

Turner at the Barber Institute: sun, sea and ships



The Sun Setting through Vapour, Joseph Mallord William Turner,
about 1809, oil on canvas, 69.2 x 101.6cm,
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.



The Victory Returning from Trafalgar, in Three Positions,
Joseph Mallord William Turner, about 1806, oil on canvas, 67 x 100.3cm,
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven.



Boats on Ruffled Water, Jan van de Cappelle, 1650s, oil on canvas, 71 x 63.5cm, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello and welcome to this week's Tuesday Talk, part of a series of podcasts given by staff at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, the art gallery and concert hall on the University of Birmingham's Edgbaston campus. My name is Helen Cobby, I'm the Assistant Curator, and today we are looking at the Barber's early nineteenth-century seascape painting by arguably the most famous marine painter of all time, the British artist Joseph Mallord William Turner. This oil painting - measuring 69 x 101cm, roughly the size of a radiator at home - was made fairly early on in Turner's career, in about 1809, when he was 34 years old. Today it is usually known as 'The Sun setting through Vapour', yet it has had numerous titles during its life so far. This has had a significant impact on the interpretation of the work, as renowned Turner scholar Ian Warrell demonstrated in recent research. During this talk, I'll present Warrell's proposals, and consider the inspiration of Dutch Old Master painters on Turner's marine scenes. I'll also explore Turner's unique take on marine painting, and his interest in harbours and the idea of travel, often associated with the sea.

Take a moment to really look at the painting. Imagine standing by the sea, just a few metres from the water softly lapping along a shoreline. It is so calm that you can hear the small sighs of the water creeping up and breaking against the beach. A murmur of voices and clinking of small moored fishing boats carry along a light breeze, enhancing the sensation of calm stillness. To your right, a group of more than a dozen men and women crowd round a little fishing boat, unloading and displaying their freshly caught fish for sale on the sand. One man has a flat fish in his left hand, a large specimen that he is perhaps holding up for others to admire. On your left, a group of sailing and rowing boats are drawn up next to the jetty onto which more baskets of fish are being unloaded. Only one solitary figure appears not to be engaging with this fishing scene; almost directly ahead of you, a fisherman in a red hat stands in the shallows of the water, holding an anchor and looking out to sea. Follow his gaze and you will see several ships scattered along the horizon, two of them are warships or 'men-of-war' as they were called. The rigging and ropes sketch complex, spidery patterns against the sky; their impressive side-on profiles almost beg to be admired. A gun is being fired from the hull of

the larger ship, perhaps to mark the hour or in salute to approaching dignitaries. Imagine what this may sound like from the shore.

Nothing, however, is more dramatic than the heavy, round ball of the burning sun. It sits low in the sky, illuminating the whole scene, from the flecks of clouds to the small ripples on the water and pebbles littering the beach. The luminosity is heightened by Turner's painting technique. He painted some areas more thickly than others, including the silvery white sun and the slim stretches of cloud above it. This technique of applying paint thickly, by brush or palette knife, to the canvas is called *impasto* and creates a textured surface which catches the light.

This seascape is typical of Turner's early work prior to his late, relatively abstract phase, which often overshadows his whole practice in literature and exhibitions. Here, the sun is already a main feature of the composition and it is clearly a preoccupation, one that continued throughout the artist's career. Turner also harnessed the sun to help with the predicament of representing the endless stretching of the sea - its lack of visual coordinates and incalculable portions of space make it one of the greatest challenges in art. He did this by ensuring that the dazzling light partly obscures the horizon, adding to the feeling of infinity that the sea can suggest.

Creating a convincing sense of depth was a great concern for Turner. By the time this work was completed he had been the Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy of Arts for two years. Turner held this post for thirty years, yet this is a lesser-known side of this famous artist's career - as is the fact that he started out as an architectural draughtsman. Turner's position was one of the five Professorships at the Royal Academy, the others were in anatomy, architecture, painting and sculpture. The wide-ranging material included in his lectures suggests that Turner attempted to link all these fields together and indicate how perspective is fundamental to all genres and practices. His lectures also looked at some of the 'Rules of Perspective'; the theories and practicalities of depicting foreshortened objects, receding lines and reflections of sunlight; the use of light and shade; and the roles of colour, line and aerial tones. These lectures marked the first time that Turner made any kind of public statement about art. With one exception, all the

known manuscripts are now in the British Library, while the large accompanying Lecture Diagrams, of which there are 180, are part of the Tate's collection.

The Barber's painting is also typical of Turner's seascapes in the way that he uses the scene to showcase his knowledge of a range of ships, especially the structure of men-of-war, while also seeming to delight in common, everyday anecdotal vignettes found along working shorelines. Turner grew up close to the water; he was born in 1775 in Covent Garden in London, close to the Thames, and studied nearby at the Royal Academy Schools from the age of 14. He loved rowing and fishing - one his fishing rods is now in the Royal Academy's collection. This hobby certainly influenced his art from the beginning. His first exhibited painting was a sea piece, entitled 'Fisherman at Sea', which he showed at the Royal Academy in 1796, and his first painting to be engraved, in 1806, was 'The Shipwreck', made a year earlier. Curators at the National Maritime Museum in London estimate that about half of his enormous output of approximately 300 paintings and over 20,000 drawings and watercolours dealt with maritime subjects. Certainly, during the first decade of the nineteenth century he established himself as a marine artist, and he attempted to bring maritime art into the mainstream of British painting. Famously, his paintings became increasingly experimental, and these abstract works are what people now think of when they conjure up his sea paintings - or even his oeuvre in general.

It was not uncommon for Turner's early maritime views to be largely imagined, and this includes the view presented in the Barber's painting. Constructing imagined scenes may partly have been a reaction to restricted travel at the time. In fact, for the first 22 years of his adult life - up until he was 40 years old - Britain was at war with revolutionary and Napoleonic France, which meant borders were closed across the channel and British citizens were not able to go abroad. Turner would have found this frustrating both personally and professionally, as he loved travelling and made summer sketching trips an integral part of his practice. I'm sure many of us can sympathise considering our own experiences of restricted travel at the moment.

During a brief ceasefire in 1802, Turner made his first continental trip to France and Switzerland, in search of new material. It was during a tour of the Alps that he met Walter Fawkes of Farnley Hall in Yorkshire, who was to become a close friend and patron - in fact, the Barber's painting is one of a pair painted for Fawkes. The other canvas, made earlier in about 1806, is now in the collection of the Yale Centre for British Art in New Haven, entitled 'The Victory returning from Trafalgar, in Three Positions'. It shows Nelson's flagship *HMS Victory* in a more pristine and triumphant state than was the reality as it carried the admiral's body back to Britain after the Battle of Trafalgar. By looking at the Barber's painting with an awareness of its pendant piece and wider political context, the seascape starts to fill with symbolic meaning. The warships act as potent symbols of the nation's sea power, protecting a quiet but essential industry, which underpins Britain's commercial strength and self-sufficiency at a time of war with France.

The time of day adds to the work's symbolic meaning. This is the focus of Ian Warrell's new research, which was published in 'Apollo' magazine in March 2020. He went back to the earliest catalogue of the Fawkes collection and found that the Barber's painting was described there as 'Coast Scene - Sunset, with men-of-war at anchor; fine weather'. Prior to this discovery, the painting's title had varied. In 1823 it was recorded as 'Calm: Three Deckers at Anchor', and until recently it even included the description 'sunrise'. In his article, Warrell argues that this shift from sunrise to sunset alters our perception of what is depicted. Namely, that the smoke near the centre of the image indicates the firing of the evening gun on the hulk behind the main vessel to mark the lowering of its last flag.

He connects the vessel to sketches Turner made of *HMS Victory* while it was moored at Long Reach on the Medway in December 1805, after Nelson's body had been ceremoniously brought ashore. A study for the Barber's painting also appears in his sketchbook, drawn at Portsmouth in November 1807, when Turner went to see the arrival of ships from the Danish navy after their surrender to the British at Copenhagen. The sketches are now at Tate Britain in London, in the posthumously titled 'Spithead' and 'Nelson' sketchbooks. If the main vessel is the *Victory*, Warrell argues that this creates a new and meaningful link with the

painting now at the Yale Centre for British Art: the Barber's work could have been intended as a sequel, a scene of final homecoming for the nation's hero and perhaps even depicting the moments before the admiral was taken from his ship.

The Barber's painting also has strong links to other oils, including 'Sun rising through Vapour: Fishermen cleaning and selling Fish', made before 1807, now at the National Gallery in London. This is noticeably larger than the Barber's work, being 134 x 179cm - one reason that it was not intended as a pendant piece, unlike the work at Yale. Compositionally, the jetty and beach are more prominent, with larger fishing boats pulling into the shore, while the warships are further out to sea. However, as with the Barber's painting, the boats and figures recall the work of seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish painters, such as David Teniers the Younger. Calm, smooth seas were a favourite subject for Teniers and his contemporaries, and also evidently an inspiration for Turner. This Dutch influence was acknowledged by the National Gallery picture's alternative title, 'Dutch Boats', when it was exhibited in Turner's own gallery in 1810.

By the mid-seventeenth century, the Dutch had risen to greatness from the riches of the sea. From cargo carriers and warships to little fishing boats, the Dutch became leaders in marine travel, transport, commerce and security. Water was central to their economic and naval successes, but was also a source of pleasure and enjoyment, for example in the winter, frozen canals provided a place for people to skate. It is no surprise that marine subjects were a favourite of seventeenth-century collectors and many artists became masters of such paintings, introducing atmospheric light effects and various weather conditions to bring life and drama to their work. An example is in the Barber's collection, 'Boats on Ruffled Water' by Jan van de Cappelle, from the 1650s. The view is of the River Waal near its confluence with Maas. The location, however, is less important than the contrasting play of light and shadow on the water, land and vessels. The narrow colour palette that includes both cool and warm tones is also typical of Dutch marine painting of the time. The low horizon line and the cropped portrait orientation of the canvas give prominence to a lively cloudscape, as well as to the choppiness of the waves in the foreground. With its drama, and its acute interest in the play

of light and colour, we can see why Turner admired works like this and how they helped to shape his own seascapes and, by the end of his life, enabled him to define an entirely new marine aesthetic in British art.

Thank you very much for listening, and thank you to Jack Davies for composing and playing the guitar music that introduces and ends these weekly talks. There will be another talk next week by one of my colleagues, so please do come back then if you would like to hear more.

Speaker info

Helen Cobby joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as the Assistant Curator in the summer of 2017. She works on a variety of projects including the care, interpretation and display of the Prints and Drawings collection, the digitisation of the collections, and research into new acquisitions. She has also curated an exhibition about the Scottish Colourists with the Director, and assisted with the curation of the most recent exhibition, 'Cornwall as Crucible: Modernity and Internationalism in Mid-Century Britain', as well as contributing essays to the accompanying exhibition booklets. Her research interests also include Rodin's sculpture and photography (the subject of her MA dissertation at the University of London), JMW Turner's early prints and drawings, feminist art history and criticism, and twentieth-century American women printmakers. For the latter, she was recently awarded a Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Grant from the Art Fund to undertake research in New York City.

Prior to the Barber, Helen worked in a variety of museums, including Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum - as the research curator, Cheltenham's Art Gallery and Museum, and most recently the Ashmolean Museum, where she curated a touring exhibition of Turner's early architectural work.

Music

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.

Select reading list

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