

Joseph Mallord William Turner



1

A British Master

During his long career, Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) painted a wide range of subjects: seascapes, topographical views, historical events, mythology, modern life, and imaginary scenes. Turner's innovative focus on light and the changing effects of atmosphere made his landscapes enormously popular and influential.

Born in London, Turner was the son of a barber who sold the boy's drawings by displaying them in the window of his shop. Turner decided to become an artist at the age of fourteen, and he enrolled in the school of the Royal Academy of Art, the leading art society in Great Britain. Ambitious as well as talented, he was elected the youngest member of the Royal Academy eight years later, at the age of twenty-two. In 1807 he was appointed professor of perspective at the Royal Academy, a position he held for thirty years. His father assisted him in the studio for many years.

Although he lived in London all his life, Turner traveled extensively across Britain and throughout Europe. By closely observing nature and sketching outdoors, he recorded his visual experience of landscapes and his emotional responses to them. His sketchbooks served as a type of memory bank for ideas he used months and even years later. Three hundred of Turner's sketchbooks still exist.



Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Self-Portrait* (detail), c. 1799, Tate, Bequeathed by the Artist, 1856. © Tate, London 2007. Photo credit: Tate, London / Art Resource, NY



2

An Illuminating Scene

Turner visited Tyneside, a town near Newcastle in northeast England, in 1818, but he did not paint *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight* until 1835, almost twenty years later. This scene shows a view of Tyneside's busy harbor. Coal was the essential source of power at the time of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, and the Newcastle region was the mining and industrial center of Britain.

The shallow Tyne River flows through rich coal fields, and flat-bottomed barges, called keels, transported the coal. Keelmen ferried coal from mines up the river to the mouth of the harbor, where they shoveled the coal into specially designed ships known as colliers. These boats were loaded at night so they could sail with the morning tide down the coast to London. Turner depicts keelmen transferring coal in the glow of moonlight and torchlight.

Although Turner's painting describes a scene of contemporary trade and industry, light is the true subject of his composition. Light from the full moon illuminates the cloudy sky and glitters on the calm water. Dark boats and silhouetted figures frame the view and draw attention across the distance and out to sea. Capturing the drama of a night sky over water, Turner makes nature a central focus of this work.

3 Painterly Technique

To convey mood and atmosphere, Turner also experimented with painting techniques. In a rather unconventional way, he applied paint with a palette knife, a tool usually reserved for mixing colors.

Turner painted some areas of *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight* more thickly than others, such as the silvery white moon and the yellow-orange torchlights. In this technique of applying paint thickly to a canvas, called impasto, the artwork often retains the mark of the brush or palette knife. Turner's heavy application and thick paint create a textured surface that allows the raised areas on the canvas to catch light.



Joseph Mallord William Turner,
*Keelmen Heaving in Coals by
Moonlight*, 1835, oil on canvas,
National Gallery of Art, Widener
Collection



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Atmospheric Effects

Turner traveled abroad several times, touring Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, France, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. He filled his sketchbooks on these summertime trips, and he returned home to work on oil paintings during the winter. In his luminous landscapes that combine memory and imagination, Turner describes weather conditions as if he had made his oil paintings on the spot.

Turner's imagination was most captivated by the Italian city of Venice. Its location on the water provided numerous opportunities for the artist to explore light and color. The two paintings here, made nearly a decade apart, illustrate the development of Turner's artistic style.

The earlier work, *Venice: The Dogana and San Giorgio Maggiore*, shows the bustling activity along and in the Grand Canal, as gondolas transport goods and people. Turner features two important sites: the church of San Giorgio Maggiore and the Dogana, or Customs House. The water sparkles with radiant sunlight and reflects the buildings and boats.

In *The Dogana and Santa Maria della Salute, Venice*, Turner's later style is a study of atmospheric effects. Details of architecture, boats, and people are minimized, and the light seems to evaporate the solid forms of the buildings and boats. Few of Turner's contemporaries understood his later works with their poetic haziness, but these paintings greatly influenced future generations of artists.



top: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Venice: The Dogana and San Giorgio Maggiore*, 1834, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection

At the "especial suggestion" of a British textile manufacturer, Turner devised this Venetian cityscape as a symbolic salute to commerce. Gondolas carry cargoes of fine fabrics and exotic spices. On the right is the Dogana, or Customs House, topped by a statue of Fortune. *Keelmen* was painted as a companion piece to this picture. When displayed together, the two paintings present a comparison between great maritime and commercial powers, Venice and Great Britain.



bottom: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Dogana and Santa Maria della Salute, Venice*, 1843, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Given in memory of Governor Alvan T. Fuller by The Fuller Foundation, Inc.

Paint with a palette knife

Challenge yourself to create a landscape or cityscape scene using only a palette knife, a traditional tool usually used for mixing paint. Experiment with it, and find out how many different ways you can use it.

You will need:
Thick acrylic paint or tempera thickened with wallpaper paste
Mounted canvas, foamboard, or white cardboard
A metal or plastic palette knife

Experiment

- Squeeze or spoon one color of paint onto your painting surface. Use the palette knife to spread the paint and create a design.

- Think about how you use the palette knife to move the paint. Spread the paint thin (like buttering toast), then make swirls of thicker paint (like frosting a cupcake). How will you cover areas of the surface to indicate sky, land, and sea?
- Use the tip or edge of the palette knife to scratch lines into layers of paint, that is, draw by removing paint. Use this process to add buildings, trees, people, and other details to your landscape.
- Gradually add one or two more colors, mixing them with the palette knife.

Reflect: How did this technique feel? What were its challenges? What effects did you create that you wouldn't have been able to do with another tool?