J. M. W. TURNER

ROMANCE & REALITY

JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER (1775–1851) is acclaimed as the first truly "modern" artist. Developing a unique personal vision, he transformed the picturesque conventions of landscape painting into nearly abstract expressions of form and color. His innovations represented an unprecedented break with the past.

The Yale Center for British Art holds the most comprehensive collection of Turner's work outside Britain. With works in all the artist's media and from every major phase of his career, it enables us to encounter Turner's rich legacy afresh. But it also highlights aspects of his practice that complicate the modern conception—itself heavily romanticized—of Turner as the lonely pioneer of Impressionism and abstraction, decades ahead of his time.

Turner, a radical innovator, was also a stringent upholder of tradition who strove to emulate his greatest predecessors. His visions of nature at its most sublime were filled with everyday human details. He was both an idealist and a shrewd businessman; a progressive and a pessimist; and a patriot who extolled Britain's growing imperial and industrial power while insisting on the futility of worldly hopes. It is this creative tension between romance and reality that this exhibition sets out to reveal.

J. M. W. Turner: Romance and Reality **is on view through July 27, 2025. The exhibition was curated by Lucinda Lax, Curator of Paintings and Sculpture, with assistance from Anni A. Pullagura, former Postdoctoral Research Associate. The exhibition is generously supported by the Dr. Lee MacCormick Edwards Charitable Foundation.**

Atmospheric Topographies

Turner's artistic education focused on learning the principles of meticulous draftsmanship. His earliest training was in the accurate representation of architectural details, the use of geometry to construct convincing linear perspective, and a highly systematic approach to rendering color. These were essential skills for topographical artists, who—in an era before photography—depicted actual landscapes, buildings, and other places in order to record their appearance.

Turner encountered a more evocative form of topographical art at the private "academy" of a wealthy physician, Thomas Monro, whose active support of many leading landscape artists, such as John Robert Cozens and Thomas Girtin, greatly contributed to their professional success. Monro had acquired a vast collection of watercolors from Cozens and paid young artists, including Turner, to copy them. This enabled these artists to absorb techniques and approaches to composition that were

often more artfully “picturesque” than those favored by specialist architectural topographers.

This experience gave Turner the confidence to develop a freer and more expressive approach to his art. Starting in the late 1790s, his works show greater attention to landscape settings, which at times become the subject, rather than the backdrop, of his images; more saturated coloring; and the portrayal of a growing variety of weather conditions. Turner’s paintings and drawings, though still strongly rooted in the topographical tradition, become invested with feeling, emotion, and a strong sense of atmosphere.

A Great Tree

ca. 1794, watercolor and graphite

Christ Church Gate, Canterbury

ca. 1792–94, watercolor and graphite

St. Augustine's Gate, Canterbury

ca. 1793, watercolor and graphite

These watercolors are among Turner's earliest finished works, made just a few years after he began his formal training. Their dark outlines and delicate washes are typical of the topographical techniques Turner learned. But they demonstrate a unique responsiveness to surface textures, exceptional variety of line, and a strong sense of light and shade. This is even more apparent in *A Great Tree,* a careful study of an ancient oak in the grounds of a cottage belonging to his early patron, Dr. Thomas Monro.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.5379; B1986.29.494; B1975.4.1962

Thomas Girtin (1775–1802) and J. M. W. Turner
after John Robert Cozens (1752–1797)

Tivoli with the Temple of the Sybil and the Cascades

ca. 1794–97, watercolor, graphite, and scraping out

A River View near Grindelwald, Looking toward the Wetterhorn

ca. 1794–97, watercolor, graphite, blue wash, and gray wash

Thomas Girtin and J. M. W. Turner after unknown artist

Landscape with Waterfall

ca. 1796, watercolor, graphite, and gray wash

These watercolors are copies of works by John Robert Cozens, perhaps the most accomplished of the previous generation of landscape watercolorists, and another unknown artist. They are collaborative productions, created under the supervision of Dr. Thomas Monro, who owned the originals. Seeking to make use of the particular talents of the artists he employed, Monro asked Turner's contemporary Thomas Girtin to draw the outlines and Turner himself to add definition and tone through elaborate watercolor washes. These examples clearly show Cozens's influence in their increasing use of carefully graduated color to give more richness and subtlety of effect to the landscapes depicted.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.356; B1975.3.1246; B1977.14.4285

Newark-upon-Trent

ca. 1794, watercolor and graphite

Paul Mellon Collection, B1975.4.1619

Dartmoor: The Source of the Tamar and the Torridge (for *The Rivers of Devon*)

ca. 1813, watercolor, gouache, graphite, and scratching out

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.4689

Harlech Castle, from Tygwyn Ferry, Summer's Evening Twilight

exhibited 1799, oil on canvas

Harlech Castle was built by King Edward I to help control Wales after its conquest in the thirteenth century. Its strong historical associations and romantically ruined appearance made it a typically "picturesque" subject for an architectural topographer. Far from dominating the image, however, the castle is portrayed in the distance—a departure from topographical traditions that is paralleled in the image's lack of minute architectural detail. Even more remarkable, however, is the scene of modern industry, in the form of a shipbuilder's yard, to the right. This presents a striking and innovative contrast with the ancient castle on the other side of the river, which perhaps symbolizes the imperturbable flow of time itself.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.76

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Newark Abbey

ca. 1807, oil on canvas

This is one of a group of ambitious works based on Turner's 1805 tour of the River Thames and its tributaries. Rivers and waterways had long been major arteries for transport and trade. Frequently the sites of historic ruins as well as of bustling contemporary activity, they provided Turner with a rich source of subject matter, such as this view of Newark Abbey. Although the painting takes a historic ruin as its subject, it confirms Turner's move away from antiquarian topography. The hazy forms of a nearby mill, ancient trees, and several moored barges dominate the composition. Yet it is the sensitive treatment of the evening sky, streaked with clouds in tints of cream, pink, and gray, that makes this image so memorably atmospheric.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.63

A Limekiln, possibly at Briton Ferry in South Wales

ca. 1795–96, oil on panel

Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.636

Tummel Bridge, Perthshire

between 1802 and 1803, oil on panel

Paul Mellon Collection, B1976.7.162

Emulation & Ambition

Turner's growing interest in evoking atmosphere brought him closer to European traditions of landscape painting. While the French Revolution and wars that followed made travel to continental Europe impossible, many collections belonging to the princes, aristocrats, bishops, and bureaucrats who had previously ruled Europe were confiscated or sold. Their paintings often found their way to London's art market and were avidly sought by British collectors, who in turn encouraged aspiring artists to view and copy their new acquisitions.

For Turner, this encounter with European painting was formative. The celebrated Dutch landscape painters became constant reference points. The paintings of the seventeenth-century French landscape painter Claude Lorrain made the deepest impression. One even brought Turner to tears: he lamented that he would "never be able to paint anything like [it]." But reverence rapidly turned to emulation. Over the next

two decades, Turner would strive ceaselessly to outdo the predecessors he most admired.

During a brief period of peace in 1802, Turner seized the opportunity to cross the English Channel. He had two aims: to see the world-famous collections at the Louvre Museum in Paris and to gather the material he needed to portray the great monuments, towns, cities, rivers, and mountains of continental Europe. His admiration of past artists, on one hand, and the drama and variety of the European landscape, on the other, were to become the guiding lights for his increasingly ambitious works.

Chateaux de St. Michael, Bonneville, Savoy

exhibited 1803, oil on canvas

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.75

Claude Gellée, called Claude Lorrain (about 1604/5–1682)

Pastoral Landscape

1648, oil on copper

Yale University Art Gallery, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Class of 1913, Fund

Lake Avernus: Aeneas and the Cumaean Sibyl

between 1814 and 1815, oil on canvas

The ancient Romans believed Lake Avernus—the water-filled mouth of an extinct volcano—was the entrance to the underworld. Turner shows the Cumaean Sibyl (a priestess) as she prepares to lead the mythical hero Aeneas through the lake to see his dead father. This depiction of the scene shows Claude's deep influence on Turner. The sweeping lines of the trees, the warmth of coloring, and the landscape's seemingly infinite recession all testify to Turner's determination to rival his admired predecessor.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.78

Lake Geneva and Mount Blanc

1802 to 1806, watercolor, pen and black ink, pen and brown ink, and scraping out

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.6301

Mer de Glace, in the Valley of Chamonix

ca. 1815 (formerly dated ca. 1803), watercolor, graphite, gum, scraping out, and stopping out

During his continental tour in 1802, Turner's main focus was to reach the sublime natural landscapes of the Alps. Among these were the Mer de Glace, France's largest glacier. The sketches he made there formed the basis for this watercolor, a tour de force of painterly accomplishment. Turner conjures up the precipitous character of the mountainous landscape by arranging the composition on a sharp diagonal. Different brush, paint, pen, and scraper effects create remarkably realistic renditions of natural textures and patterns. Carefully judged exaggerations of form and line intensify the image's emotional effect, as seen in the sinuous trunks of the blasted pines that grow on the valley's edge; the shifting banks of clouds that surround the jagged peaks; and the frozen vastness of the glacier itself. The result is a breathtaking vision of nature's power at its most overwhelming.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.4650

Devil's Bridge, St. Gotthard's Pass

ca. 1815 (formerly dated ca. 1804), watercolor, white wax crayon, and scraping out

In this dramatic watercolor, the sheer walls of the valley, the fast-moving stream tumbling into its depths, and the distant form of the bridge—mirroring the arch of the rainbow above—create a thrilling vision of the towering and treacherous mountain landscape. Its subject is the Devil's Bridge in the Schöllenen Gorge, one of the most evocative features of the St. Gotthard Pass, which traverses some of Switzerland's most breathtaking Alpine scenery. The pass's winding paths and precarious bridges were a favorite subject for Romantic writers and artists. Turner was no exception: he made a point of sketching this scene while traveling the pass during his 1802 continental tour.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.12

Vesuvius in Eruption

ca. 1818–20, watercolor, gum, and scraping out

With showers of molten magma creating the impression of a vast firework display, this view shows Turner's remarkable ability to recreate nature's intensity through his own imaginative powers. It was a fitting subject to showcase his growing technical skill: by the early nineteenth century, depictions of Mount Vesuvius in eruption had become the epitome of the artistic sublime. This strand of imagery emphasized the luminosity of the volcano's lava by placing it against the enveloping darkness of the night. Turner's view clearly derives from this formula—indeed, it was not until nearly two years later that he first visited Italy. However, he redeploys it to unprecedently spectacular effect, once again emphasizing his determination to outdo his predecessors.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1975.4.1857

Dort, or Dordrecht: The Dort Packet-Boat from Rotterdam Becalmed

1818, oil on canvas

Dort, or Dordrecht is a brilliant demonstration of Turner's quest to outdo the most celebrated of his Dutch predecessors. Its composition reworks Aelbert Cuyp's famed *The Maas at Dordrecht* (ca. 1650). More than simply recreating its diffuse, golden light, however, Turner introduced a richness of coloring that endows his painting with even greater luminosity. The overall impression is one of tranquility and calm. Nevertheless, it soon becomes clear that the painting is filled with incident, seemingly based on scenes Turner witnessed when he passed through the port during his second continental tour of 1817. The ferryboat at the center of the image is teeming with life. Its deck overflows with passengers who strain to look overboard as supplies are unloaded from the passing vessels. This combination of intense color and rich detail dazzled critics and led Turner's fellow artist John Constable to call it "the most complete work of genius I ever saw."

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.77

Experimentation & Print

Whatever medium he was using, Turner constantly—and notoriously—pushed his materials to their limits. His apparent impatience with conventional methods, however, obscures a complex relationship with artistic traditions.

Throughout his career, Turner founded his practice both on a thorough absorption of topographical methods and on recreating the brilliant light effects of his continental European predecessors. To bring them together, he did not hesitate to translate techniques and approaches from one medium to another. By using multiple thin, watercolor-like glazes in his oil paintings, he achieved an exceptional level of lucidity and transparency. Conversely, the extensive application of dense, opaque water-based mediums to his watercolors echoed the rich colors of oils.

Turner brought the same concern with tonal richness and variety to the prints that reproduced his paintings and drawings.

Far from being merely derivative, these were works of art in their own right. Indeed, in his series *Liber Studiorum* he used print as a vehicle not only to document his landscape productions, but also to expound his artistic theory. He supervised his engravers exactingly, marking up their trial prints with minutely detailed instructions. He pushed the print medium still further in his *Little Liber* print series, exploiting the vast tonal range of the mezzotint technique to create works of extraordinary depth. Turner was a virtuoso technician, always seeking new and inventive ways to intensify his pictorial effects.

Barnard Castle (for *Picturesque Views in England and Wales*)

ca. 1825, watercolor, pen and black ink, gouache, and scratching out

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.152

Robert Wallis (1794–1878) after J. M. W. Turner

Barnard Castle, Durham

1827–38, etching and line engraving, with graphite and scraping out

These works typify the many topographical views that Turner created specifically for reproduction as prints. The watercolor (left) is one of a hundred such works that Turner produced for the long-running print series *Picturesque Views in England and Wales* (published 1825–38). Its subject is the twelfth-century ruin of Barnard Castle in northeastern England. Turner deliberately enhanced the romantic appeal of the scene by exaggerating the castle's height above the river, including tiny figures to increase its apparent scale, and bathing the scene in diffuse, golden light. The print (right) shows how carefully the engraver translated Turner's vivid colors into line and tone, including such subtle details as the light filtering through the castle windows and the minutely graduated shading of the sky above.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.6896

Liber Studiorum

published between 1807 and 1819

According to Turner, all landscapes belong to one of six fundamental categories: Architectural, Historical, Marine, Mountainous, Pastoral, and Elevated Pastoral. These prints are part of a systematic publication, the *Liber Studiorum* ("Book of Studies"), containing examples from each of these categories. This work provides further testimony to the enduring influence of Claude Lorrain. Claude made sepia ink and wash drawings to record all his authentic compositions and brought them together to form his celebrated *Liber Veritatis* ("Book of Truth"). These drawings came to be seen as the epitome of the art of landscape and were later reproduced as fine mezzotints. They inspired Turner to make his own, even more ambitious equivalents. Though imitating the format and sepia coloring of Claude's drawings, Turner's plates were intended not as a record of his paintings but to illustrate his own original theory of landscape art. Although never completely finished, the *Liber Studiorum* is among the artist's most personal and pioneering contributions to the practice of printmaking.

Etched by J. M. W. Turner, engraved by Charles Turner (1774–1857)

Jason

1807, etching and mezzotint printed in brown ink

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.14029

Etched by J. M. W. Turner, engraved by Charles Turner

The Fifth Plague of Egypt

1808, etching and mezzotint printed in brown ink

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8118

Etched by J. M. W. Turner, engraved by William T. Annis (active 1798–1811)

River Wye

1812, etching and mezzotint printed in brown ink

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.13993

Etched by J. M. W. Turner, engraved by William Say (1768–1834)

Scene in the Campagna

1812, etching and mezzotint printed in brown ink

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8148

Etched by J. M. W. Turner, engraved by Charles Turner (1774–1857)

Pembury Mill, Kent

1808, etching and mezzotint printed in brown ink

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8112

Etched by J. M. W. Turner, engraved by William Say (1768–1834)

Windmill and Lock

1811, etching and mezzotint printed in brown ink

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8136

Etched by J. M. W. Turner, engraved by George Clint (1770–1854)

Peat Bog, Scotland

1812, etching and mezzotint printed in brown ink

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.13996

Etched and engraved by J. M. W. Turner

The Source of the Arveron in the Valley of Chamouni, Savoy

1816, etching and mezzotint printed in brown ink

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8177

Etched by J. M. W. Turner, engraved by Charles Turner (1774–1857)

Dunstanborough Castle

1808, etching and mezzotint printed in brown ink

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8115

Etched and engraved by J. M. W. Turner

Crypt of Kirkstall Abbey

1812, etching and mezzotint printed in brown ink

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8149

Etched by J. M. W. Turner, engraved by Charles Turner (1774–1857)

Ships in a Breeze

1808, etching and mezzotint printed in brown ink

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8108

Etched by J. M. W. Turner, engraved by William Say (1768–1834)

Coast of Yorkshire

1811, etching and mezzotint printed in brown ink

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8130

"Little Liber," or Sequels to the *Liber Studiorum*

ca. 1824–25

After he abandoned his work on the *Liber Studiorum* in 1819, Turner began a series of mezzotints devoted to atmospheric effects. Engraved by Turner himself, these prints were based on loose and simplified watercolor studies. Turner transformed these brief sketches into finished works as he transferred them to copper or steel printing plates. In the mezzotint technique, the plate is initially roughened so that it holds ink across its surface and prints a uniform deep black. The roughness is then smoothed out or "scraped" to introduce lighter areas into the image.

Because this process results in diffuse forms, it is usual to reinforce the mezzotint plate with etched outlines. Turner, however, selected subjects suited to a purely tonal treatment—clouds, waves, moonlight, storms, sunsets, and sunrises—enabling him to minimize the use of line. Taking full advantage of mezzotint's ability to render every degree of light and shade, from velvety darks to pure white highlights, he created some of the most expressive prints ever made.

Catania, Sicily

ca. 1825, mezzotint with graphite and white chalk

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8355

Catania, Sicily

ca. 1825, mezzotint

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8356

Bridge and Monument

1820 to 1825, mezzotint

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8358

Bridge and Monument

1820 to 1825, mezzotint

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8359

Shields Lighthouse

1820 to 1826, mezzotint

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8351

Shields Lighthouse

1820 to 1826, mezzotint

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8352

The Evening Gun

ca. 1825, mezzotint and scraping

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8349

The Evening Gun

ca. 1825, mezzotint

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8350

Thomas Goff Lupton (1791–1873) after J. M. W. Turner

The Eddystone Lighthouse

1824, mezzotint; engraver's proof

This mezzotint depicts powerful waves crashing against the Eddystone Lighthouse near Plymouth. The shattered mast of a sinking ship fills the foreground, its rigging pulled loose and caught by the force of the wind. The drama of the scene is enhanced by the virtuosic exploitation of the mezzotint medium, with its emphatic contrasts of light and dark, which are most notable in the lighthouse lantern and the crescent moon that illuminates the cloud-filled night sky. The first and only published example from an abandoned print series, it dates from around the time Turner is thought to have begun work on the *Little Liber* plates. Given its parallels in tone, form, and handling, it is possible that this print may have inspired their similarly expressive use of the mezzotint medium.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8297

Robert Carrick (ca. 1829–1904) after J. M. W. Turner

Rockets and Blue Lights

1852, chromolithograph

This chromolithograph reproduces Turner's celebrated oil painting *Rockets and Blue Lights* (*Close at Hand*) *to Warn Steamboats of Shoal Water*, exhibited to great acclaim at the Royal Academy in 1840. A powerful example of Turner's later engagement with maritime themes, the painting depicts the early nineteenth-century use of flares—which, when burned, would glow bluish white—to alert ships to dangerous sailing conditions.

The choice to reproduce *Rockets and Blue Lights* in the complex and costly medium of chromolithography clearly indicates the extraordinarily high regard in which the painting was held. In the adjacent display case, a bound album shows how Carrick produced an image so faithful to Turner's original that it uncannily foreshadows the products of modern mechanical reproduction.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8422

Robert Carrick (ca. 1829–1904) after J. M. W. Turner

The Blue Lights, by R. Carrick; after J. M. W. Turner, Esqre. R.A.; Shewing the Progress of the Printing

ca. 1853, chromolithograph

This album documents the steps watercolorist and lithographer Robert Carrick took to produce his chromolithograph (displayed nearby) of Turner's celebrated oil painting *Rockets and Blue Lights (Close at Hand) to Warn Steamboats of Shoal Water* (1840). The chromolithographic process required the printmaker to produce multiple individual plates, each of which printed a different color. When the plates were printed successively on top of one another, they would replicate all the tints found in the original painting. In this case, there were fourteen such plates. The album includes single color prints from each, alongside a parallel series of impressions showing the layers building up to form the completed image.

Paul Mellon Collection, Folio C N 2

William Miller (1796–1882) after J. M. W. Turner

Modern Italy

1842, etching and line engraving with graphite;
engraver's proof (a), touched

Modern Italy

1842, etching and line engraving with graphite and scraping out;
engraver's proof (c), touched

Turner was highly conscious of the potential of printed reproductions to popularize his images and generate additional income. Always mindful of the specific requirements of the medium, he was prepared to manipulate tone, line, and detail to increase the impact of the finished print. Since most prints were made by specialist reproductive engravers, this required him to supervise their production closely. This cabinet contains touched proofs (trial prints) after his oil painting *Modern Italy: The Pifferari* (1838). These clearly show Turner's almost obsessive attention to detail. Not only has he applied graphite shading to modify tonal values, but he has also written extensive notes in the margins to engraver William Miller. They include minutely detailed instructions ("Make

the front touches broad and decidedly strong") and even request changes to compositional details ("Make this into a Birds nest with Eggs").

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.8050, .8051

On the Washburn (Study)

ca. 1809–15, watercolor, graphite, and scratching out

On the Washburn

ca. 1809–15, watercolor, graphite, and scratching out

Turner made these watercolors while visiting Farnley Hall, the home of his longtime friend and patron Sir Walter Fawkes. Representing an idyllic stretch of river in the nearby Washburn Valley, they show how the artist developed initial studies into finished works. The drawing on the left was part of a large sketchbook devoted to Yorkshire subjects. With its loose washes of color applied over faint graphite outlines, it typifies the kind of rapid visual notations that Turner made on the spot. By comparison, the finished watercolor to the right, though identical in composition, employs finely graduated washes to enrich the scene with natural color. These are overlaid with minutely worked lines and strokes of paint to render fine surface texture and detail, especially in the trunk and branches of the foreground tree. Turner has even introduced an additional

pictorial detail, the kingfisher that perches on a rock in the river, subtly enhancing the image's narrative and visual interest.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1975.4.1620; B1977.14.4700

Upper Fall of the Reichenbach: Rainbow

1810, watercolor, graphite, gouache, and scratching out

Monaco at Sunset from the Southwest

1838, watercolor and scratching out

These watercolors were produced during two different European tours, one when Turner was consolidating his mature technique around 1810, and the other when this was giving way to his final, more overtly expressive style in the late 1830s. *Upper Fall of the Reichenbach: Rainbow* illustrates Turner's use of special techniques for conveying visual effects. Particularly notable is the way he has used scratching out to highlight the dramatic spray of the vertiginous waterfall. This was done by scraping through drying paints, usually with his thumbnail, which he kept specially sharpened for the purpose. *Monaco at Sunset from the Southwest* was produced on a tour of the Mediterranean coast. The vivid palette and dense bodycolor are typical of the artist's later watercolors but have few parallels in the works of his contemporaries.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.4702; B1986.29.235

Maritime Visions

From a young age, Turner recognized the rich visual and expressive potential of representations of the sea. His first exhibited oil painting in 1796 was a moonlit maritime scene, followed in 1801 by an even more dramatic sea piece that sealed his reputation as the most precociously talented painter of his generation. Coasts and harbors would form the subjects of some of his most celebrated topographical views, such as the striking watercolors of Folkestone and Weymouth on view in the exhibition.

Turner's enduring fascination with these subjects stemmed from several sources. In 1788, aged thirteen, he was sent away to school in the seaside town of Margate in Kent. He returned there frequently for the rest of his life, witnessing its transformation from fishing port to tourist resort. No less importantly, the sea was both the source and the symbol of Britain's mercantile and naval preeminence. The country's burgeoning empire grew

primarily from its commercial ambitions, but overwhelming military force followed and facilitated its colonial activities. The “wooden walls” of its warships were the nation’s primary defense against its enemies.

Turner both shared and capitalized on Britain’s maritime affinities. Shoreland scenery, boats, and warships became favored subjects. They inspired ambitious print series that enjoyed notable commercial success. Underpinning this work was Turner’s appreciation of the sea’s potential to evoke a wide range of visual and emotional effects. Ultimately, the sea itself became the artist’s most characteristic subject.

The *Victory* Returning from Trafalgar, in Three Positions

ca. 1803–6, oil on canvas

HMS *Victory* was the setting of Admiral Lord Nelson's most decisive triumph over Napoleonic France, the Battle of Trafalgar, and also the scene of his dramatic death. An irresistible subject for Turner's brush, *Victory* brought together a heroic narrative, his skill in rendering maritime subjects, and the patriotic fervor of the British public. The painting has often been assumed to depict the ship on its return from Trafalgar with Nelson's body. However, the background scenery of The Needles, a string of chalk rocks extending from the coast of the Isle of Wight, does not coincide with the course it took on its journey home. This implies, as does the simultaneous rendering of the ship from three points of view, that it should be regarded as an idealized portrait of the Royal Navy's most famous warship.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.634

Port Ruysdael

exhibited 1827, oil on canvas

Evoking the choppy, cheerless waters of the North Sea, this painting brilliantly exemplifies the way Turner exploited the differing moods of his maritime subjects to create highly affecting images. While storm clouds ominously gather overhead, a single fishing boat navigates the breaking waves, its sail straining against the whipping wind. In the foreground, an abandoned catch scattered beside the timber groins creates a feeling of loss and futility. Conceived as a homage to the Dutch marine painter Jacob van Ruisdael (1628–1682), whose name is given to the fictional port depicted, Turner's painting made a strong impression on his greatest supporter, John Ruskin. "I know of no work at all comparable," Ruskin remarked, "for the expression of the white, wild, cold, comfortless waves of the northern sea."

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.80

Folkestone Harbour and Coast to Dover (for *Picturesque Views in England and Wales*)

ca. 1829, watercolor, gouache, and scraping out

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.4701

Teignmouth, Devonshire (for *Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England*)

ca. 1813, watercolor and scratching out

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.4716

Weymouth (for *Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England*)

ca. 1811, watercolor, pen and brown ink, and scraping out

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.6297

Ship Aground, Brighton, with the Chain Pier Beyond

ca. 1827, watercolor, black ink, and gouache on blue paper

Paul Mellon Collection, B1986.29.239

Margate (for *Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England*)

ca. 1822, watercolor and scraping out

Throughout his career, Turner's involvement with print provided dependable income as well as the scope to experiment with new pictorial approaches. This view shows Margate, the seaside town on the north coast of Kent that Turner returned to throughout his life. It was produced as a design for William Bernard Cooke's lavish publication *Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England* (1814–26). The modest scale of the drawing belies the richness of its symbolic content. Most important is the contrast between the sweeping modern terraces that line the harbor and the scene of men hauling in a shipwreck in front of a heavily laden merchant ship. The former reflects the town's role as a resort for leisured middle-class visitors; the latter, both the trade that supplies their comfortable lives and the great risks taken by the sailors and shoremen on whom they depend.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1975.4.965

Color, Light & Place

In the two decades after *Dort*, Turner moved beyond artistic emulation and the pursuit of technical virtuosity to emphasize the human aspect of his subjects. On a literal level, his landscapes are populated by more varied figures. Their identities and activities help convey the essential character of the locations he depicted. Although their precise meaning often remains elusive, they seem to have a symbolic purpose, suffusing even quotidian subjects with an epic quality.

Turner's fascination with atmospheric effects grew even stronger and his approach to materials became ever more unconventional. Paint is pushed, dragged, and dripped across the surface of paper or canvas. Individual forms dissolve in hazes of light and color. Natural patterns—whether of trees, rocks, or clouds—are rendered ever more expressively.

At their best, Turner's works from these years brilliantly fuse his human, symbolic, and atmospheric concerns while remaining

reassuringly anchored in the particularities of place. Acclaimed by his contemporaries, they remain among his most admired achievements. Yet the freer and less finished style that Turner adopted as he strained to capture the fleeting effects of light and color brought increasing challenges to both popular and critical understanding. Painting, in Turner's hands, was undergoing an unprecedented transformation.

Leeds

1816, watercolor, scraping out, and pen and black ink

This complex panorama presents a compelling image of the growing industrial town of Leeds, in the northern English county of Yorkshire. A center of the wool trade, it also became notable for the diversity of its enterprises, which included banking, printing, construction, and the law. Many of these activities are showcased here: textile workers hang out newly woven and washed cloth to dry; masons mend a wall; a milk-boy and his pony return from their daily delivery. Behind them, smoke from new factories and houses mingles with the morning mist, surrounding but not subordinating the town's churches. Turner shows faith and industry coexisting within a space that is the inevitable—and welcome—product of a new technological age.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.2704

St. Catherine's Hill, Guildford, Surrey (for *Picturesque Views in England and Wales*)

1830, watercolor, graphite, scraping out, and scratching out

As with many of his earlier topographical views, Turner combines antiquarian and modern subject matter: St. Catherine's Hill was the site of a ruined medieval chapel and also of a thriving local fair. Turner combines both into a single visual whole. Under banks of soaring blue-gray clouds, the seething crowd climbs the hill between the ranks of stalls and attractions. Both culminate in the ruined, brightly illuminated hulk of the ancient chapel. The vertiginously sweeping lines and almost supernatural light give the image a dreamlike quality, forming a striking contrast with the freshness and literalness of the earlier *Leeds* (displayed nearby).

Paul Mellon Collection, B1975.4.1859

St. Mawes, Cornwall (for *Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England*)

ca. 1823, watercolor and scraping out

Paul Mellon Collection, B1975.4.964

Tours—Looking Backward (for *Turner's Annual Tour: The Loire*)

between 1826 and 1830, watercolor, gouache, graphite, and pen and brown ink on blue paper

Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.2705

Venice, the Mouth of the Grand Canal

ca. 1840, watercolor

The magical vistas of Venice and its history of rising and declining mercantile power became a source of lasting fascination for Turner. During three short visits to the island, he worked tirelessly to record its every detail, taking gondola trips along its waterways and sketching continually. He ultimately produced more than one thousand pencil drawings and 150 watercolors over a total of only four weeks. In this example, the red and brown pen and brush strokes over nearly white paper to the left capture the reflected sunlight on the Grand Canal's palaces. On the right, the forms of the Customs House and the dome and campanile of the church of San Giorgio Maggiore are deftly washed in with cool greens and blues. Though rapidly executed, the resulting image convincingly evokes the city's evanescent luminosity.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.4652

J. M. W. Turner after William Page (1794–1872)

Rhodes (for *Finden's Landscape Illustrations of the Life and Works of Lord Byron*)

1832, watercolor, gouache, and scraping out

Book illustration was another prolific strand of Turner's practice. During the 1830s, he was especially active creating illustrations for the works of a number of celebrated authors, including Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron. This view of the Mediterranean island of Rhodes was commissioned to illustrate a popular edition of *Byron's Life and Works* (1832–34). It typifies the small-scale images the artist produced to meet the needs of this market. As with his earlier *Vesuvius*, Turner had never visited the scene, instead relying on a sketch by another artist. In spite of this, his powerful imaginative and technical abilities endowed this work with a vividness of coloring and strength of form that are difficult to reconcile with its derivative nature.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.153

A View in Switzerland, probably the Domleschg Valley

ca. 1843, watercolor, graphite, and scraping out

Paul Mellon Collection, B1975.4.1421

Tell's Chapel, Lake Lucerne

1841, watercolor, gouache, and scraping out

Paul Mellon Collection, B1975.4.1419

The Moselle Bridge, Coblenz

ca. 1847–50, watercolor and graphite

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.4651

Mountain Landscape, possibly the Pass of St. Gotthard

ca. 1847–50, watercolor and graphite

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.6300

Flüelen: Morning (Looking toward the Lake)

1845, watercolor, gouache, and scratching out

Turner produced this highly finished watercolor of the small town of Flüelen after his fourth and final visit to Switzerland in 1844. More than simply recording the dramatic view he encountered, he united actuality and imagination to create his own distinctive vision. By exaggerating the contrast in scale between the town and surrounding mountains, Turner gives the landscape a feeling of unfathomable vastness. The scattered groups of diminutive figures that populate the foreground, meanwhile, possess an almost otherworldly remoteness. Hazy veils of jewellike color blend individual forms into an indistinct whole. As John Ruskin later described it, the image seems to be "fading away into a mere dream of departing light."

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.4715

Inverary Pier, Loch Fyne: Morning

ca. 1845, oil on canvas

Though long thought to represent a view in northern Italy, this painting has recently been related to a print from the *Liber Studiorum*, showing Loch Fyne in the Scottish Highlands. The confusion reflects the work's extraordinary economy of means, typical of Turner's audacious and innovative late style. All extraneous detail has been subordinated to the overall effect. Layers of shimmering glazes are developed just far enough to create individual forms that are recognizable but radically abbreviated or approximated. Sky, water, and land meld together as transient, luminous presences. Such seemingly incomplete forms blur the lines between the finished and unfinished, the abstract and the representational, challenging traditional conceptions of the very nature of landscape art.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.79

Tragic Vision

Turner's final decade was one of intense creativity, in which he took his practice in radical new directions. His ever freer and more expressive application of paint swept individual forms into dynamic vortices of wind, water, and light. These came to be the real focus of the artist's endeavors. The result was a form of painting without precedent or immediate parallel in Western art.

Turner's late works often proved challenging to his contemporaries. Recent generations, however, have come to see them as his defining achievement. With their uncanny resemblance to later nineteenth- and twentieth-century paintings, they have cemented Turner's reputation as the first truly modern artist. Yet his artistic purposes were quite different from those of the Impressionists and Abstract Expressionists to whom he is often compared.

The Impressionists were motivated by optical effects and the "painting of modern life," the Abstract Expressionists by

assertive emotionalism and formalist aesthetics. By contrast, Turner's responses to his critics—and, ultimately, the works themselves—suggest that his concern was to convey the fundamental reality of encountering the world around us, both physically and emotionally. Everywhere, we see the human struggle to survive the uncontrollable forces of nature, fating us to live out our lives in the nooks and crannies of a vast and often violent universe. It is this sublime but tragic vision that Turner presented, with unflinching directness, in his final works.

Stormy Sea Breaking on a Shore

between 1840 and 1845, oil on canvas

This small but powerful late sketch exemplifies the painterly approach that one critic, writing of a contemporary exhibition work, derided as "soap suds and whitewash." Turner furiously responded that his intention was not "to paint to be understood but to show what [it] was like." Using rapid, gestural brushstrokes and a limited color palette, Turner conveys the dizzying intensity of the sea and wind. Crashing waves scatter spray across the middle ground of the image, while light breaks through in a way that hints at the sharp breeze driving the clouds apart. It was this pursuit of sheer physical intensity, in both subject and style, that defied the proprieties of conventional landscape painting and bemused so many of Turner's contemporaries, critics and public alike.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.632

Wreckers—Coast of Northumberland, with a Steam-Boat Assisting a Ship off Shore

exhibited 1834, oil on canvas

Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1834, Turner's *Wreckers* foreshadowed the turbulent, daringly generalized seascapes of his late career. The restrained palette of warm ocher tones with cool blues and grays contrasts strikingly with the dramatic subject matter. A steamer is shown rushing to the aid of a ship overcome by a storm off the wild Northumberland coast. Meanwhile, people—the wreckers of the title—gather on the shore in the hope of scavenging the cargo lost by the sinking vessel. Their pursuit of gain symbolizes the interrelationship between loss and survival, an effect heightened by the gaunt ruins of Dunstanborough Castle in the far distance. Though reminiscent of the antiquarian topography that had so deeply shaped Turner's early work, here the endurance of the fourteenth-century fortification forms a menacing contrast with the fragility of the human lives around it.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1978.43.15

A Paddle-Steamer in a Storm on Lake Lucerne

ca. 1841, watercolor, graphite, and scratching out

This iridescent, delicately toned watercolor's setting is believed to be Lake Lucerne, where Turner spent many hours observing changing weather conditions. A band of blue-black rain clouds curves across the center of the image, while faint vertical brushstrokes evoke the downpour. A lightning flash—a figurative and literal gash in the surface of the paper—confirms the violence of the breaking storm. But the real focus of the image is the steamboat. A source of fascination to the artist, it is often interpreted as a symbol of modernity and human ingenuity. Here, however, it appears strangely vulnerable as it heads into the dark waters, the black smoke from its funnel drifting tentatively skyward.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.4717

A Ship Approaching Margate Harbour in a Stormy Sea

ca. 1840, watercolor, graphite, and scraping out

Paul Mellon Collection, B1975.4.1417

Lost to All Hope: The Brig

between 1845 and 1850, watercolor and graphite

Paul Mellon Collection, B1977.14.5378

The Channel Sketchbook

ca. 1845, sketchbook bound in red calf with marbled endpapers, comprising 88 leaves with 74 watercolors and 26 graphite sketches

This modest notebook is thought to be Turner's last intact sketchbook. A compulsive draftsman, he filled more than three hundred such volumes. This particular example was probably produced during the summer of 1845, when Turner traveled between the south coast of England and northern France. It contains a proliferation of highly abbreviated but expressive watercolor and pencil studies. Skies, sunsets, and water are rendered in deft outline or flashes of brilliant color. Their rapid execution testifies to Turner's extraordinary skill in reducing complex forms to their simplest components. Standing in as a kind of shorthand for the real views he observed, these drawings provide vivid insight into his working methods.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1993.30.118

Staffa, Fingal's Cave

exhibited 1832, oil on canvas

This mesmerizing painting shows the Hebridean island of Staffa, off the west coast of Scotland, famed for its unique geology and associations with the mythic Gaelic hero Fingal. As with so many of his most ambitious paintings, however, Turner's vision transcends the specific topographical details of the scene to convey an intensely human experience. The artist had journeyed to the site in 1831, and his painting dramatizes the moment when, in his own words, "the sun getting towards the horizon, burst through the raincloud, angry." The dramatic composition, with its complex array of formal and thematic oppositions—the natural and the artificial, warm and cool tones, light and dark—exemplifies Turner's emotional range, technical brilliance, and stylistic innovation. It is these qualities that have ensured his lasting reputation.

One of his most powerful and enduring works, *Staffa* was also the first of the artist's paintings to enter an American collection, having been bought for the New York collector James Lennox in 1845.

Paul Mellon Collection, B1978.43.14

Squally Weather

between 1840 and 1845, oil on paper laid on canvas

Paul Mellon Collection, B1978.43.16