

Constable and Turner: British Landscapes of the Early 1800s

The landscape painters Turner and Constable were influential exponents of romanticism, an artistic movement of the late 1700s to mid-1800s that emphasized an emotional response to nature. Turner, who traveled extensively, often infused his dramatic seascapes and landscapes with literary or historical allusions. Constable, who never left England, preferred more straightforward depictions of placid rural scenery.

Working in the studio from sketches and his imagination, Turner blended his oil paints in fluid layers of translucent color, called glazes. Constable, sometimes painting directly outdoors, applied flickering touches of thick, opaque oils. Despite their differences in temperament and technique, Turner and Constable evoke the same worship of nature that imbues the literature of their contemporaries, the romantic poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats.



John Constable
British, 1776–1837

Wivenhoe Park, Essex, 1816

This picture, exhibited at Britain’s Royal Academy in 1817, demonstrates Constable’s wish to be “a natural painter” because it was created almost entirely out-of-doors. During August and September 1816, the artist documented this country estate of old family friends and recorded his progress in letters to his fiancée. (The commission financed their wedding.)

Centered in the panoramic design, the red brick manor house stands out by reason of its warm color in an otherwise cool scheme of blues, greens, and grays. Constable wrote about the “great difficulty” of incorporating the thatch-roofed deer barn. To add this requested motif, he cleverly sewed about an inch of extra fabric to the canvas at the far right. Then, in order to restore the composition’s symmetrical balance, he stitched a similar strip to the left side, where he showed the owners’ daughter, Mary Rebow, driving a donkey cart.

Oil on canvas, .561 x 1.012 m (22 1/8 x 39 7/8 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.10



John Constable

Salisbury Cathedral from Lower Marsh Close, 1820

Constable frequently depicted Salisbury’s famous spire, which, at 404 feet, is the tallest in England. Piercing the air, the lofty steeple attracts attention to the atmosphere around it. One of Constable’s main interests was portraying the weather—a process he called “skying.”

When the Gothic cathedral was finished in the 1300s, its grounds were walled or enclosed; this Close forms a lush, marshy park. The couple strolling through the Close’s avenue of elms may be John Fisher, the Archbishop of Salisbury, and his wife. Their nephew, an archdeacon and art patron, was Constable’s closest friend. This personal souvenir, kept by the artist, freshly observes the sunshine dappling the lawn. With long shadows falling from the west, the time is early evening. The canvas was executed spontaneously on the spot, and its brown underpainted layer is still visible beneath the trees.

Oil on canvas, .730 x .914 m (28 3/4 x 35 7/8 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.108



Joseph Mallord William Turner
British, 1775–1851

The Junction of the Thames and the Medway, 1807

Turner, who earned an early reputation for producing accurate topographical views, opened his own private sales gallery, where he exhibited this turbulent seascape. Based on notes in the artist’s sketchbooks, the scene is the wide mouth of the Thames joining the North Sea, where the smaller River Medway further churns the waves. To the south, the town on the far shore is the seaport of Sheerness.

To heighten the storm’s impact, Turner artfully manipulated the lighting in this composition. The sails at the right, for instance, are brilliantly silhouetted against the dark clouds. In actuality, however, the sun is obscured high in the sky behind the thunderheads, making it impossible for sunbeams to strike those ships from the side.

Oil on canvas, 1.088 x 1.437 m (42 7/8 x 56 5/8 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.87



Joseph Mallord William Turner

Mortlake Terrace, 1827

A fashionable London suburb, Mortlake Terrace lies next to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, visible here on the distant bend of the River Thames. This is one of a pair of views commissioned by the owner of a town house, The Limes, named after the magnificent lime trees lining its terrace. Both scenes daringly portray the blazing disk of the sun itself, which here flashes a reflection from the stone parapet.

The companion piece, now in New York City’s Frick Collection, depicts the house at sunrise. Reversing the view, this picture looks west over the garden at sunset after the children have abandoned their toys. A black dog barks at the Lord Mayor’s flag-decked barge. This dark accent, which enhances the summer evening’s hazy paleness, was a last-minute addition. Just before the Royal Academy show opened in 1827, Turner cut the dog out of paper, stuck it onto the wet varnish, and touched it up with highlights and a collar.

Oil on canvas, .921 x 1.222 m (36 1/4 x 48 1/8 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.109



J.M.W. Turner
*Rotterdam
Ferry-Boat*, 1833

This seascape was exhibited in 1833 at the Royal Academy, where Turner taught as the professor of perspective. Conquering the problem of creating a believable sense of space across a featureless expanse of water, Turner anchored the carefully aligned design upon a small passenger ferry. From this foreground focus, a row of larger ships moves backward over the choppy waves on a diagonal line, generating a remarkable illusion of depth. The warship's Dutch flags and the skyline of Rotterdam pay tribute to Turner's predecessors, the marine painters of seventeenth-century Holland. In particular, the low horizon and cloud-swept vista derive from harbor scenes by Jan van Goyen and Aelbert Cuyp.

Oil on canvas, .923 x 1.225 m (36 3/8 x 48 1/4 in.)
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.135



J.M.W. Turner
*Venice: The Dogana
and San Giorgio
Maggiore*, 1834

At the "especial suggestion" of a British textile manufacturer, Turner devised this Venetian cityscape as a symbolic salute to commerce. Gondolas carry cargoes of fine fabrics and exotic spices. On the right is the Dogana, or Customs House, topped by a statue of Fortune, which Turner greatly enlarged in size. Moreover, the Church of San Giorgio Maggiore has been pushed very far back in space, making the Grand Canal seem much wider than it really is.

These theatrical exaggerations and the precise, linear drafting of the architecture owe much to Canaletto, an eighteenth-century Venetian painter whose art glorified his city. At the 1834 Royal Academy show, critics gave enraptured praise to the scene's radiant, sparkling waters. The next year, another commission from the same patron resulted in its moonlit companion piece discussed next.

Oil on canvas, .915 x 1.220 m (36 x 48 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.85



J.M.W. Turner
*Keelmen Heaving in Coals by
Moonlight*, 1835

On England's River Tyne, near the mining city of Newcastle, stevedores called keelmen transfer coal from barges, or keels, to oceangoing vessels. The orange glare of the workmen's torches contrasts with the startling blue of the sky. A pale tunnel of light emanates from the cool moon—leading at least one critic to complain that this could not represent night.

Commissioned as a pendant to the preceding painting and shown at the Royal Academy in 1835, this canvas creates a total counterpoint in mood and meaning. The Venetian scene is far away in the Mediterranean Sea, concerns luxury goods, and glows with warm daylight. This North Sea view—a familiar sight to the British public—reveals sooty, modern industry chilled by the colors of a winter's night.

Oil on canvas, .923 x 1.228 m (36 3/8 x 48 3/8 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.86



J.M.W. Turner
*The Rape of
Proserpine*, 1839

In classical mythology, Pluto, the god of the underworld, abducted the maiden Proserpine to make her his wife and the queen of Hades. Turner, in

this entry from the 1839 Royal Academy exhibition, depicted the moment when Pluto's fiery chariot erupts earthward, burning the meadow and terrifying Proserpine's attendants. The setting, equally dramatic, is a fantasy based upon the hills, gorges, waterfalls, and ruins at Tivoli, an ancient village near Rome.

Oil on canvas, .926 x 1.237 m (36 1/2 x 48 3/4 in.)
Gift of Mrs. Watson B. Dickerman 1951.18.1



J.M.W. Turner
*The Dogana
and Santa
Maria della
Salute, Venice*,
1843

Displayed at the
Royal Academy in

1843, Turner's late view of Venice shows the Customs House, or Dogana, from an angle opposite to that seen in his 1834 picture in this room. Behind the Dogana, the domes of the Church of Santa Maria della Salute rise against the vibrantly luminous sky. Although his early works had made Turner wealthy and famous, this later style—in which light evaporates the solid forms—was far too avant-garde for his contemporaries to comprehend. In retrospect, however, it is such late works that had the most impact upon subsequent landscapists. (The parapet at the bottom right is formally inscribed with Turner's full initials, *JMWT*; informally, friends called him Bill.)

Oil on canvas, .620 x .930 m (24 3/8 x 36 5/8 in.)
Given in memory of Governor Alvan T. Fuller by
The Fuller Foundation, Inc. 1961.2.3



J.M.W. Turner
*The Evening of
the Deluge*,
c. 1843

While Noah and his wife sleep in their tent, the biblical Flood begins. In a spiraling vortex of rain and moonlight, birds and beasts head

toward the distant Ark. This is a preliminary version of a canvas shown in the 1843 Royal Academy. Now in London's Tate Gallery, the final work uses stronger color contrasts but is equally evocative and sketchy.

Oil on canvas, .760 x .760 m (29 7/8 x 29 7/8 in.)
Timken Collection 1960.6.40



J.M.W. Turner
Approach to Venice, 1844

As barges and gondolas slowly cross the Venetian lagoon, the misty city vanishes in the twilight. John Ruskin, the major art critic who was one of Turner's few champions later in his career, hailed the canvas as "the most perfectly beautiful piece of colour of all that I have seen produced by human hands." In the Royal Academy catalogue for 1844, this entry was accompanied by a quotation that Turner himself rewrote from Lord Byron's poem *Childe Harold*:

The moon is up, and yet it is not night,
The sun as yet disputes the day with her.

Oil on canvas, .620 x .940 m (24 3/8 x 37 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.110