Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) was a Cockney-speaking Londoner born in Covent Garden (1, 2). His life encompasses the time of intense development of industrial infrastructure in England, including the networks of canals and railways. It was also a period of particularly interesting interactions between artists, scientists, and industrialists.

Turner lived close to the River Thames and not far from Somerset House on the Strand, which was, in the second half of the 18th century, the hub of science and the arts. It housed the Royal Society and the Royal Academy. This close proximity greatly facilitated exchanges between scientists and artists. In addition, the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, founded in 1754, promoted new inventions. Later, the Royal Institution (founded in 1799) aimed to achieve wider public understanding of natural philosophy (3).

Literature and the arts in the second half of the 18th century were departing from the strict rationality of the Enlightenment. What became known as the romantic movement stressed the value of emotions and imagination. The romantics emphasized the importance of the “universe within” each individual (4). In England, poets were the main proponents of romanticism: William Blake was the precursor, and later generations included William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and Lord Byron (5). They maintained the concept of “the sublime,” which was regarded as different from beauty: It was nature that incited fear and awe. In landscape painting, untamed nature became a focus, as opposed to the ordered and proscribed world of the neoclassicists. In Germany, this new trend was epitomized by the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), a contemporary of Turner.

Turner started to paint in a very disciplined way. He trained in architectural drawing and for a time studied under the topographical draftsman Thomas Malton (6). In 1793, at the age of 18, Turner won the Greater Silver Pallet in a competition for drawing landscape run by the Society of Arts (7). Turner himself dabbled in architecture (1, 8). For instance, in 1804 he designed a gallery for his house on Queen Anne Street. Although his training at the Royal Academy School did include figure painting, throughout his life Turner remained attracted to landscape and architectural images. He was not inclined toward portraiture, except for painting working people as parts of his scenes in landscape. He delighted in painting wild nature, particularly the sea. In his paintings of fire and water, the force of nature—sometimes catastrophic—is rendered through the use of color and light. His revolutionary style was heavily criticized for producing “unfinished” works (incidentally, the same criticism was later directed at the impressionists). He used the same approach in his “industrial” images of forges and foundries. After 1800, Turner applied his landscapist skills to paint historical scenes; and he was influenced by the 17th-century painters Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), and Claude Lorrain (1604/5–1682)—both of whom he particularly admired. He thus wisely merged a revolutionary painting style with then highly regarded “historical” stories. This approach gained him recognition and patronage despite the nonconformity of his style.

Turner’s work in a fascinating way synthesizes the romantic approach with technically informed architectural drawing and includes a wide range of “technological” themes. For instance, his famous painting The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last Berth to be broken up, created in 1838, is a synthesis of marine painting with the allegory of technological transition from sail to steam (9). Turner created many works in oil, but his favorite medium was watercolor. He also worked with printers and engravers.

Turner’s landscape painting was informed by his extensive travels in England and Europe. For a time he lived close to Oxford. He also went to Margate on the coast in the 1780s, visited Scotland in 1801, and in 1802 traveled to Italy, France, and Switzerland (1, 2, 5, 7). For most of his professional career, Turner was associated with the Royal Academy. He was Professor of Perspective there from 1807 (2). Apparently he was a terrible lecturer. His audiences could hardly make out what he was saying (1); however, the visual aspects of his lectures were flawless: For these lectures he prepared about 200 original drawings.

Rain, Steam, and Speed - The Great Western Railway (Fig. 1) was exhibited in 1844. The picture repre-
sents a train crossing the bridge over the River Thames at Maidenhead in a driving rain (10, 11). Here Turner combines the view of violent nature with a tribute to technology (the railway) and to architectural achievement (the bridge). Note how he achieves the drama and tension, not only through color and blur that depicts speed but also through the diagonals of the rain streams and the bridge. It is significant that the depicted railway line, from London to Bristol, was a major achievement in contemporary engineering. It was built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1806–1859) between 1836 and 1841 (12). The bridge, it was said, had the largest and flattest arch ever constructed in brick and was heavily criticized as a precarious structure. Through this painting, Turner celebrates Brunel’s success (11).

Turner’s name is very much alive on today’s arts scene. He bequeathed his works to the nation. Over 200 years later, in 1987, the Clore Gallery was opened at Tate Britain in London to house most of these paintings (13). Just recently, in 2011, a new museum, Turner Contemporary, opened in Margate to celebrate Turner’s association with this town (14). The Turner Prize, established in 1984 and awarded annually, remains the most prestigious award for a contemporary artist in Britain (15).

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