

Peace – Burial at Sea, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1842, oil on canvas, 87 x 86.7 cm



Turner from the Tate THE MAKING OF A MASTER

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1 June – 8 September, 2013

J M W TURNER remains the quintessential example of an artist whose personal mastery can be traced back through a period of youthful apprenticeship towards a complete and final union with his chosen media in later life. But what is it that makes a true master? Is mastery measured by high levels of skill, creative freedom, or by attainment that cannot be defined? Is a “master” necessarily someone in total harmony with their medium? Well, all of these criteria applied to Turner – and more. He helps us to understand the evolution of someone like Lloyd Rees and to see why it is so important – particularly in a medium like watercolour – for an artist to continuously study and refine both their understanding and practice. Mature, creative and free-form mastery often proceeds from the tightest and most structured origins, and especially where an artist is also blessed with long life and inclined to work diligently throughout all of it.

In the use of both watercolour and oils, Turner’s skills had evolved to a level that almost seems to transcend the whole idea of “skill”, becoming something altogether greater where the artist and the processes appear fused into a single creative entity. Turner’s bequest of the entire contents of his studio – some 300 canvasses and 30,000 works on paper – to the British Collection, means it is possible to trace the artist’s evolution from apprentice to master and this provides the source for “Turner from Tate: the Making of a Master” that was shown at the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA) before moving to the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Wonderfully curated by Jane Messenger at the AGSA and Ian Warrell at Tate Britain, it illustrates the complete notion of mastery – and indeed post-mastery – as seen in a single lifetime.



Turner was a barber’s son who became the most famous British artist of his era and also a major figure in the so called “Golden Age of British Watercolour” (roughly 1750 to 1850). Born in 1775, he started watercolour very early and was soon selling pictures from the window of his father’s shop in Covent Garden. He undertook a series of youthful apprenticeships to minor luminaries and attended the Royal Academy School where he was greatly impressed by Sir Joshua Reynolds. But perhaps the most significant influence on the

young artist came through access to the originals of other painters in the home of a wealthy patron and collector, which to this day is still called “Dr Monro’s Academy”. There, Monro offered talented young painters the chance to copy originals in his collection and it was there that Turner came into contact with another young genius, Thomas Girtin, in a working friendship and rivalry which fired the talents of both

To assess Turner’s achievements in watercolour it is necessary to first understand the 18th century

approach to the medium, widely known as “tinted drawing”, whereby successively darker washes were painted within a line drawing to create the impression of shadows and form. It was the system most practised at Monro’s and we can see it clearly demonstrated in the early works of Turner. “Tinting” classically involves measured processing through successive stages and isn’t, in itself, a wildly creative pursuit. But where most simply relied on tonal values, Turner and Girtin began to experiment with initial washes in colour. This was the revolution that set watercolour free from its earlier servitude to line and tone and laid the ground for the explosion of colour that would come from Turner’s brush – and affect so many other painters – in his maturity. Unfortunately, Girtin died before he was 30, a loss to British art still mourned by collectors. ‘Poor Tom,’ Turner is said to have observed; ‘Had he lived, I would have starved!’

When asked about the secret of his own success Turner is reported to have said, ‘None ... save damned hard work.’ But we can look at his body of work: evidence of his lifetime study of the originals of the great masters, his engagement with nature, work ethic and, of course, undoubted genius. Therein lies the true secret of his achievements. His later free-form mastery could only have occurred in someone who was thoroughly schooled and drilled in the basics tenets of an earlier generation.

John Ruskin said of Turner: ‘His true master was Dr Monro; to the practical teaching of that first patron and the wise simplicity of method of watercolour study, in which he was disciplined by him and companioned by Girtin, the healthy and constant development

‘The Devil’s Bridge, near Andermatt, Pass of St Gotthard’, 1802, pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper, 47.1 x 31.8 cm



'Venice, Moonrise', 1840, From the 'Grand Canal and Giudecca' sketchbook, watercolour on paper, 22 x 31.9 cm

of the greater power is primarily to be attributed; the greatness of the power itself, it is impossible to over-estimate.

Today, while Turner's pictures are well known, his actual painting methods are less so. He was an inveterate traveller throughout the British Isles and Europe, seeking

out the wild, the picturesque and the majestic wherever he went, regardless of inclement weather. He is attributed with having "never missed" a sunrise or sunset, with having himself tied to a mast in order to witness a storm at sea, and with any number of adventures, all supported by diary entries and



'Waves Breaking on a Lee Shore at Margate (Study for 'Rockets and Blue Lights'),' c. 1840, oil on canvas, 59.7 x 95.2 cm

sketches that show just how deeply immersed he was in his visual dialogue with nature. On arriving at some wild and remote place he would thoroughly explore it, making pencil sketches and recording his observations from every available vantage point. On returning to the inn at night he might then

begin working with watercolour, making colour notes based on his observations during the day – all towards securing them in his mind and on paper – exploring the possibilities inherent in what he had seen, the prevailing weather at the time, or how he chose to imagine it and the various creative/artistic



'Scarborough', 1809, watercolour on paper, 67.6 x 101 cm



Study for 'Eddystone Lighthouse', 1817, pencil and watercolour on paper, 25.4 x 38.3 cm

possibilities he might think of for composition, colouring or effect.

This creative process was essential for tapping into his deep reserves of pictorial experience and there laying the ground for future work. The art outcome for such a day might only be realised months, or even years later in a composition where the earlier sketches would be relevant, or if he found himself exploring new ways of working and plumbed his earlier experiences in search of landscapes and subjects. Drawing was the key medium of first response for most professional artists of his day; and Turner was the consummate adept in the close co-ordination of hand and eye. In his drawings, nothing was missed in a powerful shorthand that provided him with a wonderful record of his experiences and the capacity to bring a locale or moment

'Dinant, Bouvignes and Crèvecoeur: Sunset', 1839, gouache and watercolour on paper, 13.6 x 18.8 cm



'Scarborough Town and Castle: Morning, Boys Catching Crabs', 1811, watercolour on paper, 68.5 x 101.5 cm

vidently to mind, even years later.

There were three distinct stages to Turner's "system": sketches, studies and finished watercolours – from momentary scribbles on scraps of paper, through to careful studies in sketchbooks and on to sheet watercolours where he could experiment with colour harmonies that might then lead him to a finished work – the final magic of the detailed creations that were so highly prized by his patrons and which he also handed over (at huge profit) for publishing as engravings.

Although Turner's ways of applying watercolour have long been regarded as mysterious and even miraculous, he actually depended upon a practical understanding of how colour harmonies worked. He mostly started with warmer colours, that were then strengthened with darker passages and drying before defining with cooler washes and details. Washing out colour was also used to create the play of light so often associated with Turner's work. These underlying colour harmonies are really compositions in themselves, drawing the eye to his paintings wherever they hang. Walk up close to a "finished" Turner watercolour to examine it closely and you will certainly be rewarded with beautiful details but will then normally discover that these are worked into and over a broad composition in colour that might easily stand on its own – and therein lies the fascination to be found in Turner's thousands of colour sketches and notes where there is no "finish".

Some consist of just a few strokes, yet remain among Turner's most powerful statements and proof of his stature as a master painter. Painters interested in Turner's abbreviated watercolour technique will find it thoroughly revealed in *The Castle* (c. 1820–30); and the two Scarborough watercolours are a virtual before-and-after of 'The Castle', c. 1820–30, watercolour on paper, 25.4 x 38.3 cm

Although within the artist's lifetime a public distinction was very clear that "real art is painted in oils", there were many who realised that Turner's achievements in watercolours (if set aside from the usual assumptions that watercolour was somehow a "lesser" medium) were



'Venice, the Bridge of Sighs', exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1840, oil on canvas, 68.6 x 91.4 cm



Turner method. Finally, the striking study for *Eddystone Lighthouse* (1817) is an ideal introduction to the final, great and nearly abstract seapieces in oil, such as *Waves Breaking on a Lee Shore at Margate*.

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actually of equal or even greater distinction than his oils as proof of how a single human being can attain an almost spiritual integration with a medium and take it to new heights. His achievements and standing helped to raise the credibility of all watercolour artists in Britain and led to the flowering of what we now call "The Golden Age of British Watercolour".

"Turner at Tate: The Making of a Master" allows us to view the watercolours of his youth alongside

'Rome, from the Vatican. Raffaele, Accompanied by La Fornarina, Preparing his Pictures for the Decoration of the Loggia', exhibited 1820

the magnificent oils and watercolours of his later life, where he demonstrated not only his personal mastery but also the nature of mastery itself. Those with an interest in watercolour will also notice that Turner the oil painter became one of the earliest artists to paint directly onto a light ground with a virtual under-wash of colour – possibly ragged onto the canvas – and very similar to a watercolour beginning. It can be said that he carried watercolour method into his oils and then took oil technique back into watercolour; and in so doing, revolutionised them both. This is what makes this Turner exhibition an irresistible experience for anyone with an interest in the art and craft of painting.

Tony Smibert

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