

# J.M.W. Turner and modern art: Comments on an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario

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J.M.W. Turner: *Painting Set Free*, at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto—October 31, 2015–January 31, 2016

One senses a growing hunger for something recognizably human (and humane) in the surging popularity of representational imagery in art these days. So, as well as being a profound aesthetic experience in itself, the exhibition of the late work of J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto is of particular interest. In this work one can discern the fundamental elements of what were extraordinary achievements of the imagination in their time, which may also speak to the present impasse in contemporary art.

The AGO is the final stop for this touring exhibition that began in 2014 at the Tate Britain, home to over 30,000 works by Turner bequeathed by the artist to its predecessor, the National Gallery. One is left slack-jawed in the face of his prolific efforts. With supporting material from other artists, as well as artifacts (which it has to be said add little to the experience and in some ways detract from it), the show includes over 50 paintings and drawings by Turner from the Tate Britain, as well as four pieces from the permanent collection of the AGO.

Certainly, other artists working at this time made important and unusual contributions, but Turner's late artwork in particular represents a defining moment in the formation of sensibilities and conceptions that underlie the breakthroughs of modern art. Though the paintings were controversial in their day, this exhibition brings together some of the most beautiful and disturbing work done by this artistic genius: the painting that Turner did in the last 15 years of his life when his work most boldly broke from literal depiction, legitimizing more spontaneous and even abstract expression in art.

Hailed as the greatest landscape painter of the age, Turner is also arguably the greatest watercolourist of all time. It nevertheless took nearly a century of subsequent developments before this work was properly understood in terms of its role in art history, anticipating and—to a certain extent—even overstepping the great strides of the impressionists who followed after him.

In the watercolour on paper, "The Blue Rigi, Sunrise" (1842), for example, a delicately hazy, almost formless landscape, Turner's ethereal brushwork conveys the poignancy of its title in a style that is possibly a generation ahead of its time.

His earlier work is closely associated with Romanticism in art, with its emphasis on emotional expression and aesthetic appreciation. But Turner expanded and developed on this in these later years as he discovered astonishing new ways of communicating emotion and meaning in painting—hence the title of the exhibition, "Painting set Free."

Reproduction never conveys the full richness of a painting or drawing, but this is especially true in the case of Turner's work because of the sensual, tactile relationship he developed with his media and his canvas, the precision and grace of which can only be fully appreciated by direct viewing. In addition to experimenting with new materials, he was known to use a variety of tools in his application of paint, at times even his

fingers and fingernails.

In a work such as "Fire at the Grand Storehouse of the Tower of London" (1841), one sees the subtle depth of tones, the fine lines, the mysterious layering of light that he achieves, and one comes to understand why his peers considered him something of a magician.

His innovation did come at some cost, and many of the paintings shown are badly cracked, the colors faded or damaged in other ways. This premature deterioration is due to a variety of factors—Turner's use of new, commercially available media for oil painting, his experimentation with new pigments. But it is also the result of the tensions created by inventive yet flawed techniques in his layering of paint—for example, the mixing and layering of water color over oil.

## Converging currents

Turner was a deeply contradictory figure, and in a number of ways. Preoccupied with his reputation and status, he avidly sought official recognition and support, yet ignored the criticism and derision that he was eventually subjected to. Artistically, he saw himself as a guardian of established traditions in landscape painting, but at the same time he was among the most inventive and unorthodox artists in history, pushing the limits of his materials and what was considered the proper subject matter in his day.

Staunchly conservative and yet truly independent and revolutionary, Turner was a living, breathing embodiment of the tensions of the age, of the struggle between the vestigial hold of the land-owning aristocracy and its cultural traditions, and powerful new social forces, including humble, plebeian ones.

Turner's life spanned the tumultuous years between the American Revolution and the Revolutions of 1848, and encompassed the great French Revolution of 1789, the industrial revolution, the Napoleonic Wars and more—these were the convulsions that shaped his generation and informed artistic development in Britain and across Europe. This was the period that saw the social and political transformation of Europe and North America, ushering in the bourgeois order—ushering in, in effect, the modern age.

Joseph Mallord William Turner grew up essentially as an only child—his younger sister died at the age of four. His father, from Devon, became a barber and wigmaker in London and his mother came from a propertied family of London butchers. His father's shop, situated near the city's theatre district on Maiden Lane, afforded the young Turner contact with a variety of patrons, including writers, artisans and artists, as well as influential figures in the art world, many of whom proved to be of great benefit later in building his career.

This clientele provided the young artist, as an adolescent, a steady

market for his drawings and watercolours, which his father proudly displayed in his shop, allowing the boy to earn both his own money and public notice from an early age.

Drawing and painting were considered essential to a proper, all-rounded education at the time because such skills were in great demand in various commercial enterprises. Young Turner quickly figured out he had marketable talent and even greater potential, and sought to position himself for financial success. He apprenticed with a noted architect where he learned architectural and perspective drawing, the mastery of which can be seen in even his earliest work.

He began a relationship early in life with the recently founded Royal Academy of Arts (RA), an association that was to last until his death. Enrolling at the age of 14 (the momentous year of 1789!), Turner was immediately recognized as a major talent and, remarkably, his work was accepted for exhibiting the following year. Becoming an associate at the young age of 24, the painter maintained a strong relationship with the Academy, entering his artwork in their annual exhibitions, teaching, lecturing and otherwise supporting the institution throughout his life, long after it had become a bastion of conservatism.

Turner carefully guarded his personal life, but it is generally agreed that he had significant romantic liaisons with at least two women. Sarah Danby gave him two daughters with whom he had little apparent contact. Later on, and to the end of his life, he maintained a secret relationship with Sophia Booth, a widow whom he boarded with in her house on the Thames River. Also kept secret was the declining mental state of his mother, who spent her final years shut away in an asylum, abandoned and ignored by her son. Here is a man who apparently exhibited considerable callousness in his most personal relationships, but who expressed the most profound humanity and compassion in his work—the contrast, while hardly unique, is still jarring.

His father was a lifelong advocate and supporter, working after a certain point exclusively as his assistant and valet right until the end of his life. In his later years, Turner considered himself something of an invalid and indeed suffered from an array of ailments, losing his teeth and also his eyesight towards the end, leading critics to dismiss these later paintings as the work of a blind man, or alternatively, a lunatic.

Many of the relationships with friends and collaborators Turner had maintained throughout his life began to fall away, but this period also brought him his most ardent champion in the person of the noted young art critic and historian John Ruskin. About the latter Turner once declared, “[He] sees more in my pictures than I ever painted.” Though Ruskin’s interpretation was at the time controversial, he later won great respect for his six-volume work, *Modern Painters*. The first volume was published in 1843 and was dedicated explicitly to the defense of the last period of work by J.M.W. Turner, a service for which the artist was most grateful.

## A view forward

The Royal Academy of Arts in London was established in 1768, following the examples of France and Holland, enforcing strict guidelines over subject matter and style in art. It cast off the extravagance of the Baroque period and imposed the classical tradition. Artists who worked beyond these boundaries had great difficulty gaining public recognition and yet this was the institution with which Turner, the most experimental artist of his time, staunchly allied himself.

There is no genuine equivalent in the contemporary world to the social position artists held in the early 19th century, but the fame and prestige Turner enjoyed might be compared to that of a film star today. Throughout his career he was at the top of the heap. His relationships and

transactions with the aristocracy and political establishment brought him great wealth and ranked him in the cultural elite, a position he both sought and enjoyed. Politically, Turner was a republican and a British patriot, although he was never very vocal about his views.

The themes and subject matter in his paintings drew on classical mythology, historical parallels to the ancient world and contemporary political events (and particularly the progress of the Napoleonic Wars), as well as the colonial expansion of the British Empire. Ultimately, Turner departed markedly from the traditions of landscape painters such as the French artist Claude Lorrain (c. 1600–1682), whom he openly revered. There are striking contrasts in Turner’s landscape work in these later years, which place him clearly on the leading edge of advances in artistic form and content, as he responded—perhaps in spite of himself—to the pervasive and explosive social transformations taking place around him.

In addition to the various land and seascapes that he was known for early in his career, in this period of rapid innovation, Turner was both fascinated and suspicious of groundbreaking inventions such as photogravure—which seemed to threaten the very need for artists—and also the steam railway, which broke down barriers of time and space. He was also electrified by such historic achievements as human flight, realized with the advent of hot-air balloons. His enthusiasm for such astonishing advances is conveyed in his own artistic striving against all forms of physical, earth-bound restraint.

One of Turner’s most extraordinary depictions of steam locomotives is “Rain, Steam and Speed—The Great Western Railway” (1844). Here he develops imagery that is highly evocative and, in its technical exploration and lack of pictorial detail, pushes beyond even the later work of the impressionists.

Another striking work, and a favourite of Ruskin’s, is the subtle but brilliant oil painting, “The Sun of Venice Going to Sea” (1843). Centre frame, a Venetian fishing boat with painted sails unfurled approaches the viewer. The subject, perhaps from a previous era, is seemingly outside time, floating on an ethereal sea, the faint outline of Venice on the horizon, drawn in tones of green, brown and yellow, with an inspired stroke of color in the sky above. This extraordinary work has been interpreted as a reflection by the aging artist on his own mortality, which seems probable. Alternatively, it has been taken to refer to the decline of the Venetian Empire with ominous implications for the British.

Turner made efforts to write throughout his life, particularly poetry, and he even occasionally lectured, but he never articulated (or perhaps never dared articulate) what were clearly deeply held democratic and humane beliefs. Aside from the lyrical flourishes of his incomplete verse work, “The Fallacies of Hope,” his true feelings are only recorded in his visual art work. All of his paintings, although only a few are explicit in this regard, offer a protest against human cruelty and against slavery and colonial subjugation in particular.

Turner’s body of work as a whole is a staggering achievement, but it is these late paintings that incarnate in the most sophisticated and advanced fashion the strivings of art to grasp and adapt to a challenging new world. There is a great deal to learn and draw from this work, in all its contradictions and ambiguities, in informing and developing the art of our own revolutionary period.



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