

**WATERCOLOURS: STUDIO AND OPEN AIR**  
**Musée d'Orsay**  
**Graphic Arts Gallery**  
**27 May - 7 September 2008**

**This display, presenting works from the Musée d'Orsay collection, kept in the graphic arts department of the Louvre, is one of a series of in-house exhibitions from the Graphic Arts Gallery aimed at making the public better acquainted with the museum's collection.**

A technique mastered by English artists since the 18th century, producing watercolours in the open air, from life, developed in France in the second half of the 19th century, and contributed to the ambitions of modern landscape painting. In the tradition of the English school, the technique was highly codified with a set of rules, later ridiculed by Paul Signac who extolled the exceptionally free style of J B Jongkind. Watercolour painting evolved in France, and, through the widespread influence of William Turner, and above all the vital contribution of Eugène Boudin and Jongkind, it was transformed into a very free genre, and revolutionised. In parallel with this, a picturesque, academic style continued, mainly upheld by the Society of Watercolourists.

At the end of the 17th century, the practice of producing studies from life had been introduced into the programme and the philosophy of traditional Academic teaching. More practical than oils, better able to respond to the constant challenge of unpredictable, natural settings, watercolours replaced oils at an opportune moment, as much for the painters still loyal to the neo-classical tradition, as for those who were breaking free from it. In the summer of 1888, Camille Pissarro encouraged Signac to take up watercolour, praising its suitability for the demands and constraints of painting from life: "It is invaluable and very practical; in a few minutes you can take notes which would be impossible otherwise – the fluidity of a sky, certain transparencies, numerous pieces of information that hours of work would never give you, as the effects are so fleeting". Years later, Signac confirmed how pertinent this advice had been, and, in his monograph on Jongkind, added the comment, "Watercolour is just a method of making notes, a sort of memorandum, a rapid and productive process enabling the painter to increase his repertoire of elements too short-lived to be captured by the slow process of oil painting. A cloudy sky is a magnificent subject, but is constantly changing [...]".

In 19<sup>th</sup> century treatises, critical texts and articles by artists, watercolours produced from life – or assumed to be – were associated with impressions, rapid notes, instantaneity, sensation, capturing the fleeting image. Unlike Impressionist painting at the time, it did not provoke any controversy, as even in the Academic tradition it was considered as being essentially only for "shorthand". Thus, the technique seemed to be part of a fundamental quest by the Impressionists to renew landscape painting. In fact, many 19<sup>th</sup> century watercolours painted from life were finished or reworked in the studio, but the use of this "shorthand" of nature and light contributed to a fundamental quest to renew Impressionist and modern landscape painting.

**Curator:** Marie-Pierre Salé, curator. Musée d'Orsay

**This exhibition is supported by the Matmut group.**

**Practical information**

**Opening times:** Daily, except Mondays, 9.30am to 6pm, Thursdays 9.30am to 9.45pm.

**Information:** Website: <http://www.musee-orsay.fr>, tel: +33 (0)1 40 49 48 14 / 48 00

**Admission:** Museum entrance ticket: full rate: €8.00; concessions: €5.50

**Access:** Entrance through the square, 1, rue de la Légion d'Honneur, 75007 Paris

**Catalogue:** *Watercolours: studio and plein air*, 96 pages, 18 euros, joint publication by 5 Continents/Musée d'Orsay