

# JMW Turner and Fire

## *Background Notes*

Professor Sam Smiles - 4 September 2017



JMW Turner '*Vesuvius in Eruption*', 1817-1820. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection



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## JMW Turner and Fire

Turner's interest in fire was a life-long preoccupation. As early as 1792 the seventeen year-old Turner began his exhibiting career at the Royal Academy with a watercolour, *The Pantheon, the Morning after the Fire* and as late as the 1840s a number of his most significant oil paintings included fire as a central subject. This is not to say that Turner's output was dominated by pictures of fire – a mind as voracious as his could not be content with a narrow specialisation – but it was a theme to which he often returned. It allowed him to explore a large variety of subjects, ancient and modern, natural and industrial, peace and war. Fire was also, of course, very important to the artist as one of the elements and especially as a source of light. Although the sun is rightly seen as Turner's abiding fascination in respect of the origin of light and colour, fire also allowed him to pursue these interests throughout his career.



JMW Turner *Limekiln at Coalbrookdale*, c. 1797. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

Turner's understanding of nature as a dynamic system was expressed directly through the representation of fire, whose ever-changing shape and colour was as mutable as the sea. Hand in hand with this interest in fire as a natural phenomenon was his study of fire as a destructive force that threatened human endeavour. Invoking notions of the Sublime, his scenes of fire-born destruction are often almost apocalyptic in their rendering of catastrophe. However, in addition to paintings of fire as a natural power, Turner also painted numerous subjects of fire disciplined by human ingenuity, for good or ill. There are numerous subjects that show fire in its

domestic setting, as a source of comfort and the focus for social interchange. Other pictures examine the productive use of fire in commercial contexts as Britain's industrial revolution evolved, with pictures of lime-kilns and iron foundries, the coal trade and steam-powered transport for navigation and the railway. The man-made equivalent to the apocalyptic Sublime is, therefore, the harnessing of fire's energy to benefit mankind. At the same time, living through the Napoleonic wars in his early maturity (1803-15), Turner was very conscious of how man's ingenuity had used fire for destructive ends in instruments of modern warfare by land and sea.



JMW Turner *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight*, 1835. National Gallery, Washington

This range of subject-matter is impressive, demonstrating yet again how capacious was Turner's approach to landscape painting. But beyond these types of fire we should bear in mind how the business of representing fire could help Turner in his quest to understand light and colour and then to devise a way of painting that adequately captured these qualities. As is well known, many of Turner's critics found this method of working uncomfortable and from the late 1820s, some began to use fire metaphors to describe it: 'So red-hot a mass has seldom been applied to our visual organs;'<sup>1</sup> 'On land as well as on water, Mr. Turner is determined not merely to shine, but to blaze and dazzle;'<sup>2</sup> 'its glare is scorching; we hope the Academy is insured—or perhaps the picture is painted on canvas of asbestos;'<sup>3</sup> and, commenting on Turner's painting of the fires that consumed the Houses of Parliament, 'The brilliancy of TURNER'S picture is not owing to the mere fiery hue...TURNER'S picture transcends its neighbours as the sun eclipses the moon and

stars. The burst of light in the body of flame, and the flood of fiery radiance that forms a luminous atmosphere around all the objects near, cannot be surpassed for truth as well as burning brightness.<sup>4</sup> His practice as a painter thus developed into one in which rather than merely representing phenomena as a visual spectacle he was using pigment to produce something close to a direct experience of them. As Lawrence Gowing memorably noted: 'Turner was now concerned only with the inherent light that colour generates within a picture, To set it free he needed the homogenous, diffuse consistency in which paint retains its own objective value.'<sup>5</sup>

We might summarise all this by saying that Turner began his exhibiting career by showing the aftermath of a fire; he ended it by harnessing fire as a means of communication.



JMW Turner, *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, 16<sup>th</sup> October 1834*, 1835. Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio

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1. *Literary Gazette*, 9 May 1829, p.307.
  2. *Literary Gazette*, 14 May 1828, p.315.
  3. *The Spectator*, 12 May 1832, p. 21.
  4. *The Spectator*, 14 February 1835, p. 20.
  5. Lawrence Gowing, *Turner: Imagination and Reality*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966, p. 31

## List of slides (all in Tate's collection unless otherwise indicated)

1. *Cottage Interior by Firelight* c.1790–1; w/c
2. *The Pantheon, the Morning after the Fire*, 1792; w/c
3. *The Interior of the Ruined Oxford Street Pantheon*, 1792; w/c
4. *Llanstephan Castle by Moonlight, with a Kiln in the Foreground*, c.1795; w/c
5. *Limekiln at Coalbrookdale*, c. 1797; oil. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection
6. *Fishermen at Sea*. 1796; oil
7. *Lecture Diagram 65: Interior of a Prison*, c.1810. w/c
8. *Lecture Diagram 66: Interior of a Prison (after Giovanni Battista Piranesi)*, c.1810. w/c
9. *The Destruction of Sodom*, ? exhibited 1805; oil
10. *The Burning of Rome*, c. 1834-40; w/c
11. *The Eruption of the Soufrière Mountains in the Island of St Vincent, 30 April 1812, from a Sketch Taken at the Time by Hugh P. Keane, Esqre*, 1815; oil. Victoria Gallery and Museum, University of Liverpool
12. *Vesuvius in Eruption*, c. 1817 – 1820; w/c. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection
13. *Bay of Naples (Vesuvius Angry)*, c.1817, w/c. Williamson Art Gallery & Museum, Birkenhead- and *Vesuvius*, engraved by Thomas Jeavons for *Friendship's Offering*, 1830
14. *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus*, 1829; oil. National Gallery
15. *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Burning Fiery Furnace*, 1832, oil; -and George Jones *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, 1832; oil
16. *Messieurs les Voyageurs on their return from Italy (par la diligence) in a snow drift upon Mount Tarrar - 22nd of January, 1829*; w/c. British Museum

17. *A Bedroom with a Fire Burning and a Woman Reading to a Man Lying on a Sofa*, 1827; w/c
18. *The Vicar on the Hearth Rug*, 1827; w/c
19. *Men Chatting around a Fireplace*; w/c
20. *A Bedroom with a Fire Burning, and a Bed with Yellow Curtains*, 1827; w/c
21. *Fire-Light and Lamp-Light*, 1827; w/c
22. *A Study of Firelight*, c. 1840; w/c
23. *Fire at Sea*; engraved James T. Willmore in *The Keepsake*, 1836
24. *A Ship on Fire, with Small Boats (?)*, c.1845; w/c, from *The Channel Sketchbook*. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection
25. *Destruction of both Houses of Parliament by Fire Oct' 16, 1834*; engraved James T. Willmore in *The Keepsake*, 1836
26. *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament*, c.1834–5; w/c
27. *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, 16 October 1834*, 1835; oil. Cleveland Museum of Art
28. *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons*, 1835; oil. Philadelphia Museum of Art
29. *A Disaster at Sea*, c.1835; oil.
30. *Prague, Kosciusko*, 1835; w/c. National Galleries of Scotland – and *Prague Kosciusko*, engraved Edward Goodall for *Campbell's Poetical Works*, 1837
31. *Vignette Study for Kosciusko*, for *Campbell's Poetical Works*, c.1835–6; w/c
32. *Vignette Study, possibly of a Conflagration*; for *Campbell's Poetical Works*, c.1835–36
33. *Fire at the Grand Storehouse of the Tower of London*, 1841; w/c
34. *Fire at the Grand Storehouse of the Tower of London*, 1841; w/c

35. *Fire at the Grand Storehouse of the Tower of London*, 1841; w/c
36. *Fire at the Grand Storehouse of the Tower of London*, 1841; w/c
37. *Fire at the Grand Storehouse of the Tower of London*, 1841; w/c
38. *The Hero of a Hundred Fights* (c.1800–10; reworked and exhibited 1847); oil
39. *The Interior of a Cannon Foundry*, 1797–8; w/c
40. *Shields, on the River Tyne*, 1823; w/c
41. *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight*, 1835; oil. National Gallery, Washington
42. *Dudley*, 1832; w/c. Lady Lever Art Gallery
43. *Dudley, Worcestershire* engraved Robert Wallis, for *Picturesque Views in England and Wales*, 1835
44. *Whalers (Boiling Blubber) Entangled in Flaw Ice, Endeavouring to Extricate Themselves*, 1846; oil
45. *Burning Blubber*, from the *Whalers Sketchbook*, c 1844-5; w/c
46. *Peace - Burial at Sea*, 1842; oil – and *War. The Exile and the Rock Limpet*, 1842; oil
47. *The Field of Waterloo*, 1818; oil
48. *The Field of Waterloo. From Hougoumont*, engraved by Edward Finden, 1833 as title-vignette to vol.XIV of the *Life and Works of Byron*
49. *Field of Waterloo*, engraved William Miller 1834-6, for *Scott's Prose Works*
50. *Leeds*, 1816; w/c. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection
51. *A Country Blacksmith Disputing upon the Price of Iron, and the Price Charged to the Butcher for Shoeing his Poney*, 1807; oil

52. *St Mawes*, c. 1823; w/c. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection
53. *Rain, Steam and Speed, The Great Western Railway*, 1844; oil. National Gallery, London
54. *Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, 1842; oil
55. *Nottingham*, c.1831; w/c. Nottingham Castle Museum & Art Gallery
56. *The Northampton Election, 6 December 1830*, c.1830-1; w/c
57. *The Fall of Anarchy* c.1833-4; oil

### **Further Reading**

James Hamilton, *Turner and the Scientists*, London: Tate Publishing, 1998

Inés Richter-Musso and Ostrud Westheider, *Turner and the Elements*, exhibition catalogue, Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2011

William Rodner, *J.M.W. Turner: Romantic Painter of the Industrial Revolution*, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1997

The Tate website has detailed information on most of the Turner pictures in its own collection which can be accessed by entering the painting's title in the search box.

The logo for the Winchester Art History Group (WAHG) consists of the letters 'WAHG' in a bold, green, blocky font with a white outline.

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