



J. M. W. TURNER

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JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER (1775–1851) rose from a modest background to become the leading British artist of his era. Elected the youngest member (at the age of twenty-six) of the Royal Academy of Arts, this deeply ambitious artist worked over the course of six decades to raise the status of landscape painting to an unprecedented level. The art establishment's strict hierarchy of subjects had ranked landscapes below figural scenes taken from history, the Bible, and mythology. To increase respect for landscape as a worthy artistic subject, Turner created paintings rich with literary and classical associations, yet still keenly attuned to life in his contemporary Britain. His bravura brushwork and innovative focus on light and color both dazzled and bewildered his contemporaries. Moreover, his acclaimed watercolors were unparalleled in their technique and advanced the prestige of this once undervalued medium. Many of his most admired paintings in both oil and watercolor are included in this exhibition—the most comprehensive ever presented in the United States.

Early Life and Career

Turner, the son of a barber, was born and raised in Covent Garden in the heart of London, not far from the Royal Academy of Arts. Membership in this society and participation in its annual exhibitions were essential for establishing artistic reputations. Turner, who enrolled in its school at age fourteen, retained a life-long devotion and proclaimed it the “institution to which I owe everything.”

Trained as an architectural draftsman, Turner displayed a talent for watercolor, traditionally considered best suited for topographical views of towns, buildings, and landscape. Expanding on the recent work of English artists who exploited the medium's ability to convey light and atmospheric effects, Turner began to create watercolors that partook of the fashionable Picturesque aesthetic, which embraced qualities of variety, asymmetry, roughness, and decay. In *The Chancel and Crossing of Tintern Abbey, Looking towards the East Window, 1794* (fig. 1), a low vantage point emphasizes the loftiness of the overgrown, ruined vaults and captures the sense of melancholic grandeur that attracted so many visitors to the site.

Turner's determination to join the ranks of academy artists led him to take up oil painting as well. Abandoning the pleasing yet generally quiet mode of the Picturesque, he adopted a more energized pictorial vocabulary that spoke to the era's fascination with the experience of awe, transcendence, or even terror in the face of untamed and boundless nature. The Sublime, as it was known, became the dominating aesthetic of Turner's work and was expressed in the dramatic potential of sun, seas, mountains, and waterfalls, as well as cataclysmic events such as storms, avalanches, and fires. An early example of Turner's portrayal of sublime nature is *The Devil's Bridge, Saint Gotthard, c. 1803–1804* (fig. 2), in which an improbably slender bridge spans a deep gorge in the Swiss Alps; the tiny figures attempting to cross it underscore the vastness and hostility of the setting.

The majesty and danger of the Alpine landscape also inspired one of Turner's most ambitious early paintings, *Snow Storm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps*,



1 *The Chancel and Crossing of Tintern Abbey, Looking towards the East Window*, 1794, pencil and watercolor on paper, Tate, Bequeathed by the Artist, 1856, © Tate, London; 2 *The Devil's Bridge, Saint Gotthard*, c. 1803–1804, oil on canvas, Private Collection, Canada

1812 (fig. 3). The destructive forces of nature parallel Hannibal's own epic struggle: To invade Italy in the third century B.C., the Carthaginian general marched troops and elephants over the Alps. As the squall threatens to overwhelm the Carthaginian army, a vortex of clouds and mist leads the eye to the bright fields of distant Italy. Through learned references such as this episode from ancient Roman history, Turner imbued his landscapes with an intellectual seriousness that proclaimed them heir to the work of old masters he admired.



3 *Snow Storm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps*, 1812, oil on canvas, Tate, Bequeathed by the Artist, 1856, © Tate, London



4 *The Battle of Trafalgar, 21 October 1805, 1823–1824*, oil on canvas, National Maritime Museum, London, Greenwich Hospital Collection

Napoleonic Wars

Between 1793 and 1815 Great Britain was embroiled in war with France, which crowned Napoleon emperor in 1804. One of the decisive battles was fought at Cape Trafalgar off the coast of Spain in 1805, where a British rout of the enemy fleet was marred by the death of Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson, shot aboard ship by a French sniper. Turner, who had made his initial reputation in oils with marine paintings, went to see the return of Nelson's ship to England. The sketches and studies he made—including some aboard the vessel itself—resulted in *The Battle of Trafalgar, 21 October 1805, 1823–1824* (fig. 4). His largest painting and only royal commission, it addresses the patriotic sentiment associated with England's glorious victory. Yet at the same time, the work suggests the devastating toll of warfare through the desperation of men, both English and French, who writhe in the murky water amidst the smoky chaos and confusion.

Travels in Europe

Turner was an inveterate traveler, though he was largely confined to Great Britain during the Napoleonic Wars. Upon its conclusion he crossed the English Channel regularly to visit the Continent, with stops in Belgium, France, Germany, Switzerland, and other countries. In 1819 he arrived in Italy, traversing it from Venice to Naples. An essential destination for artists of all nationalities, Italy was celebrated for the riches of its classical past, the beauty of its physical landscape, and especially the radiance of its Mediterranean sun, which deepened Turner's burgeoning concern for light and color. As he did on all of his trips, Turner filled books with sketches and studies, some done on the spot. In *The Castel dell'Ovo, Naples, with Capri*

in the Distance, 1819 (fig. 5), Turner concentrated on churning clouds and the isolated castle rising on an islet in the Bay of Naples and left the foreground blank. As appealing as such studies are to modern eyes, they represent only a preliminary phase. An example of the type of watercolor that Turner considered finished and suitable for display is the highly crafted *Temple of Poseidon at Sunion, Cape Colonna*, c. 1834 (fig. 6). Turner never visited Greece, but he knew of these ancient ruins through other sketches as well as through the poetry of Lord Byron (1788–1824) and other written descriptions.



5 *The Castel dell'Ovo, Naples, with Capri in the Distance*, 1819, pencil and watercolor on paper, Tate, Bequeathed by the Artist, 1856, © Tate, London



6 *Temple of Poseidon at Sunion, Cape Colonna*, c. 1834, pencil, watercolor, and gouache on paper, Tate, Accepted by Her Majesty's Government in lieu of tax and allocated to the Tate Gallery, 1999, © Tate, London



7 *Venice, from the Porch of Madonna della Salute*, 1835, oil on canvas, Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Cornelius Vanderbilt, 1899

Of all the places Turner visited, it was perhaps Venice that most captivated his imagination. The magical light and shimmering play of reflections in waterways and against marble buildings, together with the decaying grandeur of this once powerful empire, seduced many British travelers, whose patronage sustained a thriving business of painting Venetian views. Turner exhibited many such scenes to great acclaim at the Royal Academy in the 1830s and 1840s, including

Turner and Byron's Venice

Turner's Venetian views often capture the feelings of pleasure and regret experienced by many visitors to the city, which had been in a state of decline for decades. Lord Byron, whose poetry Turner admired and frequently quoted, eloquently expressed such sentiments in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Canto IV, lines 21–27, 1818):

Her palaces are crumbling to the shore,
And music meets not always now the ear:
Those days are gone—but Beauty still is here.
States fall, arts fade—but Nature doth not die.
Nor yet forget how Venice once was dear,
The pleasant place of all festivity,
The revel of the earth, the masque of Italy!

Venice, from the Porch of Madonna della Salute, 1835 (fig. 7). Called “a piece of brilliant obscurity” by one critic, the painting is less a topographical mapping of the Grand Canal than a lyrical meditation on atmospheric effects and marine pageantry.

The Modern Master

In the 1820s and 1830s, while keeping up an intense work pace, Turner explored his profound interest in literature, history, and contemporary events in grand paintings that summoned all the powers of his artistic imagination. *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus—Homer’s Odyssey*, 1829 (fig. 8)—called “the central picture in Turner’s career” by critic John Ruskin (1819–1900)—takes its subject from Homer’s epic account of the Greek hero’s wanderings. Turner’s choice of illustrating the encounter between Ulysses and the Cyclops who held him prisoner had little pictorial precedent. Here, having blinded the one-eyed creature and escaped his dark cave, Ulysses sails with his men toward the lustrous rays of dawn. As in many of Turner’s works, the sun in all of its magnificence becomes as much the painting’s subject as the story depicted. The painting’s startling light and color—especially the piercing yellow that ultimately dominated his palette—caused much consternation. One unnamed reviewer protested: “Although the Grecian hero has just put out the eye of the furious Cyclops, there is really no reason why Mr. Turner should put out both the eyes of us, harmless critics.”

For Turner, not only the classical past but also the modern world provided subjects worthy of painting. In 1834 the artist witnessed a devastating fire that demolished the eleventh-century parliament buildings in London; the loss to the nation in terms of symbolic and historic significance was tremendous. After recording the scene in sketches drawn on the spot and in a series of watercolor



8 *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus—Homer’s Odyssey*, 1829, oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London, Turner Bequest, 1856



9 *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, 16th October, 1834*, 1835, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art, The John Howard McFadden Collection, 1928

studies, he created two canvases of the conflagration that combine the basic elements of fire, water, and air in a sublime spectacle of epic proportion. In *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, 16th October, 1834*, from 1835 (fig. 9), energetic brushstrokes and a vibrant combination of yellows, oranges, and reds convey the sense of molten heat.

Turner submitted the canvas in an unfinished state to the British Institution for its annual show in 1835. On the so-called Varnishing Day (when artists were allowed to touch up their works before the exhibition opened), he worked continuously for hours to complete it, never once pausing to contemplate what he had done or intended to do, while astounded colleagues watched his performance. He used such unconventional techniques as applying paint with a palette knife meant for mixing pigments. When finished, he sidled off without a second glance at the canvas, causing one colleague to comment: “That’s masterly...he *knows* it is done, and he is off.”

The Industrial Revolution also provided pictorial material for Turner. In *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight*, 1835 (fig. 10), he recast traditional marine painting as a heroic scene of contemporary trade and industry. Under the eerie bright glow of the thickly painted moon, laborers work through the night to transfer loads of coal from small boats called keels to larger ships on the Tyne River in Newcastle, the center of British coal production. Here both nature and modern technology act as purveyors of the Sublime. To the right, in a gripping scene that competes with the drama of the nighttime sky, fiery torches not only illuminate the toiling

Turner's Technique

Turner could be quite guarded about his painting methods and, except on Varnishing Days, rarely allowed others to watch him work. In 1818, however, he allowed a young companion to sit by his side while he created a watercolor study of a large warship. An account of the session was recorded later by a relative: “He began by pouring wet paint onto the paper till it was saturated, he tore, he scratched, he scrubbed at it in a kind of frenzy and the whole thing was chaos—but gradually and as if by magic the lovely ship, with all its exquisite minutia, came into being and by luncheon time the drawing was taken down in triumph.” (Edith Mary Fawkes, typescript in National Gallery, London)

keelmen, but also pierce through blackened smoke coming from factories on the shore. *Keelmen* was painted as a companion piece to a picture of Venice, which once had been—as Britain then was—a great maritime and commercial power. It thus may have served as a cautionary tale on the rise and fall of empires, a theme the artist returned to several times in his career.

Late Visionary Works

At the twilight of Turner's life, his increasingly indistinct handling and ever bolder experimentations in color led to accusations of excessiveness and even faulty vision. The silken, blurred reflections in the water of *Peace—Burial at Sea*, 1842 (fig. 11), for instance, elicited the response that the painting would read just as well upside down. One of a number of square canvases Turner worked on in



10 *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight*, 1835, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection



11 *Peace—Burial at Sea*, 1842, oil on canvas, Tate, Bequeathed by the Artist, 1856, © Tate, London

the 1840s, the work is a tribute to his colleague, Scottish painter David Wilkie (1785–1841), who had been buried at sea off the coast of Gibraltar the previous year. Its funereal palette signals Turner's heightened interest in a symbolic use of color. When questioned on the ship's dark sails, Turner replied, "I only wish I had any colour to make them blacker."

Still traveling regularly in his last decade, Turner visited Switzerland four times from 1841 to 1844, creating hundreds of landscape studies that he intended to use to solicit profitable commissions for finished watercolors. These works act as a visually stunning culmination of his achievements in the medium that launched his career. A poetic haziness in *Lake of Zug: Early Morning*, 1843 (fig. 12), shrouds much of the topographical detail and foreground incident; its brilliant blue center epitomizes Turner's expressive manipulation of tonal areas in this late period.

When Turner died in 1851, he left a large cache of paintings and drawings in his studio, including *Norham Castle, Sunrise*, c. 1845 (fig. 13), a depiction of medieval ruins in England that had intrigued the artist repeatedly since the late 1790s. *Norham Castle* is unfinished, but the near absolute dissolution of forms that charac-



12 *Lake of Zug: Early Morning*, 1843, watercolor on paper, Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Marquand Fund, 1959

terizes it also marks many of Turner's finished paintings, in which the application of oil, as one observer complained, approaches the fluid nature of watercolor.

Turner has continued to inspire generations of artists, including impressionists such as Monet who were struck by the luminosity of his paintings. Over the decades he has come to be celebrated as a visionary artist who, alone among his peers, forged a particularly modern path even while he participated fully in the artistic traditions of those who preceded him.



13 *Norham Castle, Sunrise*, c. 1845, oil on canvas, Tate, Bequeathed by the Artist, 1856, © Tate, London

Film

J.M.W. Turner

October 1–January 6
West Building Project Room
Daily, 10:00 am–5:00 pm,
with minor exceptions

East Building Auditorium
Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday,
noon, with minor exceptions

See Calendar of Events and
fall Film Calendar for further
scheduling details.

Narrated by Jeremy Irons
and produced by the National
Gallery, this thirty-minute
overview of Turner's career
and influences was shot on
location in Wales, Switzerland,
and other places that Turner
visited.

This film is made possible by
the HRH Foundation.

*J.M.W. Turner and
Contemporary Cinema*

January 5, 2:00 pm
J.M.W. Turner is said to have
inspired such filmmakers as
Stan Brakhage, Jordan Belson,
and Pawel Pawlikowski. A
variety of experimental shorts
and narrative features explores
the artist's influences.

Audio Guide

An audio tour is available at
the entrance to the exhibition
for \$5; narrated by Gallery
Director Earl A. Powell III,
with commentary by exhibi-
tion curators Ian Warrell
(Tate Britain) and Franklin
Kelly (National Gallery of
Art). To reserve audio tours for
groups, call 202.842.6592.

On the Web

The Gallery's Web site features
highlights from the exhibition
and links to exhibition-related
activities at [http://www.nga.gov/
exhibitions/turnerinfo.shtm](http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/turnerinfo.shtm)

Concerts

Open to the public, free of
charge; first come, first seated,
beginning one-half hour
before the concert

October 14, 6:30 pm
West Building,
West Garden Court
Voices of London; music by
Attwood, Crotch, Webbe,
and other eighteenth- and
nineteenth-century English
composers

October 21, 6:30 pm
West Building Lecture Hall
Amanda Pitt, soprano, and
David Owen Norris, pianist;
music by Braham, Debussy,
Haydn, and Vaughn Williams

November 4, 6:30 pm
West Building,
West Garden Court
Alexandria Symphony Orches-
tra, Kim Allen Kluge, music
director; music by Beethoven
and Brahms

Lectures

East Building Auditorium
Sundays, 2:00 pm

October 7
"Splendid Combinations of Color":
Turner's Oils
Franklin Kelly, senior curator
of American and British paint-
ings, National Gallery of Art

"No Settled Process":
Turner's Watercolors
Ian Warrell, curator of
eighteenth- and nineteenth-
century British art, Tate
Britain

October 28
"Enshrined in Mystery, and the Object
of Profound Speculation":
The Double Life of J.M.W. Turner
Gillian Forrester, associate
curator of prints and drawings,
Yale Center for British Art

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied
by a fully illustrated, 320-page
catalogue, *J.M.W. Turner*, edited
by Ian Warrell (210 color
images, 50 black-and-white
images). Published by Tate
Publishing. Softcover, \$35;
Hardcover, \$55.

General Information

Hours: Monday–Saturday,
10:00 am–5:00 pm, Sunday,
11:00 am–6:00 pm. Gallery
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except as noted.

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A large-print version of this
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Cover
Detail of fig. 9