

# A Turner Biography



*From: 'Turner' by Eric Shanes*

Joseph Mallord William Turner was born in Maiden Lane, Covent Garden, London, sometime in late April or early May 1775 (although the artist himself liked to claim that he was born on 23rd April, St George's Day and coincidentally Shakespeare's birthday). His father was a wig-maker who had taken to cutting hair after wigs began to go out of fashion in the 1770's. We know little about Turner's mother other than she was mentally unbalanced, and that her instability was exacerbated by the fatal illness of Turner's younger sister, who died in 1786. Because of the stresses put upon the family by these illnesses, in 1785 Turner was sent to stay with an uncle in Brentford, a small market town to the west of London. It was here that he first went to school. By the following year he was attending school in Margate, a small holiday resort on the Thames estuary to the east of London. Some drawings from those early years have survived and they are remarkably precocious, especially in their grasp of the rudiments of perspective. By the late 1780's Turner was back in London, his formal schooling apparently completed. Around this time he also began working under various architects or architectural topographers, including Thomas Malton, Jr, whose influence on his work is discernable.

After spending a term as a probationer, on 11 December 1789 Turner was admitted to the Royal Academy Schools, then the only art school in England; the President of the Royal Academy, Sir Joshua Reynolds, chaired the panel that admitted him. At this time painting was not taught in the R.A. Schools (it only appeared on the curriculum in 1816) and students merely learned drawing, at first from plaster casts of antique statuary and then, if deemed good enough - which Turner quickly was - from the nude. Amongst the Visitors or teachers in the life class were History painters such as James Barry and Henry Fuseli whose lofty artistic aspirations would soon rub off on the young Turner.

Naturally, as Turner lived in the days before student grants, he had to earn his keep from the very outset of his career. In 1790 he exhibited at the Royal Academy Exhibition for the first time, and with the exception of a few years he went on annually participating in those shows until 1850. His unusual talents were soon noticed and in 1793 the seventeen-year-old painter was awarded the 'Great Silver Pallet' for landscape drawing by the Royal Society of Arts. By now Turner was selling works easily, and he supplemented his income throughout the 1790's by giving private lessons. Between 1794 and 1797 he also coloured sketches and prints made by others, on winter evenings meeting with various artists (including another leading young watercolourist, Thomas Girtin) at the home of Dr Thomas Monro, the consultant physician to King George III and the principal doctor at the mental hospital where Turner's mother was later to be treated and where she subsequently died. Monro had established an unofficial artistic 'academy' in his house in Adelphi Terrace overlooking the Thames, and he paid Turner the sum of three shillings and sixpence per evening and a supper of oysters to tint copies made in outline by Girtin from works by a number of artists, including Edward Dayes, Thomas Hearne, Canaletto and John Robert Cozens, who at the time was a mental patient under Dr Monro's care. Naturally,

Turner absorbed the influence of all these painters, including Girtin, and the breadth of Cozen's landscapes particularly impressed him.

Other important artistic influences upon Turner during the 1790's were Thomas Gainsborough, Michael Angelo Rooker, Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, Henry Fuseli and Richard Wilson. Gainsborough's Dutch-inspired landscapes led Turner to a liking for those selfsame types of landscape. Rooker was a fine water-colourist whose control of tone had a long-term influence upon Turner's development as a tonalist and colourist, just as the dramatic role played by his staffage influenced the way that Turner elaborated the human dimensions of the scenes he represented. De Loutherbourg especially influenced the way that Turner painted his figures, varying their style according to the type of image in which they appeared, while Fuseli's heroic style of representing the human form may occasionally be detected in Turner's works. And an appreciation of the pictures of Richard Wilson, who had grafted an Italianate style onto British scenery, soon led Turner to a full appreciation of Claude Gellée (known as Claude Lorrain) who had heavily influenced Wilson and about whom we shall have more to say below. Yet from Turner's mid-teens onwards, one overriding influence came to shape his thinking about his art, and not surprisingly it derived from within the Royal Academy itself, albeit indirectly. This was the influence of Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Turner had attended the last of Reynolds's lectures or discourses in 1790, and through reading the rest of them he seems to have assimilated all of Reynolds's lessons concerning the idealizing aspirations for art that were so eloquently set forth in those fifteen talks. To understand Turner's development, it is vital to perceive it in the context of Reynolds's teachings.

In his discourses Reynolds set out a comprehensive educational programme for aspiring artists which grew out of the idealizing tradition of academic art as it had evolved since the Italian Renaissance. This was through the doctrine of 'poetic painting', which held that painting is a humanistic discipline akin to poetry, and that it should concern itself not with the arbitrariness of experience but with universals of behaviour and form. In order to express such fundamentals, painters should attempt to apprehend 'the qualities and causes of things', as well as to synthesize forms so as to make them approximate to 'imagined species' of archetypal form or 'Ideal beauties' (the three foregoing quotations are from Turner himself). To these respective and related ends, after the late 1790's Turner frequently expressed himself through subject matter drawn from literature and poetry; he filled many of his pictures with all kinds of 'poetic' devices such as visual metaphors or allegories, allusions, puns and similies. Gradually he came to express the underlying processes of nature to a matchless degree (leading the critic John Ruskin to devote vast tracts of his book on Turner entitled 'Modern Painters' to exploring the painter's grasp of the 'truths' of architecture, geology, the sea, the sky and the other components of a landscape); and from fairly early on in his career Turner came to believe that forms enjoy a metaphysical, external

and universal existence. From such an apprehension it was easy for the painter to take the short step to believing (as he evidently did shortly before he died) that 'The Sun is God', while because he thought that way we are forced to accept that the near-abstractions of late Turner are no mere painterly abstractions, despite many recent claims to the contrary. Instead, they clearly resulted from attempts to represent the metaphysical power embodied in light, if not even the divinity itself.

Reynolds thought landscape painting to be a fairly simple-minded genre because it never said much about the human condition, which for him was the principle subject of high art. Equally, he accorded landscape painting a rather low place in his artistic scheme of things quite simply because landscapists were mainly beholden to chance: if they visited a place when, say, it happened to be raining, then that was how they would be forced to represent it. Instead, Reynolds recommended the practice of landscapists like Claude Lorrain, who had synthesized into fictive and ideal scenes the most attractive features of several places as viewed in the best weather and lighting conditions, thus transcending the arbitrary. Although Turner gave more weight to representing the individual places than Reynolds had allowed for, in all other respects he adopted Reynolds's synthesizing practice, for as he was to state around 1810: 'To select, combine and concentrate that which is beautiful in nature and admirable in art is as much the business of the landscape painter in his line as in the other departments of art.'

To such an end Turner would often freely alter or omit anything in a particular scene that did not accord with his imaginative demands - so that sometimes his landscapes bore little resemblance to the actuality of a place - while unusual or particularly lovely weather effects that had been witnessed in one place could be transposed into representations of others. And always Turner employed to the full his unusual powers of mental association to link things. He made clear his belief in the supremacy of the imagination in a paraphrase of Reynolds that stands at the very core of his artistic thinking:

'...it is necessary to mark the greater from the lesser truth: namely the larger and more liberal idea of nature from the comparatively narrow and confined; namely that which addresses itself to the imagination from that which is solely addressed to the eye.'

Yet this does not mean that Turner neglected the eye. He was an inveterate sketcher, and there are over 300 sketchbooks in the Turner Bequest, incorporating over 10,000 individual sketches. Often he would sketch a place even if he had sketched it several times before, and by doing so he not only mastered the appearances of things but also honed his unusually retentive memory, which was an important tool for the idealizing artist, inasmuch as memory sifts the essential from the unimportant. Turner's principal method of studying appearances and still allowing himself room for imaginative manoeuvre

was to sketch a view in outline, omitting any effects of weather, light or even human figures and other animal inhabitants (if needed, these ancillaries would be studied separately) and then to return to the sketch at a later date, supplying the ancillaries mainly from memory and/or the imagination. Turner kept all his sketchbooks as a reference library, and sometimes he would return to them as much as forty years later in order to obtain factual information for an image. This practice began in the early 1790's, and it is easy to perceive how it grew directly from the idealizing admonitions of Reynolds.

As well as ideal 'imitation' - the creation of perfected notions of form, which by definition included the expression of the 'qualities and causes' of things - Reynolds had also advocated artistic imitation, the absorption of the qualities of the finest masters of past art through imitating them stylistically. Here too Turner followed Reynolds assiduously. Throughout his life he emulated the pictorial formulations of a vast range of past (and present) masters, from Titian, Raphael and Salvator Rosa in the Italian school, to Claude, Nicholas Poussin and Watteau in the French school, to Rembrandt, Cuyp, van de Velde and Backhuizen in the Dutch school, to any number of his contemporaries in England. Such emulation was not a sign of any imaginative deficiency in Turner, nor was it a matter of somebody who supposedly had an inferiority complex pitting himself against his betters, as has often been suggested. Turner was merely following Reynolds's teachings and example, and that is a mark of his creative vision that whomsoever he emulated, the results always ended up looking thoroughly Turnerian (even if they did fall short of their models in terms of quality).

In 1791 Turner made the first of his great many sketching tours; during the 1790's alone he ranged over the south of England, the Midlands, the north of England and the Lake District, as well as making five tours of Wales in search of the kind of scenery that had been pictorialized by Richard Wilson. On each tour he would fill a number of sketchbooks with dry topographical studies and the occasional watercolour, from which he would work up elaborate paintings and watercolours when back in London.

A surviving memoir of Turner on his sketching tour of Wales and the West Country in 1798 makes his priorities very clear:

'I recollect Turner as a plain uninteresting youth both in manners and appearance, he was very careless and slovenly in his dress, not particular what was the colour of his coat or clothes, and was anything but a nice looking young man...He would talk of nothing but his drawings, and of the places to which he should go for sketching. He seemed an uneducated youth, desirous of nothing but improvement in his art...'

This view of the young painter seems to have been a general one, for it was echoed by the topographical artist Edward Dayes whose perception of Turner was published in 1805:

'The man must be loved for his works; for his person is not striking nor his conversation brilliant.'

Although Turner's intellect was enormous, his patchy education and wholehearted commitment to his art meant he cut a poor figure socially, and although in time he would gain in social confidence, his remarkable emotional sensitivity was the cause of a corresponding vulnerability (which may have derived from unhappy childhood experiences brought about by the instability of his mother), and these meant that he always maintained his emotional defences until he felt that he could fully trust people not to hurt him. When he did trust them, however - and he always trusted the company of children - a completely different side of his personality could emerge. This can be seen in another memoir of Turner as a young man, by his lifelong friend Clara Wells: 'Of all the light-hearted, merry creatures I ever knew, Turner was the most so; and the laughter and fun that abounded when he was an intimate in our cottage was inconceivable, particularly with the juvenile members of the family. I remember coming in one day after a walk, and when the servant opened the door the uproar was so great that I asked the servant what was the matter. 'Oh, only the young ladies (my young sisters) playing with the young gentleman (Turner), Ma'am.' When I went into the sitting room, he was seated on the ground, and the children were winding his ridiculously long cravat round his neck; he said, 'See here, Clara, what these children are about!'.'

Turner's 'home from home' in the cottage of Clara Wells's father, William Wells, at Knockholt in Kent, was the first of several that he enjoyed throughout his life, and by the end of the 1790's, as the insanity of his mother intensified, it must have seemed a vital means of escape to him. As soon as he could afford it he moved from the parental abode in Maiden Lane, in late 1799 obtaining rooms at 64 Harley Street in a house that eventually he would take over completely.

From the mid-1790's onwards Turner's idealism was already finding expression in his representation of architecture, as is demonstrated by the 1794 watercolour of 'St Anselm's Chapel, Canterbury'. In works like this we can detect a total comprehension of the underlying dynamics of man-made structures, over and above a grasp of their surface appearances. Within a short time such apprehensions would extend to the depiction of geological structures, and Turner saw a profound linkage between man-made architecture and natural architecture, not only believing that the principles of the one are based upon the laws of the other, but even that a universal, metaphysical geometry underlies both. This belief was fuelled from the mid-1790's onwards by a close reading of poetry, most particularly the verse of Mark Akenside, whose long poem 'The Pleasures

of the Imagination' states a Platonic idealism with which Turner completely identified, with momentous results for his art.



'Fishermen at Sea', 1796  
© Tate Britain

From the mid-1790's onwards we can equally detect Turner's total apprehension of the fundamentals of hydrodynamics. 'Fishermen at Sea' of 1796 demonstrates how intently the painter had already studied wave formation, reflectivity and the underlying motion of the sea. From this time onwards his depiction of the sea would become ever more masterly, soon achieving a mimetic and expressive power that is unrivalled in the history of marine painting. There have been and are many marine painters who have gone beyond Turner in the degree of photographic realism they have brought to the depiction of the sea, but none of them has come within miles - nautical miles, naturally - of his expression of the behaviour of water. By 1801, when Turner exhibited 'The Bridgewater Seapiece', his grasp of such dynamics was complete, and by the time also the painter had simultaneously begun to master the ideality of clouds, making apparent the fundamental dynamics of meteorological form, a comprehension that he fully attained by the mid-1800's. Only his trees remained somewhat mannered during the 1800's, but between 1809 and 1813 Turner gradually discovered how to impart his understanding of the 'qualities and causes' of trees, something he achieved by replacing a rather old-fashioned mannerism in his depictions of boughs and foliage with a greater sinuousness of line and an increased structural complexity. By 1815 that transformation was completed, and during the next two

decades, in works like 'Mortlake Terrace' of 1826, Turner's trees became perhaps the loveliest and most expressive arboreal forms anywhere in art. The 1796 'Fishermen at Sea' was also Turner's first exhibited oil painting, and demonstrated his natural proficiency in the medium. By 1796, of course, he had already mastered watercolour, and indeed, there was henceforth nothing that he could not attain in such a drawing technique, being capable of investing it with the same powers of expression and representation that are usually to be found only in oil paint. Similarly, in his oil paintings the artist increasingly attained the kind of brilliance and luminosity that are more usually to be seen only in watercolour.



Richmond Hill & Bridge, with a Pic-nic Party (c. 1825-9)  
© British Museum, London

Primarily Turner chose to employ watercolour rather than oil paint because of the cultural roles of the two media rather than because there was much he could achieve in one of them and not the other. Watercolour was fast to work with but intimate in response and public appeal; oil paint was slower-drying but more highly regarded culturally and more publicly assertive through its capacity for deployment over much larger surfaces. Ultimately, however, Turner enjoyed an equal sureness in both media, and initially that certainty was acquired from the practice of watercolour in the 1790's when he spent so many hours tinting and colouring architectural elevations and views. These provided Turner not only with a sense of the precise tonal values of things but also with an immensely firm control over both subtle and broad tonal washes. In time, the painter's control of tone would have the most profound effect upon his abilities as a colourist, allowing him to achieve a brilliance of colour without necessarily having to use bright colours at all. Moreover, Turner never rested on his laurels as far as his painting technique was concerned. In order to extend himself, often he would set himself technical challenges, such as choosing for a set of watercolours an

unfamiliar kind of support like blue or grey paper. In some of his late works Turner's trust in new materials was misplaced, with disastrous results, but in the main his works are technically sound, and when he was especially inspired, as with 'The Fighting Temeraire' of 1839, he would go to great lengths to paint the work as carefully as possible.

In 1798 a change in the rules governing the Royal Academy Exhibitions allowed artists to include quotations from poetry alongside the titles of their works in the exhibition catalogues. Turner immediately embarked upon a public examination of the interdependent roles of painting and poetry, how each discipline could support the other and where their individual powers resided. In 1798 he appended poetic quotations (including verses by John Milton and James Thompson that identify the sun with God) to the titles of five works, in some to test the ways that painting can realize and/or heighten the imagery of poetry, in others to explore the way that poetic imagery can extend the associations of what we see, and thus move us into realms of imaginative response that we cannot reach unaided. In 1799 Turner took the latter process a stage further, employing alongside the titles of five works poetry that is particularly rich in metaphors in order similarly to extend the images imaginatively into areas that pictorialism cannot explore without verbal help. And in 1800, with two views of Welsh Castles, Turner reversed the foregoing procedure by quoting only descriptive poetry that is devoid of metaphors, and instead incorporated the metaphors into the images themselves, thus completing the process of integrating painting and poetry whilst greatly expanding the ability of visual images to convey meanings. Thereafter, Turner did not again quote poetry in connection with the titles of his works in the exhibition catalogues for another four years, although when he did so it was to state the internal responses of the people he portrayed, something that again painting cannot fully express unaided by words. This exploration of the respective powers of painting and poetry was to be of inestimable value to Turner, for he continued to benefit from his discoveries throughout the rest of his career.

Turner's investigation of the mechanisms by which pictorial meanings are communicated was equally helped by the close study he made around 1799 of the imagery of Claude Lorrain. He may have been led to undertake such a detailed analysis through being particularly struck by two paintings by Claude. One was 'Landscape with the Father of Psyche sacrificing at the Milesian Temple of Apollo' which had just been brought to Britain from Italy, and in front of which Turner was recorded as being:

'both pleased and unhappy while He viewed it, - it seemed to be beyond the power of imitation'.

The other picture was a seaport scene that belonged to the wealthy London collection John Julius Angerstein. Turner responded to this painting in a rather dramatic (and wholly characteristic) fashion:

When Turner was very young he went to see Angerstein's pictures. Angerstein came into the room while the young painter was looking at the *Sea Port* by Claude, and spoke to him. Turner was awkward, agitated, and burst into tears. Mr Angerstein enquired the cause and pressed for an answer, when Turner said passionately, 'Because I shall never be able to paint anything like that picture.'

Turner's close study of Claude around 1799 was undertaken not only by looking carefully at paintings like these, but also by scrutinizing two books of prints entitled '*Liber Veritatis*' ('Book of Truth'), a set of 200 mezzotints engraved by Richard Earlom after drawings made by Claude upon the completion of each of his paintings. Claude greatly utilized visual metaphor, whereby something we see stands for something unseen, and there can be no doubt that Turner recognized some of his metaphors, for in time he emulated them very closely indeed. Turner's responsiveness to Claude - whose influence was perhaps the greatest of all the many painterly influences he assimilated - had a very profound effect upon his expression of meaning, just as it determined the development of his mature style and imagery.



Throughout the 1790's Turner had been obtaining better and better prices for his works as demand increased; his popularity may be gauged from the fact that by July 1799 he had orders for no less than sixty watercolours awaiting fulfilment. And his growing status in the market place was matched by his growing esteem within the Royal Academy, a recognition that was made official on 4th November 1799 when he was elected an Associate Royal Academician. This was a necessary preliminary to becoming a full Academician, and Turner would not have long to wait before receiving the higher honour.

At the Royal Academy in 1801 he made a major contribution towards such an elevation (to full RA) when he exhibited his greatest seascape to date, 'Dutch Boats in a gale: fishermen endeavouring to put their fish on board', also known as 'The Bridgewater Seapiece' after the Duke of Bridgewater who had commissioned it. The picture caused a sensation, and this boost to Turner's reputation importantly contributed to his being elected a full Royal Academician on 12 February 1802 at the age of just twenty-six. Becoming an Academician granted Turner election to a very exclusive club indeed, one with the best of cultural and economic advantages, that of having a place in which automatically to display his works publicly every year without having to submit them to a selection committee.

In the summer of 1801 Turner made an extensive tour of Scotland, and this was the most ambitious trip he had undertaken so far. After his return he showed his Scottish drawings to his fellow landscapist, the painter and diarist Joseph Farington, R.A., who noted early in 1802 that:

'Turner thinks Scotland a more picturesque country to study than Wales, the lines of the mountains are finer and the rock of larger masses'.

But later in the same year Turner had the opportunity to study mountains that greatly dwarfed those of Scotland. In March 1802 a peace was signed between Britain and France, and this interruption of the war between the two nations that had already lasted for almost nine years allowed Turner to go abroad for the first time. He knew that to see truly majestic scenery in Europe you must go to the Swiss Alps, and that was where he made for in the summer of 1802, exploring some of the western cantons and the northern reaches of the Val d'Aosta before making his way up to Schaffhausen on the Rhine and thence to Basel and Paris where he stopped off to see the Louvre. In Paris Turner met Farington, and told him that in Switzerland he had suffered:

'much fatigue from walking, and often experienced bad food & lodgings. The weather was very fine. He saw very fine Thunder Storms among the mountains.'

In the Louvre Turner closely scrutinized works by Poussin, Titian and others, although unfortunately the numerous Claudes in the collection do not seem to have been on view.

On his return Turner elaborated his responses to Swiss scenery, and during the following winter he also produced an impressive painting of the view from Calais Pier looking across the English Channel, a work in which he may have been making a subtle anti-French statement. Such a secondary purpose was perhaps natural, given that while Turner was busy on the picture all the talk in Britain was of the resumption of hostilities with France.

By this time Turner had become a father. Although he always refused to marry, he is known to have sired two daughters, Eveline and Georgiana, and it has generally been assumed that their mother was a Mrs Sarah Danby, the widow of London composer of glees and catches, John Danby, who had died in 1798. However, recent research has thrown severe doubt on this assumption, and it seems much more likely that the mother of Turner's daughters was Sara's niece, Hannah Danby, who is known to have served Turner as the housekeeper of one of his London residences from the 1820's onwards and to whom the painter left a substantial legacy in his will. Nothing is known of Hannah Danby's personality or her looks as a young woman, but later in life she seems to have been afflicted with a skin disease, so that she appeared rather repulsive.

Turner was increasingly busy during the 1800's. In 1803 he began to construct a gallery for displaying his works in his house in Harley Street, apparently because the contentious atmosphere in the Royal Academy wearied him, although he went on steadily exhibiting there. The first show in Turner's Gallery opened in April 1804, with as many as thirty works on display. Further annual exhibitions were held there regularly until 1810, and then more spasmodically over the following decade.

By the late 1800's Turner was also residing for parts of the year outside London proper, first at Sion Ferry House in Isleworth, west of London, and then, after 1806, nearby at Hammersmith, until 1811 when he began to build a small villa called Solus Lodge (which he later renames Sandycombe Lodge) in Twickenham, also to the west of London. He designed this latter house himself and it is still standing, although it has been somewhat altered over the years. During this decade Turner did little touring, being extremely busy producing works for his own gallery and for the Academy, as well as innumerable watercolours on commission. His clientele continued to swell, and included some of the leading collectors of the day such as John Leicester (later Lord de Tabley) and Walter Fawkes. The latter was a bluff, no-nonsense and very liberal-minded Yorkshireman whose home, Farnley Hall, near Leeds, Turner began visiting around 1808. Fawkes was perhaps the closest to Turner of all his patrons, and the painter went on regularly visiting Farnley until the mid-1820's, becoming very much a part of the Fawkes family.

In 1806 Turner embarked upon a major set of engravings, the preliminary etchings for which he drew himself. This was the 'Liber Studiorum' ('Book of Studies') which was not only intentionally similar in title to the Claude-Earlom 'Liber Veritatis', but which was made in the identical medium of mezzotint. Originally there were to have been 100 prints in the 'Liber Studiorum' but by 1819 only 71 of them had been published and the project petered out, although drawings of proofs or the remaining designs have survived. Turner was clearly inspired by his own close study of the Claude-Earlom model to offer his 'Liber Studiorum' as a similar inspiration to others. To further that didactic aim he broke its subjects down into categories, namely Architectural, Marine, Mountainous,

Historical, Pastoral and Elevated Pastoral, the last being employed to differentiate the noble and somewhat mythical type of pastoralism found in the works of Claude and Poussin from the ruddy, farmyard type found in the Lowlands painting or in reality.

As well as being drawn to Ideal art during these years Turner also made clear his identification with other aesthetic concepts, as well as with less exalted types of imagery. To take the first, around 1800 the painter was clearly attracted to the notion of the Sublime, that power of spatial enormity in reality or amplification through art which produced sensations of grandeur, mystery and even horror through the reduction of the spectator to physical insignificance. At the turn of the new century Turner's identification with sublimity led him to paint a number of works in an upright format, scenes in which the spectator is located at a low viewpoint, so that we are over-whelmed by the scale and grandeur of the settings they project, as well as by the mysterious darkness that fills many of them. Perhaps the greatest picture Turner painted in the Sublime mode during these years was 'Dolbadern Castle' of 1800, although here the painter put the Sublime at the disposal of the poetic by altering the topography of the scene so as to increase our sense of physical enclosure and thus force us to share the experience of the prisoner who is the protagonist of the work. Such a direction of the physical qualities of a landscape to extending human experience clearly indicates Turner's humanistic priorities as a result of his wholehearted identification with the theory of poetic painting. He never lost his feeling for grandeur, mystery and fear-inducing powers of external nature but increasingly, as his palette lightened in the decade after 1800 and his desire to elaborate his academic idealism increased, Turner eschewed upright frames and pictorial darkness as economical ways to create mystery. Instead he imparted grandeur and mysteriousness by means of adjustments of internal scale, light tones, bright colours and vivacious forms, something far more difficult to bring off.

Turner consciously evolved an anti-ideal figuration. For Reynolds, as well as for a host of other academic theorists, the supreme purpose of poetic painting was to exalt the human form, to project an ideal beauty of humanity. But Turner rejected that central tenet of the theory of poetic painting. Even by 1801, when he completed 'The Bridgewater Seapiece', he had drawn upon the example of Lowlands painting for the formation of his figures, especially modelling them upon those by David Teniers the younger who had a large following in Britain for the wittiness of his intentionally boorish people. In impressive marine paintings such as 'The Bridgewater Seapiece', 'Calais Pier' of 1803 and 'The Shipwreck' of 1805, Turner intentionally aped the look of Tenier's figures in order to state the central moral contrast of his art as far as humanity was concerned: the world around us is immense, beautiful or ferocious, and eternally renewing itself, whereas man is tiny and of very limited lifespan and powers. For Turner out hubris in pitting ourselves against external nature was clearly a comic as well as a cosmic matter, and to point up that comicality he made his figures look as guache, crude and child-like, or even doll-like as possible, as Teniers and other

painters influenced by the Flemish artists (such as de Loutherbourg) had done, thus enforcing the maximum contrast between humanity and nature beyond us. In this respect Turner consciously turned his back on the major aspect of the academic idealism propounded by Reynolds, the formation of beautiful human archetypes. Instead Turner created an inverted, anti-heroic and 'low' archetype to stand for humanity, but one that nonetheless represented something archetypal in mankind in an age in which the majority of people lived tragically short and brutalized lives.

At the very end of 1807 Turner took yet another step that was to have enormously beneficial results for his art: he accepted the position of Royal Academy Professor of Perspective. The post had been vacant for some years, and between 1807 and 1811 (when he delivered his first lecture) the painter embarked upon a rigorous study programme, reading or re-reading over 70 books on art and aesthetics. Turner went on delivering the lectures spasmodically until 1828 (although he did not resign the position until 1838), and their texts are now in the British Library. They make it clear that Turner did not limit himself to an analysis of perspective. Instead he surveyed his art in its entirety, making his identification with the academic theory of poetic painting and its intrinsic idealism apparent in the process but equally mystifying his audiences, who wanted to learn something less exalted, namely the basics of perspective itself.



It is easy to detect a visual sharpening of Turner's idealism in the years after 1811, and clearly the lectures contributed greatly to that heightened sensibility.

On such augmentation took place in Turner's watercolours and stemmed jointly from yet another discovery that the artist had made in 1811, namely the expressive power of line engraving (whereby an image is etched and cut into a metal plate, and reproduces the design solely through varying intensities of line). Turner had made watercolours to be copied as line engravings since the early 1790's but in 1811 he was astounded by the degree of tonal beauty and expressiveness attained by one of his engravers, John Pye, in the engraving 'Pope's Villa at Twickenham' and this made him receptive to having more of his works reproduced in this way. Shortly afterwards he welcomed the proposal that he should make a large set of watercolours of the scenery of the southern coast of England for subsequent line-engraving. The 'Southern Coast' project was only completed in the mid-1820's but it was instrumental in leading Turner to express more consistently the essentials of place, those underlying social, cultural, historical and economic factors that had determined their existence or which still governed life there. In time Turner would create several hundreds of watercolours for similar schemes, in a great many of them displaying the utmost ingenuity in subtly elaborating the truths of place.

In 1812 Turner exhibited an unusually important picture at the Royal Academy, 'Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army crossing the Alps'. Such a subject had intrigued the painter since the late 1790's when he had copied a portrayal by J.R.Cozens of Hannibal looking down on Italy, a work that is unfortunately now lost. Yet the actual inspiration for a painting on that subject only came to Turner late in the summer of 1810 when he stayed at Farnley Hall. One day he called Fawkes's son, Hawksworth Fawkes, over to the doorway of the house and said:

"Hawkey! Hawkey! Come here! Come here! Look at this thunder-storm. Isn't it grand? - isn't it wonderful? - isn't it sublime?" All this time he was making notes of its form and colour on the back of a letter. I proposed some better drawing-block, but he said it did very well. He was absorbed - he was entranced. There was the storm rolling and sweeping and shafting out its lightening over the Yorkshire hills. Presently the storm passed, and he finished.

"There! Hawkey," said he. "In two years you will this again, and call it 'Hannibal Crossing the Alps'."

This story indicates how far Turner characteristically subordinated the sublime to the poetic, for he synthesized his landscape as Reynolds had recommended by marrying a Yorkshire storm to a Swiss alpine scene and immediately put both at the service of a 'poetic' theme. Sublimity was not an end for Turner but merely a beginning.

With 'Hannibal and his Army crossing the Alps', Turner also made an important debut in 1812. Although the painter had been appending lines of verse to the titles of his pictures in the exhibition catalogues since 1798, and some of it may have been of his own devising, in 1812 and for the first time, he added lines that

were openly by himself. These verses were drawn from a 'poem' entitled 'Fallacies of Hope' that only ever seems to have existed in the exhibition catalogues. Yet its title, and often the verses themselves, indicate Turner's view that all hopes of successfully defying the forces of external nature, of overcoming the contradictions of human nature, and of religious redemption, are fallacious. Turner continued to state such morals right up until 1850, the last year in which he exhibited at the Academy. In the case of 'Hannibal' the verse reminds us of the central irony of Hannibal's life, that for all his immense and successful efforts to cross the Alps into Italy, eventually the Carthaginian general would entirely nullify his triumphant achievement by becoming ensconced in idleness and luxury at Capua, thus frittering away his chances of defeating the Romans. Clearly it was an irony that was directed at Turner's fellow empire-building countrymen, warning of the perils that awaited then if they similarly neglected their duty to serve the needs of the state and of each other. The notion that each citizen should eschew self-interest, vanity and luxury in pursuit of the common welfare was frequently encountered in eighteenth-century Augustan poetry, whence Turner undoubtedly derived it, and he was to state that moral repeatedly after 1812 in pictures not only of Carthage but also of other great empires such as Greece, Rome and Venice whose downfall because of individual self-interest might similarly serve to warn England. Indeed, moralism became increasingly important in Turner's work after 1812, as the painter put into practice his belief, stated in a letter of the previous year, that it is the duty of an artist to act equally as a moral seer.

'Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army crossing the Alps' received some very favourable comments. For example, the American painter Washington Allston called it a 'wonderfully fine thing', declaring that 'Turner was the greatest painter since the days of Claude'. Yet Turner's art was not always received so rapturously. Throughout the 1800's it had been severely criticized by the influential connoisseur, painter and collector Sir George Beaumont, who professed to be alarmed by the liberties Turner took with appearances, and by the increasingly high tonalities visible in his works. Beaumont was probably secretly jealous of Turner's great artistic success, having himself once been called the 'head of landscape' (school), an honour that Turner had easily assumed during the 1790's and 1800's, and he did his utmost to discourage other collectors from buying works by the younger painter. Turner was understandably annoyed by this, although by the early 1810's he already had a loyal following which was prepared to pay high prices for his pictures.

In 1813 Turner exhibited at the Royal Academy an unusually fine rural scene, 'Frosty Morning', as well as his dramatic riposte to Poussin's 'Deluge', a picture he had painted some years earlier. In 1814 he exhibited two works, one of which 'Apulia in search of Appulus', contained a veiled attack on Sir George Beaumont. And in 1815 Turner exhibited two of his greatest paintings to date, 'Crossing the Brook' and 'Dido building Carthage; or the Rise of the Carthagian Empire'. Turner particularly esteemed 'Dido', and when came to draw up the first version

of his will in 1829 he requested that the canvas should be used as his winding-sheet upon his death and even asked one of his executors, Francis Chantrey, whether that condition in his will would be followed. To his eternal credit Chantrey replied that it would but that,

'as soon as you are buried I will see you taken up and unrolled'

whereupon Turner amended his will and instead left the painting to the National Gallery to hang alongside a seaport view by Claude, probably the work that he had once wept before when it was in Angerstein's collection.

It is not surprising that Turner called 'Dido building Carthage' his 'chef d'oeuvre'. He had long wanted to paint a seaport scene worthy of comparison with Claude, and with 'Dido' he succeeded. Yet the painting also probably summarized everything he was trying so hard and so opaquely to articulate in the perspective lectures. With its mastery of perspective, its superb exploration of light, shade and reflections, and its total congruence between lighting, pictorial structure and content, it is certainly far more eloquent than Turner's tortuous verbal discourses.

At the Academy two years later Turner exhibited the companion painting to 'Dido building Carthage', namely 'The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire', while in the intervening 1816 show he displayed two complementary pictures of a Greek temple. In one work he portrayed the building as it appeared in contemporary eyes, and this under Turkish subjugation, and in the other he showed it as it had perhaps looked in all its glory in ancient times, and how it might look again if Greece were free. These paintings were Turner's most open statements of his libertarianism to date.

Turner's sympathy with contemporary demands for political and religious freedom first seems to have found expression around 1800 in works alluding to contemporary struggles for liberty in Britain and abroad. During this period he was hoping to gain election as an Academician and many of the leading Royal Academicians, such as Barry, Fuseli and Smirke, were known to hold libertarian opinions. Around this time some of Turner's future patrons, such as Walter Fawkes, even held republican convictions, and undoubtedly Turner was later sympathetic to Fawke's radicalism. The painter is known to have read banned radical political literature in the early 1820's, and he went on subtly expressing his libertarian views during that decade and the early 1830's as the Greeks struggled for their freedom and the demands for parliamentary reform in Britain quickened. Between 1829 and 1833 he subtly alluded to such struggles in a number of works, and in one design - a watercolour of a Parliamentary election in Northampton - he even made his sympathies with the reform of parliament quite plain, for the drawing shows the election of Lord Althorp, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the reformist administration of Lord Grey. Naturally, Turner also celebrated the attainment of Greek freedom in 1830, in a watercolour of a

fountain on the island of Chios. The artist's identification with libertarianism was entirely understandable, given his lowly origins.

Turner continued touring during these years. In 1811, 1813 and 1814 he visited the West Country in order to obtain material for the 'Southern Coast' series and other engraving schemes, and in 1813 he had a particularly enjoyable time in Plymouth where he was much fêted locally, treated his friends to picnics, took boat rides in stormy weather (which he enjoyed enormously, having good sea-legs), and even painted in oils in the open air. This was an unusual practice for Turner, although he set no store on his oil sketches and never exhibited them.

In 1816 Turner made an extensive tour of the north of England to gather subjects for watercolours intended for engraving in the 'History of Richmondshire' scheme, a survey of the area around Richmond in Yorkshire and Lonsdale in Lancashire. Originally Turner was to have made 120 watercolours for the 'Richmondshire' project, and to have been paid the large sum of 3000 guineas for those drawings, but unfortunately the venture petered out owing to lack of public enthusiasm, and Turner made only some 21 of the designs.

In 1817 the painter revisited the Continent, stopping off at the scene of the recent battle of Waterloo before touring the Rhineland and visiting Amsterdam. Impressive paintings of Waterloo and of the river Maas at Dordrecht were exhibited at the Royal Academy the following year. 'The Field of Waterloo' is a picture stylistically influenced by Rembrandt, and it is also surprisingly modern in its treatment of its subject, for Turner eschewed vainglory in the work and instead took a very pessimistic, anti-war position. The view of Dordrecht is an idyllic river scene in which Turner paid homage to one of his favourite Dutch painters, Aelbert Cuyp. The work was bought by Walter Fawkes who installed it over the fireplace at Farnley Hall as the centrepiece of his collection. In 1817 Fawkes also bought the complete set of 51 watercolours that Turner had made earlier that year of Rhenish scenery, and in 1819 he put his large collection of watercolours by Turner on display in his London house, an exhibition that was opened to the public. For the catalogue Fawkes wrote an impressive dedication to Turner, stating that he was never able to look at the artist's works, 'without intensely feeling the delight I have experienced, during the greater part of my life, from the exercise of your talent and the pleasure of your society.'

In 1819 Turner at long last visited Italy, although he had already made a number of superb watercolours of Italian scenery that he had developed from sketches by others. On his tour Turner visited Milan, Venice, Rome, Naples, Sorrento and Paestum, before turning northwards. He probably spent the Christmas in Florence and began his return journey in late January 1820. once more crossing the Mont Cenis pass where his coach overturned during a snowstorm. He arrived back in London loaded down with some 2000 sketches and studies, and immediately started one of his largest paintings for display at the 1820 Royal Academy exhibition, a view from the loggia of the Vatican, with Raphael in the

foreground. Three hundred years after Raphael's death in 1520 Turner aptly celebrated his immortality.

Although Turner was increasingly busy making small watercolours for the engravers during the 1820's (such as the jewel-like drawing of 'Portsmouth'), perhaps the most impressive achievements of the first half of the decade were the large and superbly wrought watercolours made for the 'Marine Views' scheme and the paintings of 'The Bay of Baiæ, with Apollo and the Sybil', shown at the Academy in 1823, and of 'The Battle of Trafalgar' created between 1822 and 1824 to hang in St James's Palace. In 'The Bay of Baiæ' Turner again made clear his continuing sense of irony, for in the work the Cumaean Sibyl begs Apollo for endless life, and has her wish granted, but forgets to request the eternal good looks to accompany it; the beauty of the surrounding landscape underlines the pathetic and wholly ironical failure of human aspirations by contrast, while the ruined buildings in the background anticipate and parallel the forthcoming ruin of the Sibyl herself. 'The Battle of Trafalgar' was the largest picture Turner ever painted and it resulted from the only Royal commission he was to receive, but it was not liked and was soon shunted off to hang in the Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich.

In 1824 Turner unknowingly visited Farnley Hall for the last time, for in October 1825 Walter Fawkes died and the painter refused to visit the house ever again, so imbued was it with precious memories for him. Turner was clearly shattered by Fawkes's death, and he had good reason to be, for the Yorkshireman was only six years older than himself. Early in 1827 Turner wrote to a friend:

'Alas! my good Auld lang sine is gone....and I must follow; indeed, I feel as you say, near a million times the brink of eternity, with me daddy only steps in between as it were...'

That brink moved appreciably closer in September 1829 when Turner's father died, leaving the painter utterly disconsolate; as a friend remarked,

'Turner never appeared the same man after his father's death; his family was broken up.'

He and his father had always been especially close, doubtless because of their mutual reliance on each other during the illness of the painter's mother. The senior William Turner had served for many years as his son's factotum, and he both stretched his offspring's canvases and varnished them when they were completed, leading Turner to joke that his father both started and finished his pictures for him. That Turner did feel nearer 'the brink of eternity' after his father's death is made clear by the fact that the painter drew up the first draft of his will less than ten days after the old man's demise.

The deaths of Fawkes and Turner's father were joined by other losses at this time, most notably that of Sir Thomas Lawrence early in 1830. Turner commemorated Lawrence's funeral in an impressive watercolour he exhibited at the Royal Academy the following summer, the last watercolour he ever displayed there. And because Turner refused ever to visit Farnley again, after 1826 he took to regularly staying at another 'home from home' owned by one of his patrons, namely Petworth House in Sussex, the country seat of George Wyndham, the third Earl of Egremont. The early was a collector of enormous taste and vigour, and he bought his first painting from Turner early in the century; by the time of his death he owned nineteen of Turner's oil paintings. At Petworth Turner was free to come and go at his leisure, although the age difference between the artist and his patron (the earl was seventy-five when the fifty-one-year-old painter began regularly revisiting the house in 1826) meant that the two men were never as close as Turner and Walter Fawkes had been. After Lord Egremont died in 1837 Turner shunned Petworth, just as he had shunned Farnley Hall, and for the same reasons: death shut certain doors in his life.



Chain Bridge over the River Tees

In 1825 Turner embarked upon yet another ambitious set of watercolours destined for engraving, the series entitled 'Picturesque Views in England and Wales', a group of drawings that quite rightly has been called 'the central document of his art'. Like the 'Richmondshire' series, it was to have comprised 120 drawings, and the painter created about 100 watercolours for the project before public indifference led to its cancellation in 1838. In 1829, and again in 1833, he exhibited large groups of the 'England and Wales' watercolours and other designs; the later display must have looked especially dazzling, for it consisted of some 67 watercolours made for the series, in which every aspect of British scenery and of Turner's unrivalled mastery of the art of watercolour were evident. And throughout the 1820's and '30's the painter was busy producing

watercolours for a host of other engraving projects as well, including topographical surveys of the ports, rivers and east coast of England, the rivers of France (part of a scheme to survey the rivers of Europe that never got further in publishing terms than explorations of the Seine and Loire), and books such as the prose work of Sir Walter Scott and one treating of the landscapes of the bible, as well as poetry collections by Scott, Byron, Rogers and Campbell. Well might Turner have complained, as he did in the mid-1820's, that there was 'no holiday ever for me'.



'Messieurs les voyageurs on their return from Italy (par le diligence) in a snow drift on Mount Tarra - 22nd January, 1829'.

Exhibited at the R.A. 1829  
© The British Museum, London

Given the pressures Turner faced in producing large numbers of watercolours for the engraver, he had of necessity evolved a production-line method for making such drawings. Two accounts of this technique have come down to us from the same witness:

'There were four drawing boards, each of which had a handle screwed to the back. Turner, after sketching the subject in a fluent manner, grasped the handle and plunged the whole drawing into a pail of water by his side. Then quickly he washed in the principal hues that he required, flowing tint into tint, until this stage of the work was complete. Leaving this to dry, he took a second board and repeated the operation. By the time the fourth drawing was laid in, the first would be ready for the finishing touches'.

'...[Turner] stretched the paper on boards and after plunging them into water, he dropped the colours into the paper while it was wet, making marblings and gradations throughout the work. His completing process was marvellously rapid, for he indicated his masses and incidents, took out half-lights, scraped out highlights and dragged, hatched and stippled until the design was finished. This swiftness, grounded on the scale practice in early life, enabled Turner to

preserve the purity and luminosity of his work, and to paint at a prodigiously rapid rate'.

That the artist could maintain his inventiveness at this 'rapid rate' and under the intense pressures put upon him by the engravers is a mark of his genius.

In August 1828 Turner again visited Italy. He stayed principally in Rome where he painted and then exhibited his works publicly in a show that attracted over 1000 visitors, who were mostly mystified by what they saw. On his return journey over the Alps in January 1829 Turner's coach was again overturned in the snow (as in 1820), and he recorded the experience in a watercolour - *Messieurs les voyageurs...* - that he exhibited in the 1829 Academy Exhibition, a drawing in which we see the painter himself wearing a top hat and sitting in the foreground.

Another work that Turner displayed at the Academy in 1829 was the superb 'Ulysses deriding Polyphemus', in connection with which *The Times* said that:

'No other artist living...can exercise anything like the magic power which Turner wields with such ease.'

John Ruskin later called 'Ulysses deriding Polyphemus'

'the central picture in Turner's career',

and in colouristic terms at least one can see why he did so, for by now the artist was achieving an idealism of colour that was entirely commensurate with the ideality of forms he had mastered earlier. This idealism was based upon the use of the three primary colours, yellow, red and blue, and thus addressed the fundamentals of painterly colour itself.



'Ulysses deriding Polyphemus - Homer's Odyssey'

Painted 1829

© The National Gallery, London

Turner's interest in the theory of colour had been stimulated by his investigation of the science of optics undertaken in connection with the perspective lectures, and in 1818 he introduced the subject of colour into those talks that were ostensibly about spatial and pictorial organization. A subtle change took place in Turner's colour around that time also, and it may have been connected to his analysis of colour theory. Thereafter a greater reliance upon the primaries and a more intense luminosity becomes apparent, and certainly the change in Turner's colour was recognized at the time, for in 1823 an encyclopaedia published in Edinburgh stated that Turner's: 'genius seems to tremble on the verge of some new discovery in colour'.

By the end of the 1820's, when 'Ulysses deriding Polyphemus' appeared, such a 'discovery' had been thoroughly consolidated, and Turner was habitually creating ranges of colour that have never been matched by any other painter, let alone surpassed.

In the hanging of the 1831 Royal Academy show Turner came into conflict with John Constable. The two painters had known each other since 1813 when Constable sat next to Turner at an Academy dinner, after which he wrote to his fiancée,

'I was a good deal entertained with Turner. I always expected to find him what I did - he is uncouth but has a wonderful range of mind.'

And Constable had a very high regard for Turner's works, writing of his pictures in the 1828 exhibition that,

'Turner has some golden visions, but still they are art, and one could live and die with such pictures.'

But in 1831 Constable was on the Academy hanging committee and he had Turner's painting of 'Caligula's' Palace and Bridge' replaced on the wall by one of his own works, 'Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows'. The painter David Roberts was present at the meeting of the two men soon afterwards, and he recorded what happened in his rather ungrammatical and ill-spelt prose:

'Constable a conceited egotistic person...was loud in describing to all the severe duties he had undergone in the hanging the Exhibition. According to his won account nothing could exceed his distineredness [sic] or his anxiety to discharge the Sacred Duty. Most unfortunately for him a Picture of Turners had been displaced after the arraignment of the room in which it was placed...Turner opened upon him like a ferret; it was evident to all present that Turner detested him; all present were puzzled what to do or say to stop this. Constable wiggled, twisted & made it appear or wished to make it appear that in his removal of the Picture he was only studying the best light or the best arraignment for Turner. The latter coming back invariably to the charge, yess, but why put your own

there? - I must say that Constable looked to me and I believe to every one else, like a detected criminal, and I must add Turner slew him without remorse. But as he had brought it upon himself few if any pitied him'.

However, Turner had his revenge in the Royal Academy the following year; as C.R.Leslie noted:

'In 1832, when Constable exhibited his 'Opening of Waterloo Bridge', it was placed in ...one of the small rooms at Somerset House. A sea-piece, by Turner, was next to it - a grey picture, beautiful and true, but with no positive colour in any part of it. Constable's 'Waterloo' seemed as if painted with liquid gold and silver, and Turner came several times into the room which he was heightening with vermilion and lake decoration and flags of the city barges. Turner stood behind him looking from the 'Waterloo' to his own picture, and at last brought his palette from the great room where he was touching another picture, and putting a daub of red lead, somewhat bigger than a shilling, on his grey sea, went away without saying a word. The intensity of the red lead, made more vivid by the coolness of his picture, caused even the vermilion and lake of Constable to look weak. I came into the room just as Turner left it. 'He has been here,' said Constable, 'and fired a gun.'...The great man did not come again into the room for a day and a half; and then, in the last moments that were allowed for painting, he glazed the scarlet seal he put on his picture, and shaped it into a buoy.'

Turner liked playing these kinds of visual games on the Academy walls, where pictures were hung frame to frame, but he did not always win them. His friend, George Jones, recalled that in the 1833 Exhibition:



'The View of Venice with Canaletti painting [by Turner] hung next to a picture of mine which had a very blue sky. [Turner] joked with me about it and threatened that if I did not alter it he would put it down by bright colour, which he was soon able to do by adding blue to his own....and then went to work on some other picture. I enjoyed the joke and resolved to imitate it, and introduced a great deal more white into my sky, which made his look much too blue. The ensuing day, he saw what I had done, laughed heartily, slapped my back and said I might enjoy the victory'.

Turner also demonstrated his virtuosity in public during the 1830's, sending to Royal Academy and British Institution exhibitions rough underpaintings that he worked up to a state of completion during the days permitted for varnishing pictures. Perhaps the most spectacular recorded instance of this practice occurred on the walls of the British Institution in 1835 when Turner painted 'The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons' almost entirely in one day. He had begun work at first light and he painted all day, surrounded by a circle of admirers and without once stepping back to gauge the visual effect of his labours. Finally the picture was completed:

'Turner gathered his tools together, put them into and shut up the box, and then, with his face still turned to the wall and at the same distance from it, went sidelong off, without speaking a word to anybody, and when he came to the staircase, in the centre of the room, hurried down as fast as he could. All looked with a half wondering smile, and Maclise, who stood near, remarked, 'There, that's masterly, he does not stop to look at his work; he knows it is done, and he is off.' '.

It has plausibly been suggested that Turner was led to demonstrate such virtuosic insouciance by the example of the violinist Paganini, who had taken London by storm in the early 1830's.

As in previous decades, during the 1830's Turner usually made annual tours in order to gain material for new works. An especially important trip took place in 1833, for in that year, perhaps inspired by a work by Clarkson Stanfield, Turner had exhibited a picture of Venice (the one he heightened with blue in competition with George Jones), and after it went on display he took the opportunity to revisit Venice as the final destination on a grand tour of Europe which began in Copenhagen and took in Berlin, Dresden, Prague, Vienna, Salzburg, Innsbruck and Verona. It seems likely that a secondary purpose of this tour was to examine some of the leading Continental art collections and museums in order to advise the committee then drawing up plans in London for the new National Gallery and Royal Academy building on the Trafalgar Square site. From 1833 onwards Venice increasingly came to dominate Turner's Italian subject-matter. After 1833 a new companion entered the painter's life. Turner had continued to visit Margate over the years, and latterly he had taken to staying with a Mrs Sophia Caroline Booth and her husband, who died in 1833. Shortly afterwards

he embarked upon a physical relationship with the widow, and eventually, in the 1840's, she moved up to London to live with Turner in a cottage that she purchased in Chelsea. David Roberts talked to Sophia Booth shortly after Turner died, and later recorded (in his imperfect prose):

'...for about 18 years...they lived together as husband & wife, under the name of Mr & Mrs Booth...But the most extraordinary part of her narrative is that, with the exception of the 1st year he never contributed one Shilling towards their mutual support!!! - But for 18 years she provided solely for their maintenance & living but purchased the cottage at Chelsea from money she had previously saved or inherited...Turner refusing to give a farthing towards it....She assures me that the only money was three half-crowns She found in his pocket after death, black, She says with being so long in his pocket & which she keeps as a souvenir...'

Early on in life Turner had earned a reputation as a miser, and doubtless he had initially watched every penny because as a child he had witnessed the effects of poverty in the slum-infested Convent Garden area of London. Yet even when he became wealthy he maintained his penny-pinching habits, although after he first drew up his will in 1829 it is possible to discern some noble motive behind his habitual stinginess. Turner was well aware of the precariousness of artistic fortunes, and the perception led him both to become one of the founders of the Artists' General Benevolent Institution when it was set up in 1814, and later to attempt to create his own charitable foundation, to be funded by his estate and known as 'Turner's Gift'. This was intended to support old and penniless artists in almshouses to be built on land Turner also provided in Twickenham. Sadly, such a charity would never be realized, as we shall see.



'The Fighting Temeraire, tugged to her last berth to be broken up', 1838

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'Rain, Steam and Speed - the Great Western Railway'

© The National Gallery, London

Throughout the 1830's and '40's Turner kept up a steady flow of masterpieces in both oil and watercolour. The public did not always understand them but their incomprehension did not lead the painter to simplify what he had to say or make his depictions of things more visually approachable; if anything his meanings became more complex and his handling looser as time went by. Yet if pictures like the Venetian scene showing 'Juliet and her Nurse' of 1836 proved hard to understand - for why should Juliet be in a city that she never visits in Shakespeare's play? - nonetheless the public had little difficulty in understanding a masterpiece like 'The Fighting 'Temeraire' ' of 1839. From the start this work was recognized as an elegiac comment upon the replacement of sail by steam and, as such, it is unusual in Turner's oeuvre, for more frequently the painter welcomed technological change. This in the 1820's he had celebrated the coming of Steam in a view of Dover ('Dover Castle' 1812) and five years later after painting 'The Fighting 'Temeraire' ' he again made evident his excitement over the machine-age, in 'Rain, Steam and Speed - the Great Western Railway' of 1844. During the 1840's the painter even became intrigued by polar exploration, yet another pointer to his abiding interest in the opening up of the world around him.



'The Fighting Temeraire', 1839  
© The National Gallery

The favourable reception accorded to 'The Fighting Temeraire' , in 1839 must have been gratifying to Turner, especially as hostility to his works was frequently being voiced in newspaper reviews during the 1830's. The artist's 'indistinctness', his complex meanings and his increasingly high-keyed colour ranges (especially his love of yellow) were not calculated to win the hearts, minds and eyes of the Victorians, who preferred verisimilitude to painterliness, sentimentality to academic realism and saccharine colouring to the brilliant hues that Turner often presented to the eye. Yet from 1839, and particularly because of the vituperation poured on 'Juliet and her Nurse' in 1836 by one petty-minded critic, Turner had a new ally to assist in public understanding of what he was about. This was John Ruskin, who between 1843 and 1860 published a five-volume appraisal of Turner's works, *Modern Painters*, which was intended to demonstrate, among other things, that ,

'We have had, living amongst us and working for us, the greatest painter of all time.' Turner was clearly not too displeased by Ruskin's advocacy, and indeed, it gave him some comfort in the last decade of his life.

The late 1830's and the 1840's were not altogether happy years for Turner. He became bitter at having been passed over for a knighthood when lesser figures such as Alexander Callcott and William Allan had been so honoured (but the lack of preferment was perhaps inevitable, given that Queen Victoria thought Turner to be quite mad). And, as time passed, his despair at the thought of dying increased. This resulted in somewhat unbalanced behaviour, such as becoming very secretive about his second home with Mrs Booth in Chelsea, where he even assumed the guise of an 'Admiral Booth' in order to shield his identity. He also took to drink, albeit in a relatively mild way, and became obsessed with hoarding

impressions of his prints, in 1838 even buying up all the remaining stock of the 'England and Wales' engravings when they were auctioned off and then leaving them to rot in his house in Queen Anne Street. Moreover, although by the late 1840's Turner had begun to form his final wish that all his paintings should go to the National Gallery (a desire that he formulated in final codicils to his will in 1848 and 1849), nonetheless he did little to ensure that they were maintained in good condition. Yet despite the fear of death - an apprehensiveness that was unleavened by any belief in the afterlife - and the eccentric behaviour it led to, the artist did not let those anxieties and eccentricities darken his work. Instead his late paintings and drawings became ever more beautiful as their creator used them to ward off the terrors of dying and to bring the idealism of a lifetime to a triumphant apotheosis.



Caernarvon Castle, Wales  
© British Museum, London

In 1841, and for the following three summers, Turner returned to Switzerland. Four sets of watercolours resulted from those trips, and they are among the painter's very greatest creations, for in the intensity, beauty and solitude of the alps he clearly found some solace for his fears of dying. In the final set especially, drawings that were possibly made between 1846 and 1850, we can apprehend a continuous pulse running behind and through the outlines of discrete objects; the visible universe becomes filled with a primal sense of energy. These characteristics are equally evident in a group of oil paintings made after about 1843 from the old 'Liber Studiorum' images, works in which light, colour and energy are all intensified to the utmost degree, dissolving forms in the process. These paintings do not celebrate merely the physical world: their pulsating energies, intensities of light and dissolutions of form are clearly expressions of something beyond the physical. Given Turner's lifelong attraction to academic idealism, at whose core lay a Platonic metaphysical system that the painter had accepted at an early age, there can be absolutely no doubt that in his

late, radiant images the artist was projecting an ideal reality, one corresponding to the world of the Ideas delineated by Plato. And there is no inconsistency between Turner's lifelong identification with such a metaphysical system and his supposed statements that 'The Sun is God', for the brilliant light in these late paintings is far more than simply the hedonistic sunshine later beloved of the French Impressionists. Instead we are looking at Turner's deity, the essence and fount of creation, the godhead itself, its energies running through everything.

In 1845 the painter took the chair of President of the Royal Academy for some weeks when the actual President, Sir Martin Archer Shee, was too ill to carry on his duties. And also in that same year he made the last of his sketching tours, this time to northern France, where he visited King Louis Philippe, and old friend from the days when they both lived in Twickenham. But Turner's health began to break down in 1845, and by the end of the following year it had become very bad, not being helped by the fact that he was losing all his teeth; in his final years he had to gain sustenance from sucking his food. He continued to show a few works every year at the Academy (although not in 1848, the first time since 1824 he had not exhibited), but gradually he began to lose the physical control necessary for painting. IN 1850, however, he summoned forth his last vestiges of strength to display four pictures at the Royal Academy, all treatments of the Dido and Aeneas theme. The subject may have had a personal allegorical significance, for Turner's commitment to his art paralleled Aeneas's devotion to duty, a commitment that had led the Trojan prince to abandon Queen Dido in order to sail to Italy and found Rome. Like Aeneas, Turner had also forsworn an easy life, the enjoyment of wealth and the delights of the senses for a higher calling, while Queen Dido stood for everything he had renounced. After displaying these last four works at the Royal Academy in the late spring of 1850 it appears that Turner was too feeble physically to paint any more and he awaited death over the following eighteen months rather apprehensively and sadly. Occasionally he would be helped onto the flat roof of the Chelsea house to watch the sun rise over the flat pastures of Battersea across the river (what he called the 'Dutch view'), or see it set behind the hills to the west (the 'English view'), but that was all. The rest was silence.

Turner died on 19th December 1851. In addition to nearly two thousand paintings and watercolours in private hands, he left an immense body of work in the Queen Anne Street and Chelsea studios - some 282 finished and unfinished oil paintings and 19,049 drawings and sketches in watercolour, pencil and other media (in addition to tens of thousands of prints, which were sold off in 1874). The estate was valued at £140,000, a sum whose exact modern value is incalculable but which might conservatively be approximated if we multiply it by a hundred. The will contained two main provisions: that a gallery should be built to house Turner's works and that the charitable foundation known as 'Turner's Gift' should be created. Unfortunately, however, the will was contested by Turner's relatives and overthrown on a legal technicality, the relatives getting the money and the nation the pictures, although until 1987 no gallery was built, and only

then did it come into being through private largesse and largely as a result of pressure from an action group, the Turner Society.

The triumph of private greed over the realization of 'Turner's Gift' was extremely ironic, given that the painter had been so selfless in accruing wealth for the purpose of creating his charitable foundation. Eventually, of course, the Welfare State took over the care of old, impoverished artists, so that the failure of the charity to come into being did not matter all that much. But ultimately Turner's supreme gift was his art, and that legacy lives on in a body of work that may have been equalled in size and quality, but which has never been surpassed for its beauty, power and insight into the nature of the human condition, and the conditions in which we live.

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