

Donati's Comet, 5th October 1858

William Turner Of Oxford

Sold



## Description

William Turner of Oxford (1789-1862)  
Donati's Comet, 5th October 1858

Signed lower right: W. Turner/Oxford  
Watercolour over traces of pencil heightened with touches of bodycolour and gum arabic  
24.5 by 35.5 cm., 9 ½ by 14 in.

### Provenance:

Anonymous sale, Sotheby's, 18th March 1982, lot 114;  
With Agnew's, 1992, where bought by the present owner

### Literature:

Timothy Wilcox, *William Turner of Oxford (1789-1862)*, 1984, p.79, no.87, ill.;  
Thos. Agnew & Sons, *English Watercolours and Drawings*, 1992, no.62, ill.;  
Roberta J.M. Olson and Jay M. Pasachoff, *Fire in the Sky - Comets and Meteors, the Decisive Centuries*, in *British Art and Science*, 1998, fig. 127

### Exhibited:

Oxfordshire County Museum, Woodstock, Bankside Gallery, London and Museum and Art Gallery, Bolton,  
William Turner of Oxford (1789-1862, 9th September 1984 to 19th January 1985, no.87

Donati's Comet was one of the highlights of 19th Century astronomy and was the first comet to be photographed. It was discovered on 2nd June 1858 by the Italian astronomer Giovanni Battista Donati and by mid-August was visible to the naked eye. It was still visible in the Southern hemisphere until November and only finally disappeared from the skies completely in March 1859. It is not due to reappear for another 1600 years. It was at its closest to the earth on 10th October and apparently on 5th October was at almost its most brilliant and with clear skies and long sword-like tail arcing through the sky, the scene inspired writers and artists throughout the world. William Dyce also captured the comet on the same day as Turner of Oxford in Pegwell Bay: A recollection of 5th October 1858 (Tate, London).

Turner of Oxford was a close observer of natural phenomena, frequently working outside directly from nature and his resulting sketches were often inscribed not only with the date and time of their execution but also annotated with remarks about meteorological conditions.

Another version of this watercolour in the Yale Center for British Art is inscribed on the reverse of mount:  
'No.9/Near Oxford, half past 7 o'clock, P.M. Octr. 5th. 1858'.