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Turner at Harewood

Jonathan Finch

Harewood House was the hub of the young JWM Turner's first tour of Northern England in 1797 when he laid down the technical and creative foundations of his career, which was to radically change perceptions of watercolour as an artistic medium. He delivered four large watercolours of the new house at Harewood to Edward Lascelles, from the north-east, south-west, south, and south-east. Sometimes referred to as 'country house portraits' this type of image was designed to communicate the wealth, status and taste of the owner. Jane Austen also used houses as symbols of status and relationships in her novels, whether it was the grand yet well-ordered Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*, the chaotic and dark *Mansfield Park*, or the lost and abandoned Kellynch Hall in *Persuasion*.

Both Austen and Turner recognised that landscapes are made from social relationships and history, and Turner invites the viewer to look past the house, on to the medieval church tower and the gatehouse leading to the village on the right of the picture, or to the workers and livestock in the foreground. These animations, keenly observed by Turner, are borrowed from the classical landscape paintings of Claude and Poussin, which were avidly collected by aristocrats, such as Lascelles, on the Grand Tour in Italy. Here, however, Turner has domesticated arcadia in England. He depicts a landscape of balance, peace, and harmony, rather than the reality of estate life.

The harmony emanates from the centre of the image. Life and landscape orbit the house. The house is both an insertion and a natural feature. Yet despite being portrayed as timeless, the house and its landscape are not yet thirty years old. The trees and shrubs that surround the house and the church were new plantings, the lake was created by Capability Brown from an earlier fishpond, and the grass that sweeps down to it from the house was sown over the foundations of the medieval manor house that was demolished after Edwin Lascelles moved into the new house in 1771. Art and landscape are an illusion; a deliberate construct to naturalise the family within the ruling class, whilst the roots of their wealth lay in the landscape of Caribbean sugar plantations.

