



Norwich Castle
Museum & Art Gallery

Take One...

Norwich River: Afternoon - Teacher's Pack

The purpose of this pack is to provide supporting material and ideas for teachers using Norwich River Afternoon as part of the Take One scheme

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John Crome, *Norwich River: Afternoon*, c. 1812-19.

An image of the picture can be downloaded from our website
www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/Learning/Norwich_Learning/Information_for_Teachers/Take_One_Picture/index.htm



Inspired by the National Gallery's
Take One Picture programme

Introduction to the painting

The painting

Norwich River: Afternoon was displayed at the Norwich Society's 1819 exhibition, though like many of Crome's paintings, we are unsure exactly what year it was actually painted. The painting is broadly divided into three horizontal bands: water in the foreground; buildings in the middle ground; then sky above. The focus of the painting is a small group of figures in a rowing boat. Opinions differ as to whether they are well dressed or not but given the setting, it would seem more probable that the figures are working class. A good half of the painting is given up to the sky – typical of Norfolk's expansive landscapes – whilst the buildings and river each take up about a quarter of the picture. Rather than straight lines, the gentle curves of these bands add to the gentleness of the picture overall.

The horizontal bands help to position the viewer in space, and each has its own interest. The water is animated by extensive use of coloured reflections; the sky by the delicate cloud formations. The buildings themselves are composed of numerous triangular and oblong shapes, placed at varying planes from one another to add more visual interest. Whilst domestic buildings predominate, the largest long building at the centre of the painting may be part of a mill, whilst the newer looking timbered gable end to its right is perhaps a new factory. Church towers can be seen behind the tallest double gabled building on the horizon line and to its right. The jetties and wharves lining the river are picked out by means of dilapidated fencing but these are not derelict. Instead, like the buildings beyond, they are functional, everyday, and above all 'picturesque': in the sense of being worthy of making into a picture. With its narrow yards and enclosed trees reaching right down to the river, as well as boathouses, sheds, strings of washing, and drifting smoke, and this river frontage is evocative of Norwich in the period

– and still to some extent to be seen today, in sections such as the stretch between the Art School and Fye Bridge Street, behind Elm Hill.

In the water, on the right hand side of the painting, is a projecting piece of land with trees and buildings on it. This anchors us in the middle of the water and in turn draws our attention to the moored boats in the still, shadowed shallows beyond. The projecting trees on this outcrop are typical of this kind of picturesque landscape painting: adding vertical visual interest in a format which could otherwise end up very horizontal. The trees on the outcrop also help to frame the gently sinking sun – in contradistinction to the light blue sky and delicate pink and white clouds of the rest of the sky which give little indication of the time of day. This must be late in the afternoon, and probably late summer, judging by the foliage. The leaves are extremely delicately painted with nothing of the 'broccoli' effects Crome's pupil James Stark was accused of in his foliage. The right hand clump of trees contrasts with the equally delicately painted silver birch on the left of the painting, carefully placed to balance the composition and frame the buildings.

The colour is remarkable, combining as it does fresh greens in the trees; red-orange in the tiles; cream in the wattle and daub walls; and pearly pale blues, pinks, and gold in the sky. There is nothing cold about this river scene. Human interest is provided primarily by the boatful of figures centre foreground, but also by figures on the banks, such as the group to the right of the silver birch tree: perhaps a washerwoman and two children. The focus here is not on work but leisure and a tranquil, sunny afternoon. Although the Napoleonic Wars with France were either happening at the time or recent enough to be a painful memory, there is no hint of this in the painting.

Further Background Information

John Crome

Crome was born in Norwich in December 1768. His father was an alehouse-keeper (in what is now King Street) as well as a weaver. In those days a weaver would have worked mainly from home as a way to earn an extra living with a small loom.



In 1783, John Crome became an apprentice as a decorative painter with a house and coach painter. He was bound to this position for seven years and it would have taught him the craft of painting: grinding and mixing pigments, their durability, how to handle them and how to apply them. The heraldry and lettering of the sign trade would have helped him gain a steady hand and attention to detail, and the signs he painted for pubs taught him composition in pictures.

This type of work is what may have inspired him to paint landscapes. After a day's work he would walk up to Mousehold Heath and paint the scene before him. During his apprenticeship he did not have much money, so he made paint brushes with the hair from a cat's tail and used discarded oyster shells as palettes for his paints.

Many painters of this time learned their skills by copying the works of other artists. Crome copied works in a collection belonging to Thomas Harvey of Catton; they included works from painters such as Gainsborough and Hobbema, a Dutch painter. As well as painting, Crome also drew and created etchings throughout his career.

During his life Crome made occasional trips outside of Norwich, but very few. He preferred to stay in Norwich and paint the city itself and its immediate locality. He painted blacksmiths' shops, tumble down houses and windmills,

shipping scenes on the River Yare and at Yarmouth, and also the new mills in Norwich. Crome's interest in painting local icons and landscapes helped to form a sense of regional identity.

It is said he was admired by Constable and Turner and was an early pioneer of *plein air* painting; he made watercolour drawings and, in some cases, finished oil paintings out of doors.

John Crome died in April 1821 and is buried in the South Aisle of the parish church of St George, Colegate.

The Norwich School of Artists

This was a regional school of painting based in Norwich and its members were artists who had common aims and close family and master-pupil ties. John Crome and John Sell Cotman were the two great masters of the school. Many members of the Norwich School became a part of the Norwich Society of Artists. Created in 1803 by Crome, the Society was the first regional art institution of its kind outside London. The society held their first exhibition in August 1805 in a room in Sir Benjamin Wrench's Court, off Little London Street in Norwich, which is now part of Jarrolds Department Store. A total of 18 artists displayed over 200 watercolour and oil works and the exhibition did very well. The Society held annual exhibitions in Norwich until 1833 to show and sell work.

The artists found inspiration in Norfolk's varied coastline, flat countryside and broad skies, and many of the artists spent time sketching outside or closer to home.

Norwich Castle possesses the largest collection of paintings in existence by artists of the Norwich School. Most of the works were bequeathed by Jeremiah James Colman, founder of Colman's Mustard, and his son, Russell James Colman.

The river in Norwich – trade, industry, etc.

Norwich River: Afternoon is one of many paintings by Crome that focuses on the River Wensum. One of his favourite subjects was the industrial and vernacular architecture along the river, around the New Mills and the parish of St Martin's at Oak, near the city centre in Norwich.

As the son of a weaver, Crome would have been aware of the use of the river in the areas he enjoyed painting. These included

- Dyeing cloth
- A silk mill was in place by 1819 (powered by New Mills)
- Area around New Mills: flour mill, water raising complex which had been there since Elizabethan times, brewing industry
- River Wensum at the centre of an agricultural area
- Wensum a tributary to the Yare, leading to the port at Yarmouth where textiles, among other goods, were exported to the Continent

At this time there was also a wider cultural relevance of rivers. Links can be made to Dutch paintings to which Crome and other Norwich artists studied and admired. Also, in literature, rivers were symbolic of the nation's power, wealth and political health. This was especially true in Norfolk, where our rivers were so important to trade and industry.

Rivers were popular in 19th century paintings. Crome would have been familiar with the work of Turner, Constable and Gainsborough. Their depictions of the river created positive representations of the nation: traditional pastoral scenes, progress of modern industry and modern leisure. While important to the nation, river scenes were also a way to increase tourism in your area.

This scene you are looking at is quite calm and tranquil in comparison to the reality of the hard labour that would have taken place on the river and the tension surrounding the

work. In the 18th century the city had boomed as the centre of the worsted (textile) industry, but in the 1820s Norwich was known for its worker violence, strikes and riots in response to wage reductions and redundancies. Also, a huge number of workers flocked to the city as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Class divisions were further intensified by the Anglo-French wars that had recently ended in 1815.

Other historical events around the time of *Norwich River: Afternoon*

1811 – Regency begins

1815 – Defeat of Napoleon at Battle of Waterloo; Corn Laws passed

1816 – Bread or Butter riots in East Anglia; Jane Austen's *Emma* published

1819 – First iron steamship launched

1820 – Accession of George IV

1844 – Rail link between Norwich and Yarmouth established, gradually brought the demise of the waterways as Norfolk's main means of transport and transportation



Asking Questions

Possible themes for questions and discussion in front of *Norwich: River Afternoon*

What can we see?

- Water - a river scene. How do we know it's water? Reflections, rippled movements. Colours in water reflect the things around and above.
- River – very important, who else might use the river? What else might be on the river? What can you see on the riverbank?
- Buildings - describe shapes (triangles, rectangles, built shapes, soft shapes, etc.), heights, types, (how are they the same, how are they different), old and new, arrangements - sheds, houses, church, barns thrown higgledy piggledy together. Other structures – fences, jetties.
- Materials – (wood, brick, tiles etc. seen in the built environment).
- People - How many? What kind? Where? Who? What are they doing and what does this tell us? (leisure, working class, men & women). What are they wearing? What does this tell us about them? Rich or poor?
- Trees – How has the artist painted the leaves? How many different greens can we see? How many different kinds of trees? How can we tell? What season is it? How can we tell? Focus on the detail of the foliage and how the branches are painted.
- Evidence of activity - smoke, washing, open windows, boat, gardens (these tell us about people's lives).
- Time of year? Time of day? - How would you know? (setting sun, open windows, etc.)
- Effects of light - What direction is it coming from? What mood does it create? (calm, warm, watery, romantic).

How is the picture put together?

- What colours are used? How many different shades of one colour are used?
- How many different browns, greens, yellows, blues .name them. Why are they so bright? (reflections in the water, light & shadow).
- Identify sections in the painting. (Foreground, middle and background and the features in each).
- Where does your eye travel? (in a curve up the river and in straight lines through the buildings).
- Contrast soft, natural shapes against built ones.



Paintings for comparison

Two other paintings in the galleries depict the same area of river from different perspectives. Children can discuss the similarities and differences in them.

Some suggested questions to help them are included below.



John Crome, *New Mills, Men Wading* c. 1810-14

The tranquil scene depicts women washing and men fishing. The *Men Wading* of the title suggests they are about to swim or bathe, or perhaps catch eels.

Question:

How many men are paddling in the water?
What do you think they are saying to each other?



John Crome, *Back of New Mills* c. 1814 -17

In this painting, two men at the right, apparently on the bank behind a boat, may be conducting a business deal, about to go fishing, or just chatting. Further towards the centre, a woman washes clothes in the river whilst another hangs them up behind her

Question:

What is the woman in the red dress doing?
Talk about who does the washing for your family? How do your family dry washing?

Developing lines of enquiry in the classroom

Trees

Look closely at trees and draw branch shapes and spaces in between.

Enlarge and isolate areas of branch patterns, use to create abstract patterns. Paint or collage with black lines and colours that would be seen through the branches - sky, cloud, light.



Experiment with paint techniques for foliage, colour mixing and brushwork techniques (sponges, ragging, silhouettes, etc.).

Look closely / take rubbings of tree bark. Develop into collage.

Identify trees using shapes, bark, leaves (silver birch, evergreen).



An Open Window

What can we see out of the open windows of the houses?

Draw an open window frame as a viewfinder and develop the scene.

Viewpoints

Imagine and draw different views from different vantage points in the picture – from

the rooftops, the jetty, the trees.

Photograph a local landscape from different angles. Bring these together in one piece.

Collage / photomontage.

Perspective

Discuss visual problems of space, distance, how is it shown? (scale, colour, details).

Use photos of other scenes and extend the viewpoint out of the picture to find vanishing points.

Explore lines, shapes in the natural and built environment.

Skies

Materials - pale blue A4 card or paper, selection of grey, white, pale yellow papers (include different types of paper – e.g. sugar paper, tissue paper, newsprint, cartridge paper, printer paper), glue sticks.

Do the clouds in the painting look like anything?

Use torn paper on blue background to create cloud patterns.

Reflections

Art

Look at other pictures/ photos of reflections. What effects are created?

Visit a site with reflected surfaces (water, glass, metal). Draw and add colour palette. Drop pebbles into water (pond, water tray, bowl). Draw the patterns formed.

Drama

Reflections/mirror images. Work with a partner to mirror body shapes. Think of an everyday action – e.g. tying shoe laces, eating a boiled egg. One person to mime this. Partner to be shadow or reflection. Show your short drama to the rest of the group.

Soundscape

Resources - selection of 'instruments' including shakers, sticks, paper to rustle, textured surfaces to scrape.

Discuss the sounds you would hear if you were standing in the picture – wind, leaves rustling, voices, washing flapping etc. Create a soundscape to reflect the sounds you would hear and perform it for the rest of the group.

Other themes that could be developed

Washday.

Investigate boats, floating and sinking.

Describe a journey along a river, act out the roles of the people in the painting, and add dialogue, speech bubbles. Row the boat.

Look at mills. What is a mill? How do they work?

Rivers. What would it be like to live here? How else might the river be used? Why build near the river?



Mixed Media Collage of Norwich River: Afternoon produced by Year 5 pupils at Queen's Hill Primary School, Norwich

For more details, visit the Learning pages at www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk

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