

TURNER



MASTERS OF ART

TURNER

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Front Cover: JMW Turner, *Venice. From the Porch of the Madonna della Salute*, 1835
(detail, see page 83)

Frontispiece: T. J. Smith, *Turner in the Print Room of the British Museum*, c. 1830–32

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INTRODUCTION

Artists are remade in the images of succeeding ages. For the British, Joseph Mallord William Turner has been a precocious documenter of rural landmarks, a pioneer Romantic, a grand landscapist, a radical eccentric, then (posthumously) a grand master, hero of the Impressionists and precursor of abstraction. Recently, he has been recast as an artist inspired by science and who documented social change during the height of the industrial revolution. He has been seen as a jingoistic patriot and a supporter of liberal democracy, not despite of the opacity of his political views but exactly because it is hard to pin Turner down to a fixed position.

Ultimately, Turner owed no allegiance to anything other than art, specifically his own art. Turner's dedication to craft is legendary. He travelled hostile terrain, crossed rough seas and endured bad food, cold, lack of shelter and dangerous roads. Very few artists before him had braved the Alps to draw the scenery. Although it is probably false, he claimed he was lashed to a mast in order to observe a gale at sea; the fact that it seems plausible is a testament to the artist's documented commitment to endurance in the name of art. He climbed masts and mountains to commit unique views to memory. These pictures impressed upon observers of his art the understanding that "This man was there".

Paradoxically, Turner—that dedicated recorder from life—was never a realist. He happily adapted accurate sketched observations of places when composing a painting, adding not only figures—to indicate scale, introduce movement and provide narrative incident—but also exaggerating the height of mountains, deepening gorges and inserting trees. Turner was committed to the power and fluency in painting, not to the truth of a specific place nor to any general concept of naturalism.

The artist was part of the watercolour revolution which swept through Great Britain before reaching the European Continent. It changed the status of watercolour from a medium of anonymous print colourists and lady hobbyists—previously a medium used by professional painters for tests and samples—into one worthy of respect. Turner the ground breaker was also an upholder of eighteenth century attitudes and methods. He was deeply invested—in terms of time, effort

and money—in his pictures being engraved and circulated as a means to increase his renown, as well as being a source of income. Turner was one of the last artists to achieve prestige through pre-photo-mechanical means of reproduction. He was dedicated to the Royal Academy and sought royal patronage.

As a man Turner could be secretive, concealing his address from colleagues and even adopting false identities. He spent his riches on multiple houses which allowed him privacy and places to work. He never married yet had long-term romantic relationships and fathered children. He used his fame to obtain favourable treatment, while late in life he would drink alone in public houses only to slip away if any drinkers recognised him. Unsavoury rumours about his private life circulated: he was tight with money; he ran a public house; he had an eye for the ladies; he lost his mind and painted like a lunatic. His art became ever more liberated and technically daring as he raced against time to paint masterpieces before his health collapsed.

Turner's thinking was influenced by the advent of the public art gallery, first in the houses of the nobility and then with the opening of the Louvre in 1793, the Dulwich Picture Gallery in 1811 and the National Gallery in 1824. These events shaped his thinking towards his own galleries and how he intended his art to be viewed posthumously. This legacy proves to be contentious, even today.

This quintessentially English figure was warmly welcomed as a brother artist by mainland European and (later) American painters. Claimed by the Romantics, Impressionists, Post-Impressionists and Abstract Expressionists, Turner is a figure of worldwide importance. However, this book will attempt to outline why Turner is so beloved by the British and how his images became icons of national identity—albeit ones interpreted differently by liberals and conservatives.

This account will also caution against us becoming too caught up in the idea of Turner as a painter of technology and industry or of his imagination being sparked by scientific discoveries. These are truthful but limited ways of viewing Turner. Turner's first love—above nature, family, mankind, science, progress, the cosmos and God—was always art. He was acknowledged by Delacroix as a master of colour and it is this world of colour, forms and movement that Turner most fully inhabited.



LIFE

