

Emulous of Light

J.M.W. TURNER

by Gail Leggio

Joseph Mallord William Turner's (1775–1851) genius is undeniable, but his admirers are not always in agreement about how to define it. He enjoyed great success, and suffered some stinging criticism, during his lifetime and was canonized by John Ruskin as the hero of *Modern Painters* (1843–60), as the greatest of landscapists and a prophet of Nature. In the mid-1960s Lawrence Gowing presented a deliberately partial Turner exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Focusing on works from the last two decades of Turner's life, Gowing cast him as a prototypical modernist: "He had isolated an intrinsic quality of painting and revealed that it could be self-sufficient, an independent imaginative function."¹ The fact that Turner habitually sent his paintings into the Royal Academy in an unfinished state, substantially reworking them during the three days allotted for varnishing, added to his panache as a forerunner of Action Painting. Gowing, a lively minor abstract painter in his own right, is an eloquent proponent of this view, arguing that Turner's color "existed first and provided the imaginative substance out of which the likeness of an external subject could be made."²

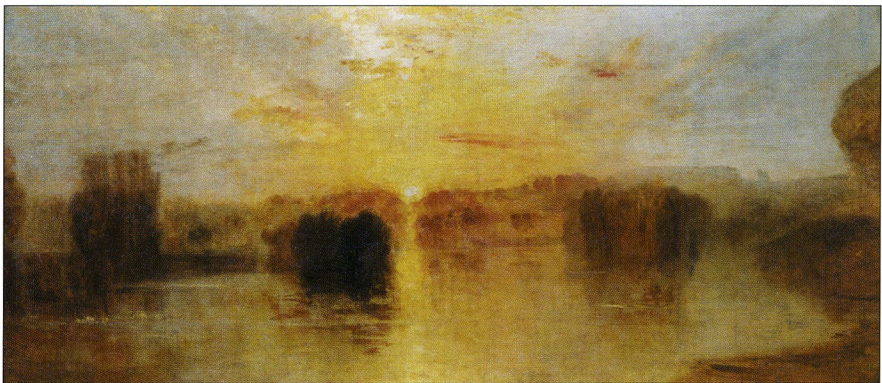
But there is clearly much more to the painter than Alfred, Lord Tennyson called "the Shakespeare of landscape," and many commentators have called



The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire, 1817 TATE GALLERY, LONDON

attention to Turner's interest in history, poetry and current events, as well as his self-conscious emulation of—and competition with—the old masters. The complexity of his achievement is suggested in the traveling exhibition “J.M.W. Turner,” with 140 works, the most comprehensive survey ever presented in the United States. The exhibition was organized by the Tate Britain, which is lending 85 works from its collection, and the three American institutions where the show is appearing: the National Gallery of Art, the Dallas Museum of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Turner was a Londoner, the son of William Turner, a barber and wigmaker who displayed the young artist's work in his shop, and Mary Marshall, a melancholy but better-class woman with helpful family connections.³ Turner grew up around the working docks of the Thames, far from the country-living ideals of the rural and the pastoral. While his work encompasses the picturesque and old master classicism, he had a special affinity for modern effects such as steam. An ambitious boy, he began taking classes at the Royal Academy at 14 and, at 26, became the youngest artist ever elected to full membership. He first stirred interest as a watercolorist, and the medium remained a vital part of his artistic life. (Half the works in the current exhibition are works on paper.) Sketching trips were crucial to Turner's development. The watercolor *The Chancel and Crossing of Tintern Abbey, Looking towards the East Window* (c. 1792) testifies to the precocious skill of the 17-year-old artist. Probably executed on a Wye valley painting expedition, it is both an elegant rendering of the ruined thirteenth-to-fourteenth-century church and an assured study of light and shadow. Tintern Abbey had intrinsic beauty as architecture and ruin, as well as historical resonance. William Wordsworth made it the occasion for one of the principal documents of British Romanticism, his “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798). These picturesque views of English landmarks were very popular; Turner painted several interiors of Salisbury Cathedral, for example. But he was primarily interested in atmospheric effects, as in *Norham Castle, Sunrise* (c. 1798) and *Warkworth Castle, Northumberland—Thunderstorm Approaching at*



The Lake, Petworth, Sunset; Sample Study, c. 1827–28 TATE GALLERY, LONDON

Sunset (1799), which was reworked in mezzotint for the popular series *The Rivers of England*, issued by W.B. Cooke, 1822–27.

When these watercolors were exhibited at the Royal Academy, the catalogue entries included lines from James Thomson's (1700–48) celebrated poem *The Seasons*. Turner was steeped in poetry and even wrote it himself. He frequently mined his own long unpublished poem "The Fallacies of Hope" for epigraphs for his pictures. History painting never enjoyed the hegemony in Britain it did in the Continental academies. English artists were more likely to be stimulated by the extraordinary riches of their literary tradition, from Shakespeare and Milton to contemporaries such as Thomson and Lord Byron. The visual art sometimes illustrated a specific narrative element but more often tried to express an intangible feeling or mood. (The Pre-Raphaelite painter-poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti referred to his illustration work as "allegorizing on one's own hook.") Poets frequently entered the interdisciplinary conversation, as Thomson does in this couplet, from his *Castle of Indolence*, describing the great landscapists: "Whate'er Lorrain light touched with softening hue,/or savage Rosa dashed, or learned Poussin drew."⁴ No landscape painter could afford to ignore the achievements of Poussin (1594–1665), Claude Lorraine (1600–82) and Rosa (1615–73). Significantly, Rosa and Claude were considered, respectively, the prime exemplars of the two terms in Edmund Burke's influential treatise *Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Turner would assimilate the lessons of all three in the more prestigious medium of oil.

The Tenth Plague of Egypt (1802), exhibited right after Turner was elected to full membership in the Royal Academy, demonstrates the young artist's mastery of Poussin's epic sublime. He would return to the composition to illustrate the "Historical Sublime" in his *Liber Studiorum* (1807–19), a series of engraved landscapes.⁵ The small figure group, mourning the death of the first-born, and the geometric architecture of the city are clear references to Poussin, although the drama of the blackening sky has a more Romantic feel. Salvator Rosa was considered the founder of the stormy sublime style, and rough crags were his specialty. Turner's Alpine scenes—such as *The Devil's Bridge*, *St. Gotthard* and *The Pass of St. Gotthard* (both c. 1803–04)—emphasize precipitous chasms, boiling with mist, by organizing the vertical-format compositions in a way that allows the viewer no stable foothold. A far better painter than Rosa, Turner establishes a mood of transcendent vertigo that suggests Friedrich. While Turner embraced the sublime, he did not abandon the beautiful. His 1817 *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* is a clear homage to Claude; the seaport scene with classical buildings flanking a sunset replicates one of Claude's signature tropes. Turner bequeathed another of his Carthaginian paintings, *Dido Building Carthage* (1815), to London's National Gallery, with the proviso that it hang next to Claude's masterpiece *Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba* (1648). Turner emulated Claude's elegiac mood and golden light, but his accompanying lines underlined the tragedy about to overcome

the ancient city: "o'er the western wave th'ensanguined sun,/ In gathering haze a stormy signal spread,/ And set portentous."

The British artist Turner owed the most to was Richard Wilson (1713–82), a founding member of the Royal Academy, established in 1768. Before Wilson, English landscapists were primarily employed to make flattering portraits of the great families' estates. Wilson, who had thoroughly absorbed the Italian landscape during his travels, along with the compositional lessons of Claude and the atmospheric skill of the Dutch masters, asserted the value of landscape as an autonomous genre. As Jack Lindsay writes, he helped British painters break "away from the parochial limitations of the topographers."⁶ Turner also picked up ideas from contemporaries such as Richard Parkes Bonington (1802–28), an associate of Delacroix whose scintillating watercolors suggest what was lost by his tragic early death. Turner found a way to translate Bonington's luminous, vibrant airiness into oil, in a number of coastal scenes keyed to a "blistering sun," in curator Ian Warrell's phrase. *Calais Sands, Low Water, Poissards Collecting Bait* (1830) is less interesting than *Fort Vimieux* (1831), perhaps because the dramatically listing ship in the latter seems a grander subject than the awkward figures of *Calais*. But only Turner could have created *Staffa, Fingal's Cave* (1832), depicting the Hebridean island that inspired the composer Felix Mendelssohn and the poet and novelist Sir Walter Scott. Turner quoted some lines from Scott's *Lord of the Isles*, praising the "mighty surge that ebbs and swells," in the Royal Academy exhibition catalogue. The painting (on view only in New York) is thrilling. The sea birds silhouetted against the turbulent waves are white on the sunlit side, black in the shadow of rain. The sunny cliff face is raw red and yellow, loosely brushed. The molten sun is a hard little circle boring through the storm clouds on the horizon. Most Turneresque is the steamboat, trailing dark smoke and enveloped in a rainy grey veil.

Turner is the great painter of storms, never more so than in the ambitious and triumphant *Snow Storm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps* (1812), the high point of his early career. Underlining his confidence, the artist used lines from his own poem "The Fallacies of Hope" (its first appearance) in the catalogue. Drawing on the Roman historian Livy's description of Hannibal forcing his way into Italy in 218 B.C., Turner adds a cautionary note about the great general's ultimate defeat. The lines read, in part:

...still, the chief advanc'd,
Look'd on the sun with hope;—low, broad, and wan;
While the fierce archer of the downwards year
Stains Italy's blanch'd barrier with storms,
In vain each pass, ensanguin'd deep with dead,
Or rocky fragments, wide destruction roll'd.
Still on Campania's fertile plains—he thought,
But the loud freeze sob'd, "Capua's joys beware!"



Staffa, Fingal's Cave, 1832 YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART, NEW HAVEN

If the lines are bombast, the painting itself is poetry. Turner here fuses history painting, moral lesson and landscape, even adding an allusion to current events. He had seen David's *Napoleon Crossing the St. Bernard Pass* in Paris, and England and France were at war. Wardell remarks: "Coupled with the warning in the verses, the storm in *Hannibal* may be seen in part as symbolizing or foreshadowing the doomed ambitions of both Carthage and Napoleonic France...."⁷ While David's image is essentially an outsized portrait with a landscape backdrop, Turner makes the storm itself the true subject, a force dwarfing all human ambition. The fighting soldiers and even the famous elephants are tiny figures, menaced by swirling white snow and a black cloud that veils the sun with soot and looms over the scene like the inexorable hand of fate.

There is plenty of evidence for Turner as a painter of modern life, for example, in his versions of *The Field of Waterloo* (1818) and *The Battle of Trafalgar, 21 October 1805* (1823–24). On a less grand scale, he embraced the visual potential of the Industrial Revolution, which most Romantics decried. In *Shields, on the River Tyne* (1823), a watercolor executed for *The Rivers of England*, he finds classical harmony in a moonlit shorescape. The figures are workmen loading coal from the local mines, and the warmth of their fires provides a marvelous contrast with the coolness of the moonlight illuminating clouds and waves. Turner found a contemporary subject that stirred his imagination in the burning of the Houses of Parliament in 1834. In 1835 he exhibited two versions of *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons*, using the familiar towers and Waterloo



Venice: *The Dogana and San Giorgio Maggiore*, 1834 NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON

Bridge to anchor compositions that are essentially explorations of elemental chaos. There are blurred crowds of onlookers and shadowy fireboats, but vermillion fire seems to be taking over the night skies and river water with unstoppable beauty. Turner made a dozen watercolor sketches of the conflagration that are nearly abstract, displays of what Sarah Taft describes as the kind of “wet-into-wet painting and spontaneous use of the brush” most likely to appeal to viewers trained to look by a century of modernism.⁸ Many of Turner’s looser watercolors have the radical simplifications of form and painterly bravura we associate with the great mid-twentieth-century abstractionists. Good examples here are *The Moon behind the Clouds*, *Study for “Shields”* (c. 1823–25), *Sunset over the Sea* (c. 1824–26) and *The Lake, Petworth; Sunset Sample Study* (c. 1827–28). *The Lake* is bared down to essentials: the sheen of still water, blocky forms suggesting shore and trees and, radiating from the sun low on the horizon, a suffusion of saffron light. Yet *The Lake* is not a private exercise, but a commissioned work, a preliminary study executed for a Turner patron, Lord Egremont. The only slightly more detailed version is installed in the Carved Room at Petworth House, a sort of Romantic predella for a Tudor portrait.

The most gorgeous of Turner’s paintings are those based on the city most associated with color, Venice. The British loved Canaletto, the Venetian vedute painter prized for his Grand Tour set pieces and luminous atmosphere. Goethe wrote of Venice in 1786: “The sunlight brought out the local colors dazzlingly, and the shadows were themselves so light that they could have served as lights

in another context.”⁹ Turner’s intoxication with incandescent color found its earthly correlate in Venice. His views range from relatively straightforward images of famous landmarks to fantastic reconstructions. *Venice: The Dogana and San Giorgio Maggiore* (1834) combines a lively scrum of gondolas and sailboats with the iconic elegance of the church, designed by Antonio Palladio. The shadowed foreground is rich in detail, and the water has real weight, but the architectural jewels on the horizon shimmer like a mirage in the translucency of the blue sky and their own watery reflections. The painting, an imitation of Canaletto that does the older master the honor of excelling him, again demonstrates how Turner masterfully fused the skills of oil painter and watercolorist. John Gage also credits the artist’s trips to Italy in the 1820s, when he became enthusiastic about the trecento and quattrocento fresco and tempera painters, inspiring “a heightened capacity to use pale but brilliant and delicately balanced masses of color without dark shadow and without chalkiness.”¹⁰ *Juliet and Her Nurse* (1836) leaves Canaletto behind; it is more imagination than vedute. The titular subject provides a detail on a foreground balcony, while the rest of the composition is given over to a moonlit carnival in the Piazza San Marco. Turner has cavalierly shifted Shakespeare’s characters from Verona to Venice and changed the proportions of the great church and campanile. It all looks like something out of the Arabian Nights.

Turner’s fascination with light and color was part of a broader phenomenon. The old symbolic color systems—liturgical, heraldic, aesthetic—were giving way to optical experiment and spectral analysis. As Gage remarks, that proto-psychedelic contraption “the kaleidoscope, invented by David Brewster about 1814, has every qualification of the perfect Romantic toy.”¹¹ Turner read Goethe’s *Theory of Colors* when he was approaching 70 (it was translated into English around 1840), but he had already presented his ideas on a system of “Historic or Poetic Colors” at the Royal Academy. In 1843 Turner exhibited a pair of paintings with the formidable titles *Shade and Darkness—the Evening of the Deluge* and *Light and Color/Goethe’s Theory—The Morning after the Deluge—Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*. Commenting on Goethe’s notion of cool colors as minus values and warm colors as plus values, Turner presents *Evening* as a grey vortex, with human and animal figures vaguely suggested, and *Morning* as a maelstrom of gold. Some critics were puzzled by the anachronistic appearance of Moses and the Brazen Serpent, although the artist may be trying to suggest the visionary quality of art. Iconographically, these are difficult paintings. And even for informed contemporaries of the artist, aware of current color theories and biblical typology, these surging masses of color and shadow seemed to push the boundaries of intelligibility. The fine critic William Hazlitt, writing about Turner in 1816, anticipated his tendency toward the extremes of representation: “Turner, the ablest landscape-painter now living, . . . delights to go back to the first chaos of the world . . . All is without forms and void. Some one said of his landscapes that they were *pictures of nothing, and very like*.”¹² The lines Turner

wrote to accompany *Morning* acknowledge the wonder of Creation, the creative energy of the artist and the difficulty of finding a form to contain it all:

The ark stood firm on Ararat; the returning sun
Exhaled earth's humid bubbles, and emulous of light,
Reflected her lost forms, each in prismatic guise
Hope's harbinger, ephemeral as the summer fly
Which rises, flits, expands, and dies.

For all his virtuosity, Turner understood that every work of art is a leap into the abyss.

NOTES

1. Lawrence Gowing, *Turner: Imagination and Reality* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, distributed by Doubleday, 1966), p. 11.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
3. Jack Lindsay, *J.M.W. Turner: His Life and Work* (New York: Harper & Row, Icon Editions, 1966).
4. Cited, Lindsay, p. 60.
5. Ian Warrell, editor, *J.M.W. Turner* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art in association with Tate Publishing, 2007), p. 43.
6. Lindsay, p. 54.
7. Warrell, p. 52.
8. Sarah Taft, "The Burning of the Houses of Parliament 1834," in Warrell, p. 181.
9. John Gage, *Color in Turner: Poetry and Truth* (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 176.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
12. Cited, Lindsay, p. 109.