Turner's Interpretation of His Modern World

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Turner's Modern World, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, March 27–July 10, 2022.

John Ruskin remarked, "modern landscape painters have looked at nature with totally different eyes, seeking not for what is easier to imitate, but for what is most important to tell."[1] This quote echoes one of Britain's greatest artists, Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), who was praised as "a modern phenomenon in the art of landscape."[2] With life spanning the steam age, Napoleonic Wars, the expansion of British Empires with political reforms, Turner witnessed the gradual formation of modern time and embraced these changes with an innovative painting style. The exhibition *Turner's Modern World* explores how Turner embarked on updating the language of art and transforming his style and practice to produce revelatory interpretations of modern subjects.

Entering the first exhibition room entitled *Signs of the Time: Early Work*, viewers can perceive the spectacle of landscapes and industries and the spectrum of imagination and reality in Turner's early works. Fourteen-year-old Turner entered London's Royal Academy as a student in 1789, but the Academy's traditional approach contributed little to Turner's modern outlook. His 1805–6 grand oil painting *Fall of the Rhine at Schaffhausen* serves as a distinguished illustration, in which Turner dedicated himself to modernizing Edmund Burke's concept of *Landscape Sublime* (Fig. 1).[3] In the foreground, *Fall of the Rhine at Schaffhausen* showcases the contemporary local color of the Swiss Alps, depicting an ongoing human drama where a woman rushes to move her child away from a fight between two cart horses. However, as commented by John Ruskin, "Turner never drew anything that could be seen without having seen it."[4] With Turner's rough and expressive painting style, the human drama lies in its physical vulnerability as human beings are dwarfed by the overwhelming waterfall behind. Using flattening thick paint with a palette knife, Turner captured the driving force of the water, and the work's grand scale enhances the prominence of the white, foamy strokes, forming the rudiment of his modern painting technique.

Glimpses of modern life also appeared in Turner's exploration of the industrial sublimity, which serves as the counterpart of the sublimity in nature. After tours to Wales and northern England, where iron ore was mined and smelted, a handful of Turner's early drawings and watercolors demonstrate his fascination with industry, including *The Interior of a Cannon Foundry and Interior of a Forge: Making Anchors* (1797–8). Both watercolors depict dark, hot and noisy industrial spaces, again echoing Burke's definition of sublimity—"whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror." By capturing the spectacle of landscapes and industries in his modern world, Turner gradually developed an omnivorous visual appetite for new features and current affairs.

The subsequent sections further reveal multiple aspects of Turner's response to modern Britain's social and industrial reality. In the chamber of *War and Peace*, curators present Turner's recollections of pre-war, wartime, and aftermath to viewers. Apart from the broad time frame, he also reflected on miscellaneous people involved in the war, including war leaders such as Lord Nelson, Napoleon Bonaparte and the Duke of Wellington, as well as ordinary soldiers and civilians. With interior walls painted in dark blood red, the showroom displays Turner's works in the style of 19th-century London Royal Academy—with large-scale paintings hung eight feet high above the ground and smaller ones below (Fig. 2). Above the sizable works hang

1 Lorenz Eitner, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism, 1750–1850: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 236.

2 This praise comes from an 1854 Letter by the American landscape painter Robert S. Duncanson (1821–72). Wall text, *Turner's Modern World*, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Massachusetts.

3 Edmund Burk's Landscape Sublime considers "the most efficient and efficacious cause of sublimity was fear or terror, an emotion which could be raised most efficiently by direct confrontation with nature." For a more concrete definition, see Gerald Finley, "The Genesis of Turner's 'Landscape Sublime'," *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 42, no. 2/3 (1979): 142.

4 Eitner, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism*, 238.

only empty frames, which might serve as a reminiscence of Art Heist in Boston, or as Schwartz comments, "a sly art-historical joke." This wall with dense installations reflects how Turner took pains to record modern military history by depicting distant history to allude to current campaigns, showcasing triumphant ships from different perspectives, or recording the aftermaths of war combined with his self-written epic poem, *The Fallacy of Hope*.

The third room, *Causes and Campaigns*, grants the viewers a bit of breathing space, with the most salient *The Slave Ship* occupying an entire wall (Fig. 3). This 1840 oil painting spanned across different periods. In the past, it alludes to 1781 atrocity on the slave ship *Zong*. In the present, it echoes in his epoch's current affairs that the British Empire ended the horrors of slavery. In the future, it continues its influential afterlife in contemporary works about Black Lives Matter, urging us to confront historical legacies of enslavement, exploitation and genocide. *The Slave Ship* thus serves as an epitome of how Turner "stood upon an eminence, letting every work of his hand be a history of the one, and a lesson to the other."[5] Shifting from geopolitical affairs to technology, *Steam and Speed* concentrates on Turner's pioneering treatment of steam technology, presenting how Turner followed his early interest in industrial advances until his later career, when he depicted steamboats and railways with a greater profundity.

The final gallery, *Modern Painter*, showcases both Turner's finished and unfinished works in the last decade of his career. While the guiding text attempts to attribute Turner's modernity to his painting techniques, it fails to wrap up the essence of the whole exhibition.[6] An underlying grander theme could be how Turner displayed the modernity of his world. Turner is characterized as a modern painter neither because his late works foreshadow modernism with their "impressionistic" or "abstract" qualities, nor because he is a proto-modernist validated by later artists and critics. His modernity exists in his ceaseless effort to respond to the current issues. In forms of sketch, oil painting and watercolor, Turner used his expressive brushstrokes to react to ongoing events such as Queen Victoria's marriage to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha in 1840, French king Louis-Philippe's visit to Britain in 1844, and the 1848's revolt in Naples. As the idea of modern artists' individual engagement with modern experience had not yet taken root in Britain, Turner's responsiveness to current issues made him prominent among his contemporary painters. Moreover, instead of merely registering complex phenomena with his unique techniques, Turner also captured the spectator's interaction with the world as in his 1845's oil painting The Arrival of Louis-Philippe at the Royal Clarence Yard, Gosport. Turner's works thus have an additional meaning of "presence," which shows viewers' perception that shapes what they experience, rather than offering disciplined scrutiny of an unchanging nature. To capture the dynamism and modernity in this era of transformation, Turner did not turn to abstraction, but toward "a fusion of the concrete with the spiritual, the elemental and the sublime.[7]

To summarize, *Turner's Modern World* focuses on the facet of modernity in Turner's paintings as narration, presenting how Turner resolutely and consistently accommodated his paintings to an innovative age. With over 100 pieces of Turner's works, the exhibition clearly articulates its central theme: Instead of being a mere painter, Turner was also an interpreter who seemed to shoulder the responsibility to create images that speak for and define his epoch. Other sub-themes, such as Turner's seascape, are also appropriately intertwined, ultimately forming an informative and eye-popping feast for visitors who join the exhibition.

Bibliography

Eitner, Lorenz. *Neoclassicism and Romanticism, 1750–1850: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. New York: Harper and Row, 1989.

Finley, Gerald. "The Genesis of Turner's 'Landscape Sublime'." *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 42, no. 2/3 (1979): 141–65.

Warrell, Ian, and Franklin Kelly. *J.M.W. Turner*. London: Tate, 2007.

5 Eitner, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism*, 240.

6 The guiding text on the room's wall ultimately concludes: "His exploration of color and loose brushwork anticipates later artistic movements, from the Impressionists in the 1870s to the Abstract Expressionists in the mid-20th century. In his final years, Turner expressed modernity not only in his choice of subjects, but also in his revolutionary approach to the very act of painting."

7 Ian Warrell and Franklin Kelly, *J.M.W. Turner* (London: Tate, 2007), 250.

Figures

Above Left
Figure 1
Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Fall of the Rhine at Schaffhausen*, 1805–6.
Oil on canvas, 148×239 cm. Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Massachusetts. Photo by Wu Yuxin.

Below
Figure 2
Installation view of *Turner's Modern World* at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Photo by Wu Yuxin.

Above Right
Figure 3
Joseph Mallord William Turner, *The Slave Ship*, 1840.
Oil on canvas, 91×123 cm. Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Massachusetts. Photo by Wu Yuxin.