



Fixing the ephemeral

Accomplished watercolourist TONY SMIBERT discusses the painting techniques of JMW Turner, the Tate Britain's research initiative to preserve the Turner Bequest, and why watercolour painting might be a philosophical exercise.

On the table before me is a small dish of watercolour — pure Prussian blue, dried by time, but ready to respond to the lightest touch of a moistened brush. Unlike most of the other paints in my studio, this is very special. It comes from the nineteenth-century studio of JMW Turner himself, via the Turner Bequest at Tate Britain. I'm using it under controlled conditions in Tasmania as a very small part of a major research initiative that will enhance public understanding of how Turner painted and help the Tate to protect and preserve his watercolours for the centuries to come.

JMW Turner was the most outstanding watercolourist of a period often called the 'Golden Age of British Watercolour' (1750–1850). But while Turner's pictures are well known, his methods are not. He left no manual, and there is only one reference to his methods — the sketches, notes, colour studies, finished watercolours and materials contained in his studio and willed to the nation when he died — among which we find some of the most unique and profound watercolours ever made.

Generally speaking, 'mastery' in watercolour is not so much about technical skill as it is about attaining harmony with your medium, and Turner attained this early in his career. He then refined his approach over a very long working life of more than sixty years: experimenting, devising and creating a wonderfully powerful response to the world he lived in. Turner's studies of waves, landforms, sunsets, buildings and human life are among the finest by any artist in any period, reflecting a deep communion with nature over years of travel.

Some suggest that he transcended the need to have technique at all. Contemporary reports refer to him pouring pigment onto paper, then scratching and working it in a frenzy before, out of near chaos, somehow evolving finished watercolours. He could work rapidly — with reports of his plunging paper

on boards into buckets of water, then working with a production line of watercolours at various stages of drying and finally hanging them out to dry like washing on a line.

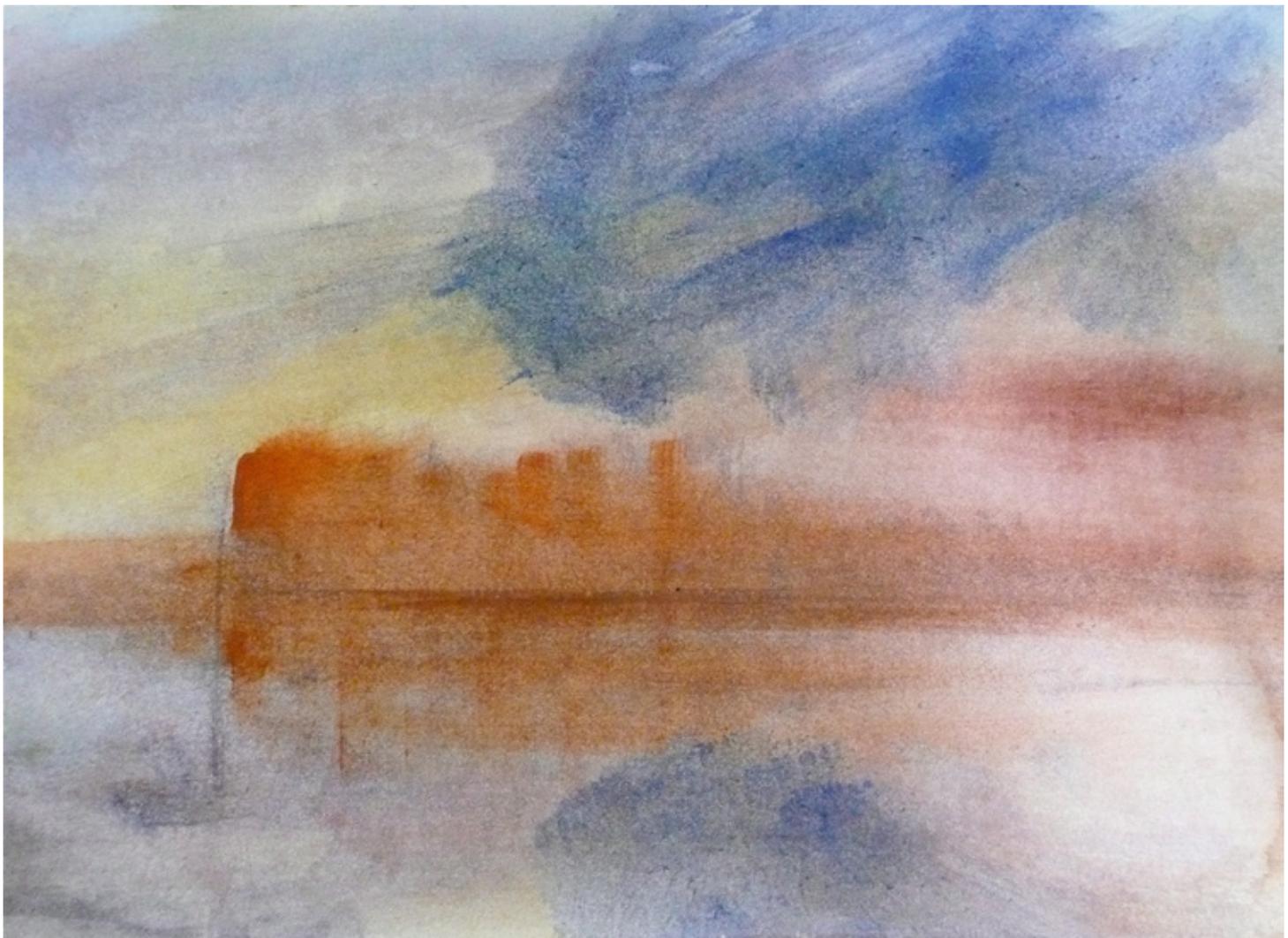
Like a skilled musician, he adapted the formality of technique acquired over years with complete freedom, and this virtuosity must have seemed extraordinary to those who still thought of watercolour in the terms of the carefully constructed eighteenth-century model. He also made a radical transition — from tonal harmony to colour harmonies, which made him a magician and superstar within his own time. While others emulated his approach, Turner stayed ahead, always experimenting and improving, in thousands of paintings, faster, simpler — and better. A parallel evolution in our own time, here in Australia, would be Lloyd Rees, whose early works were distinguished by command of detail but whose later watercolours were masterpieces of glowing simplicity.

Turner commonly started with broad washes in warm colours — the golden glow commonly associated with his works. After these had dried, he might apply cooler wash to define forms such as a distant building bathed in warm light but standing out against the deeper blues of an evening sky. Warm and cool passages were often enhanced by the addition of deeper colour values (which read as 'darks' and strengthened composition). Then came the lifting out of 'lights' by washing away broad areas of paint or by wetting some detail and dabbing away the softened paint with an absorbent material to reveal the white of the paper, and to show us a rising moon or the white sails of yachts. Turner's finishing marks, dancing flicks with a brush or careful rendering of details then stippled in tiny dabs of colour, were often the final magic brought to bear — especially when he was creating watercolours for engravers to work from — with the danger that we may be so bedazzled by the virtuosity of his finish



Tony Smibert, **Within the Tao No 6**, 2008, watercolour, 38 x 29cm. Artist's collection. Photo: Tony Smibert.

Tony Smibert, **Houses of Parliament** (Study from Turner Approach), 2008, watercolour, 20 x 29cm. Artist's collection. Photo: Tony Smibert.



JMW Turner, **Cattewater Plymouth**, c.1800–1820, watercolour, 17 x 24cm. Collection of Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, Tasmania. Image courtesy State Library Tasmania.



Tony Smibert, **Play of Light**, 2008, watercolour, 38 x 29cm. Collection of the artist. Photo: Tony Smibert.

that we fail to notice the power and simplicity of the underwashes that make Turner's compositions read well at a distance.

Senior Conservation Scientist Dr Joyce Townsend has spent over twenty years researching Turner's materials and methods then communicating them to her peers and to the public. Trained in both physics and technical art history, her skills include the analysis of tiny dots of paint used by Turner, a vast knowledge of the history of artists' materials and an understanding of how they lose colour or otherwise change over time. She also leads a team of researchers with wide-ranging knowledge in Turner's papers, pigments and methods. Her personal commitment has already brought Joyce to Tasmania for painting lessons to enhance her practical understanding (where she somehow coped with my lack of scientific method).

Already the world leaders when it comes to Turner, Tate curators and scientists are very happy to work

with practising artists. My research has given me an opportunity to put my conclusions to the test in studies recreated using 'Turner' papers within the conservation laboratory at Tate Britain as well as here in Tasmania. As for using Turner's own pigments, it's a bonus which might not dismay a scientist and is unbelievably exciting to me.

So what might a career painter in the twenty-first century want to learn from the watercolour methods of Turner? The answer goes beyond technique. Watercolour is more than an art form and Eastern artists long ago realised that it was a path to broader understandings that no painter can ever completely 'master'. You can only achieve more or less of the elusive harmony that Turner so clearly demonstrated in his works on paper and then carried over into his approach to oils (for he was a fully realised painter in watercolour before he ever touched canvas). The great Taoist painters of the past would surely recognise Turner as one of their own and delight in the life story of a man so immersed in the experience of nature and art. I want to understand what I can of what the Taoists would have called Turner's 'inner-art' — not in order to paint castles and shipwrecks, but so that I can work with my own media in my own time and way.