



*As I came down the Sandgate,  
The Sandgate, the Sandgate,  
As I came down the Sandgate,  
I heard a lassie sing:  
O! merry may the keel row,  
The keel row, the keel row,  
Merry may the keel row,  
The ship that my laddie's in!*

**from the English folk song "The Keel Row"**

Joseph Mallord William Turner,  
*Keelmen Heaving in Coals  
by Moonlight* (detail), 1835,  
National Gallery of Art,  
Washington, Widener Collection

# 1

## The Artist

During his long career, Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), the leading British artist of his era, undertook a wide range of subjects: seascapes, topographical views, historical events, mythology, modern life, and imagined scenes. Turner's innovative focus on light and atmospheric effects made his landscapes enormously influential.

Born in London, Turner was the son of a barber who put the artist's drawings in the window of his shop for sale. At the age of fourteen, Turner decided to become an artist and enrolled in the school of the Royal Academy, the premier British art society. Ambitious as well as talented, he was elected the youngest member of the Royal Academy of Art at age twenty-two. In 1807 he was appointed professor of perspective at the Royal Academy, a position he held for thirty years. His father worked as his studio assistant for many years.

Although a Londoner all his life, Turner traveled extensively across Britain and continental Europe. Through close observation and sketching outdoors, he recorded his experience of landscape, particularly his emotional response to nature. His sketchbooks served as a memory bank for ideas he used months and years afterward. Three hundred of Turner's sketchbooks survive today!



Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Self-Portrait* (detail), c. 1799, Tate, Bequeathed by the Artist, 1856. © Tate, London 2007



Keelmen and torches



# 2

## The Keelmen

In 1818 Turner visited Tyneside, a town near Newcastle in northeast England; however, it was not until 1835 that he made *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight*. The famous work shows a view of Tyneside's busy harbor. In the nineteenth century, at the time of the Industrial Revolution, coal was the essential source of power and the Newcastle region was Britain's mining and industrial center.

The Tyne River flows through the rich coal fields of northeastern England. Because the river is shallow, flat-bottomed barges, known as "keels," were used to transport the coal. The keelmen's job was to ferry coal from mines up the river to the harbor mouth, where they would shovel the coal from their keel into a ship docked there. These ships, known as "colliers" because they were designed to transport coal, would take their cargo down the east coast to London. The colliers were loaded at night to allow for departure with the morning tide. Turner depicts the keelmen transferring the coals in the glow of moonlight and torchlight.

Although Turner's painting describes a scene of contemporary trade and industry, it is not the focus of his composition: the true subject of the painting is light.

# 3 Light

Light from the full moon illuminates the cloudy sky and shines on the calm, glittering water. With dark boats and silhouetted figures framing the view of the moonlight, Turner draws your eyes across the distance and out to sea. Capturing the drama of a night sky over water, Turner makes nature a central theme in this work.

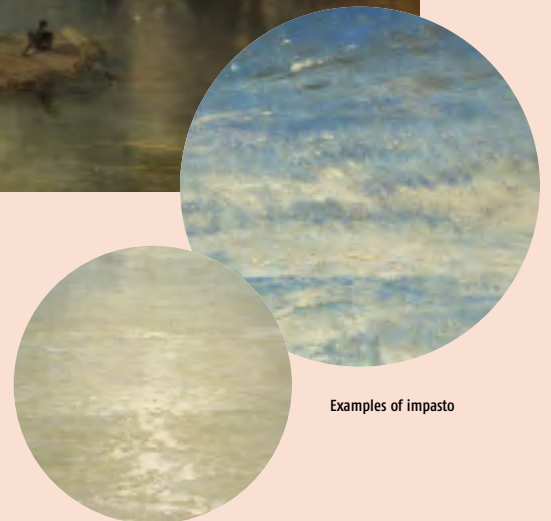
below: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight*, 1835, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

# 4 Technique

Turner experimented with painting techniques, particularly the rather unconventional application of paint with a palette knife (usually reserved for mixing paints), to convey mood and atmosphere. Looking closely at the surface of *Keelmen Heaving in Coals by Moonlight*, you can see that Turner painted some areas more thickly than others—the silvery-white moon and the yellow-orange torch-lights, for example. Turner's rough painting and thick pigment create a textured surface, allowing the raised areas to literally catch light on the surface of the canvas.



**Impasto** is the term for paint that is so thickly applied to a canvas, the medium stands in relief and retains the mark of the brush or palette knife.



Examples of impasto

see more

This fall, take the opportunity to see a retrospective of Turner's work, which includes approximately seventy oil paintings.

### J.M.W. Turner

October 1, 2007 – January 6, 2008  
National Gallery of Art,  
West Building Main Floor

The exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, the Dallas Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in association with Tate Britain, London.

The exhibition is sponsored by The Exhibition Circle of the National Gallery of Art.

Bank of America is proud to be the national sponsor.

The exhibition is made possible in part through the generous support of Access Industries.

The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

For more information about the exhibition: [www.nga.gov/exhibitions/turnerinfo.htm](http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/turnerinfo.htm)

try this!

# activity

## Turner's Travels

Turner repeatedly traveled to Europe, touring Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, France, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. Inspired by these summertime trips, he filled his sketchbooks and returned home to work on oil paintings during winter, combining memory and imagination. In his luminous landscapes, Turner captures weather conditions as if he had made his oil paintings on the spot.

### Weather Report

Look carefully at these paintings made by Turner and then fill in the spaces below to create a weather report for each city.



#### Rotterdam

In this seascape, Turner placed a small passenger ferry in the center of the canvas.

Imagine you are riding in the ferry boat:

Today's forecast for Rotterdam is

---

The clouds are

---

The waves are

---

If you go sailing today, make sure you bring

---



#### Venice

In this cityscape, Turner shows the bustling activity along the Grand Canal.

Imagine you are sitting in the gondola in the center of the painting:

Today's forecast for Venice is

---

The sky is

---

The water is

---

If you toured Venice today, you would see

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Above left: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Rotterdam Ferry Boat*, 1833, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection

Above right: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Venice: The Dogana and San Giorgio Maggiore*, 1834, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

When you visit the museum, try creating weather reports for other landscape paintings.