**Charles Frederick Tomkins, 1798–1844**

Theatrical scene-painter, landscape artist and caricaturist who was born in St Pancras, London, on 23 December 1798, his parents being Richard and Charlotte Tomkins. As a scene-painter he was known solely as Charles Tomkins, as a gallery painter usually as ‘Charles F. Tomkins’, perhaps originally to distinguish himself from his older contemporary, the watercolour draughtsman Charles Tomkins (1757–1823). This is how he has usually been listed in reference works though he was baptised Charles Frederick. That occurred unusually late, on 6 January 1805 at St Andrew’s, Holburn, with his elder brother Francis Mansell (born in Marylebone on 27 September 1796) and younger sister, Sarah Susan (b. Covent Garden, 7 January 1800). Graves’s RA exhibitors list alone records him as ‘Charley Tomkins’ on the one occasion he showed there, so that too is occasionally seen: it was no doubt what he was often called.

Nothing is yet known of Tomkins’s training except that his early work was as a scene-painter. In this he is (so far) first recorded at the Coburg Theatre – now the Old Vic – in Lambeth in 1820. From October 1821 until he left in February 1822 he was there with Clarkson Stanfield, of whom he is sometimes reported being a pupil. That is unlikely: he was already 20 when separately engaged so probably no longer under apprenticeship (the normal entry route to the craft). One can also only take at face value the later recollection (1872) of the costume historian, herald and playwright J.R Planché, recounting how he was first introduced to them there after he admired a Swiss cottage interior that they had jointly painted (probably in the melodrama *Adelaide*, in February 1821). Joseph Glossop, the Coburg manager, told him it had been done by ‘two boys’ who would be pleased to have his praise and Planché wrote that his first sight of the ‘lads’ was playing leapfrog on the stage. Tomkins would then have been 21 and Stanfield a married man of 27.

It is none the less evident that Tomkins was influenced by Stanfield’s rapid progresss in using scenic work as foundation for a wider artistic career. From the Coburg he moved on to the nearby Surrey Theatre as principal painter from 1822 to 1826, though also acted as an assistant to Greenwood at Sadler’s Wells in 1824–25 and, after Greenwood left the Olympic in 1825, replaced him there as well. He also painted at Astley’s Amphitheatre in 1828, occasionally at the Lyceum, 1825–29, and at the Adelphi in 1824 before beginning regular work there, 1826–29. After the arrival of Madame Vestris as its manager in 1831 he played a significant part in her reforms in realistic staging (e.g. the introduction of ‘box’settings for interiors) during 1832–35. He also painted scenery for Macready’s management at Drury Lane (1841–43) including his late-1841 revival of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. This suggests that Planché oversimplified in claiming he gave up stage work as a consequence of sunstroke in 1838 and with the implication that led to his early death. Sunstroke or not, it seems more likely that from the late 1830s he followed Stanfield’s example of shifting his time and energies onto his easel painting.

Tomkins began showing landscapes at the British Institution and Society of British Artists in 1825, with views at Leith and Coventry at the former and ‘Cottages’ at the latter. By 1827 (his next SBA appearance) he had visited France and, by 1828, Antwerp as well since he also had two Antwerp views at the RA that year (as ‘Charley Tomkins’ and his sole appearance there). From 1829 to his death the only years in which he did not show at the BI were 1834–37 and 1839: at the SBA – of which he was elected a member from 1837 – he only missed 1834–36. His total of works at the BI was 28, the largest annual group being four in 1831: at the SBA it was 116, including some watercolours, the largest group being a generally exceptional 24 in 1841. Although there were occasional British views throughout and one at the BI in 1838 was a ‘Fountain at Nuremburg’ (possibly from secondary sources), the majority up to 1840 were French landscapes, many coastal. By then he had also been along the Meuse in Belgium and up the Rhine, and locations there dominated his last four years of submissions.

The only oil in a UK public collection appears to be ‘Part of St Goarhausen, on the Rhine, with the Castle of Katz’ (Calderdale Council) which was no. 346 and his 74th entry at the SBA in 1841. This shows picturesque affinities to Stanfield and J.D. Harding, as does a lithograph of ‘Denint [Dinant] on the Meuse’ issued by Colnaghi for the Art Union in 1841. A surviving note from Tomkins to Colnaghi, dated 1840 in another hand, offers him ‘sketches’ for publication of his recent Meuse and Rhine tour, and says that he had not yet shown them to anyone else: this suggests it may have been in 1839/40. It is not yet clear if a view in Venice (SBA 1837) and others shown there in 1843 and 1844 of Venice, Lake Como, Genoa and Naples, were from being there or based on other images. He also showed a few still-life and genre subjects.

Martin Hardie compared Tomkins’s firm line work as a watercolour draughtsman with that of Bonington, William Callow, and James Holland. He also drew the ‘on stone’ lithographic images from Planché’s sketches for the latter’s *Twelve Designs for the Costume of Shakespeare’s ‘Richard III’*. This was published in 1830, just before Planché (from 1831) and then Tomkins himself became closely associated with Madam Vestris at the Olympic Theatre. In 1837 he was also credited with painting the decoration of temporary buildings put up for the Coronation of Queen Victoria.

Tomkins was also a caricaturist. From its foundation in 1841, he supplied early drawings for *Punch* and humour seems to have characterized some of his subject paintings. In 1839, calling him ‘the justly celebrated dramatic scene painter’, the *Morning Advertiser* (25 March) praised the ‘great many clever things’ among his SBA exhibits, singling out ‘a choice bit of *diablerie* called “The Revels begun” for its ‘imps, *à la* Wieland, tripping on the light fantastic toe…under the poisonous, though beautiful, flowers of the monkshood.’ The BM has examples of his watercolour sketches, caricature drawings and some portrait prints personally inscribed to him. One is an impression of Stanfield’s memorial print of his own father James Field Stanfield (*c.*1825): three others are ‘in role’ portraits of the actors Robert Keeley and his wife Mary Anne (in the breeches part of ‘Jack Shephard’) that they also gave him. These, with other items by Tomkins, or probably from his prior ownership, were presented in 1889 and 1904 by a Mrs Robert Barclay who is likely to have been a female relative. They include a fine full-length watercolour portrait of Tomkins by E.P. Novello, (*c.*1833–34), showing him standing in a belted painting smock or tunic and possibly overall trousers of the same material, with three long oil brushes in his hand. There are also six mainly figure and armour sketches by him in the V&A.

Tomkins exhibited solely from addresses in Lambeth, unlike others (including Stanfield) who lived there while working for the ‘minor’ south-bank theatres such as the Coburg but moved north of the river as their advances in stage and gallery work led them there. His earliest (1825) was 4 West Place, West Square. From 1829 it was 40 Walcot Place (alternatively given at the BI as 40 Upper Walcot Street) and by 1838 he was at 3 Walcot Terrace. He died aged 45 in the week of 16 September 1844 in Kensington. This is presumably where, according to a note of 26 September in the *Caledonian Mercury* (the sole mention yet found) ‘He had been under restraint for several months in a private asylum.’ The only remotely proximate explanation is the reported ‘sunstroke’ of 1838, which was also that given at the time for the initial unhinging of the painter Richard Dadd, although in his case while in Egypt: mental illness was then poorly understood, however, so little credibility can be attached to it as regards Tomkins. While he seems to have retreated from the theatre in the late 1830s, his exhibition record and the apparent travelling that supported it shows he remained busily occupied and presumably no longer needing stage income. Overworked exhaustion is perhaps as likely a reason for his breakdown (unless from more physical disease) but it will probably remain unexplained. There is no obvious record that he married and where he was buried is as yet unknown.

*Based on Art UK discussion on ‘St Goar’ – in fact ‘Part of St Goarhausen, on the Rhine, with the Castle of Katz’– (Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council) and sources there cited, plus: RA, SBA and BI lists; Sybil Rosenfeld,* Georgian Scene Painters and Scene Painting*, (Cambridge UP, 1981); Alan S. Downer,* The Eminent Tragedian: William CharlesMacready *(Harvard UP, 1966)*

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