

Romanticism III & the Birth of Modern Art – Richard Parkes Bonington

Having discussed Delacroix and coincidentally mentioned Bonington's important role in the French master's development in the period 1825-28, it would seem reasonable to discuss the Englishman's career more fully, for although not nearly so well known as Constable and Turner, Bonington was nevertheless very highly regarded in France and his works became some of the most sought after during the 1830's and 1840's. To compare his stature with the much better known Turner and Constable, the former admitted that if Bonington and Girtin, who also died in his twenties of Tuberculosis, had lived full careers, he would have starved and Constable remarked of Bonington, 'It is not right in a young man to assume great dash – great completion, without study, or pains. Labour with genius is the price the Gods have set upon excellence'. One detects here in Constable a deal of envy, that the young Bonington was so naturally gifted and that he so rapidly gained recognition, even by his late teens, whilst the former struggled almost all his life in the pursuit of fame.



Richard Parkes Bonington was born in Arnold, near Nottingham on the 25th October 1802. His father was a drawing master and portrait painter, who had been County gaoler in Nottingham and his mother ran a finishing school for young ladies in Arnold and then Nottingham. His father exhibited landscapes and portraits at the Royal Academy and so the facility for painting was definitely in Richard's blood. It is certain that his father provided the initial inspiration and influence and he was able to make use of his father's extensive collection of drawing and prints, as it was the accepted practice for budding artists to begin their training with the laborious process of copying the like.

In the early 1800s, Nottingham suffered significant economic distress, where its principal industry, lace making was hit hard by a combination of falling demand and a new mechanised process, which required fewer workers. As a result, in 1817, the Boningtons emigrated to Calais, a town having long established commercial links with Nottingham.

Portrait, oil on canvas, Sarah Carpenter, National Portrait Gallery

Bonington senior smuggled out machine parts and with the assistance of two compatriots, set up a business, Clarke, Bonington and Webster, manufacturing lace. In Calais, the young Bonington received his first official training with the French watercolour specialist, Louis Francia. Then in late 1818, the Bonington family moved to Paris, where they established a retail outlet for the lace made by Webster and others in Calais. They remained in the lace business until at least 1825, when their son's growing commercial success, enabled them to devote more time to the promotion of his interests. By Spring, the now sixteen-year-old had enrolled as a student in the atelier of Antoine-Jean Gros, one of the most respected teachers in Paris and was also to be seen copying the old masters in the Louvre, where Delacroix noticed, 'a tall young man in a short jacket, painting studies in watercolour, usually after Flemish landscapes'.

Although lasting until 1822, his studentship with Gros was not an entirely happy affair. Nevertheless, the grounding in the strict French Academic system of form and structure will only have benefitted Bonington. Already finding a ready market for his watercolours, he was causing something of a stir in the lower echelons of the Paris art market and on their parting, Gros was gracious enough to respect the young painter's talent, 'You have found your path, follow it!'

One of the lasting legacies of his time with Gros, must have been the enduring friendships made with fellow students, David Roberts, Auguste-Joseph Carrier, Eugene Lami, Camille Roqueplan and Paul Huet, all of whom would find success in their own chosen fields. They shared many of Bonington's enthusiasms, medieval history and monuments and post-classical literature, especially Shakespeare and the novels of Walter Scott and the French histories of Froissart and Monstrelet. By now a fluent French speaker and thoroughly steeped in the history of Revolutionary France, he and his friends were keen to explore French history of the 16th and 17th centuries, encouraged by a revived French patriotism, a sense of curiosity of the country's origins and an appreciation, during a period of Anglophilia, of the long-standing British enthusiasm for the picturesque appeal of the past. These men were dreamers, rather in the same vein as the Pre-Raphaelites would be several decades later, where the seductive call of elaborate costumes, mysterious Gothic ruins and intriguing narratives was compelling.



View of Rouen from St Catherine's Hill, Watercolour, 1822, Metropolitan, New York

By Autumn 1821, the almost twenty-year-old Bonington had made his first sketching tour of Normandy, a region rich in shared English and French history, in addition to attractive river and coastal scenery. By 1822, he was exhibiting at the Paris Salon, also in the dealers, Madame Hulin and Claude Shroth, where a certain Camille Corot saw one of his watercolours and years later remarked, 'This little picture was for me, a revelation. I discerned its sincerity and from that day I was firm in my resolution to become a painter'. *View of Rouen from St Catherine's Hill*, is a typical watercolour of this time, where the Seine is seen winding through this beautiful city, with the spires of the Cathedral in the background; he has accurately recorded damage to the central tower, destroyed on 15th September 1822 by a lightning strike.

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Rue du gros Horloge.

Rue du Gros-Horloge, Rouen, Lithograph on chine colle, 1824, Nottingham Castle

By exposure at the Salon and elsewhere, Bonington's talent was becoming increasingly recognised and in early 1822, he was asked to provide watercolours for engraving and publication in Jean-Francois d'Ostervald's *Voyage pittoresque en Sicile*. Such books were becoming increasingly fashionable in France and would provide a very useful income for Bonington.

In 1823, Bonington made his most extensive study of Normandy and Picardy, following his engagement with the Fielding brothers to assist with the provision of illustrations for another d'Ostervald publication. However, of much greater importance was employment on Baron Taylor's prestigious, *Voyages Pittoresques*, which included five lithographs, including a magnificent view of the *Rue de Gros-Horloge, Rouen*.

According to Bonington, much of 1824 was the happiest period of his life, which he spent in Dunkirk in the company of Madame Perrier and her daughters, who ran a boarding house in the town and where he was joined for part of the time by the painter Alexandre Colin, who became one of his most devoted friends. And after returning to Paris he wrote to Madame Perrier in December 1824, 'You can tell your good son, since he asked for news, that my pimples are doing so well, that with a bit of fine weather, I shall be able to exhibit myself as a rosebush at the first village fair – and with great success!'



Vessels in a Chippy Sea, watercolour, 1824, Yale Centre for British Art



Shipping in an Estuary, Quilleboeuf, watercolour, 1825, Yale Centre for British Art

It was during this period in the rapid development of Bonington's skills, that he painted some of his most delicately exquisite watercolours, those illustrated above being two of the finest examples.



La Ferte, the Estuary of the Somme, oil on millboard, 1824, National Gallery, London

It was also around 1824, that he began to experiment with oils and the above is a spectacular example of how in a plein-air study, he was able to transfer his watercolour skills to the medium of oil so seamlessly. These studies would then often inform easel paintings, such as *Beached Vessel*.



Beached Vessel and a Wagon near Trouville, oil on canvas, 1825, Yale Centre for British Art

He enjoyed further success and recognition, if not fame, for his entries to the famous 1824 Salon, which was of note for many reasons. First and foremost, it was the year of the triumphal return of Ingres from Rome, where his painting, *Henri IV and the Spanish Ambassador*, and the more imposing

The Vow of Louis XIII, were exhibited. It was also the year of Delacroix's exhibition of *The Massacre at Chios*. a painting not so critically well received, unlike Constable's *The Hay Wain*, for which together with Bonington and Copley-Fielding 's exhibits, they were awarded gold medals.



Henry IV and the Spanish Ambassador, oil on canvas, Jean-Dominique Ingres, 1817, Petit Palais, Paris

Henry IV and the Spanish Ambassador, is a subject that Bonington would return to in 1827, with his own interpretation of the narrative, one of his most beautiful historical costume pieces. The year 1824 was in a sense a turning point for landscape painting, so long the poor relative in the hierarchy of painting genres. The official recognition of so many English painters at the Paris Salon and the burgeoning market for picturesque landscape and architectural paintings, provided the environment in which such painters could make a good living. Bonington's work, in both oil and watercolour was already so popular that the critic Auguste Jal could write in his review of the Salon that, 'he has created a mania. For sometime amateurs have only judged him; now he has proselytes and imitators'. Among the early collectors were his friend Charles Rivet, who was to accompany him to Italy in 1826, the cloth manufacturer Coutan and a Bordeaux wine merchant of British origin, Lewis Brown and amongst aristocratic collectors, the Duc d'Orleans, the future King Louis-Philippe.

It was in the Summer of 1825 in London, that the friendship with Delacroix blossomed. Here he met up with not only the French master of Romanticism, but also Henri Monnier, Edouard Bertin and Eugene Idabey. All had been drawn there by their fascination with English literature and art, up to now only known to them through prints and a curiosity about the rapidly industrialising nation, which had recently been the instrument of Napoleon's downfall. Such artists would have been able to visit private collections and dealerships and we know from the painter, Paul Huet, that Bonington spoke ceaselessly of Turner and its logical to think that he sought out paintings by the English master where he could. He may even have been to Turner's London gallery and if not there, he will have had ample opportunity to view his works at the Royal Academy and the British Institution and if that were not

sufficient, the Society of Painters in Watercolours exhibition contained 345 works by all the leading specialists of the time, John Sell-Cotman, David Cox, De Wint and John Varley etc. By the time Bonington returned to France, he had probably seen the full spectrum of contemporary painting in England.



View of Rouen, watercolour with body colour and gum varnish, 1825, Wallace Collection.

In *View of Rouen*, a city that Bonington would have often visited, the capital of Normandy and a city rich in architecture, the Cathedral, seen across the Seine with the luminous evening sky and with the spire of one tower missing, may be seen as a lament for loss of the medieval past. The composition, with buildings seen across the river and boats in the foreground is characteristic of the English picturesque tradition and has a strong resemblance to Turner's *Castle and Town of Nottingham* of 1795.

The composition is built up of tones in layers, allowing the under-painting to show through in places, but here he has also used body colour (watercolour made opaque by the addition of a pigment derived from lead white), to add highlights and gum Arabic varnish to strengthen darker areas. Like Turner, he has also scratched out the paint in places to allow the white paper to show through. These innovations had already been used to great effect by Turner and John Varley, the advantages being the greater power and density afforded, giving watercolours greater presence and some of the prestige associated with oil paintings. For some time, water-colourists had felt themselves the poor relation of the art world. It was Abraham Ducros, the innovative Swiss water-colourist, a generation before Turner and Turner himself, who began to paint watercolour landscapes on a much grander scale, as early as the late 1790's, with paintings such as his wonderfully atmospheric *Caernarvon Castle*, 66x100 cms, Tate Britain, which undoubtedly encouraged other artists to follow his example.



View near Rouen, oil on millboard, 1825, Metropolitan.

At the end of 1825, Bonington took up the invitation to share Delacroix's studio in the Rue Jacob, Paris. In January 1826, Delacroix told his friend Charles Soullier that Bonington had just been with him. 'There's a great deal to be had from the company of that lad', he added, 'and I promise you I'm the better for it'. As already highlighted, both painters would have had much to learn from each other. Few painters have been blessed with such an instinctive talent for painting and Delacroix was patently impressed. On the other hand, up to this time, Bonington had not seriously painted in oils, nor had he seriously attempted the depiction of historical, or oriental compositions, both of which Delacroix was beginning to produce. Collaboration was mutually beneficial, with the development of both painter's efforts to depict post-classical history and literature with convincing sentiments, using rich colours and textures. Here, they had been preceded by the Scottish painter, David Wilkie, whose Dutch Golden Age inspired pictures had a marked influence on Delacroix and led to a renewed study of Rembrandt.

As highlighted, Bonington had already commenced painting in oils and *View near Rouen*, above, is another fine example of his ability to seamlessly transfer his watercolour skills to that of oil painting of masterly fluidity. From early 1826, until barely three years later, Bonington was at the height of his powers, producing sparkling oils and watercolours with a fluency that deeply impressed Delacroix. 'I could never cease to admire his marvellous grasp of effects and facility of his execution', he wrote to the critic Thore in 1861, in what has become a much quoted appreciation of Bonington, '...not that he was easily satisfied. On the contrary, he frequently repainted entire passages, which seemed wonderful to us; but his ability was such that his brush instantly recovered new effects as charming as the first'. And in summing up Bonington's qualities, he said '...nobody in this modern school, and possibly even

before him, has had that lightness of touch which, particularly in watercolour, makes his pictures, as it were, like diamonds that delight the eye, quite independently of their subject, or of any representational qualities’.

On the other hand, to achieve some balance, it is unlikely that Bonington at the age of twenty-four, could have attempted anything on such a scale as Delacroix’s Salon debut, the *Barque of Dante and Virgil*. The far less momentous qualities of charm and a breath-taking dexterity were to be Bonington’s principal attributes, though they were present to a degree matched by very few others in the history of art. Nevertheless, whilst he sought the prestige that accompanied large history paintings, his studio companion and friend reassured him, ‘You are king of your domain and Raphael could not do what you do’.



A Seated Turk, oil on canvas, 1826, Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Centre for British Art.

There was no Paris Salon in 1826, but there was an important exhibition at the Galerie Lebrun in aid of the Greeks’ struggle against the Turks. Among the paintings on show were Delacroix’s *The Execution of Doge Marino Faliero*, Wallace Collection and Bonington’s *A Seated Turk*. This may have been as a response to several small scale oils with Turkish subjects, which Delacroix had painted shortly before. In the prevailing circumstances, this was probably not an ideal choice, but its highly unlikely that Bonington was insensitive to the suffering of the Greeks at the hands of the Turks. Such Orientalist paintings were very much of the moment and many painters, led by Delacroix and Gabriel Duchamp, a specialist in the genre, were involved in their production.



Roadside Halt, oil on canvas, Metropolitan, 1826, New York

The sumptuous, *Roadside Halt*, almost certainly based on a sketch made whilst on one of his Normandy sketching tours, does appear to be strongly influenced by both Constable and Dutch Golden Age cabinet paintings. Both the paintings of the 17th century Philips Wouwerman and Adrian van de Velde come to mind, then all the rage amongst aristocratic French collectors.

Coastal and river scenes had always been popular and indeed still are with collectors. Some of Turner's best loved watercolours and oils are of such subjects, possibly one of the most renowned being the much more monumental, *Sun Rising over Vapour*, painted with *Dido Building Carthage*, as an homage to his hero, Claude Lorrain. *On the Coast of Picardy* and *Coastal Scene with Fishermen*, are two of Bonington's finest examples, demonstrating the innate ability to capture atmosphere and scenery.



On the Coast of Picardy, oil on canvas, 1826, Wallace Collection



Coastal Scene with Fishermen, oil on canvas, 1827, Tate Britain



Francois I and Marguerite de Navarre, oil on canvas, 1827, Wallace Collection.

This is a version of a painting, which was exhibited at the 1827-28 Paris Salon, showing the King of France with his sister Marguerite. He was renowned for his affable personality and love of the arts, whilst his sister was also a beneficent poet and author of *L'Heptameron*, a collection of tales modelled on Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The subject of the narrative is based on the discovery, recorded in 1724, of a verse scratched, supposedly by Francois himself on a window pane in the Chateau de Chambord.

In this and other period costume pieces, Bonington transforms the highly polished, but somewhat lifeless paintings of theatre by Ingres and other contemporaries, to produce vibrant scenes animated by expressive brushwork and subtle chiaroscuro, with in this picture, a particularly convincing emotional interplay between the siblings.

Until Bonington travelled to Italy, he had never been outside England and North-Western France. For an Academically trained artist, a visit to Italy was thought essential and indeed for most of the 18th century, the tour of Italy was regarded as a rite of passage for all young aristocratic men and indeed a few women. However, rather than Rome, Florence, or Naples, Venice was Bonington's preferred destination, following his illustrious contemporary, Turner, who had visited in 1819. He left Paris in Spring 1826, accompanied by his good friend, Charles Rivet, a 'well-heeled' politician and amateur artist, who owned a chateau near Mantes, where Bonington was a frequent visitor.

During the course of the Italian tour, which lasted 11 weeks, the two companions spent 4 weeks in Venice, before leaving for Padua and Ferrara. With its wealth of Gothic architecture and magical light, Venice provided a rich source of inspiration for future works. Bonington made many sketches, views of the city, but also studies of individual buildings, some in oils, others, drawings and watercolours, where he brilliantly captured city life. He would of course also have been very familiar with the 18th century views of Venice by Canaletto and Guardi. With this material he was then able produce his Venetian paintings back in his studio. Here its interesting to compare and contrast the treatment of the views in the different mediums on page 13, although it is difficult to fully appreciate just how much of Bonington's watercolour technique he was able to carry over to his work on canvas, without the ability to view them directly. Whatever, the employment of atmospheric perspective in both is superlative.



Lagoon, Venice, watercolour, 1827, Louvre



Grand Canal, Venice, Sunset, oil on canvas, 1827, private collection

When it came to painting his oil sketches, the principal difference between Bonington and his contemporaries, was that he preferred to paint his sketches on the millboard he had bought in London, rather than on canvas, or paper sheets, which were customary for others. These oil sketches are now regarded by many as his finest achievement, a glorious series of dazzling views, which perfectly demonstrate his mastery of the oil medium. Like his predecessor, Thomas Jones, the Welsh 18th century painter, who spent many years in both Rome and Naples and now most famous for his spontaneous sketch views of Naples in oils, these works were principally for pleasure and to train the eye; they were not for sale and most remained with Bonington until his death.

Travelling back from Venice, with a brief sojourn in Florence, then via La Spezia, Genoa, Turin and Switzerland, Bonington and Rivet were back in Paris by the 20th June. It is likely, that by this time Bonington was already suffering from the Tubercular condition, which would end his life prematurely. Back in Paris and with his interest in painting historical scenes invigorated by the opportunity to study the great 16th century masters of Venice, he embarked on a sustained campaign of painting watercolours with historical narratives, with a wider and more complex chromatic scale, which must at least in part have reflected his admiration for Titian, Tinteretto and Veronese.

In the late Spring of 1827, Bonington visited London again, with a letter of introduction to Sir Thomas Lawrence, the Royal Academy president and where he had *Scene on the Cote d'Opale* (Duke of Bedford) on display at the R.A. Although he was too shy to take advantage of the introduction, he did take the opportunity to renew his contacts with leading figures in the art trade. It was clear that although he was already overwhelmed with commissions, he still sought to exploit every possible avenue of patronage in an expanding market.



On the Cote d'Opale, Picardy, oil on canvas 1826/7, private collection

On the Cote d'Opale, Picardy, at only 10x13 inches, is probably a study, from which the larger Duke of Bedford painting of a similar title was completed. This little gem was sold at Christies in 2016 for almost £1.4 million. It was one of the last of Bonington's celebrated French coastal landscapes to remain in private hands. As previously highlighted, Bonington's fame had by 1826 achieved something of a cult status amongst French artists and connoisseurs from both sides of the Channel, who found in his work a freedom and naturalism that was in striking contrast to Academic Classicism.

Here the artist achieves a dazzling effect with such apparent ease, horizontal bands of colour and exposed canvas ground describe the patterns of shifting light on the beach, still wet from the retreating tide, while with broad textured brushstrokes, he captures the sweeping sky. The low horizon is marked with vertical accents, most strikingly with the red and yellow head-dresses of the two central children, but also in details such as the boats to the right of the peninsula, which are executed with a masterful wet-in-wet technique.

In both 1827 and 1828, he exhibited at the Paris Salon, as well as at the British institution and on visiting London this time, he overcame his shyness and introduced himself to Lawrence. The great man, later recalled with pleasure, remarking that Bonington's 'mind seemed to be expanding in every way and ripening into full maturity of taste and elevated judgement'. Such remarks, coming from a painter Bonington very much admired, can only have encouraged the ambitions he now had for his art.

In May 1828, he sent what would be his last submissions to the R.A., most likely that painted the previous year, *Grand Canal Venice, Sunset*, private collection, illustrated on page 13. The Times praised the 'bold, stately picture, displaying a power and breadth of style, which can come from none but a master's hand'.

In June 1828 while the R.A. exhibition was on, Bonington was forced through illness to cancel another tour to Normandy, where he had planned to meet up with Paul Huet and Eugene Isabey and its clear that during the Summer, his health declined rapidly as pulmonary tuberculosis took its course. In July, his desperate parents took him to London to seek a medical opinion, but nothing could be done and on the 23rd September, he died; his twenty-sixth birthday would have been just over a month later. His funeral, attended by Sir Thomas Lawrence took place at St James Chapel, Pentonville, but his body was later moved in 1837, to be buried with his parents in Kensal Green cemetery.

Despite the brevity of his career, there is no doubt, that Bonington together with Constable, were hugely influential with the Romantic landscape movement, that later became known as the Barbizon School, influencing the art of Theodore Rousseau, Charles-Francois Daubigny, Jules Dupre, Constant Troyon and the more loosely associated Camille Corot.

The 4th Marquess of Hertford, who spent most of his adult life in Paris, became a passionate collector of Bonington's works. One of the richest men in Europe, he bought not only paintings, but the finest 18th century furniture and porcelain, but he had a particular penchant for Bonington, whose works he purchased between 1843-1869, often paying what were considered for the time to be outrageously excessive sums. The Marquess frequently expressed the opinion that he only liked 'pleasing pictures' and so its unsurprising that Bonington's paintings full of charm and rich colour, were so entirely to his taste. And so, it is due to the legacy of his illegitimate son, Sir Richard Wallace and his widow Lady Wallace, that the Wallace Collection in Manchester Square, London is now open to the Nation, free of charge, the repository of so much beautiful art, none more so than the Bonington paintings, which rub shoulders with those of the great masters of the past.