



Widely regarded as Britain's greatest painter, Joseph Mallord William Turner was a prodigy who entered the Royal Academy Schools in 1789, aged fourteen, and exhibited his first watercolor, a London scene, in 1790. In 1802, he became—at twenty-four—the youngest artist yet to be elected as a full Academician, Turner's early work set the pattern for his future career. He mastered and then transformed established styles and methods and formed the habit of traveling during the summer, when he collected material to work up into finished images during the winter. His watercolors soon attracted attention for their striking compositions and adventurous techniques, winning commissions from influential patrons and engravers of illustrated publications.

By the turn of the century, Turner was at the forefront of a new trend, producing "exhibition watercolors" whose large scale, varied effects, and narrative and historical subjects sought to compete with oil painting. Distinctive methods such as scratching into the paper with a fingernail or brush handle or mopping away wet wash to raise highlights showed Turner breaking free, as an older artist observed in 1799,

of the "mechanically systematic approach of drawing."1 That an idea or subject might arise from process or performance rather than from a conscious act of representation is of course very modern, but there was nothing accidental or unconscious about Turner's creative process. The "idea in his mind"<sup>2</sup> came from what he had seen, remembered, or imagined, and drove his lifelong quest for appropriate pictorial and technical expression. The unfinished studies, experiments, and works in progress begueathed to the Tate museum in 1856 are among his most inventive works, taking a path of constant transformation and rebirth, but Turner presumably regarded them as means to an end and not, as the modern eye would like to see, pictures in themselves.

Even Turner's most seemingly impressionistic work was usually done in the studio—hardly ever outdoors or in front of the motif. While many of the finished pictures look expressionistic, they are not abstract in the modern sense. Rather, Turner's abstraction was atmospheric, depicting the ephemeral effects of light and air. His advocate, the renowned critic John Ruskin, admired Turner as the foremost "modern painter" based on his

truth to nature. Indeed, Turner saw himself as a landscape painter, stretching the motif's capacities to the widest extent imaginable in the early nineteenth century. In his paintings, light and color are often said to be among the all-pervading features, their interplay and interdependence a part of his works' dynamic character. So too is the way his art conveys an extraordinary energy, whether that of the natural world, waves, clouds, or changeable weather, or new technologies that harnessed and confronted nature's power.

In this exhibition, storm and flood are seen by themselves and as the central drama of historical and modern subjects. Mountains and sea show the world in motion: the glacial creep of geological change in the Alps, the sudden fall of a rock propelled by an avalanche, the changing appearance of Mont Rigi according to time and weather, the swell and heave of the sea. Turner's mountains can look like frozen waves, and his waves like moving mountains. His generation called these phenomena Sublime and relished the sense of fear they aroused, along with awe and admiration. The rhetorician Hugh Blair found the Sublime in "hoary mountain" and "solitary lake," and in the "excessive grandeur . . . of the ocean" arising "not from its extent alone, but from

the perpetual motion and irresistible force of that mass of waters."<sup>3</sup> For the philosopher Dugald Stewart, the "idea of literal sublimity" is "inseparably combined with that of the sea, from the stupendous spectacle it exhibits when agitated by a storm,"4 while Edmund Burke, another philosopher, gave new impetus to the Sublime in relation to beauty, as an idea that stretched back to antiquity. Turner modernized it when he depicted recent fighting in an Alpine pass, ships wrecked by storms, or a steamer battling a blizzard. His art is a window into a time of violent, accelerating change, torn by war and revolution and altered by machines, with peace and solace to be found in glimpses of transcendental calm.

Turner's eye for a subject significant beyond its immediate content—metaphorical as well as literal—was a key factor in his success, leading the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray to observe that his pictures "affect the imagination like music or poetry." Turner often used poetry to amplify the content of his paintings. Morning amongst the Coniston Fells, Cumberland was accompanied in the Royal Academy catalogue by John Milton's description in Paradise Lost of "mists and exhalations" rising from hills and water as



Figure 1

the sun comes up. Milton appears again in relation to *The Deluge* (fig. 1). The subject is the biblical Flood, but Turner showed it with a passage from *Paradise Lost* describing rising wind, darkening sky, and torrential rain falling "till the earth / No more was seen." In the foreground, a heroic black man attempting to rescue a girl from drowning was probably added in sympathy with British campaigns to end the slave trade, an evil worthy of divine

punishment in the eyes of abolitionists like the Earl of Carysfort, for whom the picture may have been intended.

England's war with France had restricted travel until 1802, when the Treaty of Amiens was signed, enabling Turner to travel safely to the Continent that year—his first visit. He could not have painted *The Deluge* if he had not taken this version of the so-called Grand



Figure 2

Tour—a requisite journey for artists since the Renaissance—and seen pictures by Nicolas Poussin, Titian, and Paolo Veronese in the Louvre. Even more important for his personal development was his experience of the Swiss Alps on the same trip. There he recorded impressions of glaciers, towering peaks, weathered rocks, and deep gorges. His dynamic view of nature can in large part be traced to these watercolor sketches. So too can his belief that nature's workings, as natural history, were as significant as conventional historical subjects showing human dramas, as in the Old Master paintings he saw at the Louvre. The landscape itself could represent such drama through metaphor, contrast, and the expression of pure energy.

The resumption of war in 1803 forced Turner to halt his travels temporarily. He began teaching at the Royal Academy in 1807 where, as the professor of perspective, he praised "our variable climate where the seasons are recognizable in one day" and "nature seems to sport in all her dignity."6 English landscape, coasts, and rivers inspired oil paintings, watercolors, and prints that built a comprehensive picture of the nation its landmarks, picturesque sights, and new industries. Changeable weather enhanced the mood of these diverse images, often leading to works that were not directly related to the English countryside. A snowstorm in Yorkshire, for example, gave Turner the idea for the background of his picture of Hannibal in the Alps, while a spell of near-Mediterranean heat in Devon in 1813 inspired him to paint its scenery in an almost Italian light two years later. Turner showed his growing appreciation of light and atmosphere in a brighter and more luminous palette and became known as a "white painter," reflecting the way he brought an inner light even into soberly colored pictures by applying thin or transparent layers of oil paint to a white ground, just as he did when using watercolor on white paper.

Turner's first visit to Italy in 1819 was a landmark in his life. He found the Italian light and its sharpening effect on color to be thrilling; it demanded to be painted. This visit and another in 1828 bookend a period when dazzling light and vivid color function in his work almost as a species of the Sublime, pushing the boundaries of vision and consciousness and often shocking his contemporaries. Nowhere was Turner's color more vivid than in the pictures of ancient history or classical mythology that he continued to paint until he died, using the array of new pigments coming onto the market to breathe new life into classical landscapes.

Turner made at least three trips to the city of Venice—one in 1819, another in 1833, and a final trip in 1840. Like other artistic chroniclers, from Canaletto to Whistler, he loved the floating city's distinctive architecture and atmosphere. In both finished works and studies, his aqueous images of Venice are often considered to be among his most poetic, capturing the luminous majesty and alluring decay of this once great mercantile power. From famous sites such as the Doge's Palace, the Basilica of San Marco, and the Bridge of Sighs (fig. 2) to intimate views of the canals



Figure 3

crisscrossing the city, Turner's Venetian works draw the observer deeper into the city's complex, shifting moods.

But Turner's color was not always bright, nor his light that of the warm South. In the 1830s, he sent cool, silvery sea-pieces to the Royal Academy that some critics thought saved a reputation battered by the extravagant effects in other pictures. A palette of cold grays, browns, greens, and blues shot through with white defined one of his most renowned later pictures, Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth—celebrated not only for its narrative of a paddle steamer negotiating rough and treacherous shallows, but also for the personal mythology that Turner attached to it: he claimed that he had witnessed the storm while tied to the boat's mast, not expecting to survive but determined to paint it if he did.

The onset of steam power in the 1820s had contaminated the atmosphere, leading Ruskin to write gloomily of the "storm cloud of the nineteenth century." Yet works like *Snow Storm* (fig. 3) show that Turner was fascinated rather than repelled by such developments as trains, factories,

and steamships. Between 1840 and 1846, he employed opposite extremes of the tonal spectrum—light and dark, plus and minus, positive and negative—to create powerful emotional effects that were intensified by the atmospheric impact of steam. The evocation of a dark Sublime is seen in Peace—Burial at Sea (cover), where Turner utilizes a rich black, relieved by the whites and reds of moon and lamplight, to depict the burial of the painter Sir David Wilkie, whose body is dropped into the water from a smoke-belching steamship off the coast of Gibraltar. Such indications of new technology were not universally appreciated. Ruskin praised Snow Storm as one of the "grandest statements of sea-motion, mist, and light" ever painted,7 but he overlooked the steamer. The Times likened the steamship in *Peace* to a "burnt and blackened fish-kettle."8 Easily ridiculed, pictures like these have achieved canonical status only in modern times.

Such paintings showed Turner's increased interest in allowing the unfinished qualities of a work to lend it an emotional expressiveness. This approach continued in his later seascapes, which were often painted while Turner was staying on the



Figure 4

Kent coast and working, as Ruskin recognized, for his own pleasure. *Seascape with Storm Coming On* (fig. 4), for example, shows the atmospherics that the critic William Hazlitt had observed in his exhibited pictures back in 1816—"abstractions of aerial perspective, and representations not so properly of the objects of nature as of the medium through which they were seen . . . the elements of air, earth, and water." Hazlitt quotes an assessment of Turner's landscapes as "pictures of nothing, and very like." This observation was as perceptive as it was prophetic.

Turner died in London in 1851, a modern Old Master defended by Ruskin but falling behind changing tastes. In his late, most personal work, his style had undergone a transformation as dramatic as that of the older Titian,
Rembrandt, or Picasso. The dynamic vitality
of his art and his capacity for reinvention was
matched in his personal life by his restless
curiosity and need to keep on the move. Living
for his work, he found it hard to settle, make
himself comfortable at home, or form lasting
relationships. He never married and kept his
mistresses and children in the background.
He had close friends but wasted little time on
correspondence beyond business matters.

Turner was nowhere more mysterious than outside his native country, his work traveling less happily than he did and his embrace of Europe after the Napoleonic Wars not reciprocated across the Channel. French, German, and Austrian painters who knew his pictures from prints were appalled by the new work he showed in Rome in 1828. He did not show in Paris's famous "Salon des Anglais" in 1824. Yet his international appeal today, demonstrated afresh by this exhibition, has made up for these setbacks. As an artist, he now belongs to the world.

Adapted from David Blayney Brown, "Worlds in Motion," in *Turner: The Sea and the Alps*, Kunstmuseum Luzern exhibition catalogue (Munich: Hirmer, 2019)

## Notes

- 1. Joseph Farington, Diary, November 16, 1799.
- 2. Ibid.
- 3. Hugh Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, 3rd ed. (London, 1787), 58.
- 4. Dugald Stewart, Philosophical Essays, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh, 1818), 422
- 5. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Fraser's Magazine*, June 1839, 744; cited in *The Oxford Companion to J.M.W. Turner*, edited by Evelyn Joll, Martin Butlin, and Luke Hermann (Oxford, 2001), 332.
- 6. Quoted in John Gage, Colour in Turner: Poetry and Truth (London: Studio Vista, 1969), 213.
- 7. John Ruskin, Modern Painters, 4th ed. (London: Smith, Elder, 1848), 1:376.
- 8. *The Times* (UK), May 6, 1842.
- 9. William Hazlitt, "On Imitation," in *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt* (London: Dent, 1902), 1:76n1. First published in *The Examiner* on February 18, 1816.

## **Images**

- Fig. 1: The Deluge, exhibited 1805 (?). Oil on canvas, 56 1/4 x 92 3/4 in.
- Fig. 2: Venice, the Bridge of Sighs, exhibited 1840. Oil on canvas, 27 x 36 in.
- Fig. 3: Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth, exhibited 1842. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in.
- Fig. 4: Seascape with Storm Coming On, ca. 1840. Oil on canvas, 36 x 47 7/8 in.

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This exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

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