

## Turner beyond the Baroque Masters, Trafalgar & The Late Sea Paintings

“I hate married men; they never make any sacrifice to the Arts, but are always thinking of their duty to their wives and families, or some rubbish of that sort.”

So said Turner, with what may have been a sideways swipe at John Constable, who with seven children to support after the death of his wife Maria in 1828, must have seemed to Turner, a confirmed bachelor, a considerable burden, holy inconsistent with the ambitions of a serious painter. Nevertheless, it was around 1799 when Turner had moved into Marylebone, a fashionable area of London, that he began his relationship with Sarah Danby, at thirty-three, nine years older than the young painter. Sarah had been married previously to John Danby, a successful organist and glee composer, with whom she bore 6 children, five daughters and one son, two of whom died in infancy. Turner and Sarah lived together for short periods at various addresses and two daughters, Evelina and Georgiana resulted. He saw little of the girls, although they almost certainly featured in the painting *Crossing the Brook*. He spent most of his latter years in Margate and then Chelsea, with Sophia Caroline Booth. He left nothing to Sarah Danby in his will and she died in poverty in 1861.

“I have no secret but hard work. This is a secret that many never learn and they don’t succeed because they don’t learn it. Labour is the genius that changes the world from ugliness to beauty and the great curse to a great blessing.”

“I know of no genius but hard work.”

The above quotes, in many ways sum up Turner’s philosophy of his art. His was an absolute focus on the development of his career, rarely allowing any outside influences to distract him from work in progress. From an early age, he had both an astute business brain and a competitive drive to outperform his many rivals in the Academy. Although not as well educated, or eloquent as Constable, he managed early on, despite his recorded awkward use of spoken and indeed written English, to make friends and attract influential patrons, that is with one particular exception, Sir George Beaumont, Constable’s friend and patron, who remained an implacable critic of Turner’s work. He was intensely ambitious and immensely talented, as his progression through the Academy confirms, being admitted at fourteen years of age, exhibiting his first work the following year, then his first oil painting *Fishermen at Sea* in 1796 as a twenty-one-year old, three years later becoming an Associate Member of the Royal Academy and Member in 1802 as a twenty-six-year old, becoming the youngest artist to become a full Academician.

His love of the Dutch and Italian Baroque masters was fostered by his early access to the houses and extensive art collections of the Duke of Bridgewater, for whom he was commissioned to paint a companion piece to William van de Velde’s, *A Rising Gale*. The resulting painting, *Dutch Boats in a Gale*, for which he received the princely sum of 250 guineas, secured Turner’s growing reputation when it was exhibited to great acclaim at the Academy in 1801. Within a few years, by 1805, *Ships Bearing up for Anchorage* had been bought by another hugely influential patron, the Earl of Egremont, who would prove to be one of Turner’s most steadfast and generous patrons. Besides the immediate advantages of selling his work, this kind of patronage gave Turner privileged access to some of the most important private art collections in Britain. Within these collections, the paintings of Claude Lorrain (1611-93), Aelbert Cuyp (1620-91), Rembrandt (1606-69), William van de Velde (1633-1707) and other masters of the Dutch Golden Age School, were most commonly to be found. So it was no surprise, that early on in his career Turner would wish to pay homage to those past masters he so much revered. Other than William van de Velde, it was Claude Lorrain to whom he first paid homage, with his *Dido Building Carthage* of 1815 and the earlier *Sun Rising over Vapour* of 1807. In his first will of 1829, the two works were bequeathed to the National Gallery on the condition that they were hung in perpetuity with Claude’s *Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba* and *The Marriage of Isaac and Rebecca (The Mill)*.



*The Marriage of Isaac and Rebecca, (The Mill), 1648, Claude, oil on canvas, 152x200 cms*



*The Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba, 1648, Claude, oil on canvas, 149x197 cms, N.G.*



*Dido Building Carthage*, 1815, Turner, oil on canvas, 156x230 cms, N.G. London



*Sun Rising Over Vapour*, 1807, Turner, oil on canvas, 134x180 cms, N.G. London



*The Dort Packet-boat from Rotterdam Becalmed*, 1818, Turner, oil on canvas, 158x234 cms, Yale



*The Mass at Dordrecht*, 1650, Aelbert Cuyp, oil on canvas, 115x170 cms, N.G. of Art, Washington

In 1817, Turner painted *The Dort packet-boat from Rotterdam Becalmed*, an homage to Cuyp's renowned masterpiece, *The Mass at Dordrecht*, then in the ownership of Viscount Alford of Ashridge Park, Hertfordshire. Since 1764, when the Earl of Bute purchased the majestic, *River Landscape with Horseman and Peasants*, N.G. London, Aelbert Cuyp had become the most collectable of the Dutch Golden Age masters and this wonderfully atmospheric painting has always been regarded as another of his masterpieces. *The Mass at Dordrecht* commemorates the assembly on the Mass at Dordrecht in July 1646, of a large Dutch transport fleet carrying 30,000 soldiers in a show of force by the rebel Northern Provinces, fighting for independence from the Spanish Crown, at the outset of the negotiations that would eventually result in the Treaty of Munster of 1648. At the time Turner was competing with the other Academy sea painters of renown, Nicholas Pocock (1740-1821) and Clarkson-Stanfield (1793-1867), but it was Augustus Wall Calcott (1779-1844) with his *Entrance to the Pool of London* of 1816, commissioned by the Marquess of Lansdowne, who emerged as his most serious challenger. And it was in response to Calcott's widely regarded triumph over Turner, that the latter took up the gauntlet, to produce on even grander scale, *The Dort*, a painting eulogising not only Cuyp, but his life-long love of Dutch Golden Age painting.

The depiction of the Sea was dear to Turner's heart from early in his career, as his first oil painting, *Fishermen at Sea*, exhibited at the Academy in 1796 confirmed. However, it may also have been a calculated manoeuvre, as the passion for marine art remained undiminished for aristocratic collectors, especially in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars that followed. Willem van de Velde and his father, who came to work for Charles II in 1672, remained a strong influence on British art and Ludolf Bakhuizen (1630-1708), a Dutch German born marine painter and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the French born, Rome based master Claude Joseph Vernet (1714-89) wielded more contemporary influence on home grown painters like Nicholas Pocock and Dominic Serres (1722-93).



*Fishermen at Sea, Cholmeley Sea Piece*, 1796, Turner, oil on canvas, 91x122 cms, N.G. London

## The Battle of Trafalgar – Contested Waters

Trafalgar was central to Turner's work for several decades after the victory, which propelled Nelson deep into the National psyche. Of all naval engagements, it was the Battle of Trafalgar, fought on the 21<sup>st</sup> October 1805 against the combined French and Spanish fleets, that defined the relationship between the Navy and the Nation for the next hundred years. Analysis of Turner's response to Trafalgar, should be understood in the wider context of other sea warfare, the most conspicuous, dating back as far as Drake's defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the Anglo-Dutch wars of 1652-74 and more recently the Revolutionary Wars, with the Fourth Battle of Ushant, more commonly known as The Glorious first of June, when the British Fleet, commanded by Admiral Lord Howe achieved a tactical victory over the French Fleet.

The symbols of Naval patriotism were its victories, ships, commanders and sailors, expressed in popular phrases such as 'heart of oak' and 'wooden walls', which became common currency alongside the cultural stereotype of the honest, nautical jargon-speaking, Jack Tar. The 'ship of state', a universal metaphor, thus resonated powerfully in England. The fact that Vice-Admiral Nelson died on duty and in the most heroic of circumstances, walking around the quarter deck of his flag-ship in plain view of French snipers, made the subsequent victory that much more poignant, to the point of being romantic, which is of course the manner in which the death of Nelson has always been portrayed ever since, whether in verse, or on canvas.

In order to galvanise support for the ongoing war, especially in the wake of Napoleon's victories at Austerlitz and Ulm in November and December 1805 respectively, the British Government sought to gain maximum political advantage from Trafalgar and the death of Nelson. The centrepiece of the strategy was Nelson's funeral in January 1806, a carefully stage-managed event that was calculated to encourage the outpouring of both grief and patriotism, but above all to emphasise the Navy's centrality to the Nation. Trafalgar also became an important event for the art world, where several prominent academicians including most notably Turner, produced his first *Battle of Trafalgar, as seen from the Mizen Starboard Shrouds of the Victory*, within months of Nelson's funeral.



*The Battle of Trafalgar, as Seen from the Mizen Starboard Shrouds of the Victory*, 1806-8, Turner, oil on canvas, 171x239 cms, Tate

At the time that Nelson was struck by the musket-ball in his left shoulder, he was walking the quarter-deck in conversation with Captain Hardy. Having been raised from the deck where he had fallen, Hardy expressed a hope that he was not severely wounded, to which Nelson relied,

'They have done for me at last, my backbone is shot through.' Within a chaotic scene of the Victory and French ship, Redoubtable entangled in each other's rigging, firing broad-sides at point blank range,

Turner's painting depicts the small group of officers surrounding Nelson's body; Nelson was mortally wounded at 1.15 pm and died at 4.30.



*The Death of Nelson, 21 October 1805*, William Devis, oil on canvas, 20x27 cms, National Maritime Museum.

Unlike the above depiction by Turner, this earlier, much smaller painting by the lesser known William Devis, depicts the final hours of the dying Nelson, surrounded by his faithful and admiring officers beneath deck, striking a much more intimate scene. Devis was in debtor's prison, at the time of Nelson's death, but was released in order that he might take up the challenge issued by the publisher William Boydell, of producing

the best picture, which Boydell would then engrave, the very substantial prize being 500 guineas. With the support of Alexander Davison, Nelson's banker and one of Devis's patrons, he was able to spend a week on board HMS Victory off Portsmouth after its return from Trafalgar. Although pitted against the much better known Benjamin West, whose depiction was a much grander affair, more akin to Turner's later painting, it was Devis's painting that won Boydell's commission. William Bromley, the engraver eventually took 2 years to produce the plate, which was finally successfully published in 1812.



*The Death of Nelson on the Quarter deck aboard HMS Victory, 1807*, W. Bromley, engraving, National Maritime Museum



*The Death of Nelson*, 1811, Benjamin West, oil on canvas, 50x64 cms, National Maritime Museum.

Benjamin West's interpretation was undoubtedly influenced by his own earlier portrayal of the death of General Wolfe, although he will have seen both Devis's much more intimate scene and that of Turner.



*The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770, Benjamin West, oil on canvas, 151x213 cms, N.G. Canada, Ottawa.

In 1822, Turner received the Royal commission from George IV for this his second and more successful depiction, *The Battle of Trafalgar*, to be a pendant to James de Louthembourg's painting, *The Glorious First of June*. On receipt of this later commission, Turner embarked on an unusual amount of research. Several portrayals of the battle had already been painted, the most contemporaneous being Nicholas Pocock's version of 1805 (bottom page 10), with its prescriptive emphasis on the plan of the Battle. However, it is evident that Turner did not want to produce a Naval painting more typical of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In any case his contribution required to be more similar in spirit to that of James de Louthembourg's work of 1795, *The Glorious First of June*. And there are indeed similarities, not only in terms of exact scale, but also in the focus on the melee of small boats, drowning men and the flotsam and debris of battle. However, Turner concentrates to a much greater extent on the Victory, its almost ethereal and heroic presence, whilst in the background the French ship, Redoubtable is in its death

throes. Whilst he had already exhibited a formidable knowledge of ship's architecture in his previous works, he extended his research still further by borrowing a plan of the ship from the Admiralty.

The completed painting combines a number of incidents from different times of the battle. The falling mast, perhaps an allusion to the dying Nelson, bears his white vice-admiral's flag, while the code flags spell 'd-u-t-y', both the last word of his famous signal to the British fleet at the commencement of the Battle and the last words Nelson reportedly spoke, 'Thank God I have done my duty' are flying from the mainmast. On the right is the French ship, *Redoubtable*, surrendered and crippled, later to sink during the storm that followed the end of hostilities. In the foreground, British seamen endeavour to save both British and French sailors from the bloodied sea, suggesting that Turner was mindful of the importance of the display of common humanity, even in mortal conflict and as already highlighted, he must have felt that such was required to match the sentiments of the Louthembourg painting. John Singleton Copley's painting of 1778, *Watson and the Shark* will almost certainly have had some relevance here for both Louthembourg and Turner.

In 1829, *The Battle of Trafalgar* was somewhat ignominiously moved from its original and intended position at St James's Palace to the recently opened National Gallery of Naval Art, situated in the Painted Hall of the Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich, which ever since has led to the belief that the work may not have been so well regarded contemporaneously, especially so by George IV. Rather, the transfer of this painting and its earlier pendant, Louthembourg's, *Glorious First of June*, should be seen as the culmination of a policy, where a series of paintings were transferred from the Royal Collection as a personal gift from George IV. The King had earlier approved of and become the founding Royal Patron of the National Gallery of Naval Art at Greenwich Hospital. When this collection was first opened to the public, it predated the opening of the National Gallery by just a few weeks.



*The Battle of Trafalgar*, 1823-4, Turner, oil on canvas, 262x369 cms, National Maritime Museum



*The Glorious First of June 1794*, Loutherbouurg, 1795, 267x374 cms, oil, National Maritime Museum



*The Battle of Trafalgar*, 1805, Pocock, oil on canvas, 71x100 cms, National Maritime Museum

Nicholas Pocock's *Battle of Trafalgar* is typical of the genre of paintings, which had recorded naval battles for the previous two hundred years. They were a combination of ship portraiture and battle plans, first appearing during the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and popularised during the Anglo-Dutch wars. The distance from the action, although portraying the apparently chaotic nature of naval warfare, provided very little emotional involvement for the viewer and did not truly reflect the destruction and frightful carnage of such battles.



*A First Rate Taking in Stores*, 1818, Turner, watercolour, Bedford Museum.

This watercolour was reportedly painted one morning during a visit to Farnley Hall, home of one of his early patrons, when his host, Fawkes, asked him for a drawing to demonstrate the scale of a man-of-war. Turner responded to the friendly challenge by depicting in the space of a few hours, three ships that are vastly exaggerated in size in relation to the sailors and other small vessels. The 'first-rate' on the right towers

over the supply boats at its side, its crew is dwarfed by the over-sized gun ports and the cropped image further emphasises the distortion of scale. No doubt Turner was aware of the liberties he was taking with scale, which may have been a playful response to his patron's request, but also conveys a serious message by emphasising the symbolic grandeur of a 100-gun ship of the line.



*Watson and the Shark*, 1778, John Singleton Copley, oil on canvas, 182x230 cms, N.G. Washington

Copley's dramatic portrayal of a shark attacking 14-year-old Watson caused a sensation when it was exhibited at the R.A. in 1778. Although badly injured, Watson, who commissioned the painting, went on to have a successful business and political career. The painting is regarded as an important progenitor of 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism and will undoubtedly have been known to Gericault, who precisely forty years later painted *The Raft of the Medusa*. It, or one of the two copies

produced by Copley, an American painter, living in London at the time of the paintings, will also undoubtedly have been known to Turner, as the rescue of a drowning French sailor in the foreground of his painting appears to confirm.

Some years after Turner's contributions, Clarkson Stanfield, one of Turner's principal rivals in the field of marine art, produced his huge painting, generally regarded as the most accurate portrayal of the events at the height of the Battle. On his death in 1867, Dickens, a close friend, said of Stanfield:

'Success had never for an instant spoiled him...He had been a sailor once and all the best characteristics that are popularly attributed to sailors, being his and being in him refined by the influence of his art, formed a whole not likely to be often seen.'



*The Battle of Trafalgar*, 1836, Clarkson Stanfield, oil on canvas, 532x120, Institute of Directors



*Staffa, Fingal's Cave*, 1832, Turner, oil on canvas, 91x131 cms, Yale Centre for British Art

In the early 1830s, Turner began to produce the series of progressive sea paintings, for which he has become most justly famous, the first being *Staffa, Fingal's Cave*. In 1831, Turner visited Staffa, a Hebridean Island off the West coast of Scotland, gathering material for *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*. He had collaborated with Scott, already a celebrated writer and poet in the 1820s, on *The Provincial Antiquities and Picturesque Scenery of Scotland*.



**Fingal's Cave** is a unique sea-cave formed of hexagonally jointed basalt columns within a Paleocene lave flow, similar in structure to the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland. Felix Mendelssohn's evocative Hebridean Overture (Fingal's Cave), composed after the young composer's trip to the island in 1829, was premiered in London on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1832, the week after the Royal Academy exhibition opened with Turner's painting on display. On his visit, Turner clearly relished the stormy weather and later recounted that a number of passengers refused to journey on to the nearby island of Iona and in order to compensate,

'the displeased captain' took the steamboat around Staffa three times. 'The sun getting toward the horizon,' he wrote, 'burst through the rain-cloud, angry, and for wind.' This atmospheric painting appears to represent the scene just as Turner described it, with the steamboat positioned near the brooding skies, the setting sun on the right and the cave entrance bathed in light to the left.



*Rockets and Blue Lights (Close at Hand)*, 1840, Turner, oil on canvas, 92x122 cms, Clark Institute

The many times restored, *Rockets and Blue Lights (Close at Hand) to Warn Steam Boats of Shoal Water* is one of a number of works which engage with the contemporary issues of lifesaving and maritime warning. Here a group of huddled spectators on the beach, standing safely back from the mountainous sea, is joined by the viewer as they witness, a ship in distress in the middle-ground, smoke emanating from the funnel and the waves crashing over the harbour wall on the horizon. To the right, flares explode in the sky, warning shipping of impending danger, the presence of shallow water.

Exhibited in 1840 at the Academy and at the British Institution the following year, reviews were largely negative, something that Turner was now beginning to become used to. Notwithstanding, the *Literary Gazette*, was more appreciative, observing that 'the general effect is very powerful' and furthermore that 'we forget the parts that are extravagant in admiration of the whole.'

The latest restoration of the painting was completed in 2004 by Bull & Rand at the Clarke Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, subsequent to which, controversy and critical concern were raised at the disappearance of another ship, thought to be originally present in the painting. As is well known from Turner literature, a print by Carrick of 1852 and a large watercolour copy (private collection) of the original made before 1855, by Whistler no less, both show two vessels. The second vessel, nearer to the viewer, on the right of the image, smoke billowing from its funnel, can be quite clearly seen. In their defence, the Clark restoration team proposed that this second ship was added at an earlier restoration and since not thought to be by Turner's hand, was painted over. However, this earlier copy, made just after Turner's death plainly confirms that it was in the original painting and hence should not have been obliterated.



*Copy after Rockets and Blue Lights to warn Steam Boats of Shoal Water*, 1855, Whistler, watercolour

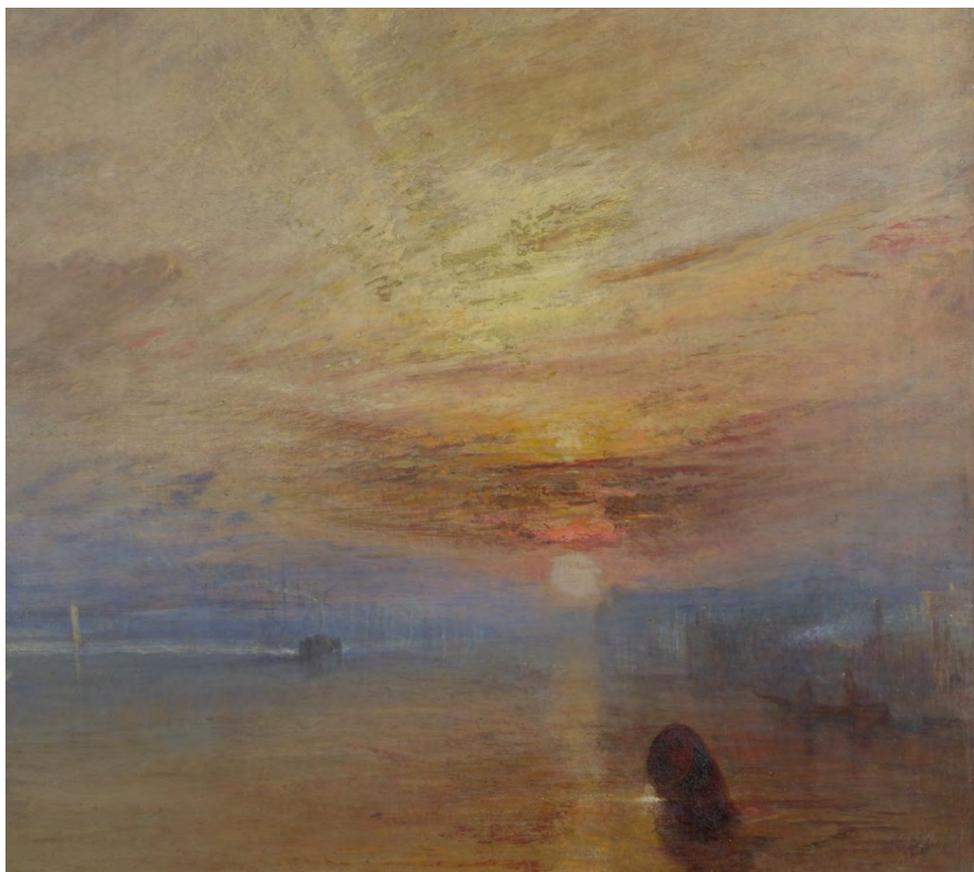
After the end of the Napoleonic War, many of the great warships were moored permanently off the naval dockyards. The *Temeraire* had played a distinguished role in Nelson's victory at the Battle of Trafalgar. However, from 1820, she functioned primarily as a depot ship off Sheerness, until sold at a routine Navy Board auction in August to a Rotherhithe ship-breaker and timber merchant. By this date, already fourteen of the twenty-seven ships of Nelson's fleet had been sold off.

The *Fighting Temeraire* was Turner's last Trafalgar related painting and was exhibited to universal praise at the Academy in 1839. This ethereal, almost ghost-like image represents the ship being towed by a steam tug from Rotherhithe to be decommissioned and broken up at Sheerness in 1838. The painting, regarded by Turner as "My Darling" was thought to be a comment on the transition of sail to steam, emphasised by the appearance in the background of a ship in full sail and the decline of British Naval power since the Napoleonic wars, but could also be read symbolically as a reference to death and regeneration. The painting also signifies a climax in Turner's use of colour. The painting could hardly be structured more clearly. It is executed almost exclusively in the primary colours of blue and yellow, together with their respective darker and lighter shades.

As before, Turner has used artistic licence, as at this juncture, the *Temeraire* would have been without masts and rigging, as they would have been removed by the Navy to be used elsewhere. Given the critical acclaim it received at the RA in 1839, these inaccuracies were either overlooked, or went unnoticed. The *Morning Chronicle* noted, 'In this striking performance, Mr Turner has indulged his love of strong and powerfully contrasted colours with great taste and propriety. A gorgeous horizon poetically intimates that the sun of the *Temeraire* is setting in glory.' It was Turner's final reposte to the criticism he had received by both public and artistic establishment of previous Trafalgar related works.



*The Fighting Temeraire*, 1838, Turner, oil on canvas, 91x122 cms, N.G. London



The yellow, orange and red colours increase in intensity from the bright sun to the black of the vessels on the far right, seen against the light and the dominant pictorial element of the buoy in the foreground. The darkening horizon brightens upwards into a blue colour, thereafter transformed into the pale white of the higher clouds. The phenomenon of colour was described by Goethe in his *Theory of Colours*, a copy of which Turner had in his possession. A hazy area appears yellow when an area, or source of brightness is behind it and as it intensifies, it turns orange, then red, until finally completely intensified, it appears quite black.

Turner was inspired to paint *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On*, after reading 'The History and Abolition of the Slave Trade', by Thomas Clarkson. In 1781, the captain of the slave ship, Zong ordered that 133 slaves be thrown overboard so that insurance payments could be collected. Although slavery had been outlawed in the British Empire since 1833, Turner and many abolitionists believed that the practice of slavery should be abolished around the world. The painting was exhibited at an anti slavery conference, intending for Prince Albert, who was speaking at the event to see it and be moved to increase British anti-slavery efforts.

The colours employed in *Slavers* are almost identical with those found in *The Fighting Temeraire*. However, the reds in the former have been intensified to an extensive yellowish-red, while the widespread yellow is heavily refracted throughout the painting.

It was in 1840, around the time of this painting, when John Ruskin first met Turner, whose sensational support, commenced the eulogising of Turner to such an extent that well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even early 20<sup>th</sup> century, no critic dared to question the wisdom of his words. To the young Ruskin, Turner's work of this period underlined his liberation from the stifling conventions of past masters and embodied the highest principles of landscape art by its uncompromising 'truth to Nature'. Having read the reviews of the Royal Academy of 1842, Ruskin decided to write a response that would, 'blow the critics out of the water'. So came into being the seminal, five-volume work, *Modern Painters*. His single-minded admiration, some might say even myopic, so powerfully expounded in his published works, encouraged a new audience for Turner's paintings, many of which had remained unsold at his death.

Ruskin singled out *Slavers* as the work upon which Turner's immortality should rest, noting that, 'Its daring conception, ideal in the highest sense of the word, is based on the purest truth' (Ruskin 1843, p.248). Ruskin was given the painting by his father the following year, but eventually sold it to the American collector, J.T. Johnston in 1872, as given his sensitive nature, he found the subject to disturbing to live with.



*The Slave Ship*, 1840, oil on canvas, 91x123 cms, Turner, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



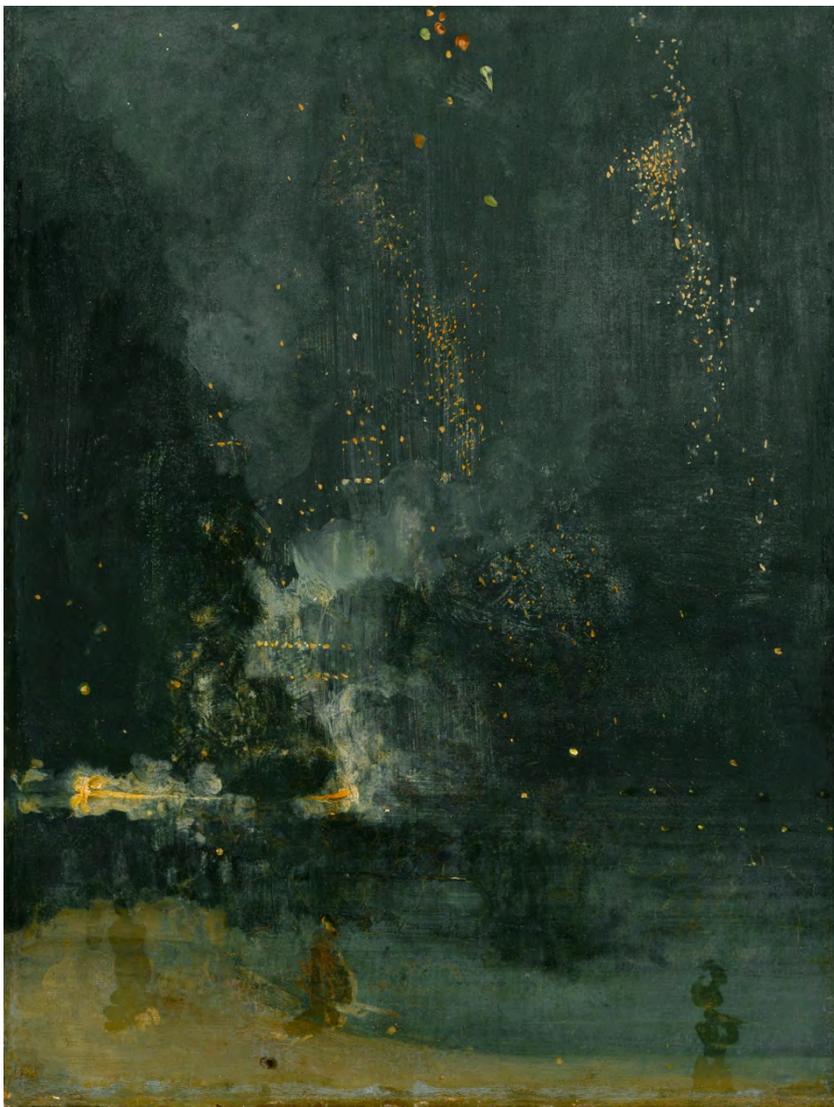
The expanded image above depicts both the power of Turner's vivid imagination, the array of fish and shark-like monsters, combined with the awful reality of the spectre of drowning men and women, their arms reaching out of the water in desperation. The chained ankle and leg in the immediate right foreground, around which a host of fish are congregating is perhaps the most shocking confirmation that these poor souls were thrown overboard, still with chains and manacles attached.



*Snow Storm: Steam-boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, 1842, Turner, oil on canvas, 91x122 cms, Tate Britain

The story goes that Turner asked to be tied to the mast of a steamship during a nocturnal storm. Fact, or fiction, Turner evokes the terror of a storm at sea and man's vulnerability in the face of the sublime forces of Nature. This is emphasised above all by the dramatic vortex, a commonly used device by Turner, suggesting movement and elemental motion. Given the far-reaching impact of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, it is interesting to note that his defence of *Snow Storm*, should specifically evoke the heroic identity of the artist in the storm. In the chapter entitled, 'Of water, as painted by Turner', Ruskin famously described the painting as, 'one of the very grandest statements of sea motion, mist and light that has ever been put on canvas, even by Turner'. He continued, 'Of course it was not understood; his finest works never are; but there was some apology for the public's not comprehending this, for few people have had the opportunity of seeing the sea at such a time, and when they have, cannot face it. To hold a mast or a rock, and watch it, is a prolonged endurance of drowning which few people have courage to go through. To those who have, it is one of the noblest lessons of nature.'

If *Snow Storm* was conceived, as is thought as a kind of manifesto, then its inclusion in the Turner Bequest is of vital importance. Mocked and reviled by the critics when exhibited in 1842 with *Burial at Sea*, by the 1870s it was seen as an integral part of Turner's legacy, no doubt much assisted by Ruskin's vocal support. Ralph Nicholson Wornum, the Keeper of Pictures at the National Gallery since 1855, noted in 1875, that the collection was, 'happily rich in the great sea-pieces of Turner, as in his other works'. He continued, 'the pictures are distinguished for their variety and individuality. He is clearly the prince of painters of the English School, in marine and other landscapes.' It was Turner's focus on the Sublime qualities of the existential forces of the sea and his ability to encourage the viewer to use their imagination, that set him apart from his serious rivals, Serres, Pocock and Stanfield.



*Nocturne in Black and Gold-The Falling Rocket*, 1874, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, oil on panel, 60x47 cms, Detroit Institute of Arts

By the 1860s, both Aestheticism (Art for Art's Sake) and Impressionism were having a profound impact on perceptions of art. Indeed, Turner's *Snowstorm* was called upon in 1878, during the celebrated libel trial of Whistler versus Ruskin. The painting was used as evidence specifically to underline the inconsistencies of Ruskin's passionate defence of Turner's late style and his vilification of Whistler's nocturnes, specifically, *Nocturne in Black and Gold-The Falling Rocket* of 1874.

Unsurprisingly, both the subject and the formal qualities of Whistler's painting, had the same ephemeral effects of rockets falling, evidenced by his watercolour copy of a chromolithograph after *Rockets and Blue Lights*. In passing, both the earlier *Nocturne: Blue and Gold-Old Battersea Bridge* of 1872 and even earlier

*Crepuscule in Flesh Colour and Green Valparaiso* (below) of 1866 in the Tate also appear to confirm the influence of Turner.



Which then leads on to the thorny and much debated question, as to what extent Monet and Pissarro were influenced by both Turner's late Venetian and sea paintings, as they undoubtedly had ample opportunity in late 1870/early 1871, to view examples of his work, already on view in the Turner Bequest, then still in the National Gallery.

Compared with the Impressionist style, Turner's late paintings have some similarities, their focus on light and colour and capturing an impression, but there are important differences, notably

that his brushwork remained very tight when painting details. However, it should be noted that Monet's early mature work, with the now accepted credentials of an Impressionist painting, was *La Grenouillere*, painted in 1869, that is before he would have had an opportunity to see Turner's work.

The typical features of an Impressionist painting by Monet, Pissarro, or Sisley is the uniformly animated manner of brushwork on canvas on a white/cream coloured ground, using varying brush-strokes and often unmixed primary colours, painted en plein air 'before the subject'. Yes, Turner also painted 'before the subject', but invariably in watercolours, but since the Impressionists did not commonly use this medium, comparisons of style here have less relevance. On the other hand, Turner's canvases were principally painted in his studio, usually carefully planned and executed.



*Dawn After the Wreck*, 1841, Turner, watercolour, gouache & red chalk, 37x25 cms, Courtauld

Notwithstanding, one can safely assume that Turner was an experimenter, always trying to push the boundaries of what was possible in the various mediums, be it watercolour, oils, or print making. For a long time now, a patriotic 'rose-tinted-spectacle' view of Turner, would suggest that he anticipated all the innovations of 19<sup>th</sup> century painting, that Turner was an Impressionist before Impressionism and even an Abstract painter before Abstraction. Indeed, some art historians suggest persuasively that the 20<sup>th</sup> century abstract painter Mark Rothko, with his so-called 'Colour Field' works may have been influenced by both Turner's watercolour 'Colour Beginnings' of 1819 and after and indeed the late oil paintings, especially *The Fighting Temeraire* and *Slavers*. In *Dawn After the Wreck*, in spite of its title, invented by Ruskin, this watercolour does not directly represent the aftermath of a shipwreck. It does however, imbue the scene with a sense of solitude, melancholy and even despair with the crimson clouds, "the feeble blood-stain on the sand", to quote Ruskin and the lone howling dog. The intense palette of red, blues and yellow, the moonlight on the sand, which Turner evoked by rubbing and scratching through the watercolour wash, give the work more an appearance of an exploration of

colour. Rather than illustrating an incident, the painting should be understood as an exploration of the nature and mood of the sky and sea.



*No. 3/No. 13 (Magenta, Black, Green on Orange)*, 1949, Mark Rothko, 217x165 cms, Museum of Modern Art. New York.

Rothko also was fascinated with colour, but only in so far as the intense emotional response he hoped the combinations of colour alone would elicit from the viewer. Surely it does not require much of a leap of faith to see the relationship between Turner's deep interest and passion for colour and Mark Rothko's, Colour Field painting, characterised by significant open space and an expressive use of colour, first developed in 1947. Rothko spent the remainder of his career exploring the limitless possibilities of layering variously sized and coloured rectangles onto fields of colour.

Interestingly, here again we seem to have history repeating itself, as like Vincent van Gogh, who became obsessed with the colour yellow in his paintings during the Arles period and who with episodes of manic depression and epileptic type fits, was almost certainly Bipolar, Rothko was also severely depressed in later life, eventually committing suicide in 1970, as did Vincent 80 years earlier in Auvers-sur-Oise. Which begs the question as to how it is that so many relatively unrecognised and often impoverished painters in their time, other examples being Paul Gauguin, Amedeo Modigliani and Egon Schiele, died in tragic circumstances, only to gain such fame posthumously.

Another interesting aspect of the debate on Turner's 'Modernity', is the extent to which Turner's career mirrors that of other great masters, who were active painters throughout long careers, Titian and Rembrandt being the most often quoted examples. The changes in technique which are most often associated with the mature, or late style of all three, is the much greater freedom and expressive nature of their brushwork. It was of course this lack of clarity, or indistinctiveness that characterised Turner's mature style, a feature that indeed he appeared pleased to admit being 'guilty of.'

'I don't paint so that people will understand me, I paint to show what a particular scene looks like'

'Indistinctiveness is my forte.' Response to a patron on receipt of a painting.

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

'My business is to paint what I see, not what I know is there.'

As related to in the previous narrative on Turner, the seeds of this change of style appear to have commenced after his second visit to Venice, especially in his watercolours. And it was these watercolours, the so-called 'Colour Beginnings', that seemed to signal the beginning of a change in oil technique, an intentional move away from the strictly mimetic representation, towards a style of painting governed more by the imagination, or at least a distillation of an emotional response to Nature.

Whilst obviously not a sea painting, it would be extremely remiss not to finish this exploration of Turner's career without discussing *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway*, which was first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1844, although it may have been painted earlier. It depicts an early locomotive of the Great Western Railway crossing the river Thames between Taplow and Maidenhead

on Brunel's Maidenhead Railway Bridge/Viaduct, opened in 1839, which carried the recently opened line to Bristol and Exeter. The view is towards London and the bridge seen to the left is the Taylor's road bridge, of which the foundation stone was laid in 1772. The painting is also credited for allowing a glimpse of the Romantic strife within Turner and his contemporaries over the issue of the technological advancements during the Industrial Revolution.

Once again, Turner relies on Claude for the diagonal recession from foreground to a vanishing point at the centre of the picture. However, whereas the Baroque master's intention was to use perspective to order his landscapes according to the horizon, making everything diminish towards it, holding the colour in proportion to the depth, as in for example *The Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*, Turner's exaggeratedly steep foreshortening of the viaduct, along which our eye hurtles to the horizon, is used to suggest the speed of the oncoming locomotive, headlights blazing through the driving rain.

Although the title follows the Turner pattern of 'Nature first' in his titles, the viewer is first drawn to the centre of the image, to what looks like a monstrous fiery kiln underneath the bridge and flames engulfing the apparently ecstatic figures on the far side of the river. On top of the bridge is the face of a demon with the body of a coal burning centipede, which itself looks like a line of glowing embers. Ahead of the train, hard to spot, a tiny hare at full speed, is metaphorically trying to stay ahead of 'the state of the art technology' of the mid 1800's. Oliver Meslay points out in his book, *JMW Turner: The Man Who Set Painting On Fire*, "the notion of the Sublime was no loner confined to natural phenomena, but incarnated in machines created by humanity with god-like aspirations, whose new power it served to magnify and begs to question; what should we fear more, the awe of the wild, or the annihilation of it." Sentiments very close to those of Ruskin, who was strongly opposed and fearful of the societal consequences of the Industrial Revolution.



*Rain, Steam & Speed – The Great Western Railway*, 1844, Turner, oil on canvas, 91x122 cms, N.G.

Since 1833, Turner had stayed regularly in Margate with Sophie Caroline Booth, the wife of a bargeman, where he rented rooms from her on Margate's seafront. Sophie was widowed soon after their first encounter and for the next eighteen years until he died, she secretly became Turner's most devoted companion and mistress. As his health began to fail, in 1846, he moved to live with her in Chelsea, at 6 Davis Place on Cremorne New Road, then an unfashionable riverfront location. He sent his final seascape to the Academy in 1849.

He died in his Chelsea home on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1851, aged seventy-six and very wealthy. In accordance with his wishes, he was buried in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral alongside Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Lawrence and other celebrated Academicians, 'my brothers in Art' as he described them and also near to his hero Admiral Lord Nelson. Interestingly, Sophie retained a number of paintings after Turner's death, several of which were purchased at auction by Hugh Blaker, on behalf of Gwendoline Davies, who with her sister Margaret built up a wonderful collection of principally 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century art, including works by Millet, Corot, Boudin, Carriere, Monet, Pissarro, Sisley, Degas and Rodin, now housed in the National Museum Wales in Cardiff. Blaker wrote in his diary on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1922, 'Quite an exciting afternoon at Christies. Bought Turner's *Beacon Light*': The Brocklebank collection, previous owner, Sophie Booth, for 2,500 guineas.

As previously related, Turner had already, shortly after the death of his father in 1829, drawn up his first will to the effect that his *Dido Building Carthage* and *Sun Rising Through Vapour* should be displayed side by side with Claude's *Landscape with the Marriage and Rebecca* and *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*, (N.G. Gallery 15). By linking these paintings, Turner was ensuring his association with the Baroque master, whom he revered above all others, until his dying breath. He also bequeathed small amounts to his relatives and funds to go to the Artists General Benevolent Institution, the Royal Academy and the establishment of a college for distressed landscape painters. In both 1831 and 1848, he amended his will to include his collection of finished paintings, most of which have been housed in the Clore Gallery, Tate Britain since 1987, in accordance with Turner's expressed that they be placed in a specifically dedicated building. The collection amounts to almost three hundred oil paintings, around 30,000 sketches and watercolours, including three hundred sketchbooks, arguably the most extensive collection of one artist to be found anywhere in the world.

On Turner's death, a group of relatives tried to stop probate being granted on the grounds that Turner had been of unsound mind, but they were unsuccessful. They then challenged the legality of the proposed 'decayed artist's charity.' The Court of Chancery finally approved a settlement between the executors and the claimant group in 1856. The principal provisions of the settlement were that sadly the charity was declared invalid, the relatives received Turner's money, property and engravings, but the works of art were left to the Nation. The Royal Academy also received £20,000, about £1.6 million in today's money.

In 2011, a descendant of Turner, Ray Turner, descended from the artist's cousin, criticised the failure of the Art Institutions to properly honour Turner's wishes. He did however accept that his great-great-great-grandfather was amongst 19<sup>th</sup> century family members, who successfully contested the will, but notwithstanding, in his opinion the Royal Academy, Tate Britain and the National gallery have also not strictly adhered to the terms of the will, specifically Turner's vision of provision for needy artists.

As a footnote, one is reminded here of the ongoing debate on the future of the Sir Hugh Lane Bequest, a collection of 39 paintings, which are currently shared between the National Galleries of Dublin and London. The benefactor was an Anglo-Irish art dealer and collector, who drowned on the return journey of the *Lusitania* from New York, sunk by a German submarine off the coast of County Cork in 1915, having written into his will before he left Dublin, an unwitnessed codicil, bequeathing his entire collection of 'Modern Art' to the National Gallery in Dublin, not the National Gallery as originally intended. The collection includes many iconic Impressionist paintings, most famously, Monet's *Lavacourt under Snow*, Renoir's *The Umbrellas* and Edouard Manet's *Music in the Tuileries*.