

## J.M.W. Turner

Joseph Mallord William Turner was born in the year of the “shot heard ‘round the world” in America (1775), and died in the year the Crystal Palace was built (1851). In between, the painter—whose wonderful ultra-British name was refined by art history into the even more august-sounding J.M.W. Turner—was raised in Covent Garden in the heart of London, became the youngest-ever full member of the Royal Academy at 26, enjoyed a long artistic career filled throughout with public attention, and ended up England’s richest artist. For his dramatic and inventive portrayals of the sea, ships, fog, and sunlight, Turner was hailed during his lifetime as one of the world’s most groundbreaking painters. Because such radically non-academic Turner pictures as *The Thames Above Waterloo Bridge*” (1830-1835) predate Edouard Manet’s supposed beginning-of-it-all *Luncheon on the Grass* by as many as 30 years, Turner has given Manet a serious posthumous run for the title of “first modern painter.” The art historian Lawrence Gowing has said that “no artist ever had the three traditional motives of painting—fame, money and the love of art—in better balance than Turner.”[[13]]

A current retrospective of the artist, entitled simply *J.M.W. Turner*, at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., contains a couple of dozen oils and a slew of watercolors in Turner’s signature style—great expanses of light blues, hazy rusts, silvery greys and—most of all—heaven-sent light yellows. Indeed, Turner was probably the artist who profited most from the introduction into art supplies in the 1820s of an abundance of yellow pigments. So much was that the case, in fact, that a few critics accused Turner of having contracted “yellow fever.” With all the suns-on-the-horizons and swirling, backlighted mists in the galleries, the Washington exhibition boggles not so much the mind as the eyeballs.

Underneath his painterly daring, however, Turner was an academic draftsman and composer *par excellence*. As a boy, he was apprenticed to an architect and learned to render buildings and their surroundings in meticulous pencil and watercolor. He even took on private drawing pupils when he was only 21, and in 1807 was elected Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy. Seven years later, the first portions of his *The Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England* appeared. In the days before

photography and passenger trains, reproductions of Turner's drawings were the best way a non-traveler could get a sense of what other parts of Britain looked like. When coupled with his romantic imagination and keen visual memory of his frequent sojourns (Turner made a tour of the Alps in 1802), the artist's draftsmanship and heightened—albeit not yet radical—sense of color produced stunning works of art well before the years in which he reached the style for which we know him best.

One such work is *The Battle of Fort Rock, Val d'Aouste, Piedmont, 1796*, a 27" x 40" watercolor and gouache ("with," says the National Gallery's catalogue, "scratching-out and stopping-out") done in 1815 and loaned to the exhibition by the Tate Britain Gallery in London. At first glance—by our late modern eyes—the picture is as strictly cornball as a grand-opera death scene or the slow-motion finale of one of those uplifting, triumph-of-the-underdog sports movies. While a battle rages on a mountain road and bridge in the upper left, a woman (from a local village?) tends a wounded soldier on a foreground ledge just left of center. Turner's formal balances are all in place—hot fire vs. cool atmosphere in the central background "V," brownish neutrals to either side, and four glowing centers of interest (the protagonist couple, a highlighted bit of wall on the road above them, flames in the distance—all on the left—and *something* flickering bright in the upper right) nicely distributed over the composition. It's for this kind of performance—elevating landscape to the hierarchical level of history painting—that Turner first earned considerable fame.

Turner's convincing "realism"—you do believe you're actually there—is strangely generalized, though. The figures aren't nearly as detailed as Turner's very early and precise architectural watercolors tell you they could be. The specificity of broken trees and craggy cliffs are fairly easy to finesse, compared to, say, that of a particular human face. Turner knows this, and takes advantage of it because his real aim is to give his audience a dose of extreme "picturesque" that borders on the "sublime." The "picturesque" was all the rage in painting at the time, and it meant ruins (natural and man-made), asymmetry (all those things going on to the left of center, held in pictorial equilibrium by that punctuated chasm on the right), and just plain neat-o things like silhouetted pine trees, forbidding mountains, and distant waterfalls. The "sublime"—to where Turner and a few other artists at the time wanted to push the picturesque—meant

not meditative calm or the best glass of wine in the world, but rather the depiction of the breathtaking puniness of human beings in the face of the forces of nature. In *The Battle of Fort Rock*, Turner gives the idea a couple of extra twists: the man and woman on the ledge are puny compared to the battle raging overhead; the battle is minor compared to the giant fireball in the middle distance, and the whole human drama—war wounds, battle, fireball—is cosmically insignificant compared to the mountains, sky and cataracts.

Additionally, the catalogue says, “It is likely that...two similarly sized works [*Lake of Lucerne, from the Landing Place at Fluelen, Looking Towards Bauen and Tell’s Chapel, Switzerland*, also painted in 1815, and *The Battle of Fort Rock*] were conceived as a pair, treating the theme of war and peace in the years of Napoleon’s domination of Europe.”[[54]] Outrage at the excesses of empire is a little remote from us today—though, in the light of current events, it shouldn’t be. What we tend to see in Turner is show-offiness: big space, big theme, big drama, big nature, all captured in a moderately sized watercolor on paper, by an eloquent hand guided by a thoroughly professionalized romanticism. For some people—most lay people, probably—this is painting “like it oughta be.” For others, devotees of the eat-your-lima-beans modernism of, say, Cézanne, and its after-effects in de Kooning all the way through to, say, Bill Jensen, this middle-period Turner is the kind of retrograde siren song whose influence every serious painter more interested in structure than effects should stay away from. Dedicated postmodernists will likely stand aside from any conflict of views and declare that they can’t see the reason for any kind of fuss at all. *The Battle of Fort Rock* is, after all, great hokey fun and over-the-top camp. Maybe it’s even potential fodder for Jeff Koons’s inevitable late, dark period. As for me, I hold in principle with the middle group, but I can’t resist this particular painting’s particular power. Which makes it a wonderful provider, I think, of esthetic experience the way it oughta be.