

EXHIBITION GUIDE

Edward Lear: Moment to Moment
9 September – 13 November 2022
First Floor Galleries

Ikon presents *Edward Lear: Moment to Moment*, the first exhibition dedicated solely to Edward Lear's landscape sketches. It comprises nearly 60 works - many exhibited for the first time - borrowed from various private and public collections. Tracing journeys made through Europe, the Middle East and India across many decades, the exhibition reveals Lear's compulsive drive to depict and evoke the present through his in-situ drawings.

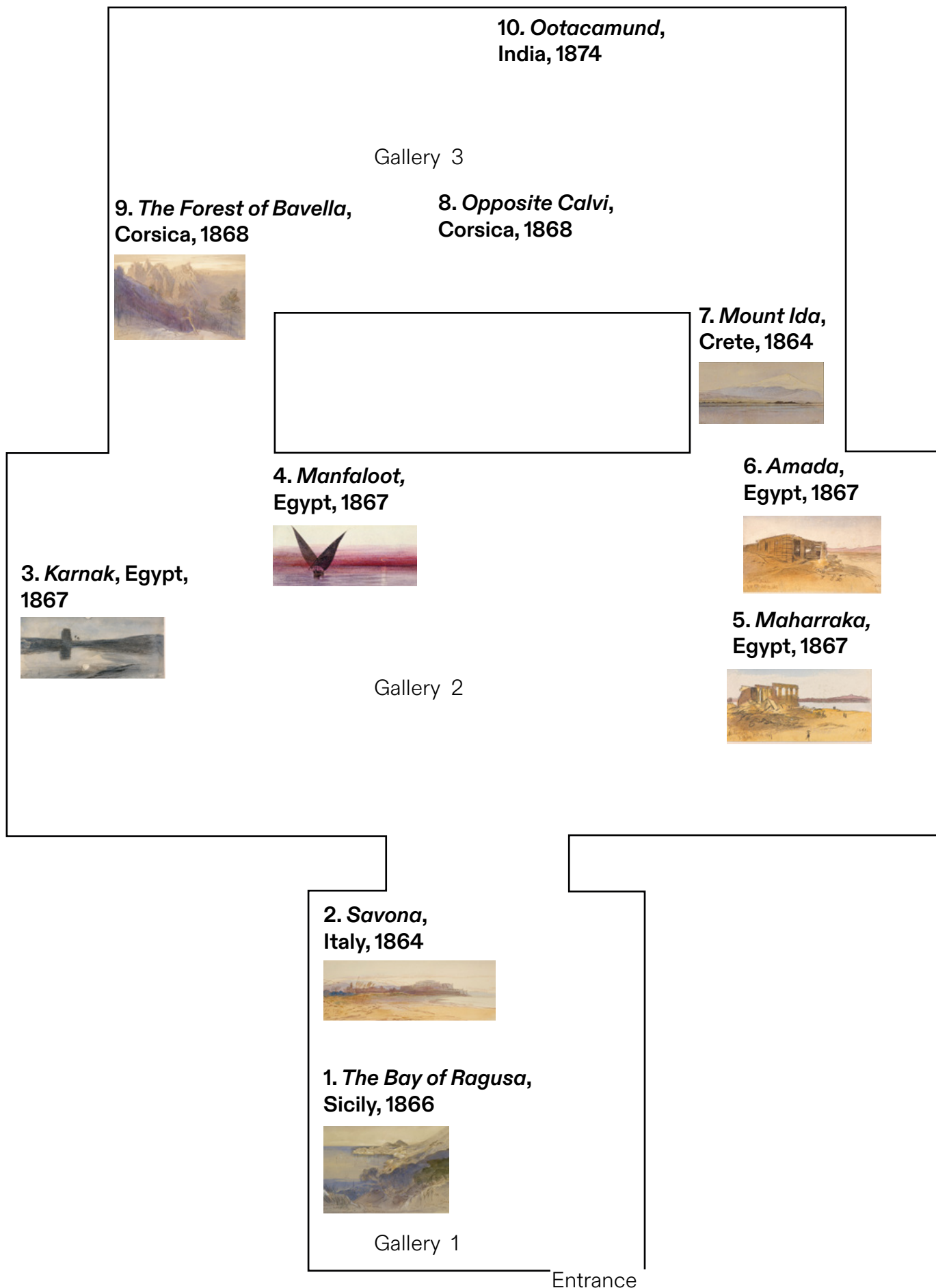
Lear is best known for his limericks and poems such as *The Owl and The Pussy-Cat* (first published in 1871), but has also been recognised as "the finest bird artist there ever was" (David Attenborough). A nomadic figure, he led an isolated life to conceal his epilepsy – a condition which carried great social stigma at the time – spending more than 50 years travelling and making over 9,000 pictures as he went.

Many of these depictions of landscapes were never intended to be shown publicly; they provide a rare insight into Lear's need to capture the moment, illuminating his experimental methods of composition, successive drafts, doodlings and written marginalia. Lear regularly numbered the works, noting the place, date and exact time of day that he drew them.

Hubert Congreve, who travelled with Lear on a sketching expedition, gives an intriguing account of his working method:

"When we came to a good subject, Lear would sit down, and taking his block from George, would lift his spectacles, and gaze for several minutes at the scene through a monocular glass he always carried; then, laying down the glass, and adjusting his spectacles, he would put on paper the view before us, mountain range, villages and foreground, with a rapidity and accuracy that inspired me with awe-struck admiration ... They were always done in pencil on the ground, and then inked in in sepia and brush washed in colour in the winter evenings."

First Floor



Moment to Moment is co-curated by Matthew Bevis, Professor in English Literature at University of Oxford, and Jonathan Watkins, Ikon Director. The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue (available to buy [here](#)), excerpts from which are included in this guide featuring key works from the exhibition.

Gallery 1



1. *The Bay of Ragusa, Sicily, 1866*

“To encounter Lear momentarily is to be invited into a negotiation with different senses of time. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “momently” in three ways: “enduring for a moment; transitory”, “recurring or operative at every moment” and “imminent”. The last of these options can be sensed in Lear’s favourite time of day, which was also his favourite time to paint. He was an early riser, a lover of what he called “the beautiful broad morning effect”, a suitor of daybreak and its links to daydream. Being on the scene before anyone is up, and as the world wakes to itself, he takes in the moment both as interval and as herald. Morning gives him what he most wanted the world to give, a sense of the otherworldliness of the real – and of oneself as a part of this.”

– Matthew Bevis



2. *Savona, Italy, 1864*

“Note Lear’s scribbled comments bottom-left: “O wind! O cold! O stones! O Sand!” When travelling Lear would often mix up what he called “pictorial suggestions with untimely scraps of poetry.” The year in which he began consistently adding nonsense words to his drawings (“rox” to denote “rocks” say, or “raven” to signify “ravine”) was the same year in which he was preparing his first *Book of Nonsense* for press. Sometimes a note on the paper even sounds as though it aspires to be a sort of nonsense haiku: “myriads of tombstones / like almonds / in a cake.” “O! path!”, Lear writes on another sketch, and such whimsical hailings stand as invitations to viewers to take their own odd paths through his images.”

– Matthew Bevis

Gallery 2



3. *Karnak, Egypt, 1867*

“Lear’s pictures of Karnak in this exhibition are timed at 9.30 and 10pm. Lear delicately outlines the moon in black and he even outlines its reflection, as though fearful that it won’t stay put. Maybe looking at the moon in such a way lends disturbance to the latter image. “Identifying with all this various topography naturally makes one less sane than usual” he wrote to a friend. Naturally. And, as a creature of the moment, he is susceptible to more than just the phases of the moon.”

– Matthew Bevis



4. *Manfaloot, Egypt, 1867*

“In his diary for this day (4 March 1867), Lear wrote: “At 5.5 rose the thin red crescent dying moon – & a ghastly effect of immense black sails passing upstream made this a sight. Manfaloot in the dusk seems much as I left it in 1854!” The moon may be dying and the sails may be passing, but the curvature of the sails as they cross at their base, and the way they rhyme with the shape of the moon, enhances the solidity of both. As the diary-entry makes clear, the picture is also testament to a kind of duration: Manfalut, a city on the west bank of the Nile, is much as the artist left it, if not *just* as he left it. The instant is felt to be more than momentary but less than momentous. Lear even makes space for an alternative depiction of it — or it could be another instant, a split second earlier or later: note the pentimento (top-left, a faint pencil outline of the sail).”

– Matthew Bevis

Gallery 3



5. *Maharraka, Egypt, 1867*

“Lear’s drawings sometimes blend realist detail with eccentric imaginings. In this way, they can be seen as corresponding to his poetry, conjuring up a world that feels both familiar and strange, marked by elements of nonsense and the unexpected. Four drawings of another ancient Egyptian temple, Maharraka, near Lake Nasser, made two days after the Amada sequence, depict the building with close attention to architectural detail; cracks can be seen piercing the walls and fluting in the columns. Yet one of the sketches features a stylised stick-like figure in the foreground. Much like the moving figure itself, Lear creates a composition that dances between fantasy and reality, injecting the landscape with an energy that brings the ruins to life.”

– Jonathan Watkins



6. *Amada, Egypt, 1867*

“On 12 February 1867 he draws the temple of Amada (the oldest Egyptian temple in Nubia) on no fewer than five occasions in forty minutes, adding a time-stamp to each picture (6.50 a.m., 7.10, 7.20, 7.25, 7.30). He was looking to capture the temple from different angles, but what one senses when looking at the series is not so much difference but similarity — a turning of the scene in the mind, an attendance upon it as the site of a ‘now’ which has somehow been elongated without being enshrined into timelessness.”

– Matthew Bevis



7. *Mount Ida, Crete, 1864*

“Lear made Corfu his base until 1864, when the Ionian Islands were returned to Greece. When he left, he spent a month on another island, Crete. On Sunday 8 May he rose early, “the world very clear & blue. Then we came down to the sea, which is perfectly calm, & like a large opal mirror - & sat on the sand until 9.30”. The next day, on the old steamship Persia, he made a string of watercolour sketches: of Mount Ida at 4 pm (“vast”, his note said), rising above grey green slopes; again at 5.30 from a different angle, with snowy heights catching the light and a rocky outcrop breaking into the pearly sea (“wild, grand coast”, he noted).”

– Jenny Uglow

8. *Opposite Calvi, Corsica, 1868*

“In the drawings of the mid-1860s nonsense scribbles and wayward details sometimes creep in, like the penguin-like figures in their headdresses, with the exclamation “O dantesque female!”, on a sketch made in Corsica, opposite Calvi.”

– Jenny Uglow



9. *The Forest of Bavella, Corsica, 1868*

“The climax of his Corsican journey — and journal — was an inland trip to the Forest of Bavella, where he spent just over two days at the end of April 1868. The exhibition includes three of the drawings he made on the same day. The first of these (numbered 128 by Lear) is dated with typical punctuality “7.10 a.m. 29 April 1868” and is of a brooding sublime landscape. A procession of trees slopes down from left to right, just touched by a flood of dawn light against a stark backdrop of bare towering crags, which he marks as being “dark purple gray”. The second (numbered 129) is dated “8.20 a.m. 29 April 1868”, an hour or so later, is of almost the same landscape, and is in a sketchy, free style, marked by beautifully fluid handling of the outlines of trees and mountains. The scene is bathed in a warm early morning light, with a dark heart of bluish-purple brown smudged in under the delicate slender trees. The third (number 144) is another featherily precise and atmospheric large watercolour entitled “The Forest of Bavella”, this one dated eight hours later at “4 pm”. In it, a few delicate tall pines stand out against a greeny-browny-grey blur of other trees.”

– Hugh Haughton

10. *Ootacamund, India, 1874*

“Lear travelled through India during 1873-74. His drawing by this time had become very loose and his sketches were overlaid with broad washes of colour. *Ootacamund*, was painted on 7 October 1874, twenty-six years after *Constantinople from Eyüp (Eyoub)*, the earliest work in this exhibition. The meticulousness of the latter has given way to a kind of shorthand, but the basic compositions are remarkably similar. Lear retained a pictorial formula even as his artistic style became increasingly free.”

– Jonathan Watkins

EVENT

[Symposium: Edward Lear in the Round](#)

Monday 12 September




Free, Livestreamed on Ikon Gallery Youtube

This one day symposium draws on key themes of Ikon's ground-breaking exhibition – Edward Lear, [Moment to Moment](#) – and reads across Lear's oeuvre, highlighting connections between his diverse activities and achievements. A wide range of established and emerging experts on Lear speak at the event, with ample time for questions and discussion.

This event is supported by the [Arts and Humanities Research Council \(AHRC\)](#), [The Finnis Scott Foundation](#) and [University of Oxford](#).

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