

Turner - Seminar 1

Background Notes

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WAHG

Turner: Lecture Notes N°1

THE CONTEXT & THE ARTIST

Joseph Mallord (or Mallad) William TURNER

1775-1851

Introduction

There are two main reasons for revisiting Turner.

- Firstly his oeuvre is extensive and varied. No one lecture or exhibition can do justice to the varying aspects of his works. There is a vast and varied bibliography, thousands of learned papers and a Society exclusively devoted to studying his works. Thus in my view it should help us in our viewing if we can take an overview of the main points made in order to try and understand what Turner was trying to achieve.
- Secondly Tate Britain is holding a major Exhibition of his works but that concentrates on only one aspect of his oeuvre namely his relationship with Past Masters. Such a selection is understandable in view of his enormous legacy of work. The disadvantage is that it tends to neglect other aspects of his work.

The greatest British painter?

Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) is probably the greatest painter that England has ever produced. Both profoundly original and astonishingly prolific he helped to transform landscape painting into an art form of enormous range and power. Thus elevating landscape to the status in which history painting was held. Furthermore he and Thomas Girtin developed the expressive power of watercolour to the extent that it could vie with oils as a serious medium.

He explored a wide range of genres—from landscapes to historical subjects and scenes from his imagination—and was a prolific and innovative painter and watercolourist as well as a printmaker. Upon meeting Turner in 1813, his contemporary and erstwhile rival John Constable (1776–1837) wrote, "*He is uncouth but has a wonderful range of mind.*"

His prime motivation

Although, he initially became known for his topographical watercolours, which he began exhibiting at the Royal Academy in London in 1790 his prime motivation was his aspiration to elevate landscape to the status in which history painting was held. Furthermore he posited himself as the heir to the classical landscape tradition, as embodied in the pictures of Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) and, especially, Claude Lorrain (ca. 1604–1682), whose work he emulated throughout his career.

By the 1840s his increasingly abstract images, in which forms were subsumed by light and colour, were mockingly dismissed by critics as "*the fruits of a diseased eye and a reckless hand.*" However the influential critic John Ruskin (1819–1900) took up Turner as a special interest and proclaimed his greatness as a landscape painter, thereby contributing to the artist's fame.

Turner gained notoriety for his bravura displays during the Varnishing Days that preceded the opening of the annual Royal Academy exhibitions, when he reworked his pictures as they hung on the wall.

After a turbulent career, Turner's reputation waned, and he died in relative obscurity in 1851. But his reputation is now greater than ever. He was an inspiration to the Impressionists and in 1906, when a group of his late, unfinished oils was first exhibited, the

inherent abstraction of his work fascinated modernist critics and he was *reborn* as an avant-garde artist.

His art and legacy continue to evoke tradition and modernity. He stipulated in his Will that two of his paintings hang beside the work of Claude Lorrain in London's National Gallery and left the bulk of his work to the nation, which are now mainly held in the Clore Gallery, Tate Britain, and he is the inspiration for the Turner Prize, the award for contemporary art given by the Tate.

Perhaps no painter in the history of western art evolved over a greater visual span than Turner. If a comparison is made between one of his earliest exhibited masterworks, such as the fairly low-keyed *St Anselm's Chapel*, Canterbury Cathedral of 1794, with a vividly bright picture dating from the 1840s, such as *The Falls of the Clyde*, it seems hard to credit that the two images stemmed from the same hand, so vastly do they differ in appearance.

Yet this apparent disjunction can easily obscure the profound continuity that underpins Turner's art, just as the dazzling colour, high tonality and loose forms of the late images can lead to the belief that the painter shared the aims of the French Impressionists or even that he wanted to be some kind of abstractionist, both of which notions are untrue. Instead, that continuity demonstrates how single-mindedly Turner pursued his early goals, and how magnificently he finally attained them.

To trace those aims and their achievement by means of a selective number of works, as well as briefly to recount the artist's life, is the underlying purpose of this seminar.

The historical context.

Turner painted from the end of the eighteenth century to the mid of the ninetieth century. A period initially dominated by the Napoleonic wars which restricted the movement of British people to

the continent. Fortunately this period coincided with a vast improvement in travelling condition within the UK, mainly due to the expansion of toll roads and later through the introduction of Railways. Thus the British explored and were interested in their own country. After 1815 the British once again travelled to the Continent. For Turner Switzerland and Venice held particular fascination. The former provided him with sublime views and the latter because he was particular interested in the light and the contrasts that it played upon the water and the land.

The artistic context

It was an age when watercolours became popular and widely practised by professional and amateur alike. Turner was a master of this genre and this will be discussed later. But for the moment I want to remind you of the then prevailing aesthetic artistic theory regarding landscape.

Interest in landscape painting and in looking at the landscape itself grew rapidly through the second half of the eighteenth century. Definitions of types of landscape or view, seen from an aesthetic or artistic point of view, followed.

At one extreme was the **SUBLIME** (awesome sights such as great mountains) at the other the **BEAUTIFUL**, (the most peaceful, even pretty sights). In between came the **PICTURESQUE**, views seen as being artistic but containing elements of wildness or irregularity.

The meanings of THE BEAUTIFUL, THE PICTURESQUE and THE SUBLIME were based on the theory of art put forward by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* published in 1757. In summary Edmund Burke defined

The Beautiful = Nature arranged to reflect the Classical –
Claudian - balance

The Picturesque = Nature perceived as a picture

The Sublime = Nature with a sense of tension

The Picturesque was not coherently defined but was endlessly discussed. It was a set of ideas about, and attitudes to, actual landscape, landscape paintings and landscape gardening. It was frequently characterised by a preoccupation with the pictorial values of architecture and landscape in combination with each other. It was an aesthetic marked by pleasing variety, irregularity, asymmetry, and interesting textures. For example medieval ruins in a natural landscape were thought to be quintessentially picturesque.

Burke amplified his meaning of *the sublime* as an artistic effect that produces the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling. Burke wrote '*whatever is in any sort terrible or is conversant about terrible objects or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the Sublime*'

AN OVERVIEW OF TURNER'S LIFE AS A PAINTER

Turner was born at 21 Maiden Lane, Covent Garden, London, sometime in late April or early May 1775. The area was well populated with printmakers, artists and suppliers of their needs such as paints, canvasses etc. Turner was baptised as Joseph Mallord William but was initially known as William. His father was a wig-maker who had taken to cutting hair after wigs began to go out of fashion in the 1770's. He early recognized his young son's artistic talents and displayed his early drawing efforts in the window of his shop selling them at prices ranging from 1 to 3 shillings. Thus from a very early age William realised that his artistic efforts had a monetary value.

Little is known about his mother, Mary (née Marshall), other than that 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 afflictions, in 1785 Turner was sent to stay with an uncle, a butcher in Brentford. It was here he first went to school. A year later Turner was staying with his fishmonger uncle at Margate. Some drawings from this stay have survived and they are remarkably precocious, especially in their grasp of the rudiments of perspective. Aged 12 he first signed and dated a watercolour: a copy of the engraving of *Bacon's Tower, Oxford*.

Back in London he was employed by a number of architects and in the summer of 1789 he stayed with another Uncle, Joseph Marshall at Oxford where he filled a sketch book with pencil drawings of *buildings and views of Oxford* some of which he completed as watercolours. It was one of the first examples of Turner of rapidly sketching landscapes which he later worked up into watercolours; a practice that he continued throughout his life.

He then received a certain amount of instruction in the architectural drawing-office of *Thomas Malton*. Turner never lost this architectural drawing experience which he put to good use in his later works such as the watercolours *Interior of a Prison* and *Fonthill Abbey* as well in his oil paintings such as *Dido building Carthage*. Turner also received some instruction from the watercolour artist *Edward Dayes*. But he was never apprenticed to Dayes or to anyone else

In December 1789 aged 14 Turner was admitted as a probationer 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. Turner studied first in

the Cast Academy for three years and then in the Life Class between 1792 and 1797. In March 1793 he won the Society of Arts prize for landscape drawing.

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. During Friday evenings he met various artists (including another leading young water colourist, Thomas Girtin) at the home of *Dr Thomas Monro*, the medical consultant. It was here that Turner's mother was later to be treated and where she subsequently died. Monro owned an extensive artistic collection at 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 colourist, and the dramatic way that Turner elaborated the human dimensions of the scenes he represented. 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). Yet from Turner's mid-teens onwards, one overriding influence came to shape his thinking about his art. This was the influence of Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Poetic Painting

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 the 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*'

Turner applied this doctrine not only in History painting but in Landscape painting thus raising it to the level of History painting. Like the latter he imbued Landscape painting with intellect and imagination. Like the poet he engages both the viewers' hearts and minds.

Topography

Furthermore his early lessons in topography stayed with Turner throughout his life. His first exhibited paintings were carefully delineated watercolours of recognizable English

monuments and landscapes. Although Turner developed an extensive visual vocabulary that ranged far beyond precise renderings, first-hand observations remained crucial to his working method.

Visual Records

Over the course of five decades, he filled hundreds of sketchbooks with visual records of scores of tours through England, Scotland, and Wales, and around the Continent to Belgium, France, Holland, Italy, the Rhineland, Switzerland and elsewhere. Turner relied on these on-site sketches to inform even his most highly imaginative paintings. For instance, *The Grand Canal, Venice* exhibited at the RA in 1835, combines multiple viewpoints to present an impossible view of several Venetian landmarks.

In 1791 Turner made the first of his great many sketching tours. During the 1790's he ranged alone 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 painted 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.

Dynamics of natural phenomenon

In 1796 he exhibited his first oil painting *Fisherman at Sea*. It demonstrates how fully the painter had already understood 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. By 1801, when Turner exhibited *'The Bridgewater Seapiece', or Dutch Boats in a Gale* his grasp of such dynamics was complete. By that time also the painter had simultaneously begun to master the essential dynamics of cloud

motion, thereby making apparent the fundamental truths of meteorology, a comprehension he fully attained by the mid-1800's. Only his trees remained somewhat mannered during the decade following 1800.

The Royal Academician

In 1802 Turner, aged 27 was elected a Royal Academician. It was also the 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 Alps, and that was where he made for in the summer of 1802, exploring some of the Swiss western cantons and the northern reaches of the Val d'Aosta before making his way back up to Schaffhausen on the Rhine and thence to Basel and Paris. He travelled via Calais. ***Calais Pier, with French Poissards preparing for Sea: an English Packet Arriving*** is based on a real-life event. On a sketch for this picture he noted that the seas had been so rough he was '*nearly swampt*'. He aimed for the Alps where he captured sublime views in his sketch books to be worked on at a later date. The oil painting ***Snow-storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps*** epitomises such a transformation. Whilst the recorded images provided him with the raw material for such sublime paintings as ***The fall of an avalanche in the Grisons*** exhibited in 1812,¹ Yet there is no evidence that he visited the area represented in this painting, or that he actually witnessed an

¹ Indeed the stimulus for creating this scene may have been reports of an avalanche that occurred at Selva in the Grisons in December 1808, killing twenty-five people. Yet

avalanche, Far from attempting reportage, Turner creates an almost abstract scene of overwhelming elemental forces. On his journey back to England he visited the Louvre where he admired old masters

In 1805 he exhibited *The Shipwreck* at his Turner Gallery. It was acquired for £317. It was the first oil to be engraved and the first large single plate after Turner's work. Impressions were sold to 130 subscribers.

In 1807 he was appointed RA's Professor of Perspective and he brought out the first number of his *Liber Studiorum*. This was central to Turner's career as the most personal and carefully conceived series of prints in his entire oeuvre that acted as the rest of his sketch books as an essential reference tool .We shall be discussing this work later.

Between 1809 and 1813 Turner gradually attained a profound understanding of arboreal forms, and thereafter replaced a rather old-fashioned mannerism in his depictions of trunks, boughs and foliage with a greater sinuousness of line and an increased sense of the structural complexity of such forms. By 1815 that transformation was complete, and over the following decades, in works such as *Crook of Lune*, looking towards Hornby Castle and the two views of *Mortlake Terrace* dating from 1826 and 1827, Turner's trees would become perhaps the loveliest, most florescent and expressive natural organisms to be encountered anywhere in art.

After *Waterloo* Turner in 1817 visited the Netherlands and the Rhineland and in 1819 he first visited Venice, Rome and Naples and was made an honorary member of the Academy of St Luke. The clear light and bright colours of Italy fascinated him, His watercolours, especially those painted in Venice show him using pure colour without the conventional indication of shadows by dark grey or brown tones.

The 1820's show a great advance in the technique of his oil sketches. These show a much greater range, even within individual sketches, between thin washes and a thick impasto which is often scored into by the brush handle or even Turner's thumbnail to suggest details of form. A second visit to Rome in 1828-9 resulted in still bolder compositions in pure colour and the sketches on coarse canvas seem to have been tryouts for larger compositions for example *Ulysses deriding Polyphemus*.

On his second visit to Venice, in September 1833, he created a series of views of the city that betray on the one hand an ardent interest in recording what he saw and, on the other, a Romantic sensibility that suffused his pictures with a sense of the grandeur of nature and of its magnificent light and colour. *The Grand Canal, Venice* 1835 is based in part on a pencil drawing made during Turner's first trip to Venice in August 1819 and combines two viewpoints along the Grand Canal. It was shown with four other works in May 1835 at the Royal Academy, where it was well received as one of his "*most agreeable works*."

Many of Turner's figure paintings are associated with Petworth where, particularly in the years 1828 to 1837, Turner was a frequent guest of the third Earl of Egremont. The series culminated in '*Interior at Petworth*', possibly painted under the impact of Egremont's death in 1837, in which the forms are dissolved in an onrush of light. These visits also produced what are perhaps Turner's most idyllic landscapes, the long oblong compositions designed to be set into the panelling of the dining-room at Petworth though replaced a year or two later by the more finished paintings still in the house.

In 1843 returning from an extended sojourn in the Swiss Alps, Turner approached his agent with the novel idea of soliciting patrons for large watercolours to be based on sketches from the trip. *The*

Lake of Zug, was commissioned by Hugh Andrew Johnstone Munro of Novar (1797–1864) as part of the scheme, and was later owned by John Ruskin. It exhibits the technical prowess that made Turner controversial and celebrated. The monumental forms of the lake and mountains reveal successive layers of colour—applied in fluent watercolours, drier washes, and semi-opaque mixtures—while the hazy mist and glittering reflections were scraped out of already painted areas, recovering the smooth white surface of the paper.

Landscapes imbued with emotional and intellectual messages

By the 1840's Turner was increasingly interested in using landscape and the effects of light to demonstrate that landscape, like history painting could express emotions and embody interpretation of life and convey a moral or intellectual message. Two paintings illustrate this point. In the first *War, the Exile and the Rock Limpet* Napoleon, the man who once ruled Europe is reduced to a costumed doll, his reflection conversing in a puddle with a rock limpet. The dying sun dominates the centre of the picture and symbolizes world chaos, in which history is played out as the downfall of an individual. Man's striving for power is presented by Turner as an ultimate futility and he illustrates that greatness and absurdity, importance and banality coincide. Whilst *Peace - Burial at Sea* is a tribute and a dignified memorial of the death of a friend and contemporary painter.

Turner's debt to Reynolds

There are so many aspects of Turner work that cry out to be studied but I wish to conclude this seminar with observations concerning Turner's debt to Reynolds which at first sight might seem odd. Reynolds accorded landscape painting a rather low place in his artistic scheme of things quite simply because in his view landscapists were mainly beholden to chance: if they visited a place for example when it happened to be raining, than 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 in many 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 Turner 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 exercised his unusually retentive memory, which was an important tool for the idealizing artist, in as much 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. This is the reason why I believe that a view of some of these sketchbooks is important in understanding Turner.

They also reveal the various insights into his comprehension of forms, those essentials elements that determine why a building is shaped the way it is in order to stand up, why a rockface or mountain appears as it does structurally, what forces water to move as it must, what determines the way clouds are shaped and move, and what impels plants and trees to grow as they do. No artist has ever matched Turner in the insight he brought to these processes. This was recognised even before his death in 1851 by some astute critics, especially John Ruskin who in his writings extensively explored the artist's grasp of the '*truths*' of architecture, geology, the sea, the sky and the other principal components of a landscape or marine picture. But there was another essential element. Turner believed that landscapes could convey a full range of artistic, historical, and emotional meanings and thereby merited to be considered on par with history painting. This ladies and gentlemen is why Turner is such a great painter.

SUMMARY OF TURNER'S LIFE AS A PAINTER

- Born in Maiden Lane, Convent Garden - son of William Turner, a London barber and wig maker.
- Talent was precocious - sold drawings at a very early age; From about 1786 aged 11 gained some experience in colouring antiquarian engravings and received some instruction in the architectural drawing office of Thomas Malton and from the watercolour artist Edward Dayes
- 1789 entered Academy schools aged 14 & in 1790 exhibited first drawing *View of Lambeth Palace* at RA
- 1793 awarded Society of Arts' prize for landscape drawing
- 1796 first oil exhibited '*Fishermen at Sea*'. Thereafter he exhibited regularly at RA
- 1799 appointed ARA
- 1802 elected RA, aged 27. Visits France & Switzerland
- 1807 appointed RA's Professor of Perspective. Brings out No.1 *Liber Studiorum*
- 1817 visits Belgium, The Netherlands and the Rhineland
- 1819 first visit to Italy. Made Honorary member of Roman Academy of St Luke
- 1825 tour of the Netherlands
- 1828/9 visits France & Italy
- 1839 tours Belgium
- 1840 visits Venice again
- 1842 visits Switzerland again
- 1845 appointed Deputy President RA
- Died 19 December 1851, aged 76; buried in St Paul's Cathedral.