

# The Norwich School of Painters

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## Introduction

In the late 1700 early 1800's idealised or imaginary landscapes were in fashion. The Norwich School of painters did not follow this trend, instead painting what they saw around them. Green in Bottinelli (2013 p11) says they aimed to "paint the scene right on their doorstep 'as it was'".

In this essay I discuss what is meant by 'the Norwich School of Painters'; who were its members; and explore what made it different through examination of the work of its two most talented members.

## What is the Norwich School of Painters?

In the early nineteenth century a group of painters living in and around Norwich founded a Society of Artists, meeting regularly to compare work, exchange ideas, and from 1805 until 1833, hold annual exhibitions of their work. Artists within this group became known as the Norwich School of Painters.

Murray (1997 p374) state that "This was the only recognised school of painting in England which had an internal cohesion comparable to the Italian local schools". Rajnai (1976 p1) considers that "The Norwich Society is without doubt the most important of the provincial artist groups of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in England".

## Who were the members of the Norwich School of Painters?

Holme (1920 p72) quotes from the announcement of the reopening of the Norwich Society of Artists Exhibition In 1828 "Since its establishment the Norwich Society has shown 4,600 pictures, the work of 323 individuals".

When considering those artists that have stood the test of time, then two names stand out, John Crome and John Sell Cotman. Moore (1985 p9) sums up the sentiments of all the work I have read for this project when he states "The paintings of John Crome and John Sell Cotman are the finest work of the Norwich School".

It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider membership of the Norwich School, Day (1979), Barnard (1950) and Rajnai (1985) all have lists of members. Walpole (1997) has a comprehensive list of 57 artists plus Appendices on "Works by Norwich School Artists in Public Collections" and "Norwich School Artists Represented in the Witt Library". In terms of major members there is no doubt as to the pre-eminence of Crome and Cotman, others to receive most citations are the children of Crome and Cotman, James Stark, George Vincent, John Thirtle and Joseph Stannard.

It is important at this stage to state that not everyone would agree with the importance or influence of The Norwich School. Andrew Graham-Dixon writes on his website "The School of Norwich is a bit of a myth. Plenty of painters, most of them amateurs of some description, became affiliated to the Norwich Society of Artists, but their work was uneven and, to put it charitably, extremely various".

He continues “The truth is that Norwich in the nineteenth century only produced two artists of genuine distinction, namely Crome and the considerably younger John Sell Cotman”.

Kaines Smith (1923 p154) considered that it was not proper to think of it as a single school, he thought it better to speak of “the school of Crome and the school of Cotman”.

With these conflicting statements I prefer to take the view of Binyon (1897 p5) “The Norwich School had no common bond of theory; it is their Norwich birth and training which constitute them a distinct body”.

## **What was different about the Norwich School?**

For Allthorpe-Guyton (2004 p2) “the significance of Norwich School painting lies in a realism based on direct observation. It is a departure from the ‘rococo’ prettiness of Gainsborough and the Arcadian classical landscapes derived from Claude and Poussin”.

The Tate Gallery website states “At the heart of the Romantic Movement was a new feeling for nature: the painters of the Norwich School created a distinctive regional expression of this new attitude, rooted in their response to the landscape of Norfolk.”

According to Murray (1997 p374) “Because of the strong links between East Anglia and Holland the chief characteristic of the Norwich School is a dependence on 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch realistic landscape (Hobbema, Ruisdael)..”.

Moore (1988 p152) is more nuanced, saying that from the Norwich artists there was “no slavish imitation of seventeenth century Dutch painting techniques: but their work does show a sincere attempt to understand and learn from them”.

To gain a better understanding of the style and lasting importance of the Norwich School I will study paintings by John Crome and John Sell Cotman to illustrate what it is that marks them out from their contemporaries. There is not room to complete a full assessment of the paintings; rather I will try to explain what each says about its painter.

## **John Crome (1768-1821)**

Crome came from a humble background, his father a journeyman weaver, who had no formal artistic training, but who was to become a successful drawing master and a landscape painter of considerable reputation. He founded the Norwich Society of Artists in 1803 and served as its President in 1808 and 1821.

He lived most of his life in Norwich, and his Norfolk land and seascapes form the vast majority of his work, although journeys outside the county also provided subjects. He painted mainly in oil although he did also produce watercolours and a number of etchings.

## *The Poringland Oak 1818-1820*

The painting depicts an almost idyllic country scene, four young boys in a pool in front of a massive oak tree, bathed in late evening light. Most writers seem to agree with Watt in Collins (2013 p156) when she states that “Traditionally the bathers are said to be Crome’s sons with a young friend”.

For me this whole painting is about the beauty of nature and the pleasure that people can take from it.

The massive oak tree is a motif for the strength and grandeur of nature and the light which bathes the whole scene is captivating. The children are not painted in great detail, tending more towards an impressionistic effect, which draws attention back to the oak.



*oil on canvas, 1251 x 1003mm, Tate Gallery, London*

Brushwork is apparent in the clouds of this painting, but much of it is also very fluid with little brushwork evident. An exception to this is the foliage of the tree where tiny brush marks can be seen, almost as if the brush has been just touched on the canvas.

Hemingway (1979 p12) describes how Crome strongly recommended breadth in a painting to his pupil James Stark. He defines breadth as implying “both the suppression of detail and the creation of pictorial effect through the arrangement of light, shade and colour in a discernible compositional structure”. I think this is well illustrated in this painting.

There is no great detail in the foreground and the background recedes smoothly without any strong sense of demarcation between the fore and middle ground of the painting. The oak tree is a picture of solidity, as Barnard (1950) put it “Crome’s trees have roots”.

Andrew Graham-Dixon describes how Crome “made landscape painting a vehicle of feeling” and when I studied this painting I thought that I could almost feel the atmosphere. I think a large part of this is due to how he has rendered the lighting within the painting; not just the light in the sky, but

also the tinged light of the clouds, the light shining on and through the foliage, the light shining on the tree trunk and even more so the light reflecting off the surface of the water.

As Kaines Smith (1923 p105) states of Crome's paintings "it is not the objects or the scenes that Crome depicts which constitute the beauty of his pictures, but the light that falls upon them, is reflected from them and fills the atmosphere in which they are enveloped".

## John Sell Cotman (1782-1842)

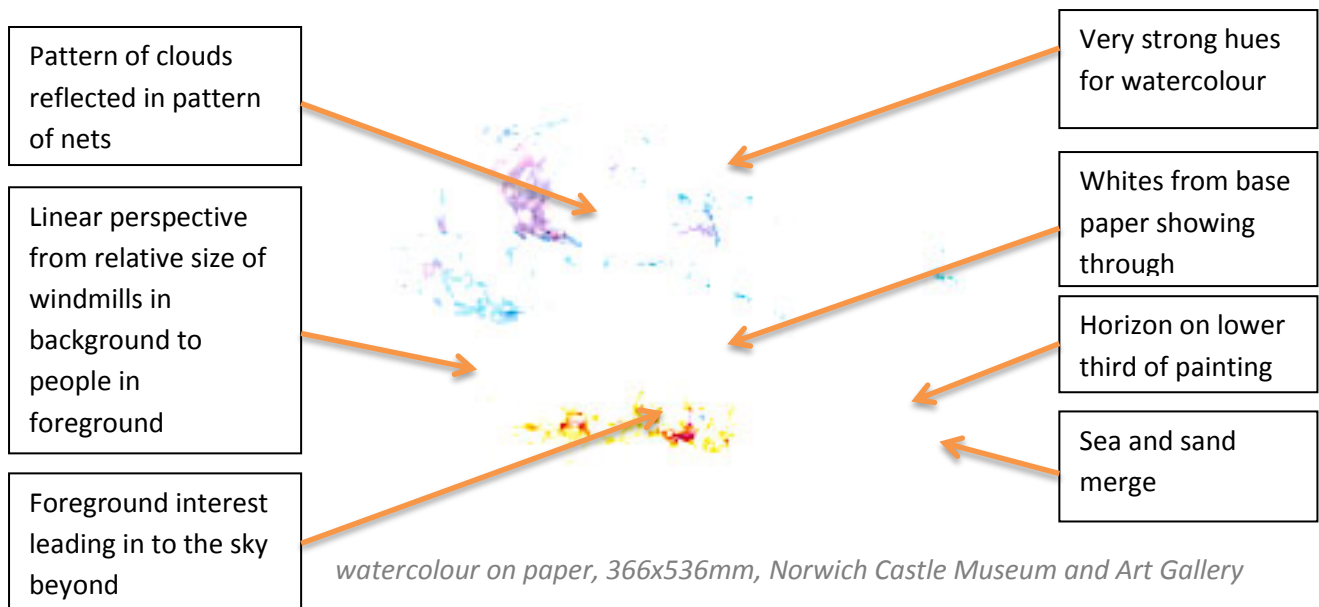
Cotman was the son of a haberdasher and a milliner, from lowly but respectable social origins. He too was largely self-taught. Whereas Crome is renowned for his oils, Cotman is famous for his watercolours. He also painted in oils and has a substantial body of highly regarded etchings to his name.

Cotman spent various periods of his life in Norwich, Yarmouth and London. While many of his work are representations of Norfolk scenes, he has a larger proportion than does Crome of scenes from outside the county.

Cotman struggled throughout his life to make a living from his paintings Kaines Smith (1926 p19) writes "the young Cotman was a century ahead of the taste and intelligence of his day – a position which does not pay".

Cotman worked as a drawing master and in 1834 was appointed as Drawing Master at King's College School in London where he remained for most of the rest of his life. He was a complex character whose moods would sway from great exuberance to deep depression.

### *Storm on Yarmouth Beach 1831*



This visionary painting shows the onset of a fierce storm, fisherman clear away their nets while the buildings of Yarmouth can be seen in the background.

When I first saw this painting I was immediately taken with two aspects of it, firstly the intensity and vibrancy of the colour and secondly the sheer energy with which the storm clouds have been portrayed, you can almost feel the rain driving in from the inky black clouds.

The colours are very intense, but also complementary (blue and orange) this gives a certain harmony to the painting as Thompson says in Rajnai (1982 p20) comparing Cotman with Turner "Turner's purpose was dynamism ... Cotman's was harmonic". Not that this makes for a sedate painting, just the opposite with Cotman's portrayal of the storm clouds. Lyles in Blayney Brown et al (2000 p116) describes how Cotman produced the intensity of effect in the sky; from the early to mid-1830s he mixed his watercolours with a flour or rice paste which thickened it. Not only did this make the colour more intense but as it took longer to dry on the paper he was able to drag or wipe the medium to create a variety of textures and effects. The intensity of colour and texture is remarkable for a watercolour.

While the colours and energy of the painting struck me first, as I continued to study it one other aspect struck me and that is the patterns within the painting and the shape of it. As I looked at it I could see the pattern of the nets in the clouds, of the clouds in the grouping of people. The painting was much more than a study of people on a stormy beach; it seemed about the patterns of nature (two thirds of the painting is given to the sky). I found it difficult to express exactly what it was that I was experiencing, but in later reading found it perfectly summarised by Clifford (1965 p69) when he describes the scene in the painting and writes "We are quite as conscious of the strange shape of the drama as we are of the drama itself".

Just as Crome subtly painted the strength and beauty of nature in *The Poringland Oak* so Cotman portrays the intensity, drama and strange patterns of nature in this watercolour. It is so strong that Clifford (1965 p65) calls this side of Cotman's nature "the demonic visionary of *Storm on Yarmouth Beach*".

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that Crome and Cotman were the two major painters of the Norwich School. Mallalieu (1974 p9) describes them as "the two suns around which all the others orbited". Without them it is perhaps unlikely that the Norwich School would have been established and it certainly would not have been recognised with the importance that it is today.

What was their legacy apart from the establishment of the school? I believe they were two major artists of the Romantic Period, notable for different reasons. For Crome it was the portrayal of the beauty of nature emphasised by the light that shines on, from and through it. Watt in Bottinelli (2013 p23) describes his style as "an atmospheric naturalism that influenced the work of two generations of Norwich artists".

Cotman was one of the first major artists to work in watercolours who depicted the beauty, power and patterns of nature. Rienaeker (1953 p37) believes that his painting "has within it the added power to stir us to wonder and awe at the varying aspects and moods of nature".

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Andrew Graham-Dixon: <https://www.andrewgrahamdixon.com/archive/the-norwich-school.html>

Tate Gallery: <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/press-office/press-releases/romantic-landscape-norwich-school-painters-1803-1833>

## **Painting Links**

The Poringland Oak : <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/crome-the-poringland-oak-n02674>

Storm on Yarmouth Beach :

<https://www.eveningnews24.co.uk/what-s-on/yarmouth-s-seafaring-past-captured-in-oils-1-1143286>