beautifully, which suggests he moved to the east to get this viewpoint for the latter three pages. The website of Tate writes that the sketch on page 26 verso is drawn ‘from Letná Hill’. The hill is located to the east of the Belvedere and a map, Neuester Plan von Prag mit seiner Umgebungen, published by Gottlieb Haase Söhne in the same year when Turner visited the city writes ‘Belvedere’ to mention the hill of Letná. An actual view from Letná Hill shows a panorama with the Charles Bridge in the middle distance and the Petřín Hill in the background, which appears similar to Turner’s study on page 26. However, if we look towards Hradcany, the area around the castle, another hilltop with an old bastion now in the premise of Kramář’s Villa, the official residence of the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, blocks the view and the castle or the Belvedere cannot be seen at all, though Turner’s sketch on page 27 shows the castle and the summer palace.

As the map of 1835 and another one published by the same publisher in 1841 show, the hilltop space of Kramář’s Villa had no architecture then and was a part of the hilltop gardens around the bastions near the east end of the old city walls. A hand-coloured print made in the same age by Johann Gabriel Friedrich Poppel after Ludwig Lange obtains a viewpoint probably from this hilltop as its composition introduces part of the bastion in the foreground and the Charles Bridge is overlooked with eight of its arches seen. Turner probably stood around here to draw the bridge on page 26. The castle and the Belvedere should also be viewed beautifully from this probable vantage point of Turner, as John Murray’s guidebook describes that ‘from that part of those new gardens (Neue Anlagen) called the Bruska Bastion... the windings of the river, the bridge and islands, the Strahow hill, and the most ancient and picturesque part of the Hradschin, are seen to great advantage’. The name of Bruska can be found in a map of 1823 to refer to the area around the heights. The successive three pages 26, 26 verso and 27 make a wonderful panorama taken from this hilltop overlooking various attractions which the city was proud of including the Old Town, the Charles Bridge, the Petřín hill, Hradcany and the Belvedere palace, from left to right.

Probably after drawing one more sketch around the Belvedere or Letná (TB-CCCI, 27 verso), Turner moved down away from the heights. Several sketches might have been drawn on the way down as the viewpoints overlooking the castle and the Belvedere on pages 28, 29 and 36 verso are lower than that for page 27.

2. In the Old Town
The following pages of the first sketchbook are
dedicated to several street views around the Old Town on the eastern bank of the Vltava. The first one on page 28 verso represents a view of the Old Town Square, which was a square of trade and business and ‘in its narrow streets are situated some of the best and most showy shops’. Turner focused on the buildings around the square without depicting any figures. On the left of the composition is drawn the buildings of the Old Town Hall with the monumental tower with turrets on the top. The tower installs the famous astronomical clock at the base. At centre, Tyn church with the two rising gothic spires is drawn in the distance with fainter lines. Another rougher drawing of the square from the same point is on page 36.
Turner wandered around the square to investigate the main architecture including the astronomical clock and Tyn Church. On page 37, Turner got closer to Tyn Church. He depicted the gothic twin towers at centre with their pinnacles on the tops. On the right is seen the Marian Column which was built in 1650 to thank for helping the city defence against the Swedish troops in 1648 but was demolished in 1918. The fountain Turner introduced in the foreground does not exist today while the Jan Hus Memorial stands today in the square, which was unveiled in 1915. On the left of the composition is drawn a crowd of figures in front of Kinský Palace, the eighteenth-century Rococo mansion of a noble family.

Turner also used the second sketchbook to study around the square, whereas it is not clear whether Turner visited the square multiple times during his stay in Prague. On a vertically long composition on page 85 verso of this sketchbook shows the famous medieval astronomical clock installed on the southern sidewall of the Old Town Hall. Turner focused on the clock with more detailed and sharp lines used to depict the face of the clock, while the blurry image of the towers of Tyn church appears in the background.

The astronomical clock was investigated again on the next leaf of the sketchbook on page 86 verso. Turner looked at the clock through the space below arches at the end of the Melantrichova, the ally written as ‘Schwefel’ (sulphur in German) in the 1835 map.

3. On and around the Charles Bridge

Turner spent quite some time on the Charles Bridge. He used both sketchbooks but much more examples can be found in the first book (TB-CCCI, 29v, 30, 30v, 31, 33, 33v; TB-CCCIV, 85). This historic bridge had had more than 400 years of history when Turner came here to draw views around. For the drawing on page 29 verso of the first sketchbook, Turner stood on the eastern end of the bridge to look towards the castle on Hradcany on the right and the Petřín Hill with the towers of St Lawrence, a catholic church on the hill on the left. Below the church towers, Turner inscribed ‘all in light’. In the left foreground,
the bridge whose balustrades are decorated with baroque statues of saints leads to the west bank. One human figure is sitting along the balustrade.

The painter looked towards the opposite direction to see the gothic Old Town Bridge Tower. On the left of the detailed study on page 33 verso is the dome of St Francis. One of the towers of St Salvator is also seen between the bridge tower and the dome. To the right is one of the city’s former watermills.
Turner’s Footsteps in Prague in 1835

There is a study on page 31 which depicts a view from the south side of the Charles Bridge. With its impressive viewpoint from the lower level, the sketch has a lively atmosphere with a wide arch of the bridge and some local figures in the foreground. At centre are two gothic towers at the entrance of Malá Strana, an area on the west bank. While it is suggested that towers at left are those of St Nicolas, the middle one of them looks too slight to be the central dome of the church. The towers should be those of the Church of Mary Virgin under the Chain as a photograph I took from the viewpoint shows. Turner depicted the dome of St Nicolas very faintly just behind the lower bridge tower.

While walking along the east bank of the Vltava, he made several sketches of the Charles Bridge from the north (TB-CCCIV, 96, 94, 93, 92, 89 verso, 69) and one from the south (TB-CCCIV, 89). Page 89 in the second sketchbook shows a view of the bridge with a tower on the right. This tower looks different from the tower now at the same point but that which is depicted in a print published in around 1850. Behind this tower, Turner depicted the pinnacles of the Old Town Bridge Tower.

One of the studies which draw the bridge from the north is on page 93 showing the bridge with the Old Town Bridge Tower and Petřín Hill behind the bridge on the right. The statuary of the Holy Crucifix on the north balustrade of the bridge is also depicted and several figures render animated feeling along the river. Two figures are sitting on the edge of the riverbank in the left foreground. A few figures are standing on the head of a boat coming from the right. And another boat in the middle carries more people and seems to be leaving the bank.

If we look towards the west beyond the river from the same point, a view of Hradcany which Turner drew on pages 90, 91 and 95 can be obtained. The Belvedere can also be seen to the right of the hill but here on page 95 the palace is drawn separately on the top right of the sheet.

If we walk down the bank to the south for about a mile, we will arrive at a viewpoint where Turner roughly drew a distant view of the castle in faint outlines on page 88.

Then Turner might have crossed the river to get to the west bank and to obtain several views looking towards Petřín Hill and Hradcany on the following pages 84, 83, 82 verso, 81 verso (probably) and 81 (probably).
4. In and around the Castle

The Prague Castle in Hradcany was the most preferred subject that Turner drew during his stay in the Bohemian capital. We have already identified quite a few studies showing the castle from different viewpoints.

Turner climbed up the hill of Hradcany – ‘Hrad, in Bohemian, means a steep hill’ – to stand on the forecourt in front of the castle and obtain a wide panorama including the Old Town and the south of Hradcany on page 31 verso of the first sketchbook.

Entering the Castle complex, he stood to draw on page 71 the southern gothic tower of St Vitus Cathedral. This is the place where another British topographer, Samuel Prout (1783-1852), drew a study of the tower. Prout was famous for his topographical lithography. After he first travelled abroad in 1819, he made further tours throughout Europe in the next two decades. Some of his accomplishments in Prague developed into the publication of Facsimiles of Sketches made in Flanders and Germany in 1833 which has five views of Prague in lithograph.
The facing page 70 verso has three different rough drawings of towering architecture and probably one at centre is a part of the southern sidewall of the cathedral. As the above drawings on the facing pages are both drawn with the book used upside down, Turner probably sketched them in series.

5. From the Petřín Hill

From different vantage points on the Petřín Hill, Turner looked towards the castle on Hradecany and the Old Town beyond the Vltava. He drew quite a few sketches including some in detail and others rough in the two sketchbooks (TB-CCI, 32, 32 verso; TB-CCCIV, 72, 72 verso, 73 verso, 74, 74 verso, 75, 76, 76 verso, 77, 78, 79, 80, 87, 99), which suggests that he devoted long hours to investigate different viewpoints on the hill.

From the hill, the Prague Castle on Hradecany can be seen occupying a very prominent spot in the capital. On page 79 of the second sketchbook, Turner obtained a viewpoint overlooking the castle complex with the rising tower of St Vitus. In the foreground, Malá Strana, the area on the west bank of the river
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This wide prospect with symbolic architecture on the west bank of the river should have attracted the painter so much as he made several studies almost from the same viewpoint including those on pages 32 and 32 verso of the first sketchbook. Several other rough sketches including that on page 87 from the second book seem to command views of the castle from the Petřín Hill.

Turner also investigated views towards the Charles Bridge and the Old Town from the Petřín Hill. Almost from the same viewpoint for a rough study on page 79 verso which shows the river, Turner took time to render the architecture around the bridge in detail on pages 78 and 77. These pages make a wider panorama from the hill overlooking the Malá Strana on page 78 and the Old Town on page 77. On the far left of the composition is seen the onion-domed tower of the Church of Our Lady Victorious which is and was known as the Shrine of the Infant Jesus with its Child Jesus statue. On the right of the church are drawn the twin towers of the Church of Mary Virgin under the Chain, two bridge towers and the Charles Bridge. The east bank of the Vltava is drawn on page 77 with the Old Town Bridge Tower, the dome of St Francis, the tower of the Old Town Hall and the towers of Tyn Church in the Old Town Square.

On the Petřín Hill Turner drew not only panoramic views of the city below but also buildings on the hill including St Lawrence’s Church on page 74 verso and the Hunger Wall seen through the trees on the left of page 76 verso.

6. Malá Strana

Turner did not devote so many pages of the sketchbooks for Malá Strana, the area on the west bank of the river sometimes referred to Lesser Town in opposition to the bigger Old Town, but he made one detailed drawing of a view with St Nicholas’s Church in the centre and the towers of St Vitus Cathedral in the castle complex in very faint lines in the distance on page 68 of the second sketchbook. The next page of the sketchbook shows a quick sketch of Buchau, a town now called Bochov and the following pages including two pages showing distant views of Prague from the south (TB-CCCIV, 64 verso, 65) were used on his way to the west. In the foreground of this study in Malá Strana can be seen a carriage. Turner might have spent his last hours here around Malá Strana to leave the Bohemian capital to head to his next destinations.
Professor Emeritus David Hill at the University of Leeds has traced a wide range of Turner’s footsteps in Britain and on the Continent. David himself, one of the leading scholars on Turner, is a widely travelled art historian, whose footsteps can be found on https://sublimesites.co/

For the Germany tour, see Powell (1995), pp.46-60.

Anon. (1837), pp.316-19, 321-22. It is suggested that this guidebook was one which Turner consulted in the 1830s, though it was published after he visited Prague. See Powell (2001), p.342.

Unfortunately for scholars of our age who try to trace footsteps of the painter in detail, Turner was not a frequent correspondent or a thorough diarist to record his itinerary. See Powell (2001), p.341.


The map is in the map collection of the Faculty of Science, Charles University, Prague [094:912.43(437.311)], available online through the Charles University Central Catalogue.

Unfortunately, I could not get into the premise of the villa when I investigated around the area in March 2020, though the villa is open publicly on a few days in summer. Photos illustrating an online pamphlet of the Kramář’s Villa shows the castle beautifully seen from the villa, https://www.vlada.cz/scripts/file.php?id=83321, accessed 31 May 2020.

It was decided by the city council to reconstruct the column in 2020 and the pediment had already been installed in March 2020 when I visited the square.


References cited


ターナーの 1835 年のプラハ滞在

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要約
本研究ノートは、イギリスの風景画家ジョゼフ・マロード・ウィリアム・ターナー [1775-1851] が 1836 年夏の南ドイツ旅行の際に訪れた、プラハでの制作をたどるものである。プラハ滞在中に用いた 2 冊のスケッチブックに描かれた風景を追跡することによって、ターナーの当地での活動についての基礎的な情報を提供することを目的とした調査報告である。

（2020 年 6 月 1 日受理）