

Turner: The Sun is God

Schools Resource

Aoife Convery & Catherine O'Donnell



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Introduction

This resource is designed to support an inquiry-based exploration of the exhibition. Inquiry-based learning is collaborative, process-based and creative. It mirrors how artists and other creative professionals develop their practice.

The resource provides contextual information about Turner's life and work, and focuses in-depth on five key works from the exhibition. It is intended to be used before and after your visit or online session.

By providing this information here, it frees up time on the tour for students to connect directly with the works themselves, ask questions and observe in detail Turner's materials and techniques.

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Inquiry-Based Learning

Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) is collaborative, process-based and creative. It mirrors how artists and other creative professionals develop their practice. There are lots of ways to use IBL in the classroom, and you may already use inquiry in your practice.

One model of inquiry we find useful is the MOE STAR Learning Art Through Inquiry Model. This has five components, or repeatable steps in an inquiry process, which can be ordered in any sequence to represent the diverse ways artists engage with their practice. Modelling the process of practicing artists ensures that the MOE STAR model reflects real-world inquiry and makes it particularly relevant in the context of gallery education.

[Watch this video to find out more](#) (requires a free Vimeo account).

Connect and wonder: helping students connect with and wonder about themes and big ideas that are personally meaningful; artists and artworks; the relationships between things and people around them

Investigate: helping students to research given topics, artists and artworks or materials; explore new materials; experiment and learn about new mediums, art forms and processes

Make: helping students to create different artworks using different materials and processes; explore different art forms; improve and refine an artwork

Express: helping students to say what they think; present ideas and feelings

Reflect: helping students to plan steps to take; think about ways to improve their work; think about ways to learn and work better

Turner: The Sun is God

Over 80 paintings by the English artist J.M.W. Turner are on display in Ireland for the first time in this exhibition of works from Tate's impressive collection. Devised by world-renowned Turner scholar David Blayney Brown, *Turner: The Sun is God* explores the artist's fascination with the vast, humbling forces of nature as well as with the sun, moon and clouds. An unmissable opportunity to view the work of one of the greatest painters of the Romantic period, the exhibition features oil paintings as well as an array of watercolours. From light and atmosphere to the luminous sublime, this selection of works showcases Turner's artistic innovations alongside his mastery of light, colour and atmosphere.

There are five thematic rooms in the exhibition, and this resource includes one key work per room. The themes are:

- Memory, Imagination and Synthesis
- Facing Nature
- Light and Atmosphere
- The Sun is God
- Darkness is Visible

Inquiry Ideas

These ideas can be scaled up or down depending on the age and ability of your students, the time you have available and the potential for cross-curricular exploration. For example, a primary school class may use the exhibition as the jumping-off point for a larger cross-curricular inquiry on climate change, or a post-primary art group may have a practical lesson focusing on investigating Turner's materials and techniques. The possibilities are endless!

Connect and wonder: during your tour or online session, discuss with your class:

- What is going on in this picture?
- What do I see that makes me say that?
- What do I want to find out more about?
- How does this connect to my own life?
- Are there any big ideas I want to investigate further?

Investigate: based on your exploration of Turner's works, you may want to focus an investigation on Turner's use of materials, how artists have depicted the weather, how the landscapes depicted have changed since Turner's lifetime, or something else!

This resource should help provide a starting point for your inquiry, and [we have also gathered some more useful resources on this Padlet wall.](#)

Make: create artworks based on your investigations.

Express: this should be embedded at every stage of your inquiry. Give students opportunities to express their views and share their thinking.

Reflect: support students to reflect on their learning collaboratively and as individuals.

J.M.W. Turner: About the Artist

James Mallord William Turner was born in April 1775, the son of William Turner, a barber and wig maker. His mother, Mary, lived with a mental illness and so young Turner was sent to stay with uncles in Brentford and Sunningwell. His father supported and encouraged his artistic talent and in December 1789, aged 14, Turner entered the Royal Academy Schools.

Turner learnt from a young age the importance of sketching on the spot as a basis for larger studio works. By the mid-1790s, he had settled into a routine that he would keep for the rest of his life, travelling and sketching in the summer and working in his studio in the winter on commissions, engravings, or exhibition works.

He first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1790 where he originally showed watercolours. In later years he exhibited oil paintings. He was

recognised as a prodigy and was already quite successful by age 25.

In the early nineteenth century, landscape painting was often looked down upon by the academies as simply copying what you could see, but Turner's insistence over several decades on making the landscape the star of his work helped to raise landscape arts to the status of fine art.

Some of his most famed works, like *Rain, Steam and Speed*, combined elements of the natural world with new technologies like steam power. These images came to symbolise the emergence of the modern world, the advent of the industrial revolution, and the beginning of modernity.

Upon his death, Turner left a large bequest, approx. 30,000 works, to the British nation. In 1900, the National Gallery of Ireland was gifted 31 of Turner's watercolours and drawings by the English collector Henry Vaughan.



The Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons

Exhibited 1810

Oil paint on canvas

Accepted by the nation as part of
the Turner Bequest 1856

Joseph Mallord William Turner
The Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons
Oil paint on canvas
Unframed: 90.2 x 120 cm
Framed: 135 x 166 x 16.5cm
Photo © Tate







The Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons

Turner was fascinated with the atmosphere and the weather it produced as well as the vast, powerful forces of nature.

Capturing natural phenomena became something of a lifelong obsession for the artist. Legend has it that Turner had himself tied to the mast of a ship during a storm so he would be able to paint the event from his memory.

Turner travelled a great deal across Europe, but he was especially fond of the Alps, a large mountain range that spans seven countries across Europe, France, Switzerland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Austria, Germany, and Slovenia. Overall he would cross the Alps between 8 and 9 times in his life.

The inspiration for the scene would have been reports of an avalanche that occurred in the Grisons region of Switzerland in December 1808, killing 25 people.

Turner was inspired by Edmunds Burke's ideas on the Sublime, and he explored the awe and terror that the landscape and nature can instil. Turner does not attempt to create an accurate record of what happened, instead, he creates a testament to the overwhelming force of nature.

John Ruskin, art critic and friend of Turner, noted of this work that "no one ever before had conceived a stone in flight".

In this work Turner made use of a palette knife, using it to apply and model thick slabs of paint to create a cascade of falling snow. When the thick paint had dried, he applied a glaze of yellow ochre, before scraping back the glaze from the white, allowing the yellow to remain only in the tiny creases of the surface, adding a sense of depth and vibrancy.

Rain, Steam, and Speed, engraved by R. Brandard

Published 1859-61
Engraving on paper
Purchased 1987



After Joseph Mallord William Turner.
Rain, Steam, and Speed, engraved by R. Brandard, published 1859-1861
Engraving on paper
Unframed: 15.5 x 21.7 cm
Framed: 44.7 x 59.8 x 2.5cm
Photo © Tate



J. M. W. TURNER, R. A. PINT.

G. STANFORD, SCULPT.

RAIN, STEAM AND SPEED. RA 1844

Rain, Steam, and Speed



Turner was very aware of the role prints and engravings played in making his art more accessible and increasing his audience. The first substantial series of prints based on his work, *Picturesque views on the southern coast of England* (1814–26, engraved by James Charles Allen), were based on material Turner produced from his tours around England in the 1810s and this publication and others like it brought Turner's work to the wider public.

This engraving is based on his painting *Rain, Steam and Speed the Great Western Railway*, from 1844. The 1840s was a period of 'railway mania' in Britain with the country becoming connected by rail.

Turner was not interested in creating an accurate technical painting of a train; instead, he was seeking to convey the sensation, the feeling of the

moment. This work embodies the Sublime undeniably, but now it is not just nature but human-made machinery that is capable of being Sublime.

In the lower right corner, a tiny hare, a traditional symbol of speed, runs ahead of the train. The hare was a late addition to the work, lightly brushed on top of the existing paint, and as a result, is now nearly invisible on the actual painting. However, it is much more visible in the engraving as Robert Brandard, the engraver, specifically tried to capture all the details in the painting.

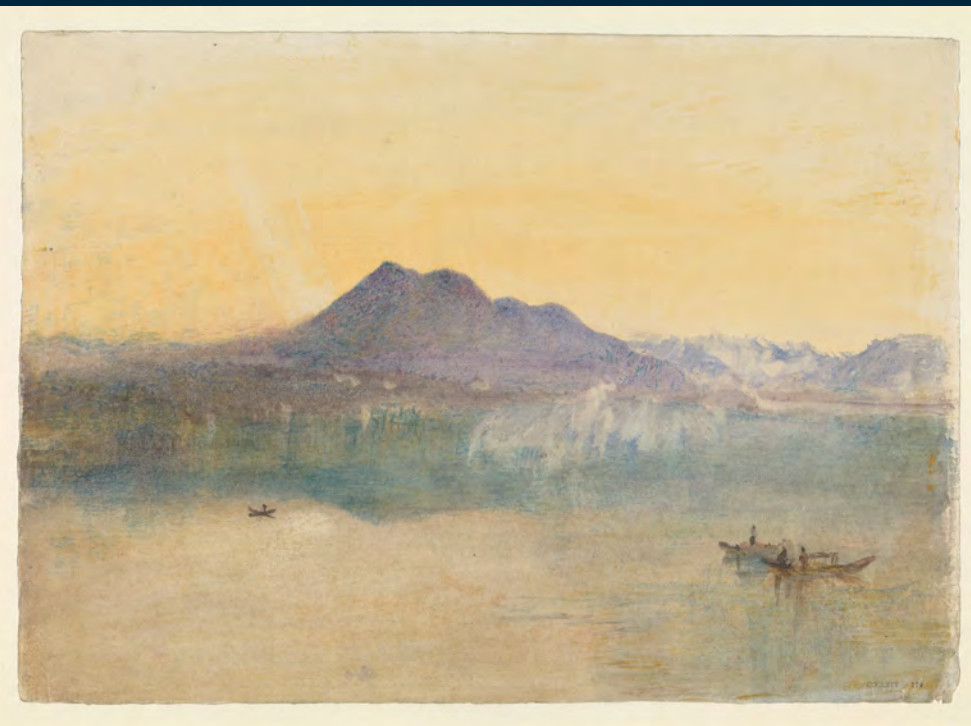
The work is a dramatic manifestation of the Industrial Revolution, showcasing the new technological advancements in speed and in doing so it captures the very concept of modernity in Britain in the 1840s.

The Dark Rigi: Sample Study

c.1841-2

Watercolour on paper

Accepted by the nation as part of
the Turner Bequest 1856



Joseph Mallord William Turner
The Dark Rigi: Sample Study, c.1841-1842
Watercolour on paper
Unframed: 23.1 x 32.4 cm.
Framed: 44.7 x 59.8 x 2.5cm
Photo © Tate







The Dark Rigi: Sample Study

In the later part of Turner's career, his work focused mainly on European scenes. Particularly from his tour of Switzerland in the early 1840s.

In the last few decades of his life, there was a resurgence of interest in his watercolours. This is one of several sample studies that Turner gave to his agent Thomas Griffith to show to clients to encourage them to commission more finished works.

Turner loved to observe nature first-hand and over the course of his life, he continuously made studies on the spot to capture the moment and the atmosphere of his surroundings. One of his favourite subjects was Mount Rigi on Lake Lucerne in Switzerland.

He depicted the mountain at different times of day, for example, in *Dark Rigi Sample Study* we see the mountain at dawn surrounded by mist. His careful use of blue and purple against a golden sky gives the sense of the sun rising behind the mountain.

Turner has even added figures and boats as visual references for space and distance. Turner used thin washes to produce very subtle graduations of colour, using tools like sponges or blotting paper to remove and spread the watercolour, to create mist and fog-like effects.



Going to the Ball (San Martino)

Exhibited 1846

Oil paint on canvas

Accepted by the nation as part of
the Turner Bequest 1856

Joseph Mallord William Turner
Going to the Ball (San Martino), exhibited 1846
Oil paint on canvas
Unframed: 61.6 x 92.4 cm.
Framed: 90 x 120.1 x 13.3cm
Photo © Tate





Going to the Ball (San Martino)

Over the course of Turner's long career, his attention to light and the atmosphere overtook the scenic elements in landscape painting. Slowly but surely his scenes became engulfed in light.

Before his death, Turner is said to have declared "the sun is God." The sun was certainly his most frequent motif. Some critics have even suggested that his suns could be seen as self-portraits.

In this work, we see the canals of Venice, and beside them, the great church of San Martino (St Martin) at sunset. The canals are filled with people on boats heading to one of the city's famous ballroom dances. It is a wonderful example of Turner's famous love of the colour yellow.

During Turner's lifetime, one art institution, the Art Union, proclaimed that Venice, in Italy, might have been built to be painted by Turner. To him, the floating city of Venice offered everything he loved: water, light, the sense of the Sublime, the past, the long history, and the misty atmosphere that made things look soft and cloudy.

In his later career, his Venetian paintings made up more than a third of his output and were among his most sought-after works.

His late glowing paintings of Venice, of which this is one of the finest, might be said to be the most quintessential Turner images. This was also Turner's last painting of Venice and was in his studio at the time of his death in 1851.



The Vision of Jacob's Ladder

c.1830

Oil paint on canvas

Accepted by the nation as part of
the Turner Bequest 1856

Joseph Mallord William Turner
The Vision of Jacob's Ladder, c.1830
Oil paint on canvas
Unframed: 123.2 x 188 cm
Framed: 151.9 x 216.9 x 15cm
Photo © Tate





The Vision of Jacob's Ladder

This work is almost certainly a depiction of a passage from the Bible, from Genesis 28:10, where a man named Jacob has a vision where he is shown a stairway or ladder to heaven and is spoken to by God. Unlike the original passage, however, this work shows Jacob, surrounded by his family, looking out towards the viewer and being addressed by an angel as opposed to God himself.

The work contrasts areas of deep darkness with intense light, adding a sense of intense drama to the piece. As a result, it is one of Turner's darkest paintings.

The dramatic effects of chiaroscuro, light, and colour are very reminiscent of the Italian artist Titian (c. 1488/90–1576) but the flickering forms of the angels also owe a lot to Titian's fellow Italian artist, Tintoretto (1518–1594).

It seems as though this painting was worked on over a considerable period of time. Elements such as the basic forms and the hill are akin to paintings that Turner exhibited in 1806. However, the very painterly, almost impressionistic depiction of light and colour, suggests a much later date, probably the late 1820s.

The painting was kept in Turner's studio for many years and was neglected. It was turned to the wall and was seemingly even used as an impromptu palette.

Glossary

Chiaroscuro: an Italian term meaning light-dark, originated during the Renaissance. This is the use of contrast in light and dark tones, often to create volume and depth or add drama to a visual image.

Engravings: a method of printmaking in which lines are cut into a metal plate or ground. These lines hold ink which is transferred to paper via a press. The engraver uses a variety of lines and marks to convey details. In the 18th century engraving was a way of mass producing prints to be seen widely.

Glaze: a thin layer of semi-transparent paint is applied over dried paint, usually oil paint, to build up colour and vibrancy. Often applied in a number of layers to create depth.

Impressionistic: an image that has qualities of Impressionism, an art movement from the 19th century that focused on how things looked at a precise moment in time, including effects of the light and weather, instead of painting things perfectly realistic.

Industrial Revolution: the period of technological advancement that led to new forms of energy like steam power and new machinery which led to the creation of factories and large cities. The Industrial Revolution changed society from a mostly rural and farm-based society to an urban society focused around industries.

Glossary

Railway Mania: When the world's first modern inter-city railway, the Liverpool and Manchester Railway (the L&M), opened in 1830 it began a period of public and economic excitement about railways and trains. Railway companies like the Great Western Rail laid hundreds of miles of rail, connecting cities in Great Britain and leading to an excessive enthusiasm for railways that resulted in widespread investment in railways in Britain in the mid-19th century.

Romantic Art: an artistic and literary movement in Western culture beginning in the late 18th century that showcased a keen interest in human expression and emotion, spirituality, and the natural world.

The Royal Academy: an art institution in London, founded in 1768 to support the arts in England. The Royal Academy Schools is Britain's longest-established art school.

Sublime: refers to a quality of greatness or passion that is grounded in awe and often terror. It most often is used in reference to the forces of nature. Edmund Burke's 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* was a crucial text for Romantic artists and argued that beauty and the Sublime were mutually exclusive and something could be beautiful or sublime but not both.

Washes: similar to glazing, it involves applying layers of diluted watercolour to a dry surface to build semi-transparent layers of colour.

Contact us

Let us know how you found this resource and share photos of your inquiries by emailing codonnell@ngi.ie.

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Catherine O'Donnell
Education Officer
with responsibility for Teachers, Schools & Youth
T: +353 (0) 1 663 3579 / 0876436310
E: codonnell@ngi.ie

