

Turner Contemporary



Turner and the Elements 28 January – 13 May 2012

**A resource for teachers using or visiting the
exhibition.**

Welcome to *Turner and the Elements*, our first major show of JMW Turner's work at Turner Contemporary. We hope that you find this resource helpful in preparation for your visit to the exhibition with your group.

Visiting the exhibition and using this resource

This resource is designed to give teachers contextual and background information about selected artworks in the exhibition. There are also free resources that have been created by young people for students to use during their visit available to download on our website. Entrance to the gallery is free but groups must book in advance. On site learning sessions are also available – to book your visit please call 01843 233026 or email learn@turnercontemporary.org. For more information please visit our website www.turnercontemporary.org.

Turner and the Elements

The exhibition brings together 95 works; over 80 watercolours and 12 late oil paintings, to explore the important role that the depiction of the elements played in Turner's landscape watercolours and paintings. The works are organised into five themed sections: Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Fusion. Turner studied the four elements as individual forces in many preliminary watercolours, but also explored their relationships as found in nature by creating works that combined these powers.

Since classical antiquity, the four elements were considered the principles of the creation of the world and humanity. By 1800, life in Britain was becoming characterised by industrialisation. This, alongside the evolution of more exact natural sciences, would eventually displace the theory of the four elements. At this time of upheaval, painters such as Turner reacted with a new interest in the raw materials of nature. Now the main focus of a painting, landscape was freed from its traditional role as a background for figurative scenes or view of a particular region, enabling landscape painting to emerge as a significant genre in itself.

Turner's innovative painting technique and the influence of scientific and technological developments during his lifetime revolutionised landscape painting. His unconventional use of colour and almost abstract paintings ensured Turner's status as *the* artist of the elements and the founder of modern landscape painting.

Turner and the Elements is organised in collaboration with Bucerius Kunst Forum, Hamburg, and The National Museum, Cracow.

Turner and Margate

Turner Contemporary is the third and final venue for this exhibition. The gallery is situated on the very site where Turner lodged with Sophia Caroline Booth – believed to be his mistress – during his many trips to Margate. She lived right on the coast with a view of the beach, pier and jetty. Inspired by this setting, Turner created over 100 works here in Margate, including the 1840 work *The New Moon*; this painting is exclusive to Turner Contemporary and has not been shown in the other venues for this exhibition. Spectacular views from our gallery location today are mirrored in this work and several others included in the exhibition, which feature Margate and the Thanet region. This area was of great importance to Turner. He remarked to the influential writer and art critic John Ruskin that “...*the skies over Thanet are the loveliest in all Europe*”. The unique quality of light in this part of Kent drew Turner back time and again.

Turner: A short biography

Born in London in 1775, Turner was sent to attend school Margate in 1786 and began to make his first drawings from nature. He trained as an architect's assistant, but at the age of fourteen decided to become an artist. In December 1789 Turner was accepted as a student at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, where he studied until 1793. During his final year he was awarded the Society of Arts prize for landscape drawing. By this point Turner was attending few lectures, instead travelling around Britain making watercolours of his sketches. His encounters with the grand forms of nature including waterfalls and mountains, led to the development of his own watercolour style; works which he presented to the Royal Academy and exhibited in 1795. He exhibited his first oil painting in 1796 and at the age of 27 was elected a full member of the Royal Academy.

The theory of the elements was still taught in Turner's day. Whereas scientific discoveries in areas such as geology, meteorology and chemistry became difficult to visualise with the human eye, elemental theory offered painters visibility. Turner believed the four elements represented the world of the senses. In depicting fire, unlike many of his colleagues, he alluded to the role of fire in the creation of the earth and its use in industry, bringing ancient myths into the present.

Early in his career, inspired by Rubens, Turner used the mythical gods – Neptune and Aeolus – to represent elements water and air, as seen in *Drawing after Peter Paul Rubens, Quos ego!* 1790-1. Later, he portrayed these natural forces without references to gods or heroic figures. Turner's focus upon the elements

themselves as a step away from the historical or mythical subject matter around 1810-1816 was viewed by contemporary critics in varied ways. Critic William Hazlitt reflected popular contemporary opinion, describing paintings such as *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps*, 1812 as “without form and void,” going “back to the first chaos of the world”. As early as 1803, artist John Constable had made similar comments about Turner’s atmospheric and apparently unfinished style, describing it as over-excited artistic exuberance. The uniqueness of the works in their focus on the elements was later praised, however, by John Ruskin who believed the depictions of stormy seas were full of character and energetic like nature itself. He noted the mingling of the elements in a single composition; for example the water, rocks and clouds transform smoothly from one material state to another in *The Pass at Faïdo, St. Gotthard*, 1843. In doing so, Ruskin highlights Turner’s fusion of the elements.

The Elements:

Earth

Turner was very curious about earth throughout his career. His depictions of various types of rock formations show his keen interest in geology and understanding of contemporary scientific discussion. Throughout tours of England, Scotland and Wales in the last decade of the eighteenth century, Turner explored how the appearance of the landscape changed depending on clouds and light quality. He used colour to create mood and developed new motifs such as dramatic mountainous backdrops, narrow gorges, and the mighty Devil’s Bridge over River Mynach. In the absence of an intermediary foreground and figures, Turner enhances the impression of wilderness, portraying mountains as a product of nature and independent of humanity.

The Alps became a popular destination for artists after the Treaty of Amiens in 1802 finally allowed travel to the continent. Turner travelled in difficult conditions over several passes to reach the Aosta Valley in Italy – a region that had never been visited by a notable artist. Sketchbooks and watercolours capture his experiences of the mountains. His fascination with monumental alpine scenes endured through to his later works and stimulated his curiosity for the elementary forces of nature.

Selected work:



Mont-Blanc and Le Chetif looking over Pre-Saint Didier in the Val d'Aosta, 1836
Watercolour on paper
255 x 279 mm
© Tate, London 2011

Turner began with a realistic view of the mountainous landscape then distanced himself from this type of representation, to experiment with colour and watercolour techniques in this image. He emphasises the translucent quality of watercolour here by applying colour loosely in very pale washes. In doing so the mountains blur into one another and their summits dissolve into the misty sky. Small touches of red, blue and brown at the base of the painting may represent figures. The scale of these figures in comparison to the vast mountains ahead, acts to further emphasise the imposing nature of the landscape.

Water

Turner was particularly drawn to the element of water, with marine paintings making up around one third of his work. Although the element of water was classically considered the wellspring of life, Turner mostly depicted the more threatening aspects of water, with wind and weather. The sea was important for the island nation of Great Britain; Turner's marine paintings during the Napoleonic Wars reflected Britain's need to secure its imperial and economic power by controlling the seas. The subject of shipwrecks provided a means to express this precarious situation, in creating a metaphor for human vulnerability in the face of nature. The power of the element of water in his paintings

emphasises the danger of the situation and draws the viewer into the event, encouraging them to participate. In doing so, Turner moves away from the ideas of a distanced experience advocated by the notion of the sublime.

Throughout his life Turner alternated between realistic representation and an experimental style. Ports played an important role in the identity of Britain as a seafaring nation and Turner depicted a series of fourteen of the most important, including Ramsgate, in a traditional manner. He also produced more informal observations of water, often without recognisable human structures, to create universal seascapes. This provided an opportunity to experiment with colour, light and shade.

Selected works:



Ramsgate, from: *The Ports of England*, 1826-28, c. 1824
Pencil and watercolour on paper
160 x 232 mm
© Tate, London 2011

Although realistic, Turner generates the same drama of his experimental work by placing the body of tumultuous water in between the viewer and the safety of the coastline. By positioning the ship low in the painting amongst rising waves he suggests the danger of sailing; the ship is at the mercy of the waves. This is emphasised by the proximity of the lighthouse, signalling that we are close to land and at risk of shipwreck.



A Stormy Sea, c. 1829
Watercolour on paper
373 x 555 mm
© Tate, London 2011

Turner's minimalist style and sketchy brushstrokes in this study accentuate the vigorous motion of the stormy waves. A limited palette is applied rapidly to suggest a wave about to break.



Stormy Sea, c. 1830
Gouache and watercolour on paper
134 x 189 mm
© Tate, London 2011

Turner uses blue paper here to play with the effects of watercolour on a dark surface. Over the course of his career he experimented with many different coloured papers. The storm clouds and threatening seas merge dramatically as

the same colours are used to depict sea and sky. The darker surface allows him to add white highlights to great effect to when depicting foaming waves and moonlight.

Air

As a boy Turner had spent hours lying watching the sky, observing the movements of the clouds and changes in light. These observations were recorded in 65 watercolours in his *Skies Sketchbook*, 1816-1818. Almost all of Turner's investigations into the element of air were created in watercolour. Quick to apply and with a translucent, luminous quality, this medium proved most suitable to capture changes in the sky and fleeting clouds. Sketches of the sky at sunrise, sunset, in daylight and during various weather conditions, functioned as preliminary studies for larger paintings from 1819.

Observing the sky was very fashionable in England in the early nineteenth century. Unlike other artists, Turner was less interested in the scientific characteristics of clouds than in their variety and movement. In his cloud studies he developed a technique of depicting landscape through colour only. In this way he did not portray a particular time or place, but instead experimented with forms.

Selected works:



Duddon Sands, c. 1825-32
Pencil, watercolour and chalk on paper
276 x 452 mm
© Tate, London 2011

Turner uses few colours to depict a non-specific landscape, shrouded by a heavy black cloud. The scale of the approaching storm cloud compared to the cluster of trees implies the power of the impending storm.



Margate, c. 1830
Watercolour and pencil on paper
352 x 518 mm
© Tate, London 2011

This cloud study is one of a collection of sketches known as 'colour beginnings'. In these works forms are reduced to the barest description of sea and sky. Such works may appear abstract to us today, but this concept was not understood or promoted in the nineteenth century, even by Turner who was renowned for his experimental nature. Therefore he would not have intended these loose colour beginnings to have been exhibited as finished painting during his lifetime. Instead these informal studies acted as a means of training his eye, developing his imagination and thinking about landscape in pure colour, whilst gathering raw material to inform his studio paintings. In this view of Margate, Turner is inspired by the coastal panorama and unusual northern light of the region.



The New Moon; or, "I've lost My Boat, You shan't have Your Hoop," exhibited 1840
Oil on mahogany
654 x 813 mm
© Tate, London 2011

The exposed location of Margate provided an outstanding view of the sky and its spectacular sunsets. Since the 1820's, Turner had been exploring the possibility of suggesting a broader view of the landscape by including both the setting sun and rising moon. Here the paint was applied quickly and thickly in areas. The pier and a departing steamboat are just visible in the background, suggesting the bustle of the town's port. The artists' village of Margate was a popular weekend destination amongst Londoners, who travelled down on these steamboats. The subtitle – *I've lost My Boat, You shan't have Your Hoop* – suggests his fondness and understanding of children, here playing on the beach during their visit to Margate.

Fire

Turner viewed fire as a power that counteracted the other three elements. He depicted the industrial benefits of fire, as well its destructive abilities. By the end of the eighteenth century, symbols of industrial progress such as factory buildings and smoke stacks were visible in landscape painting, highlighting the industrialisation of Britain. Turner's sketchbooks around 1800 are full of motifs such as windmills and foundries. The devastating force of fire was also present, in depictions of natural disasters and the burning of the Houses of Parliament in London on 16th October 1834. Turner witnessed this event and created several studies and paintings based on sketches he made on site. His studies of this

event and a similar historic catastrophe in Rome aimed to capture the essence of the incidents, by accentuating the impact of the element fire. By depicting these imposing buildings engulfed in flames Turner created a universal image which he used repeatedly as a stand against decadence.

Volcanoes acted as a device for representing the element of fire and created compositional highlights in Turner's landscapes. The large volcanic eruptions that occurred during Turner's lifetime heightened interest in volcanoes amongst scientists and artists. These eruptions also impacted the atmosphere, creating vivid, fiery skies across Europe at sunset which likely inspired Turner's experiments with colour. Turner was captured not only by natural spectacles but also fireworks, such as the spectacular displays in Venice, as depicted in his watercolours and gouaches of the city at night from 1840.

Turner also presented fire in a more familiar form; as a source of heat in every house. Turner's many domestic drawings depict detailed interiors with a fire glowing in the grate. A warm and intimate mood is created as light shines into the room, illuminating silhouetted figures.

Selected works:



The Burning of Rome, c. 1834-35
Gouache, pencil and watercolour on paper
216 x 367 mm
© Tate, London 2011

The blurred foreground and lack of architectural detail here emphasises Turner's focus upon the element of fire and its destructive power. These structures appear

as ghostly shells and scorched remnants. He uses vivid reds and oranges to illustrate the raging flames towering high above the distant buildings.



A Study of Firelight (Venice?), c. 1840
Gouache and watercolour on paper
226 x 292 mm
© Tate, London 2011

Turner draws us close to the blaze, next to a dominant but unspecific structure. The approaching flames fill half of the composition. He suggests the intense heat of the fire by using rich red gouache – a paint slightly thicker than watercolour – highlighted with white and yellow.



Venice: Fireworks on the Molo, 1840
Watercolour, bodycolour and chalk on paper
228 x 300 mm
© Tate, London 2011

Turner became increasingly interested in the dramatic effects of light and shade during the mid 1830's and early 1840's. Here the fleeting explosions of fireworks are highlighted against the inky sky. For this work and other similar studies, Turner worked from dark to light using brown paper, dark watercolours and white chalk.



Burning Blubber, from: *The Whalers Sketchbook*, c. 1844-45
Chalk and watercolour on paper
221 x 330 mm
© Tate, London 2011

Turner explores the formless nature of fire here. Similar to the fleeting movement of clouds, he was interested in this element's dynamics. His use of chalk intensifies the colours of watercolour, to describe the blaze and dense smoke.

Fusion

Turner was interested in the conflict between the elements. His late works mixed all four elements together to resemble the relationships between these forces in nature. Scientists believed the interaction of these elements created an energy that powered the world in a constant process of creation and decay. To capture this idea, Turner discarded representational details and moved away from the tradition of dividing a composition into distinct spatial areas. Instead he worked from the centre outward to create whirling vortices and maelstroms. The rotating movement of a vortex scattered space, emphasised the energetic force of the elements and pulled the viewer into the painting. By removing the gap that allowed the viewer to experience the danger of the scene from a distance, Turner moved further still from the ideas of the sublime.

The maelstrom merged earth, water, air and fire together indistinguishably. To unite the landscape in this way Turner used colour and light: he scattered light

across the scene and replaced the main components of the composition with zones of colour. No longer interested in a realistic depiction of a location, Turner's subject was light itself. Reducing the landscape to its simplest forms to create a fusion of elements was an important move towards abstraction, which for many of Turner's contemporaries was incomprehensible.

Selected work:



Snow Storm – Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth, exhibited 1842
Oil on canvas
914 x 1219 mm
© Tate, London 2011

The swirling movement of the vortex dissolves the shapes of the boat and harbour into the stormy waves and sky. The steamboat's fuming smokestack symbolises the technological benefits of nature's resources, against a backdrop of the dynamic elements in full force during a storm.

Some questions to trigger discussion around any or all of the works:

- Why do you think Turner was so inspired by Thanet?
- Which element do you respond most to: earth, water, air or fire?
- Why do think some paintings are realistic and others abstract? Which do you prefer?
- How do you think Turner painted these pictures? Do you think they are they from real-life or imagination?
- How do the colours used in the paintings make you feel? Hot, cold, energetic, scared?
- Does the title of the painting matter?

Glossary:

Abstract

The term abstract literally means to withdraw or separate something from something else. In the context of art, the artist begins with something visible and then abstracts aspects of it to result in a simplified version. An accurate visual depiction of a subject is replaced by non-representational shapes, lines and forms to create an unrecognisable or stylised interpretation.

Abstraction as an art movement however, arose around the beginning of the twentieth century. Although Turner is viewed as an important precursor of abstract painting, this concept was not understood or defined during his lifetime. Therefore in relation to Turner's work, the term abstract should be used in its literal sense, to describe his method of visual reduction rather than a defined style of art.

Aesthetic

Aesthetic refers to the appearance or beauty of an object or artwork. The term can be used to describe the visual character of a painting in an emotional or sensory context, as opposed to purely intellectually.

Minimalist

The term minimalist can be used to describe the manner in which an artwork has been created; utilising a narrow range of materials, colours and form. Turner often simplified forms in many of his studies, using minimal colours and shapes to suggest an impression of the elements, rather than create a detailed representation of a particular landscape.

The Sublime

The sublime was a key term in the understanding of nature during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The term literally means raised, high up or aloft. In relation to painting, the sublime is defined as having a quality of intensity or magnitude so great that our ability to comprehend it is temporarily overwhelmed. This may relate to physical, moral or spiritual elements within the painting. The aesthetic of the sublime created a new interest in the depiction of

elements. This type of work evoked strong emotion in the viewer; vastness, solitude and darkness inspired fear of the elements raging in nature, yet with a realisation that this danger did not represent a real threat. Therefore viewers could experience the exciting sensation of terror from a safe distance when encountering a formidable visual account of an event.

Turner both exploited and reacted against this aesthetic technique. In his early career he created radical compositions such as *The Devil's Bridge, St. Gothard*, 1841-43. The motif of the St. Gothard pass allowed the viewer to safely experience the tension felt by the traveller ascending this ravine. Neither foreground nor sky provides orientation for the viewer, emphasising the verticality of the cliff. In his later works Turner often distanced himself from this tradition by actively drawing the audience into the work. In *Storm at Sea*, 1820-30, he merges the grey-blue sea and sky in swirling strokes, eliminating the ability to gauge our safe distance from the storm.

Romanticism

In use by the early nineteenth century, this term distinguished new forms of art, literature and music from the classical tradition. Partly a reaction to the industrial revolution and rationalisation of nature, the movement rejected the logic and restraint of art of the past. Romanticism explored our relationship and response to the natural world, emphasising expression, emotion and the senses in a bold, dramatic way. Stylistically, colour and brushstrokes were prominent aspects in romantic art.

For more information on exhibitions, to book your visit, or to find out more about Turner Contemporary please visit the website at www.turnercontemporary.org or give us a call on 01843 233 000.

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Cover image:

The New Moon; or, "I've lost My Boat, You shan't have Your Hoop," exhibited 1840
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