Turner and British Sea Painting: Tradition and Innovation

Background Notes

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JMW Turner. *The Battle of Trafalgar, as Seen from the Mizen Starboard Shrouds of the Victory,* painted 1806 & reworked 1808. Oil on canvas. 173 x 239 cm. Tate

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As an island nation with an expanding empire, a powerful navy and burgeoning international trade, it is hardly surprising that marine subjects played an increasingly important part in eighteenth century British painting. The impetus for its development, however, is usually traced back to Charles II's employment in the early 1670s of the Dutch artists, Willem van de Velde the Elder (1610/11–1693) and Younger (1633-1707), in the "taking and making draughts of sea-fights". The works of the van de Veldes, together with those of compatriots such as Simon de Vlieger (1601-53) and Ludolf Bakhuizen (1630-1708) and Jan van Goyen (1596-1656) were widely collected in eighteenth-century England; their skill in representing naval battles, coastal subjects, shipping and the sea in all its moods served as a model for British painters in the following century. They also set the standard against which British efforts, such as those of Samuel Scott (1702-72), were judged. Scott began his career as a painter of naval battles in the manner of the van de Veldes, but diversified to include coastal subjects, London and the Thames Estuary, and Indian ports and settlements colonised by the East India Company.

The patron base for this kind of art was principally formed by men who had made their careers at sea and who judged errors of maritime detail harshly. Nautical painting was a challenging genre that demanded a detailed knowledge of the various classes of ship, their rigging and their manoeuvres under sail. Many artists acquired this specialised knowledge while serving either in the Royal Navy or the merchant marine. Robert Cleveley (1747-1809), for example, maintained two careers: the first as a celebrated marine painter and the second as purser on various ships of the Royal Navy. The French-born artist, Dominic Serres (1722-93) also had an early career as captain of a Spanish vessel, until he was arrested by the British on a voyage to Cuba. He subsequently settled in England and eventually became Marine Painter to King George III. He and his eldest son, John Thomas Serres (1759-1825) worked for many years on a volume entitled the *Liber Nauticus and Instructor in the Art of Marine Drawing* **[fig 1],** which was eventually published in 1805, after Dominic Serres death**.** The book was lavishly illustrated with immaculate aquatints by John Thomas Serres after his father's drawings; they covered all aspects of the marine painter's art, from wave forms to the intricate details of a ship's construction. The book demonstrates just how much specialized knowledge was required of a sea painter; it also suggests that the genre had become profitable enough to attract significant numbers of aspiring painters.

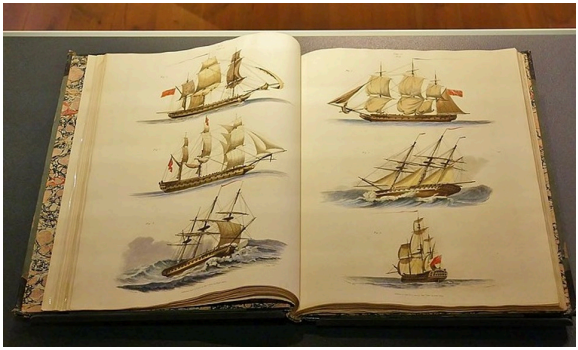

Figure 1: Dominic and John Thomas Serres. *The Liber Nauticus and Instructor in the Art of Marine Drawing* 1805.

Nautical art may have been a flourishing and distinctive genre by 1800, but it was far from universally respected. According to the Royal Academy, which ranked the various subjects of painting in a strict hierarchy according to the intellectual demands they supposedly placed on the artist, sea paintings were one of the lesser genres: in fact, they were classified as a subcategory of landscape. That said, not all academicians accepted the lowly status attributed to nautical art: it was the greatest of their number, JMW Turner, who demonstrated how powerful and compelling marine painting could be. In his hands, sea painting was raised to the status of the greatest historical paintings which, according to the Academy, were the apogee of the painter's art. The great critic, John Ruskin, claimed that Turner's later marine paintings included 'the noblest seas ever painted by man' and, over the years, few have seriously contested his judgement. One third of Turner's oil paintings are of marine or seafaring subjects, including his very first exhibited oil, shown at the Royal Academy in 1796: an extraordinarily accomplished painting which depicted *Fishermen at Sea* **[fig 2]**, by moonlight, off the Isle of Wight. Turner made significant contributions to all categories of marine art and even added some new subjects of his own devising, but he returned time and again, particularly in his earlier career, to fishing subjects. This was partly because he admired the courage with which fishermen earned their arduous and precarious livelihoods; it was also because he could study them at close quarters. Unlike his predecessors, for most of his early career he had very limited opportunities to experience life on the open waters because Britain was at war with France from 1793-1815.

The successes of the Royal Navy against the Napoleonic fleet did, however, give Turner the opportunity to try his hand at naval battles and thereby to rival his distinguished predecessor, Samuel Scott, and, more pointedly, his older contemporary and rival, Philip James de Loutherbourg (1740-1812). In 1799, like de Loutherbourg (and Robert Cleveley and Thomas Luny), Turner painted a large scale picture of Nelson's triumph over the French fleet at The Battle of the Nile, which created quite a stir when shown at the Royal Academy, but which was subsequently and inexplicably lost. His second attempt at a naval battle, this time showing Nelson's victory at Trafalgar, was, as his title suggests, a radical rethinking of the genre. He titled it *The Battle of Trafalgar, as Seen from the Mizen Starboard Shrouds of the Victory* (1806-1808) **[front cover]**. Whereas most paintings of naval battles viewed the action from a distance, Turner places the viewer at close quarters, in the thick of the battle. In spite of its drama, ingenuity and painstaking research, it found little favour with the public or the critics and it failed to find a buyer, probably because it was such a radical departure from previous depictions of a marine battle.

After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815, it became possible for British painters to travel once more on the continent. In 1828, Turner made an extended tour of Italy, in the course of which he visited Vesuvius and the Bay of Naples. He made brilliant and unexpected use of this experience the following year, when he painted and exhibited one of his most original and remarkable pictures, *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus – Homer's Odyssey* **[fig 3]**. Above a volcanic cave, on a headland in the Bay of Naples, Turner places the blinded cyclops, Polyphemus, who clutches at his eye and throws rocks blindly at Ulysses' departing vessel, while Ulysses hurls taunts and insults at his defeated foe. It is a new class of marine subject - a mythological seascape - and it was intended to demonstrate that nautical scenes could be as powerful, dramatic and intellectually complex as the historical paintings beloved of the Royal Academy. In a brilliant piece of analysis more than half a century ago, the great Turner scholar, John Gage, demonstrated that Turner intended his painting not solely as a mythological subject, but also as an allegory of the forces of nature, for it included the vulcanism of Polyphemus's cave, the chariot of the sun and the phenomenon of phosphorescence, visible in the ghostly appearance of the nereids beneath the prow of Ulysses' ship.

Figure 2: JMW Turner. *Fishermen at Sea,* 1796, oil on canvas. 91.4 x 122.2 cm. Tate

Figure 3: JMW Turner. *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus - Homer's Odyssey,* exh. 1828, oil on canvas, 132.5 x 203 cm National Gallery, London

Figure 4: Clarkson Stanfield. *Mount St Michael, Cornwall.* 1830. Oil on canvas. 153.2 x 244 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Australia.

Figure 5: JMW Turner. *Hurrah! For the Whaler Erebus. Another Fish!* exh. 1846. Oil on canvas. 90.2 x 120.6 cm. Tate

Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus was not, however, well received. The gorgeous prismatic colours of Turner's painting were viewed as 'extravagance' by contemporary critics. They preferred the topographical detail, the impeccable nautical knowledge and the sober colouring of *Mount St Michael, Cornwall* **[fig 4]***,* painted in 1830 by Clarkson Stanfield (1793 – 1867). Stanfield, who served eight years in the Royal Navy and the merchant marine, was a friend, admirer and rival of Turner. Ruskin wrote of him that "One work of Stanfield alone presents us with as much concentrated knowledge of sea and sky, as, diluted, would have lasted any one of the old masters his life".

Turner's achievements as a sea painter were all-encompassing: in the last twelve years of his life, between 1839 and 1851, he used the genre to express his horror of the slave trade in *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhon Coming On,* (1840), to lament the loss of his friend, the painter David Wilkie (1785-1841) in *Peace – Burial at Sea* (1842) and, most famously, to lament the passing of the age of sail and, indeed, of time and youth, in *The*

Fighting Temeraire (1839). It is invidious to select one aspect of his output as a demonstration of his genius, but if pushed to do so, I would point to his final set of four whaling paintings, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1845 and 1846. Whaling subjects were, before Turner, a very specialised and localised form of painting, patronised by whaling entrepreneurs and captains, and produced largely around the main British whaling ports such as Hull. In his picture, *Hurrah! For the Whaler Erebus. Another Fish!* (1846) **[fig 5]** Turner revealed a knowledge of whaling practices to equal those of John Ward (1798-1849) or Thomas Binks (1799-1852), for whom the whale fishery was a staple of their art. Turner's quartet of whaling subjects were the last original, nautically themed oil paintings that he exhibited. He died on December 19th, 1851, but his reputation as a sea painter endured. He had a notable influence upon two of his most distinguished successors in the genre: the first was the American artist, Winslow Homer (1836-1910), who travelled to England in 1881, studied Turner's works in London and then spent months living with, and painting, the fishing community of Cullercoats in North Tyneside; the second was the brilliant English marine painter, William Lionel Wyllie (1851-1931). Wyllie's admiration for Turner led him in 1905 to write a study of the artist that is rich in insights, especially (as one would expect) on the marine paintings.

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