

Turner and Constable: A Comparison

JMW Turner (1775–1851), J Constable (1776–1837)

What is the biggest difference between these two paintings? In which painted view would you prefer to take your holiday? Why? Artist Henry Fuseli wrote that Constable's work "made me call for my greatcoat and umbrella" because the weather looked so real. After looking at Turner's work, what would you call for: sunglasses/umbrella, t-shirt/jumper?

Constable described the busy beaches of Brighton in a letter to a friend: ladies, gentlemen, footmen, children, nursery maids, dogs, boys, fishermen... Can you find any of these people in the painting? Who are the people in Turner's painting? Could there be a story behind the figures? Who is enjoying themselves more?

How real are these painted places? Do you think that they were painted outdoors in front of the scene, or later in a studio?

Think about the artist's choice of colour. How has it been used to evoke the atmosphere? What would have happened if the artists had swapped their painting palettes for the pictures?

The two paintings were completed around the same time. Do you think the artists were painting images from the past or the present? Can you tell what time of day and year it is in the paintings?



JMW Turner 1775–1851
Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: Italy exh1832



J Constable 1776–1837
Chain Pier, Brighton 1826–7 (exh1827)

Turner

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: Italy is not a painting of a real place, but a scene Turner invented. Inspired by a poem by Lord Byron, whom he admired, Turner tries to express the atmosphere of Italy which he loved. Byron's poem tells the story of Childe Harold (Childe is an old title for the son of a nobleman) who wasted his youth and then decided to start a new life in Italy, drawn there by the beauty of its classical ruins. Turner, like Byron, loved the decaying beauty of Italy's heritage.

The painting was displayed in 1832, with a section of Byron's poem attached to it. The man in a monk's habit, among the figures at the front, is thought to be Childe Harold.

Constable

Although Constable made many sketches of Brighton, this is his only major painting of the town. He was staying in Brighton because the sea air was meant to help his wife, who was suffering from tuberculosis. Constable was resentful of being in a place that he disliked, feeling that it had become too popular and the beach was 'only Piccadilly by the seaside'. His mood is reflected in the painting which is turbulent and stormy.

The fact that his wife died in 1828 made him dislike the place even more. After her death Constable's work became even more stormy, his feelings being reflected in his painted skies.

Throughout his life, Constable made studies of skies at different times of the day and year. He has been described as the greatest painter of skies and weather in the whole history of landscape painting.