

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

500.n.

Joseph Mallord William Turner was already fascinated by the possibilities of landscape painting from an early age. He studied nature around him on numerous walks and outings, but also modelled himself on famous artists, such as Claude Lorrain. Apart from classical and contemporary history, biblical and mythical themes, as well as knowledge of the natural sciences, influenced his landscapes. Turner's use of colour, light and atmosphere amazed and provoked his contemporaries. He increasingly pushed the boundaries of what could be depicted. Posterity has celebrated his prodigious modernity.

Our exhibition aims to explore the question of how the artist trained and invented himself and honed his image. The presentation is structured chronologically:

On the left side of the Kunstbau, we show how Turner presented himself in public: this includes works he exhibited in London at the Royal Academy or in his private gallery. He became known throughout Europe through his prints, which can be seen under the Rotunda. Turner's public appearances also included his tenure as Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy, which we present in the 'Auditorium', situated in the middle of the exhibition space.

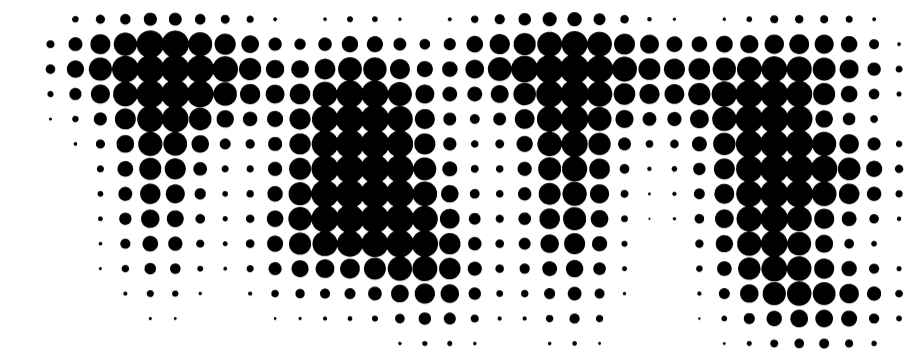
Various studies, experiments, watercolours and paintings that Turner did not show publicly during his lifetime are on display in the right-hand half of the Kunstbau and in the cabinets. It is still a matter of debate today whether some of these works are unfinished or whether he withheld them in his studio for other reasons.

How Turner was perceived in the art discourse of his time and by subsequent generations provides another focus of the exhibition. Today, Turner is considered by many to be an important precursor of modern painting. Some even see him as the first abstract artist in art history per se. Others stress that he is very much a nineteenth-century artist and take the overall historical context into account. We are also interested in the chequered history of Turner's reception, which we address specifically in the Rotunda.

Almost all the works exhibited here are the property of the so-called Turner Bequest, which he magnanimously bequeathed to the British public in his will. It is administered by Tate in London. Turner was very keen to grant both students and the public access to his work and thereby indelibly inscribe landscape painting in British art history. Indeed, towards the end of the nineteenth century, landscape painting became a subject in its own right at the Royal Academy.

Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus
und Kunstbau München
/ Lenbachhaus Munich
28. Oktober 2023 – 10. März 2024
28 October 2023 – 10 March 2024

Die Ausstellung wurde vom Lenbachhaus
in Kooperation mit Tate, London,
organisiert.
*The exhibition was organized
by Lenbachhaus in cooperation with Tate,
London.*



Weitere Leihgabe / *A further loan*
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen,
Neue Pinakothek, München

Mit freundlicher Unterstützung des
Förderverein Lenbachhaus e.V.
*With generous support of
Förderverein Lenbachhaus e.V.*

Medienpartner / *Media partner*

arte

Kurator*innen / *Curators*
Karin Althaus, Nicholas Maniu

Direktor / *Director*
Matthias Mühling

Geschäftsleiter / *Administrative Director*
Hans-Peter Schuster

Kommunikation / *Communication*
Claudia Weber, Anke Gröner,
Ekaterina Mahboub, Valerie Maul,
Beate Lanzinger, Laura Diel,
Christof Viernstein

Organisation
Stefan Kaltenbach

Museumsdienste / *Technical Services*
Andreas Hofstett, Stefan Terhorst,
Sabine Winzenhöler

Restaurierung / *Conservation*
Elline von Monschaw, Franziska Motz,
Daniel Oggenfuss, Isa Päßgen,
Roxanne Schindler

Verwaltung / *Administration*
Sabine Kippes, Siegfried Häusler,
Birgit Kammerer, Judith Kellermann,
Thomas Staska

Vermittlung / *Education*
Mona Feyrer

Architektur und Gestaltung /
Architecture and Design
Buero Kofink Schels, München

Grafische Gestaltung / *Graphic Design*
HERBURG WEILAND, München

Licht / *Lighting*
Bernd König, München

Farben / *Colours*
Farrow & Ball

Direktor / *Director*
Matthias Mühling

Geschäftsleiter / *Administrative Director*
Hans-Peter Schuster

Sammlungsleiterinnen /
Heads of Collections
Karin Althaus, Eva Huttenlauch,
Melanie Vietmeier

Kuratorin für Gegenwartskunst /
Curator Contemporary Art
Stephanie Weber

Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin /
Associate Curator
Susanne Böller

Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin im
Rahmen der UKRAINE-Förderlinie der Ernst
von Siemens Kunststiftung zusammen mit
der Hermann Reemtsma Stiftung /
*Associate Curator financed through the
UKRAINE Funding Line at the Ernst
von Siemens Foundation for the Arts and
the Hermann Reemtsma Foundation*
Oksana Oliinyk

Provenienzforschung, Sammlungsarchiv /
Provenance Research, Collections Archive
Sarah Bock, Franziska Eschenbach,
Lisa Kern

Wissenschaftliches Volontariat /
Assistant Curators
Nicholas Maniu, Johannes Stanislaus

Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin,
Assistentin des Direktors /
Associate Curator, Assistant to the Director
Elisabeth Giers

Bibliothek / *Library*
Adrian Djukic

Bildung und Vermittlung / *Education*
Mona Feyrer, Annabell Lachner, N.N.

Volontariat Bildung und Vermittlung /
Trainee Education
N.N.

Registrier*innen / *Registrars*
Stefan Kaltenbach, Susanne Nolting,
Karola Rattner

Restaurierung / *Conservation*
Elline von Monschaw, Franziska Motz,
Daniel Oggenfuss, Isa Päßgen

Volontariat Restaurierung /
Trainee Conservation
Roxanne Schindler

Kommunikation / *Communication*
Claudia Weber, Beate Lanzinger,
Ekaterina Mahboub, Jacqueline Seeliger

Volontariat Kommunikation /
Trainee Communication
Laura Diel

Fotoatelier / *Photo Studio*
Simone Gänsheimer, Ernst Jank,
Lukas Schramm

Verwaltung / *Administration*
Sabine Kippes, Siegfried Häusler,
Birgit Kammerer, Judith Kellermann,
Thomas Staska

Museumsdienste / *Technical Services*
Andreas Hofstett, Stefan Terhorst,
Sabine Winzenhöler

TURNER AS AN EXHIBITION ARTIST

Turner entered the Royal Academy of Art in London as a student in 1789 at the age of fourteen. After showing watercolours for the first time at the annual exhibition in 1790, he was represented at almost every exhibition staged by the Academy until the end of his life. In 1802 and still only twenty-six years old, Turner became the youngest full member elected to the Royal Academy up until that point in time.

Exhibitions were an important 'public-relations' vehicle for Turner. The well-attended shows were noticed by a wide audience and discussed in the press. They were also particularly important for sales and networking with clients and potential sponsors.

Turner mainly showed landscape paintings — a genre that was not part of the Academy's curriculum at the time. It was ranked well below history painting, which was considered the highest rung of the aesthetic hierarchy. He liked to reference famous role models in his works — to critical acclaim. They include the classical seventeenth-century landscapes of Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin, as well as seascapes by Willem van de Velde the Younger, vedute by the Venetian Canaletto, as well as Philip James de Loutherbourg's romantic scenes and epic depictions of naval battles. Turner's depictions drew on the discourse surrounding contemporary art theory, such as Edmund Burke's description of natural forces as 'sublime'. His history paintings, such as *The Tenth Plague of Egypt*, are distinguished precisely by their expansive and sublime landscape settings.

From 1798 onward, it was possible to supplement the paintings submitted for the Academy's exhibition catalogues with texts. Turner chose quotations from poets, such as John Milton or Lord Byron, to accompany his works. He also quoted excerpts from his own epic poem titled *The Fallacies of Hope* on numerous occasions. To this day, it is not known whether the poem existed as a work in its own right beyond the context of the catalogue entries.

In 1804, after disputes with individual members of the Royal Academy, Turner opened a private gallery in his residence (Harley Street, later Queen Anne Street) in the heart of London. Critical voices, such as Turner's rival John Constable, found fault with his painting style, calling it 'extravagant' and 'inattentive to nature'. During this period, the nickname 'Over-Turner' was coined to allude to Turner's supposedly 'over-the-top' style of painting.

SKETCHBOOKS, DRAWINGS, WATERCOLOURS, AND OIL SKETCHES

Even as a young man, Turner modelled himself on famous artists from the past and worked as a draughtsman for architects and topographical artists. However, the study of nature was foremost in his work. As a youth, he visited relatives in the country and at the seaside – in then rural Brentford, Margate and Sunningwell. From 1792 onward, he undertook long journeys throughout England, Wales and Scotland, constantly sketching everything he beheld. Many surviving sketchbooks, works on paper and oil studies bear witness to this industrious activity. Turner mostly drew in pencil when outdoors, but he also made watercolours and oil sketches in the open air. He would subsequently work on these studies in the studio.

Turner was interested in motifs that transcended the popular taste of his time: he discovered the rugged, mountainous landscape in Wales in 1792 and veritably annexed it for art. From 1805 onward, he regularly took boat trips on the Thames, which he documented in numerous oil studies. He painted some of them while actually on the boat, capturing views seen from the river. Turner used small wooden panels for these oil studies or canvases, which he would later cut up. One of Turner's contemporaries reported admiringly:

'[Turner] had a boat in Richmond [...]. While on his boat, he painted on a large canvas directly from nature. Until one has seen these sketches one knows nothing of Turner's ability.'

Turner was fond of experimenting with unusual forms and effects. One example is his 'Transparency', which was designed with transparent and opaque areas on both sides of the sheet and transforms into an evening twilight landscape as soon as a light source is placed behind it.

Turner carried out his earliest oil paintings in accordance with academic practice, using thick layers of oil paint on a dark ground. From 1802 onward, he drew on his experience from studying watercolour techniques and applied the oil paint to canvases primed with white or off-white pigment. This enabled him to achieve similar translucent effects as he did in his watercolours – an important step on his way to becoming a 'painter of light'.

Turner experimented with and honed various techniques in his studies. They were somewhat private in character and were largely inaccessible to anyone in his studio.

TURNER'S TRAVELS AND HIS STUDY OF NATURE

Turner was born into troubled times. The year in which he was born – 1775 – coincided with the outbreak of the American War of Independence, waged against the colonial rule of Great Britain. After the declaration of the French Republic in 1792, Europe was engulfed in the extensive French Revolutionary wars waged between France and several European states including Great Britain. The Napoleonic Wars ensued and continued until 1815. Turner's father's wig business collapsed, with the concomitant effect that the commercial viability of his art became increasingly important to Turner.

In 1802, the 'Peace of Amiens' briefly ended the war between France and Great Britain – after ten years, it was now possible to travel to France once more. Turner visited Paris, Grenoble and the Alps. On visits to the Louvre, he studied Napoleon's art treasures looted from Europe: in addition to works by Titian, Raphael, Rembrandt and Rubens, he was interested in the landscapes of Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain. However, unlike many of his colleagues from the Academy, Turner only spent part of his time abroad in Paris. He was much more drawn to nature and took the opportunity to explore the French and Swiss Alps.

Few other artists travelled as far and wide as Turner. Early on in his career, he tapped into the whole of Great Britain as a source of inspiration. After his first trip to France in 1802, he had to wait until the end of the Napoleonic Wars before finally travelling to the continent again in 1817. In addition to visits to the art metropolises of Paris, Rome and Venice, he repeatedly travelled to the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy and the German-speaking countries. He always returned to London with a rich haul of sketches, watercolours and a number of oil paintings. The depictions of European sites are so prominent in his oeuvre that he is regularly referred to in art history as one of the first 'European' painters.

Turner complemented his exploration of the natural environment with the study of science. He was particularly interested in optical phenomena. The painter Charles Lock Eastlake, later the first director of the National Gallery in London, gave Turner a copy of his translation of Goethe's *Zur Farbenlehre* (Theory of Colours) in 1840; the book, containing Turner's annotations, is extant as part of his estate. Turner maintained regular contact with pioneering contemporary physicists, such as Mary Somerville and Michael Faraday, who contributed to the study of physics, such as magnetism and electromagnetism, among other things.

TURNER AS PROFESSOR OF PERSPECTIVE AT THE ROYAL ACADEMY

Turner was Professor of Perspective at London's Royal Academy for thirty years (1807–1837). Students at that time were obliged to attend five different lectures: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Anatomy and Perspective.

Turner had sufficient practical and theoretical experience by dint of his earlier work as a draughtsman for architects, such as Thomas Hardwick, or the topographical artist, Thomas Malton the Younger. The latter's father had written an important book on perspective. In preparation for his lectures, Turner nevertheless studied some thirty treatises on the theory of perspective drawn from four centuries of scientific inquiry. This was one of the reasons why he delayed his first lecture until 1811.

Turner produced large-format drawings to illustrate the content of the lectures. Approximately one hundred sheets of paper have survived: they range from simple diagrams to detailed watercolours. They show schemata with central concepts, geometric bodies and sections of buildings, as well as actual architectural representations. The drawings were designed to be seen from a distance. An assistant had to place them on a stand one by one during the lecture. However, there were rumblings from the students that the alternation of the illustrations was too fast. As a result, Turner switched to hanging several of them on the wall at the same time. In turn, this led to complaints that it was not clear which illustration he was referring to.

Moreover, many listeners also complained that Turner was a poor public speaker: he would jump chaotically back and forth between topics and his diction was mumbled. Nonetheless, the forbearing students found his lectures to be both insightful and instructive. The painter Thomas Stothard, who was severely hard of hearing, attended the lectures because there was so much to see.

Another student also tendered glowing, albeit measured praise: *'The diagrams were truly beautiful, speaking intelligibly to the eye if his [Turner's] language did not to the ear.'*

Turner began with remarks on the utility of perspective in painting. This was followed by the theoretical and historical underpinnings and then the practical application of these insights. Another lecture was devoted to observations on atmosphere and aerial perspective, followed by general considerations about the role of architecture and landscape in painting. In his lectures, he also focused on examples from art history, problems of composition, or the role and effect of colours. He was always careful not to become too abstract or theoretical. As a result, he concentrated on the applicable rules and did not lose sight of the usefulness of perspective in painting in general, whereby he admitted that, to achieve certain painterly effects, one had to bend the rules from time to time.

THE RECEPTION OF TURNER'S WORK THROUGH PRINTMAKING

There was one artistic medium seminal to Turner's widespread success: printmaking. His work became known outside Britain via the availability of reproductions. From 1807 to 1819, Turner published a series of seventy-one prints in a volume titled *Liber Studiorum*. Inspired by Claude Lorrain's *Liber Veritatis*, he understood this publication as a study manual for landscape painting. He produced his own watercolours as templates for the prints, which were then converted into etchings and mezzotints by engravers.

One such watercolour can be seen in the display case under the Rotunda and, next to it, the etching made by the mezzotint engraver, Charles Turner, in 1808 (the two were not related). The motif is based on Turner's painting *The Fifth Plague of Egypt*, which the writer William Beckford had bought. The view of the pyramids is based on other depictions and Turner's imagination, as he never visited Egypt.

The *Little Liber* series, from which the *Paestum* print in the exhibition has been taken, was produced in the 1820s as a continuation of his *Liber Studiorum*. Turner made these prints himself. Compared to the works of professional engravers, they are less precise, less sharp in detail. The effect thus corresponds much more to Turner's paintings, in which light and shade take precedence over drawing or the line.

In addition, Turner created numerous illustrations for works by writers and poets, such as Walter Scott, Thomas Campbell, or Lord Byron, which were widely distributed via the publication and popularity of these books. The renown attached to his prints often led to disappointment when the public had the opportunity to see Turner's oil paintings in the flesh. Hence the comment by the former director of the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, Gustav Friedrich Waagen, written in 1837:

'I made an effort to seek out the landscapes of the extremely popular painter Turner, who is known throughout Europe for his many, often very brilliant compositions that resplendently festoon [...] books as delicate steel engravings. I could hardly believe my eyes, however, when, in a view [...] of the Burning of the Houses of Parliament, I came upon such a cursoriness of execution, such a complete lack of truth, as I have ever encountered.'

LANDSCAPE AND HISTORY PAINTING

Landscape painting was Turner's self-elected main objective. He travelled against the academic hierarchy that ranked history painting above all other genres, and simply turned historical events or mythological scenarios into landscape paintings by embedding them in stunning natural settings.

Turner became acquainted with famous collectors and patrons, such as William Beckford (Fonthill Abbey), George Wyndham, 3rd Earl of Egremont (Petworth), and Walter Fawkes (Farnley). They also inspired him to explore new pictorial vistas: *The Long Cellar at Petworth* (1834), painted at Petworth, for example, translates an architectural study into a swirl of light and colour.

It is not always clear where the inspiration for this extraordinary visual invention came from. Such works include *Jason* (1802), for example, or a painting that may represent *The Vision of Jacob's Ladder* (ca. 1830). For a long time, many were puzzled by what the painting *The Fall of Anarchy* (? , ca. 1833–1834) — featuring a skeleton on the back of a white horse — actually represented. Today, it is assumed that the painting references the poem *The Masque of Anarchy* by the Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Shelley's political protest poem was a response to the infamous Peterloo Massacre in 1819, in which eighteen men and women were shot dead and hundreds injured by the military during peaceful protests against the Corn Laws, their visceral effects on grain tariffs and in support of universal manhood suffrage. Turner's depiction presumably refers to the moment in the poem when a mysterious, luminous mist awakens the people's resistance. Anarchy personified — the antithesis of freedom according to Shelley — falls down dead from his horse. This picture is a vivid example of Turner's interest in unusual motifs.

As a rule, contemporary audiences, not unlike future generations, judged Turner primarily on formal grounds. One issue, for example, was the dominance of colour in his work. The Victorian art critic, John Ruskin, championed Turner as a 'modern painter', but also described in detail his idiosyncratic pictorial inventions. In the fifth and final volume of *Modern Painters* (1843–1860), Ruskin endeavoured to highlight the artist's iconographic achievements by describing the contents of his paintings in great detail.

TURNER'S LATE WORKS

The Industrial Revolution shaped Britain in the nineteenth century. Turner's early paintings of the sea still depict sailing ships; later on, steamers find their way into the paintings. *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night the Ariel left Harwich* – by means of this long, narrative title, Turner is telling us that the painting is not a product of his imagination. The swirling composition is based on the artist's personal experience. *Snow Storm* is now one of Turner's most famous works. When the painting was shown at the Royal Academy in 1842, it provoked vehement reactions. Turner had increasingly pushed the limits of what could be represented in his art. He insisted, however, that painting on the edge was the only way to adequately represent what he had experienced – the snow storm.

Even before the work was shown, Turner's style of painting had been criticised as 'unfinished', but now many considered the painting to be indicative of his artistic decline. One reviewer described the painting as *'a domestic joke on a washing day: it is to our eyes a mass of whirling soapsuds'*. A second review claimed, *'This gentle-man has, on former occasions, chosen to paint with cream, or chocolate, yolk of egg, or currant jelly, – here he uses his whole array of kitchen stuff.'*

In the final years of his life, it is hard to discern any difference between publicly shown and 'unofficial' works. Disregarding his audience, Turner made paintings that broke with the visual habits of the time.

At the end of the exhibition space you will find on the right-hand wall two paintings featuring motifs from Switzerland that never left Turner's studio during his lifetime. Since they seem extremely abstract, even by today's standards, it has been discussed time and again whether he really ever finished such paintings. To this day, there is not enough evidence to resolve this issue conclusively. However, Turner was certainly not concerned with 'abstraction', a concept that only emerged in the twentieth century. Instead, he concentrated on what had fascinated him all his life: light. In the two Swiss paintings, Turner elevated sunlight to the status of a visual motif in its own right.

VENICE AND WALHALLA

Turner first visited Venice in 1819, limiting himself at the time to pencil sketches and watercolours. His first painting of Venice was made shortly before his second trip there in 1833: *Bridge of Sighs, Ducal Palace and Custom-House, Venice: Canaletti Painting*. It is a homage to the vedute specialist, Giovanni Antonio Canal, aka Canaletto, who died in Venice in 1768. Canaletto can be seen in the painting working on an easel in the left foreground. There is an anecdote about the painting: Turner is said to have painted it in just three days after learning that his Academy colleague Clarkson Stanfield, also wanted to submit a Venice study.

After two further visits to Venice in 1833 and 1840, Turner showed works featuring motifs from the lagoon city at almost every Royal Academy annual exhibition. The Venice paintings were a great success and sold well. It is possibly due to this success that Turner cultivated an increasingly free style of painting in his exhibition paintings. The Venice paintings are characterised by an increasing blurriness. In some cases, Turner applies the paint with a palette knife and smudges the colours. It is no longer apparent where the water ends and the land begins.

Reactions in the British press varied between appreciation and outright scorn. One critic described the Venice paintings as follows:

'Turner is preeminent for the daring originality of his effects: slight and extravagant as his works are, there is truth as well as power of art in his representation of natural phenomena, when viewed at a proper distance – say from the middle of the room. If not complete pictures, they are wonderfully fine studies of composition, colour, and atmospheric effect: his seas are boiling surges, his clouds are floating masses of vapour; space and light are depicted, though form and substance are vague and filmy. [...]

His architecture in the two views of Venice [...] is too evanescent for any thing but a fairy city.'

On his return from Venice in 1840, Turner travelled via Regensburg and captured the construction of Walhalla in a watercolour (on display in the adjacent cabinet). The temple was commissioned by King Ludwig I of Bavaria and designed by Leo von Klenze. It was intended as a hall of fame for prominent people from various German states. Walhalla was to be a meaningful monument to Germany's unification as a nation. Turner supported the idea of unification because he hoped it would stabilise Europe and inaugurate lasting peace. The watercolour later served Turner as a template for the oil painting *The Opening of the Wallhalla*. It was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1843 and in Munich in 1845. Whereas the painting was well received in Britain, Germanophone criticism was much more negative. The art historian Georg Kaspar Nagler deprecated the work in his scathing assessment in 1849: *'Turner combined a garish, meretricious colour palette with an overall nebulosity.'*

The annual highlight of the British art scene in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the summer exhibition at the Royal Academy, an art college founded by King George III in 1768. The exhibitions were held in the impressive Great Room of Somerset House on the Strand from 1780 until 1837. The exhibition showcased the latest works by members and students of the Royal Academy. Until the end of the nineteenth century, male exhibitors dominated, although two women, Angelika Kauffmann and Mary Moser, were also among the founding members. The exhibition was particularly important for attracting customers and patrons. A few days before the opening, the paintings were hung in close proximity right up to the ceiling. The artists involved then had the opportunity to make final changes to their works on the so-called *Varnishing Days*. Once the work was completed, a final coat of varnish was applied to the paintings. The French term 'vernissage' is derived from the so-called varnishing days, as the French word 'vernir' means to varnish.

For Turner, Varnishing Days had a special significance. When the proposal was made to abolish Varnishing Days, Turner protested. On the one hand, they were one of the few social events in which he participated and which he regarded as an important opportunity to engage with other artists. Even after criticism of his novel pictorial inventions and stylistic experiments grew and he increasingly withdrew from society, he continued to exhibit at the Royal Academy.

On the other hand, Turner had a habit of only finishing his paintings on the given Varnishing Day. This enabled him to respond to the situation in the room and to treat his paintings in such a way that they received maximum attention alongside all the other competitors.

VARNISHING DAYS AND THE ROYAL ACADEMY

*'[W]hen [John] Constable exhibited his Opening of Waterloo Bridge [1832 in the Royal Academy], it was placed in the School of Painting, one of the small rooms at Somerset House. A sea piece by Turner was next to it — a grey picture, beautiful and true, but with no positive colour in any part of it. Constable's picture seemed as if painted with liquid gold and silver, and Turner came several times into the room while he was heightening with vermilion and lake the decorations and flags of the city barges. Turner stood behind him, looking from the Waterloo to his own picture; and, putting a round daub of red lead, somewhat bigger than a shilling, on his grey sea, went away without a word. The intensity of the red lead, made more vivid by the coolness of his picture, caused even the vermilion and lake of Constable to look weak. [...] He has been here", said Constable, "and fired off a gun." [...] [Turner] did not come again into the room for a day and a half; and then, in the last moments that were allowed for painting, he glazed the scarlet seal he had put on his picture, and shaped it into a buoy.'*¹

*'On the varnishing days he was generally one of the earliest to arrive, coming down to the Academy before breakfast, and continuing his labours as long as daylight lasted; strange and wonderful was the transformation he at all times effected in his works on the walls. Latterly he used to send them in in a most unfinished state, relying on what he could do for them during the three days allowed to the members — and so much did he value this opportunity, and the fellowship of that period, that it is certain the varnishing days would never have been done away with while Turner lived.'*²

¹
Walter Thornbury, *The Life of J. M. W. Turner, R. A., Founded on Letters and Papers furnished by His Friends and Fellow Academicians*, Volume 2 of 2, London 1862, pp. 187.

²
Richard and Samuel Redgrave, *A Century of Painters of the English School*, Volume 2 of 2, London 1866, p. 120.

CONTEMPORARY RECEPTION AND JOHN RUSKIN

At the beginning of Turner's career, his works were received with great enthusiasm in the press and by contemporary audiences. This public acclaim soon provided him with a large clientele eager to buy his work.

Growing financial independence enabled Turner to become ever bolder artistically — both in terms of the formal realisation of his work and in his choice of motifs. But this audacity was harshly criticised. When Turner showed *Snow Storm — Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth making Signals in Shallow Water* at the Royal Academy in 1842, he was severely rebuked for it. One critic, for example, remarked that the composition had been painted with 'soapsuds and whitewash'. According to some contemporaries, the artist's later works were evidence of his artistic decline.

Nevertheless, Turner still had many supporters. Probably his best-known advocate was John Ruskin. The art critic dedicated his five-volume work *Modern Painters* to Turner in particular. He praised him as the most important British landscape painter. First and foremost, Ruskin initially emphasised the '*closeness to nature*' of Turner's painting. Later, he concentrated on detailed analyses of the content of the works and praised their novel pictorial inventions. After Turner's death, however, Ruskin also criticised what he considered to be his '*inferior*' late work.

Ruskin's *Modern Painters* positively framed the long-term reception of Turner. Many of the biographies of Turner that appeared from 1862 onwards reference Ruskin's seminal work.

Whereas contemporary reception of Turner in Great Britain was characterised by wildly fluctuating critical opinion, the consensus among German-speaking critics at the time was that Turner was an '*extravagant*' and '*showy*' painter (J. D. Passavant) and that '*English art*' in general was '*mindless*' (Heinrich Merz). For German-speaking contemporaries, the precisely executed works of Caspar David Friedrich were the apotheosis of ideal landscape painting and not Turner's style of painting, which was purportedly governed by the nebulous, transient moods of light and the weather.

*'But when public taste seems plunging deeper and deeper into degradation day by day, and when the press universally exerts such power as it possesses to direct the feeling of the nation more completely to all that is theatrical, affected, and false in art; while it vents its ribaldry on the most exalted truth, and the highest ideal of landscape that this or any other age has ever witnessed [meaning Turner], it becomes the imperative duty of all who have any perception or knowledge of what is really great in art, and any desire for its advancement in England, to come fearlessly forward, regardless of such individual interests as are likely to be injured by the knowledge of what is good and right, to declare and demonstrate, wherever they exist, the essence and the authority of the Beautiful and the True.'*¹

*'And now, but one word more. For many a year we have heard nothing with respect to the works of Turner but accusations of their want of truth. To every observation on their power, sublimity, or beauty, there has been but one reply: They are not like nature. I therefore took my opponents on their own ground, and demonstrated, by thorough investigation of actual facts, that Turner is like nature, and paints more of nature than any man who ever lived.'*²

*'Mr Turner takes a canvas, places a spot of yellow here, a blue there, then a red splodge, rubs these splodges in random directions, throws a certain number of vertical and horizontal, straight and crooked lines into the composition, from which an active imagination can construct at will buildings, people, trees, clouds, angels and devils and everything else, and then he christens the child.'*³

1

John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (5 Volumes, 1843–60),
E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.), Volume I (Library Edition III),
London 1903,
'Preface to the First Edition' (1843), p. 3.

2

John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (5 Volumes, 1843–60),
E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.),
Volume I (Library Edition III),
London 1903,
'Preface to the Second Edition' (1844), pp. 51

3

Ernst Förster (?), 'Londoner Kunstausstellungen und Kunstbestrebungen, 1846.'
I. Die Ausstellung der königl. Akademie der Künste',
in *Kunstblatt*, No. 49, 1 October 1846, pp. 198.

TURNER AS A 'PROTO- IMPRESSIONIST'

Turner's late work still met with incomprehension from its contemporary public. However, subsequent generations embraced it with great admiration. The Impressionists Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro, in particular, appropriated Turner for themselves.

In 1885, the poet Émile Verhaeren published *L'Impressioniste Turner*, one of the first articles to formulate the idea of Turner as a 'proto-Impressionist'. The painter Paul Signac, considered a pioneer of Pointillism, a style of painting structured on complementary contrasts and spots of colour, also considered Turner to be a role model. Turner's focus on the properties of light in his late work represents a point of contact for art at the turn of the previous century.

Turner's work thus developed an astonishing afterlife. Suddenly, it was interpreted in a new context — a process that seems to be ongoing. The reading of Turner as a 'proto-Impressionist' or even 'precursor' of modernism indicates that his works are also significant beyond their historical context. In the course of the twentieth century, another approach manifested itself: from the 1950s onwards, Turner was identified as a 'precursor' of Abstract Expressionism.

'Turner was born an academician and died an impressionist [...]. Turner's impressionism cannot be gainsaid. From the day he deliberately abandoned the time-worn procedures, he took the phenomena of light as his constant, relentless, lifelong object of study. He decomposed the solar prism, seeking to express its magical effects on canvas by combining the basic hues of which it is composed. The mists of gauze threaded with gold that the dawn spreads over the waters, the blaze a setting sun ignites in the sky, the most subtle tonal gradations caused by rain, fog, a flurry of snow, the vapor sun's rays set rising from the sea [...].'

ACTUALISATIONS: FROM ABSTRACTION TO CLIMATE CHANGE

The idea of Turner as an 'abstract painter' was preceded by two significant events: first, the discussion about the division of Turner's works into the 'finished' and the 'unfinished'. This was initiated as early as 1910, for example, by the British journalist and historian, Charles Lewis Hind. Second, the discovery of previously unknown paintings by Turner in the basement of the National Gallery in 1946 by Kenneth Clark, the director of the museum at the time. This discovery probably involved the so-called 'beginnings': Turner used this term to refer to templates for paintings he made from around 1818 onward, in which he created his colour compositions with large colour fields and continued to work from there. However, with the exception of the works exhibited by Turner himself, it is still not possible to ascertain conclusively which paintings he regarded as finished and which were 'beginnings' or unfinished, intermediate states.

The high point of Turner's posthumous career as an 'abstract' artist came in the exhibition *Turner: Imagination and Reality* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1966. It presented Turner in a white cube environment and thus treated him as a contemporary artist.

The interpretation of Turner as a 'precursor' of Impressionism or Abstraction is based on purely formal criteria. From the 1970s, however, the focus shifted back to more historical, contextual, or iconographic interpretations.

Even nowadays, viewers of Turner's art are discovering new interpretations and fresh approaches: for example, the recent rehanging of the Turner rooms at the Tate in London has drawn attention to social and political aspects. In the field of research, Turner's thematisation of slavery in paintings, such as *'Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)'* (1840) is gaining a new valence, especially with regard to Britain's colonial past. Turner's interest in nature also seems more topical than ever in the face of advancing climate change. In contrast to many contemporaries, Turner depicted the effects of industrialisation in his paintings and thus took up a subject, the consequences of which we are experiencing directly today.

'I thought deeply about how well we know Turner and what visitors might like to see in his work [...]. Working on the exhibition, Turner's Modern World, held in 2020–21, laid very helpful groundwork for this task. Its focus was Turner's representations of modernity — of the impacts of the industrial revolution, the transition from sail power to steam, reckonings of injustice in society, and the experiences of those engaged in the Napoleonic Wars. All of us who worked on the exhibition were continually struck by the continuities between Turner's world and our own, and his ability to show us what it means to be human in a time of flux. None of us could have predicted the flux that we, too, would be plunged into, however, as events conspired to make 2020 a momentous year in our own time. The final phase of the exhibition's development coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic and the outpouring of support for the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the killing of George Floyd. These events brought the exhibition's theme — of tumultuous times and jolting shocks that changed the way life was lived — into much sharper focus. When the exhibition opened in October 2020 it was to visitors wearing facemasks, to a fresh wave of fierce public debate about the structures and symbols of inequality in British life and to amplified concerns about Earth's climate. We found then that Turner's pictures resonated anew.'

*'A work of art is finished when the artist has said all he has to say. Turner had no more to tell about sunrises, sunsets, or pale sails against pale skies. He knew that, and he had the strength to leave them as they are — unfinished, but supremely realized.'*¹

*'In all history, including art history, a kind of prophecy is inherent and unexplainable. Something in the spirit of the age, the affinities and rivalries of nations, and inter-weavings of one art with another, motivate individual artists of various schools, all at the same time, in the way of an unconscious response to the cultural matrix. Presumably none of the present-day abstract painters whose principal means of expression is light and colour had Turner and his life-work in mind; but looking back upon their revolution, more than a hundred years later than his, we see a kinship.'*²

*'Now we find that a kind of painting, which is of vital concern to us, was anticipated by Turner. And by Turner alone; no one else before developed so far and with such devotion this special order of painting, which is so hard to define and yet so recognisable. It is hard to define because the fantasy and the image are implicit in the material it is made of, inseparable from the actual behaviour of paint in the painters hands. Turner showed that a certain potentiality was inherent in the nature of painting. The latent possibility has emerged again. Turner's vision and his towering fantasy remain his own, beyond compare. Nevertheless we meet him with a sense of recognition.'*³

¹
C. Lewis Hind, *Turner's Golden Visions*,
London 1910, p. 262.

²
Monroe Wheeler, 'Foreword and Acknowledgements',
in Lawrence Gowing (ed.),
Turner: Imagination and Reality, exh. cat. MoMA,
New York 1966, p. 5.

³
Lawrence Gowing (ed.),
Turner: Imagination and Reality, exh. cat. MoMA,
New York 1966, p. 56.