

Turner's Modern World at the Tate Britain: J.M.W. Turner's artistic depiction of early capitalism

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Tate Britain, London until September 12, 2021 (Because of the pandemic the Tate is due to open on May 17 at the earliest); *Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, October 17, 2021-February 6, 2022*; *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, March 27-July 10, 2022*

The Tate Britain exhibition, *Turner's Modern World*, brings together for the first time the social and political paintings of the great British Romantic artist J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851).

The exhibition catalogue explains, “despite many exhibitions on particular themes in his work at Tate and elsewhere, none has presented the spectrum of his modern subjects.”

It continues, “Turner’s lifelong interest in the inventions, events, politics, society, culture and science of his time—the focus of this exhibition—resulted in many of his most original works and transformed his way of painting.

“None of his British contemporaries came near to matching him,” the catalogue essay points out, “and it is even more remarkable that this artist, who began as a topographical watercolourist, regarded himself as essentially a landscape painter and was so enthused by the history and art of the past, created such a vivid and comprehensive testament to his own era—not just as a witness but an interpreter and tribune for his generation.”

Turner was born in 1775, the year the American Revolutionary War broke out, and reached adulthood whilst Britain fought Revolutionary and Napoleonic France (1793–1815). During his lifetime, Europe and North America became transformed into a new bourgeois order—the “Modern World” of the exhibition’s title.

Revolutionary opposition erupted to decaying feudalism and aristocratic privilege from a new, wealthy capitalist class, and from the newly emerging working class,

blighted by poverty and dire conditions. The early days of capitalism saw an explosive growth of industry and cities. The catalogue authors explain how the ruling elite sought “to curb revolutionary sympathies in the 1790s” and suppress the struggle for electoral reform.

Turner’s artistic talent was recognised early on. He was admitted to the Royal Academy of Arts (RA) at the age of 14 (the year of the French Revolution) and elected as an Associate Member 10 years later. Turner’s ability to transcend the RA’s conservative training regime was partially due to his growing up in London’s radical and bohemian Covent Garden, where his father worked as a barber. His travels around Britain as a draughtsman apprentice stimulated his fascination for the new industrial processes. One of his earliest paintings is the atmospheric 1798 drawing of a cannon foundry.

Whilst Turner enjoyed great fame and wealth, he lived modestly, and the paintings in the exhibition are proof of his great sympathy for the poor and oppressed. That Turner did not become more political the curators put down to his reliance on commissions from wealthy patrons and his being regularly condemned by critics. It “taught” him to be circumspect and not openly support causes official circles might consider contentious.

The Reverend Thomas Dunham Whitaker, for example, rejected Turner’s depiction of *Leeds* (1816) as a frontispiece for one of his books because it showed unacceptable aspects of the new Yorkshire. In the picture, his first detailed image of an industrial city, Turner focuses on the cloth-workers with smoking mills and factories in the background.

Turner’s picture *Ploughing Up Turnips*, near Slough (1809) depicts agricultural workers thrown off their small-holdings and condemned to subsistence wages as a result of the rapid enclosure of common lands. In the

background looms Windsor Castle, the palatial residence of George III, nicknamed “Farmer George,” for his close identification with the turnip, which relied on a crop rotation system dependent upon the enclosures. Turner’s focus on the huddled workers breaks with traditional landscapes, which used such figures purely for adornment.

Throughout his life Turner only received one royal commission. His “calculated bid to attract” the attention of the future George IV with his painting *England: Richmond Hill on the Prince Regent’s Birthday*, displayed in the 1819 RA Exhibition, failed. The picture remained unsold.

Elsewhere, the exhibition shows how Turner’s work is imbued with ideas of progress, democracy and freedom. Many of the pictures he painted for himself were “about great liberal causes of the day—political reform, religious toleration, Greek independence, ending the slave trade—as well as those taking the side of victims of war, colonial deportation and man-made and natural disasters suggest he became progressively reformist in much of his thinking.”

Turner’s eye-witness vibrant painting *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament* (1834–35), which destroyed much of the building in 1834, can be read as a symbol of the parliamentary system threatened by the reform movement—the Reform Act had been passed in 1832, giving more property owners the vote, but excluded the working class and women.

In *A Disaster at Sea* (1835), Turner painted the fate of 120 female convicts and children being transported to Australia the previous year on the ship *Amphitrite*. They were left to drown when it grounded off the French coast by the captain who declared they would abscond if rescued.

Five years later, whilst the World Anti-Slavery Convention was meeting in London in June 1840, Turner exhibited *Slave Ship*, which depicts another captain who threw his slave cargo overboard to collect the insurance money. Turner was the only artist to tackle such a subject.

He accompanied his painting with lines from his poem *Fallacies of Hope* attacking the brutal commercialism of the slave trade and perhaps an apology for his own investment in 1805 in a Jamaican slave estate. To their credit, the curators treat Turner’s youthful action in the context of the time.

Like many of his contemporaries, Turner expressed republican sympathies. He sided with the “democratic” faction in the RA who supported the French Revolution in

its early days, but after the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte, disillusionment and British patriotism set in.

However, by the time he painted *The Field of Waterloo* in 1818, Turner had tempered his patriotic leanings to paint an image that neither celebrated the final victory over Napoleon nor took the British side. Instead, he depicts compassion for the suffering and futility of war.

There is no triumphalism over the defeated Napoleon either. In *The Exile and the Rock Limpet*, (1842) the former emperor stands in his island exile on St Helena, watched over by a British guard contemplating his imprisonment whilst a lowly snail is able to move around unhindered.

The victory of the new age of steam age was also expressed in Turner’s paintings. In the *Fighting Temeraire* (1839), an ancient, sailed warship is shown being towed to a breaker’s yard by a diminutive steamer. A bloody sunset represents the *Temeraire*’s controversial history—some of its sailors were hanged in 1802 for mutinying against orders to sail to fight the French in the West Indies (mutiny was then endemic in the British Navy), but the ship went on to play a vital part in Nelson’s victory at Trafalgar in 1805.

Turner’s ability to portray technological progress reached its imaginative highpoint in 1844 when, aged nearly 70, he produced *Rain, Steam, and Speed—The Great Western Railway*. In that work he condensed the effects of the latest Firefly Class steam train, hurtling along Isambard Kingdom Brunel’s engineering masterpiece, into its bare impressionistic essentials.

Turner’s exceptional ability to cognise the emerging modern capitalist world in his art contributes to ensuring that his works are enduring. His paintings, among other things, are some of the only visual images of a revolutionary age before the advent of photography.



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