

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



John Varley (London 1778 - London 1842)

Figures on a path by the Thames

signed 'J Varley' (lower right)
watercolour on paper
8.5 x 13 cm (3¼ x 5¼ in)

In this small and charming watercolour a man has paused to talk to two women, whom he has come across on his walk, and his dog waits patiently on the path ahead. They are standing outside a small house, which looks as weathered as the nearby tree straining in the wind. The viewer's eye is led along the path into the distance where people are sailing and fishing along the tranquil waters of the River Thames. Despite the visibly gusty conditions, the scene is illuminated by soft, warm sunshine. John Varley has built up the scene using layers of colour, executed in rapid, loose brushstrokes. *Figures on a Path by the Thames* exemplifies the qualities of 'clear skies, distances, and water' which Varley described as 'the beauties most sought after in the art of water colours'.¹

Varley was one of the most successful and prolific watercolourists of his generation, and the present work is characteristic of his best work, as can be seen in a comparison with a picture such as the Victoria and Albert Museum's *Landscape with a [Cluster of Cottages behind Trees on the Bank of a Stream](#)*. The works share similar features, such as the calm stretch of water, gnarled aged trees and a bright blue sky, across which drift wispy clouds. Into these peaceful and idyllic scenes Varley paints carefully placed, but generalised staffage in order to animate his diminutive landscapes. In both works we can see how Varley allows one colour to dominate the work's palette, although whereas he uses layers of green in *Figures on a Path by the Thames*, in the V & A's work it is autumnal browns which dominate. Varley's technique is surmised by Storey, who says 'His tints are refreshingly light, with a full and free pencil; and his colour is fresh and pure...seldom indeed do we find a man better versed in the rules of composition, which he applied with the aptitude of true genius'.²

Varley worked primarily as a watercolourist throughout his career, and he drew inspiration from a variety of other artists, including [Thomas Girtin \(1775-1802\)](#) and John Robert Cozens (1752-1798). He also came into the circle of Dr Thomas Munro, whose tutelage and patronage had such a profound effect on English watercolourists of this period.

Varley's landscapes range from general views, to more specific topographical scenes, but the River Thames, which the present work depicts, 'was always a favourite resort of his'.³ Invariably his works

exude a sense of quiet contemplation, achieved through his use of multiple layers of wash. Early in his career he exhibited at the Royal Academy, but he was also a founding member of the Society of Painters in Water Colours. He was also a gifted teacher, noted for his enthusiasm, and he wrote several books on drawing, aimed at the amateur, which laid out rules for composition and explained the value of tints, amongst other things. Although in later life he struggled with his debtors, Varley's contribution to British watercolour painting was immense and *Figures on a Path by the Thames* is an excellent example of his work.

¹ Story, Alfred T., *James Holmes and John Varley* (Richard Bentley and Son, London, 1894), p. 220.

² *Ibid.*, p. 282-283.

³ *Ibid.*, p.214.

Artist description:

At the age of 15, John Varley attended an evening drawing school in Holborn, London, run by J. C. Barrow. Throughout his career he worked primarily in watercolour. His first exhibited work was a *View of Peterborough Cathedral* (exhibited at the Royal Academy, 1798). In between sketching expeditions to Wales (1798 or 1799, 1800 and 1802) and Yorkshire (1803) he executed topographical views of towns—particularly of half-timbered buildings in Hereford, Leominster, Conway and Chester—drawn in the picturesque idiom of the late 18th century. From 1800 until as late as 1820 he attended evening classes at Dr Monro's 'Academy' in London and also visited Monro's cottage at Fetcham, Surrey. In company with Monro he executed the watercolour *View from Pilsden, Surrey* (1800; Newcastle upon Tyne, Laing Art Gallery), which shows the influence of Thomas Girtin. This painting is inscribed *Study from Nature*, an inscription that recurs on some of his work as late as 1831.

Varley's early watercolours have been seen as his most inspired. They often combine naturalistic qualities with the influence of other artists, forming striking and original compositions, as in *Sunrise from the Top of Cader Idris* (1804; England, private collection), which is remarkable for its glowing light effects and owes much to J. R. Cozens; another example is *Harlech Castle and Tygwyn Ferry* (1804; Paul Mellon private collection), in which the broad, unmodulated wash layers resemble the contemporary work of J. S. Cotman, with whom Varley became acquainted in 1802 at meetings of the Sketching Society.

In 1805 Varley became a founder-member of the Society of Painters in Water-Colours. His contributions to its early exhibitions furnished 'the very backbone of its landscape art' (Roget). In the ensuing years he wished his watercolours to rival oils and they became larger, more varied in technique and more aspiring in content. Varley helped to create this taste and increasingly adapted his work to suit it, for example *Suburbs of an Ancient City* (1808; London, Tate).

As Varley became more prolific, exhibiting about 20 watercolours a year (he had a large family to support, having married in 1803), he increasingly worked to a formula, often painting Welsh scenes interpreted through the eyes of the Old Masters, for example *Landscape with Harlech Castle* (c. 1825; London, V&A).

Varley's finest and most characteristic watercolours date from the early years of the Society of Painters in Water-Colours, c. 1805–20. They are models of those 'clear skies, distances and water' that he claimed 'are the beauties most sought after in the art of watercolours'. Such features are often best seen in the watercolours of a long horizontal format, which he first adopted after his trip to Northumberland in 1808, for example the *Distant View of Bamburgh Castle, Northumberland, and Holy Island*. Such broad and luminous works contrast with his later ones, which from 1837 were executed on coarse paper and more densely painted, using deep blues, purples and pinks over a brown ground (cologne earth), often with gum (e.g. London, V&A). He also worked with the Patent Graphic Telescope invented by his brother.

Varley was a gifted and successful teacher, renowned for his phenomenal enthusiasm and engaging personality. He wrote a number of drawing manuals, mainly intended for the amateur, in which he explained the value of tints and set out rules of composition, many of which are evident in his own work. His pupils included William Henry Hunt, William Mulready, John Linnell, David Cox, Copley Fielding,

Peter De Wint, Francis Oliver Finch and Samuel Palmer, all of whom he encouraged to sketch from nature. In 1818 Linnell introduced Varley to William Blake, who, for Varley's benefit, drew his famous visionary heads in two of Varley's sketchbooks; some of these, including the *Head of the Ghost of a Flea*, were engraved by Linnell for Varley's *Treatise on Zodiacal Physiognomy* (1828), a publication that reflects Varley's life-long interest in astrology. Despite his success as an artist and teacher, Varley was always short of money and spent much of his later life in debtors' prison.

Writings

A Practical Treatise on the Art of Drawing in Perspective (London, 1815–20)

A Treatise on the Principles of Landscape Design (London, 1816–21)

Collections

Varley is represented in the following collections: Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Tate, London; Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, amongst others.