



front cover

Joseph Mallord William Turner 1775–1851

Self-Portrait 1798

The Unknown Turner



Notes for Teachers

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Introduction

Joseph Mallord William Turner, a famous artist in his lifetime, has continued to be admired right up to the present time. When Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro took refuge in London from the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71, their discovery of Turner’s atmospheric paintings may have influenced the subsequent development of their art. As a result, the French consider Turner the English artist par excellence. A century after the Impressionists found Turner in London, the American abstract painter Mark Rothko donated his Seagram Murals to Tate partly because of his admiration for Turner’s late painting. That painters as diverse as Monet and Rothko should admire Turner draws attention to the enormous variety contained in his art. There is literally something in it for everyone.

The lasting esteem in which Turner is held ranks him alongside such artists as Vincent van Gogh and Pablo Picasso. Biographies abound on these two men, focusing on Vincent’s madness and Picasso’s girlfriends. By contrast, much of the extensive writing on Turner concentrates exclusively on his painting. This is exactly what the artist wanted. He covered the traces of his private life so successfully that even scholars are unsure about many of the facts. Two recently published biographies, though full of information, still leave the reader with a feeling of vagueness about some crucial things. Were Evelina and Georgiana really Turner’s daughters, for example, and if they were, what kind of a father was he to cancel the annuities he originally planned to leave them in the first version of his will?

Art historians complain that too much emphasis on the dramatic events in Vincent van Gogh’s life have meant that we are unable to look dispassionately at the art. We tend to interpret each of its elements in terms of his life, interpreting flourishes of paint as evidence of the turmoil of his mind. Although too great a fascination with an artist’s life can lead to distortion of the facts and away from the art, is it right to concentrate wholly on the art without reflecting on the human being that created it? This is a question to consider as you read the first section of this pack. Teachers have told us that children often become interested in art through hearing about an artist’s life. They maintain that knowing something about

Ideally, teachers would first present Turner’s paintings to their students in the gallery without offering biographical information. Later on, once they have been introduced to some of the contents of the pack, students could discuss whether this makes a difference to their appreciation of the art. And from there they could proceed to talk more generally about the place of autobiography in art and what role it plays in their own work.

Turner the man as well as about the times in which he lived will help rather than hinder appreciation of his work. But there is more to our decision to focus on Turner's personality than that. The question of individuality as opposed to universality is currently being hotly debated. Some of the short-listed artists in the annual *Turner Prize*, created in deference to Turner's wish to help young artists, use events in their own life as the prime material for their art. The most obvious and extreme case is Tracey Emin but she is not the only one. Much of the criticism directed against her work in the Press results from the fact that critics view it as too personal. They believe that painting should be distanced from the individual events in an artist's life. And Turner would certainly have agreed. Do you and your students agree with the premise that an artist's private life should remain so? Or do you think that as the creator's personality will inevitably affect his artwork to a greater or lesser extent it can legitimately be discussed? After all why are the best biographies considered to be literature and yet self-revelation is banned from art? We have tried to breach Turner's barrier of privacy to find out whether knowing the kind of man that he was will help us to appreciate his art.

This pack is in four parts. The information provided is intended for teachers of all age groups – you can select what is appropriate in it for the age of your pupils – and suggestions for student work and class discussion are included. Since Turner was interested in literature and poetry, often choosing literary themes for his work, the pack is directed at English as much as Art teachers.

The first part of the pack considers the enigma *Who was JMW Turner?* and includes a section devoted to *Turner's Life in his Art* by Colin Grigg.

The second part looks at *How Turner was affected by the events of his time*, offering some of the background to the times in which the artist lived. Turner survived to the age of seventy-six, through a period of many changes. We will find out how he was affected by circumstances and which events he chose to record.

The third part is about *Turner's painting techniques* by Tate conservator Joyce Townsend.

There is also a selection of focus sheets, devised by Catherine Cullinan. These can be photocopied for primary and secondary students, to use in front of the paintings. Please check before your visit whether paintings will be on display by phoning 020 7887 8734.

Who was JMW Turner? A comparison with Pablo Picasso

Turner's Secrecy

Whereas Pablo Picasso, the most famous artist in recent history, lived through an age when exposure to the media was inescapable for the famous, Turner was able to live the secluded life that he wanted undisturbed. Those aspects of his life that he wanted could remain secret. A friend talked about him, mellowed by wine, becoming more "like other men, always and excepting keeping up that Mystery."

While we may feel that we know too much about Picasso's varied love life, and are distracted by it from his painting, we gain an equally unbalanced perspective if we consider Turner's art as if it had no connection with the life of the man who created it. His life must, in some way, have shaped his art.

Turner's Life Story

The Infant Genius

Turner is said to have "first showed his talent by drawing with his finger in milk spilt on a teatray." By the time he was twelve, his father was putting up his drawings for sale in the window of his barber's shop. Watercolours of people's houses, or of famous beauty spots, sold well at the time because photography had not yet been invented. You could not buy a postcard as a souvenir of a place visited.

Radley Hall: South Front and East Side 1789

Turner was fourteen



Eclipsing one's Father

Picasso's father, who was an art teacher, is said to have stopped painting in 1895 when his son was just thirteen, because the young Pablo could paint the claws of a pigeon better than he could. In Turner's case his father's abdication was somewhat less dramatic. The artist was grown up, well over twenty, when his father stopped working as a barber to become his studio assistant, preparing his son's paints and canvases until the helper died in 1829, aged eighty-four. The story about young Pablo is part of the myth that surrounds him.

There are many other stories that contributed to the Picasso myth. For instance, you may know that he could pay for a meal in a restaurant with a drawing sketched on to the paper tablecloth. Turner could be a showman too, but we rarely think of him in that way. On Varnishing Days at the Royal Academy, artists were allowed to touch up their paintings, after the works to be exhibited had been hung on the walls. Turner enjoyed amazing other painters present by transforming something very vague, described by one critic as 'chaos,' into a recognisable scene with a few touches of his brush.

The Temple of Poseidon at Sunium (Cape Colonna) c1834

Turner was fifty-nine



- If a fourteen-year-old produced the drawing of Radley Hall at your school, would the teacher be impressed? What do you think is good about it? Is there anything about it you feel able to criticise? Compare it with the much later drawing of the Temple of Poseidon. What tells you that the artist was older/more skilled/more confident when he made this?
- How would you feel about being able to make money when children of the same age were still in the classroom? What would your mother say? How would your life and your family's life be changed? Write a letter to a friend explaining how it feels to be a young genius.

In *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, John Berger describes how strange it would have been for a child at that time to feel that he had ‘overthrown’ his father. He might feel triumphant but he might also feel guilty. What had happened was not normal; it was not something that should have happened when you were young.

More successful than John Constable

Turner continued to be successful with one early milestone following another. He was admitted to the Royal Academy Schools in the year he painted Radley Hall. He was only twenty-four when he was elected Associate of the Royal Academy in 1799, and he became a full member – an RA – in 1802. Belonging to the Royal Academy was a stamp of approval by the profession that helped artists sell their work. Poor John Constable was envious of Turner’s success as he was only recognised by the Royal Academy much later on in life.

Self-Portrait 1798

Turner was twenty-three



- Look out for the rooms in Tate Britain with Constable’s work and see whether you can understand why people preferred the paintings of Turner. Look at the differences in the artists’ way of painting landscape. Make a sketch of a tree from a Turner painting and one from a Constable painting. How are they different? Which looks more ‘real’, which more ‘poetic’?
- Look at the artists’ choice of subject matter. Are their landscapes just studies of nature or have they been given an additional subject, from mythology for instance?

Riches

By the time Turner was twenty-four, Joseph Farington recorded in his diary that “he had more commissions at present than he could execute and got more money than he expended.” By 1810–11 he had about £12,000 (which amounts to more than three-quarters of a million pounds today). He never had a bank account, preferring to invest in shares. Like Picasso, he invested part of his fortune on property.

Was Turner mean?

Turner had a reputation for meanness. Following his death Mrs Booth, with whom he lived in his final years, said that after their first two years together, he never spent any money on her. And yet he could be generous, preferring not to pursue those who owed him rent. In this as in many other respects, he was a mixture of opposites.

“Such an ugly fellow”

If you are famous, does it matter what you look like? Turner thought it did. He was not happy with his own appearance and the *Self-Portrait* 1798 is one of very few. He has chosen his position carefully to hide the worst feature of his face.

The artist Clarkson Stanfield said that Turner “would not suffer any portrait to be taken of him because nobody would believe such an ugly fellow made such beautiful things.” Turner wanted his art rather than his appearance to speak for him. The inner man, not the external appearance, was what mattered.

Do you think Turner the man is ugly? What you cannot see, because he is not in profile, is that he had quite a big nose. He was small, only 5 feet 4 inches tall, (this fact is known because a tailor’s pattern for his trousers survives) and was described as a “short, sturdy, sailor-like youth.” His sailor’s gait probably developed because he spent so much time aboard ship. He was described as having “the look of an English farmer, black clothes, gross enough, big shoes, and hard cold demeanour” by the French artist, Eugène Delacroix, who met him in 1829 or 1832.

Portrait of JMW Turner “The Fallacy of Hope” 1851

Engraved by T Hogarth Litho. Published in 1851.



- Can you guess what Turner’s worst feature was? (Look at the *Self-Portrait*, the portrait by Count d’Orsay and at Turner’s death mask in the Clore Gallery). Imagine how Turner would speak to you if he came back to life.

A “hard cold demeanour”

Turner was in fact neither hard nor cold but he was often either reserved or tongue-tied, which may have misled Delacroix. Unlike the Frenchman, who was both handsome and at ease in society, Turner, the ill-educated son of a barber, was laughed at for the mumbled lectures he gave when Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy. His long poem, *The Fallacies of Hope*, from which he used quotations to accompany some of his exhibited paintings, has rarely been taken seriously. This was unfortunate because poetry, considered the sister art to painting, meant a great deal to Turner.

“No-one could have imagined, under that rather rough and cold exterior, how very strong were the affections that laid hidden beneath,” said Clara Wells, who knew him for most of his life. Mary Lloyd, who also knew him well, said that “he spoke little, as if painting were his only language. His voice was deep and husky, and full of feeling; his sentences broken but letting out flashes of wit and humour, almost involuntarily.” The difficulties of his childhood (see overleaf) might have led Turner to conceal his feelings and, as a result, he could seem boorish, particularly as he was moody and known for his terrible rages. His friend George Jones explained that “he never in early life felt the tendered hand of generous friendship: the hands extended to him sought to profit by his talents at the smallest expense possible... he became suspicious and so sensitive that he at length dreaded the motives of all by whom he was approached on business.” He would watch visitors to his gallery through a spyhole and once threw out a visitor whom he saw there surreptitiously making sketches.

That constituted the dark side of his personality. Nonetheless, JMW Turner had many redeeming features. He would never say anything against a fellow artist and the terms of his will left money to set up a charity for the support of distressed landscape painters and single men.

- Now imagine that you are becoming famous for your paintings, which are bought by wealthy aristocrats with a grand education. They have studied Latin and Greek and can write and speak fluently and elegantly. You have not been to school very much and you have had worries at home while you were growing up. You find it very difficult to express what you feel in words and people sometimes laugh at you behind your back. You are rather clumsy. Can you understand Turner’s embarrassment at his lack of social skills? Compare his self-portrait with others in the gallery. Does Turner’s diffidence show?

The Events of his Life

Turner's Childhood

William Turner, as he was known until he became an Academician and chose to use his initials JMW to distinguish himself from all the other painters called William Turner, was probably – but not certainly – born on 23 April, St George's Day, 1775, to a barber and his wife Mary. The family lived in a narrow street called Maiden Lane in Covent Garden. Turner's father would have made a fairly good living out of his business, as barbers did well through the wig trade. The child would have had a glimpse of the wealthy as they came to have their wigs attended to.

A Mad Mother

Mary, his mother, was diagnosed as mad in 1799 (possibly suffering from schizophrenia) when Turner was twenty-four, and was locked up for the rest of her life. First she was taken to St Luke's hospital in Old Street, and then a year later, when she had not recovered, she was admitted to nearby Bethlehem Hospital where she died in 1804. She was cared for free of charge because Thomas Monro, a specialist in mental health who worked there, was a patron of Turner's. Eleven years after Mrs Turner's death, there was an enquiry into the terrible conditions of life in the hospital and Dr Monro was forced to retire. Even in Mrs Turner's day, although visitors were no longer admitted to view the mad as a spectacle, as they had done in Hogarth's day, patients were treated rather like criminals. Being in Bedlam, as it was known, involved "cages, chains, beatings, blood-lettings and straightjackets" (Anthony Bailey *Standing in the Sun*). From the time she was admitted, Mary, who had been subject to violent, unpredictable rages, never saw her husband or child again, and Turner neither mentioned her nor allowed others to do so. The fact that his mother was mad would not have helped Turner in his career and he might also have been frightened that he might become mad too. Occasionally he was himself described as 'mad,' either on account of the strangeness of his art or because, like his mother, he was subject to uncontrollable bouts of fury.

The Rake's Progress VIII: The Rake in Bedlam 1733–4

By courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum.



Look for Turner's early paintings

- Find early paintings done up to the time of Turner's mother's incarceration in 1804. Might his choice of subject matter have been in any way influenced by his own circumstances?

As if this were not a sufficient shadow over his childhood, the only other child of his parents' marriage, Mary Ann, died before she was five, when Turner was eight years old.

Compensations: A Love of Sea and Water

Possibly because of the unhappy situation at home, Turner spent part of his childhood away from London, living with his mother's butcher and fishmonger relatives, first in Brentford and then at Margate. This introduced him to the country and the sea but it also meant changes and interruptions in his schooling, which ended completely when he was in his early teens.

In all the places that Turner lived in as a child, he was close to water, which he grew to love. The art critic John Ruskin, who was a strong supporter of Turner, pictured him as a boy, leaving his home in the darkness of narrow Maiden Lane, and making his way down to the river and along it as far as London Bridge, where he could find plenty of ships "these the only quite beautiful things that he can see in all the world, except the sky." He imagined him talking to sailors and trying to cajole his way aboard. According to Ruskin, Turner loved "anything fishy and muddy, like Billingsgate or Hungerford Market...; black barges, patched sails, and every possible condition of fog." Later, from 1805 to 1811, when he lived along the Thames at Isleworth and Hammersmith, Turner had his own sailing boat. He used it as a mobile painting studio in the same way that the Barbizon artists and Claude Monet would do later. From it, he could observe the sky and reflections on the water and make sketches.

Throughout his life Turner's favourite hobby was fishing. When he stayed as the guest of Lord Egremont at Petworth in the 1830s, for instance, he would fish in the lake in front of the house. When he was travelling, he carried a large shabby umbrella, which usually contained a long two-foot dagger but had also been known, less alarmingly, to hold a fishing rod!

- **Look at the oil sketches Turner made of the Thames valley in 1805. Compare them with his paintings of water in other rooms. What differences do you notice in his treatment of water in *The Shipwreck*, in his paintings of Venice and in his seascapes of the 1830s? In each case see how the way he paints corresponds to a particular effect that he wants to capture. Notice, for instance, the difference in his painting of calm and rough water. Make some sketches of your own to illustrate different techniques.**

Turner's Life in his Art

Turner's patrons demanded pictures – called History paintings – which took 'noble' subjects from the Bible, classical texts and mythology. Paintings were only considered Art if they treated special people in extraordinary situations. In a sense this tradition continues today with public wariness of artists whose work speaks directly of themselves. No danger of that pitfall for the private secretive Turner. If he had wanted to find a parallel story for his own experience, however, Turner could have looked to mythology. Some people think he did, in the story of Aeneas.

The Story of Aeneas and Dido

Turner's first history painting, at the time of his election as Associate of the Royal Academy, was *Aeneas and the Sibyl, Lake Avernus*. In the last months of his life, he was working on a series of four paintings taken from Virgil's *Aeneid*. What was it about the myth of Trojan leader Aeneas that so appealed to Turner?

Aeneas' story is first told by Homer in his *Iliad* and was later developed by Virgil in his *Aeneid*. He fled from Troy with his father Anchises and his son Ascanius and wandered the world in search of a home. According to legend that place was to be Rome and so Virgil's poem became a kind of national epic for the Italians. The two themes of filial piety to one's father and of extended travels are certainly relevant to Turner's own life. If we now consider the meaning of some of the specific episodes of Aeneas' adventures that Turner illustrated, we may notice parallels with his own life and wonder whether this is mere coincidence or deliberate design. You must draw your own conclusions!

- This could be the starting point for you to explore classical mythology to find stories parallel to episodes in your own life, or to invent a fantasy life of your own. Which imaginary hero(ine) do you most admire? Rewrite the story placing yourself in the starring role!
- Paintings in the Tate collection that tell the story of Aeneas are: *Aeneas and the Sibyl, Lake Avernus* c1798; *Dido and Aeneas* exh1814; *The Decline of Carthage* exh1817; *The Golden Bough* 1834; *The Visit to the Tomb* exh1850 and *The Departure of the Fleet* exh1850. They may not all be on display at any one time. Find as many of them as possible and look at others on the Tate website at www.tate.org.uk. Would you be able to appreciate them without knowing the story of Aeneas? In Turner's time, educated people would have been familiar with this story but, in his best paintings, Turner provides clues to help us understand. In which of these paintings do you think he is most successful as a storyteller?

Parallels in Turner's Life to the Story of Dido and Aeneas

JMW Turner never married, perhaps because his parents' example was not inspiring. But he did probably have at least two close relationships with women. In 1798, aged twenty-three, he moved away from home to Harley Street and, at the same time, he met Sarah Danby and began his first serious relationship with her. She was about nine years older and recently widowed. They never lived together and chose to conduct their affair in secrecy. Perhaps this mature woman with her (ready made) family of three children provided Turner as much with a mother substitute as with a lover.

It was in the same year, 1798, that he completed his first historic landscape in the classical style, *Aeneas and the Sibyl, Lake Avernus*. In the story of the meeting with the Sibyl, the hero, Aeneas, has come to a temple by Lake Avernus from which he hopes to go to the underworld to talk to his dead father and to find out from him what will be his eventual fate. Guarding the entrance to the underworld is the Sibyl, an ancient priestess, who was subject to divine rages. Virgil described her, saying "Her breast heaved and her bursting heart was wild and mad."

Aeneas and the Sibyl, Lake Avernus c1798



- Does the figure in the painting look wild? Could this mythological woman have reminded Turner of his own mother?
- Did Turner see Sarah Danby, at least for a while, as his white dove and his precocious artistic talent his golden bough into the world of art?
- Have you ever imagined a place in your mind before you visited it? Was the reality very different from your dream? Does Turner's landscape look real to you? Can you believe in Aeneas and the Sibyl? (Notice how light and insubstantial she is whereas he is clad in solid armour that sparkles in the light.)

The Sibyl tells Aeneas that to reach his father he must first find a golden bough on a sacred tree in the dark dense forest that grows around the lake. It seems an impossible task until his mother, the goddess Venus, changed into a white dove, shows him the way. He retrieves the golden bough and gains entry into the magical world.

In *Aeneas and the Sibyl*, Turner combined known and unknown, dream and reality. The subject from Virgil's *Aeneid* had been suggested by his patron, Sir Richard Colt Hoare, who also provided him with a drawing of the Italian setting. Turner was not able to travel to Italy before 1819 because of the Napoleonic wars. In this painting he imagines, with his patron's help, what Italy might be like.

One of the mysteries surrounding Turner is the way that he managed to become familiar with the classics despite the fact that he had so little schooling. Much of his knowledge must have come from reading works in translation. It is known, for example, that he read Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*.

The Travels of Aeneas and of Turner

The story of Aeneas begins with the sack of Troy and charts the hero's restless wanderings, travelling around the Mediterranean looking for a new homeland. Turner was a great traveller himself, seeking out wild landscapes and ships riding on stormy seas. His paintings record the many places he visited in Europe and show nature as he experienced it, in storm and sunshine, with man at the mercy of nature's power.

In *The Parting of Hero and Leander* (1837), Turner shows a man who will drown for the love of a woman. Hero and Leander kept their passion secret, meeting only at night when Leander swam the Hellespont to be with his beloved. Hero guided him with a flaming torch but one night a storm blew out the light and whipped up the waves. Leander was drowned and when Hero saw his body, she flung herself into the torrent and also died.

- Find paintings showing people endangered by stormy weather. People believe Turner was fatalistic, expecting disasters. Can you find pictures supporting this view? Can you also find some calm sunny views?

In a poem Turner wrote:

*Love is like the raging Ocean
Winds that sway its troubled motion
Women's temper will supply.*

The stormy waters in *Hero and Leander* may echo the turbulence of Turner's clandestine affair. Despite the stormy nature of his relationship with Sarah Danby, it seems probable – despite the absence of any firm documentary evidence – that Turner was father to her two daughters, Evelina and Georgiana.

An Obsession with Widows

In 1814, Turner exhibited *Dido and Aeneas*. Aeneas was washed up on the shores of Africa after a storm and the malicious gods contrived that he should fall in love with a widow, Dido Queen of Carthage. He stayed with her in her fabulous kingdom. Since Turner had not yet been to Italy, he had to imagine it with the help of the neo-classical architecture that he could see in England and the Italian landscapes of his favourite painter, the seventeenth-century artist, Claude Lorrain. In *Dido and Aeneas*, Claude's example helps Turner turn Isleworth into the Italian countryside! Turner's reliance on a mental picture of Italy echoed the vision of Italy which came to Aeneas in a dream and was to determine his future. That dream told Aeneas that Italy would become his eventual destination and homeland.

The painting shows people leaving the civilised city (Turner was a city boy) to venture into the pagan world of the forest. It is there that Dido and Aeneas would become lovers while sheltering in a cave. But all the time, they would try to resist their passion, which fitted in with neither of their plans. Dido wanted to remain true to her dead husband and Aeneas wanted to continue his travels. This reluctance to surrender to the power of love could be a reflection of Turner's own attitude. Painting dominated his life. He might have seen women as a threat to man's creativity. Just as Leander's love for Hero led to his death, so Turner might have felt that women could drown you if you get too close.

- **Does Dido and Aeneas seem more dreamlike than real to you?**
In front of the city, people are gathering for the hunt. See what animals you can find. Can you spot Dido and Aeneas leaning close to one another on the left-hand side of the painting?

In his biography of the artist, Anthony Bailey describes Turner's obsession with widows in literature who experience tragic partings from their lovers. "Aeneas and Dido provide a parallel of tragic love and separation, and Aeneas was the hero he most identified with." Aeneas was tempted to marry Dido, but realised that in doing so, he would be diverted from his true destiny. By the time he painted the picture, Turner had parted from his first widow, Sarah Danby.

The Death of a Beloved Father

Turner's painting, *The Golden Bough*, dates from 1834. He first visited Italy in 1819. In the foreground is the Sibyl brandishing the Golden Bough, which Aeneas needs in order to be able to rejoin the ghost of his father. There is also a snake, symbolising death and the dark side of nature, while the Fates, who determine our life, are shown dancing in the middle ground. The overall impression is of an idyll, yet that is not how it was painted in the words of the *Aeneid*. The beautiful mist which Turner shows rising over the middle distance actually represents poisonous vapours hanging over the crater of a dormant volcano. In the original, it is a sinister place where the earth has cracked open and all the birds have fled.

In *The Aeneid*, Aeneas had carried his old father Anchises from burning Troy, only to see him die in mid voyage. Turner's own father had died in 1829 and the artist never really recovered from his loss.

- The beauty in Turner's painting reflects Byron's dictum that whatever disasters befall "nature still is fair." He offers us an image of the duality in life where we always have a choice to make between darkness and light. How do you view life? Is it the picnic or is it the snake?
- Does this Italian landscape look more real now that Turner has been to the country? Notice how much lighter this painting is to those he did in England. The Italian light had a lasting effect on his use of colour.

Another Widow

By 1834, the date of *The Golden Bough*, Turner had also met his next widow, Sophia Booth, who was more than twenty years younger than him. As with Sarah Danby, the relationship was kept secret. In the last years of his life, Turner returned to paint Aeneas' time in Carthage and the temptation caused him by the widow Dido. Sophia Booth said that Turner had worked on a number of late pictures all at once, painting them in rotation. In *The Visit to the Tomb* 1850, he shows Dido taking her lover to the tomb of her dead husband, Sychaeus, hoping in vain that it will cool her passion for Aeneas. (Turner had known the husbands of both of his mistresses before they were widowed). This ploy cannot work. The gods have determined that the two shall fall in love. Was Turner drawing a parallel between his own need for love set against his determination to devote himself to his art?

Another of his last paintings depicts Mercury sent to remind Aeneas of his destiny, and the final work, *The Departure of the Fleet* exh1850, shows the moment when Aeneas leaves Carthage as his wedding to Dido is due to take place and Dido in her sadness, kills herself. Perhaps, conscious of his own impending death, Turner wondered what would happen to the two widows he was leaving behind.



Joseph Wright of Derby 1734–1797

A Moonlight with a Lighthouse, Coast of Tuscany exh1789

- Does this glimpse of Turner's private life affect the way we receive his paintings? Was he right to think that his life was none of our business? How important do you think the personal is in a work of art today? Must it be disguised, or can the raw facts of Tracey Emin's abortion or of Richard Billingham's father's drunkenness become art? And how much should the story of your life inform your art?
- Do you think Turner was religious?
Art historian James Hamilton contrasts his attitude to nature with that of Joseph Wright of Derby and thinks that Turner lets nature speak for itself, shaking off any religious connotations. See whether you agree by contrasting Wright of Derby's *A Moonlight with a Lighthouse, Coast of Tuscany* exh1789 with Turner's *The Bell Rock Lighthouse* 1819 (watercolour and gouache with scratching out), The National Gallery of Scotland).

Was Turner religious?

The day after his father died in 1829, JMW Turner made the first draft of his will. That year there had been a cholera epidemic and Turner was frightened that the disease would infect him. (There was good cause for his alarm but it has also been suggested that he was something of a hypochondriac). Possibly it was with such worries on his mind that he painted *Death on a Pale Horse* around 1831, in very thin, dilute, blood red and brown paint. Anthony Bailey suggests that the painting might have been provoked by his reading of the book of *Revelations* in the Bible, but neither of the recent biographers discusses the vexed problem of Turner's faith. Was he a believer?

We know that he went to church with his friends the Trimmers when he visited them and that it was important to him that he should be buried in St Paul's Cathedral. His work has undoubted spiritual content. But was his spirituality the result of religious belief or simply the awe of a creator at the magnitude of the creation of which he formed a minute part?

The Power of Nature and the Power of God

Both Turner and Wright of Derby were the friends of scientists but, during their lives, art and science were seen as part of one continuum, with nature and the divine the driving force. It was only in 1859, eight years after Turner's death, that Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published, after which it became more difficult for scientists to reconcile their professional and religious beliefs. Darwin's ideas created a crisis in the beliefs of the critic, John Ruskin, a strong supporter of Turner, and a knowledgeable geologist and botanist. Both his faith and his response to the beauty of nature were thrown into doubt by Darwin's work.



The Bell Rock Lighthouse 1819

The Sun is God

Turner's spirituality was centred on the sun. He made no secret of his love of what he called the "prime cheerer" and the "fairest of beings" and Ruskin described him as a "sun-worshipper of the old breed." Whether this worship was truly religious is open to question. As a painter, Turner depended on the sun to reveal colour and the beauty of nature. His veneration for it might have been as simple as that.

Youth, Old Age and Death

Travelling through the north of England in 1831, Turner doffed his cap at Norham Castle as he passed by it, because he associated it with his success as an artist. He had made a watercolour of it on his first visit there in 1797, when he was twenty-two years old. *Norham Castle on the Tweed* 1819 reproduces his early impressions of the spot. At the time he was working chiefly as an architectural draughtsman. The countryside of northern England revealed to him his potential as a landscape painter. "Repeatedly, over the following fifty years," Tate curator Ian Warrell explains, "he went back to his two 1797 sketchbooks for inspiration." In the blurred forms of *Norham Castle, Sunrise* c1845, we can speculate that the old man is remembering his past, seeing it in the bright light of remembered youth; if not through rose-tinted spectacles, at least in much clearer hues than those used to record its appearance fifty years before when he first visited the place.

Norham Castle on the Tweed 1819



Paint an image of the past

- How far back can you remember and how precise is your memory? Clear enough to paint? Can you remember any details or is it all blurred like a faded Victorian photograph? Try and paint or write about one of your earliest memories.

Turner's late Paintings

Many people today prefer Turner's late works such as *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* exh1842, in which they can enjoy colour, brushwork and atmosphere for their own sakes. There is no need to be a classical scholar to enjoy them. Of course, it is for that very reason that his learned contemporaries were critical of those paintings. In the last decade of his life, Turner's status as a genius began to be questioned and his art remained unsold. For the last fourteen years of his life, Turner was a Victorian but his painting style is very different from what we think of as Victorian art. It is more abstract and so seems more 'modern' to us than the detailed narrative paintings of his contemporaries. For that very reason it shocked them. Edward Lear reported that Turner's late paintings were seen as the wreck of a great mind although, to Lear, they were "the glorious setting of a glorious sun."

Norham Castle c1845



- Look out for his last paintings. They are easy to spot because of their light washes of colour, blurring brushwork and absence of detail. Try to work out how he has painted them. Are there layers of superimposed colours? Has he used brushes/a palette knife/a sponge? What is the central focus of the painting? Has he created it by colour or by the thickness of paint?
- Compare *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* exh1842 with a Victorian painting like JE Millais' *Ophelia* 1851-2. List as many differences as you can in the way these two pictures are painted. Consider the reasons why each artist may have painted in the way he did. What effect did each want to achieve? Why was Millais so precise, why was Turner's painting so blurred?

Turner as an old Man

Meanwhile the human being was showing signs of age. He looked very different from the fresh-faced youth of his self-portrait of 1783. In later life he had a round stomach, was red-faced and wore a hat, even indoors. His red face might have come from all the walking he did on his travels when he was exposed to the elements – although another factor might have been his enjoyment of drink. (He is said to have drunk up to eight pints of rum and milk a day!) Despite his girth he continued to cover large distances by foot on his travels abroad right into the 1840s, and, at sixty-nine, he was still wearing out the heels of his shoes while walking in Italy.

In 1846, perhaps a year after painting *Norham Castle, Sunrise*, Turner moved to 6 Davis Place, Chelsea, to live with the second widow, Mrs Booth. Sometimes, she is simply described as his 'housekeeper.' For all we know, that might have been all she was. To his neighbours there, he was Mr Booth. To the boatmen who rowed him along the Thames with her, he was Admiral or Puggy Booth. (He loved the sea, despite its dangers, and could travel without sickness in turbulent waters. He felt at home talking to sailors – possibly more so than talking to artists and their aristocratic patrons – and was not averse to be mistaken for a sailor himself.) Turner seems to have enjoyed these alibis which allowed his true identity to remain fluid. No one in his public life was introduced to Mrs Booth or knew where he lived with her. His official address was that of his gallery in Queen Anne St. Its caretaker was Hannah Danby but her 'care' towards the end of his life seems to have simply consisted in living there. The gallery itself fell steadily into disrepair, dust lay thick everywhere and paint flaked off the canvases.

- Mrs Booth cared for Turner in his last illness and when, after a spell of bad weather, the sun shone again at last, he is said to have declared "The Sun is God." Which of his paintings do you prefer?

How Turner was affected by the Events of his Time

Turner's personality affected the way he responded to the events of his lifetime, which was a period of enormous change and upheaval. He was fascinated by inventions and celebrated some of them in his work. Even in the year of his death he had not lost his interest in the new. In January 1851, he wrote appreciatively to Hawkesworth Fawkes about the Crystal Palace which he had visited as it was going up in Hyde Park. On the other hand, he was no painstaking historian. He did not make consistent records of all the changes that affected his and other people's lives: he only picked out those events that interested him.

The Growth of Industry

In 1775 when Turner was born, the population of Britain was about nine million. By the time he died in 1851, it had increased to about twenty million, with a heavy concentration in cities, where the growth of industry was altering Britain's identity as a predominantly agricultural nation. Increase in manufacture affected Turner personally when work began in December 1806 on the construction of the West Middlesex Water Works. It destroyed the peace and quiet surrounding the house he had rented in Hammersmith.

Turner's interest in Science

Industry went hand in hand with science, whose innovations Turner observed with interest. From 1781, the Royal Academy was in the same building as the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries. Scientists and artists respected one another's discoveries. Turner supported the inventions of engineer IK Brunel with the same enthusiasm as those of his fellow painters. The steam engine, the camera and chemical dyes were just a few of the inventions that affected his practice as an artist.

- In *Turner and the Scientists*, James Hamilton describes Turner's "fascination with the way things worked, or were made, or the people who made them, or the *effect* that scientific and technological advance had on the world and society around him." Find paintings of ships or carriages which look as if they would really work.

Making as Understanding

His training as an artist affected the way he viewed and recorded the world. He connected drawing with making because he had worked as an architectural draughtsman and was able to design and oversee the building of his own house (Sandycombe Lodge) and gallery (in Queen Anne St). So making any kind of drawing did not mean observing superficial patterning; it meant understanding the functioning of what he saw. His great paintings of sea and mountain give us the illusion that he knew how they worked too. It is such a convincing illusion that it is possible to be misled. Andrew Wilton has described how a competition to discover which mountain was included in one of Turner's Lake District views, revealed that the mountain in question came from a different area. It was Snowdon!

Transport in Turner's Lifetime

When Turner was born and throughout his childhood, goods were moved slowly but efficiently between major cities by a network of canals. Transport by road was slow. By the end of Turner's life, the invention of the steam engine had completely altered that picture.

Travel by Rail

Railways gradually supplanted canals as a means of moving goods (the network spread through the country with two major periods of railway building and speculation in 1835–7 and 1844–7). Many people were frightened of trains at first. Not so Turner. His *Rain, Steam and Speed* (National Gallery) conveys his excitement at speed and celebrates Brunel's Great Western Railway and his Maidenhead Bridge, which sceptics were sure would collapse.

Travelling abroad

Turner first crossed the Channel to France on 15 July 1802 during a break in the hostilities between France and England. He journeyed from Calais to Switzerland and then to Val d'Aosta on the Italian border. On his return journey, he stopped in Paris for two days in September to study the paintings displayed in the Louvre, which had been looted by Napoleon from the countries he had conquered. Turner's *Holy Family 1803* was begun under the influence of Titian's *St Peter Martyr* which he had seen there.

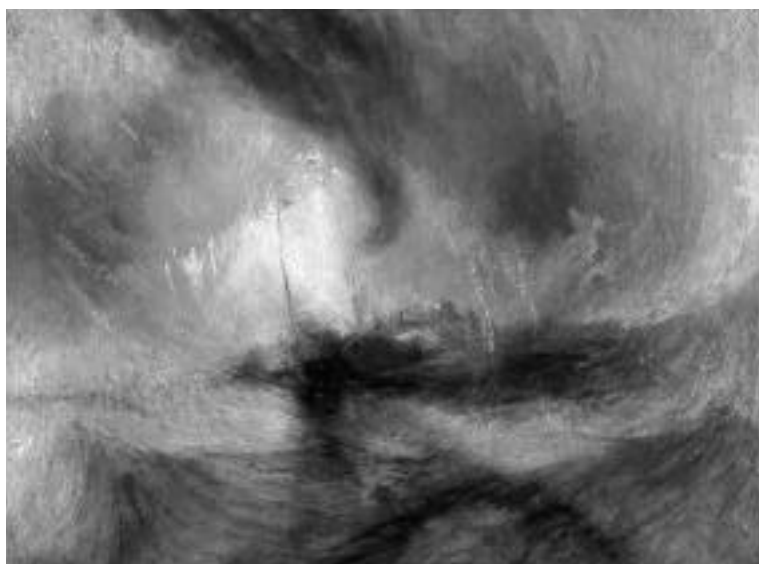
Look at *The Shipwreck* exh1805.

- On his first channel crossing, Turner's packet boat was forced by heavy seas to wait outside the harbour bar at Calais. Can you see the shipwreck? It is not the real subject of the painting, which is concerned with the smaller boats around it. Which of these do you think will reach harbour safely? The boat with the creamy-yellow sail is similar to the boat that would have carried Turner to France. Would you feel as safe on it, as a passenger, as you do on today's giant ferries?
- Find paintings of sailing ships and compare them with late paintings of steamships. Which way would you prefer to travel? How is the atmosphere different in these early and late works?

Travel by Sea from the Age of Sail to the Age of Steam

Late in Turner's life, steam engines transformed travel by sea. The rich brown sails of the ships on the Thames, common in his early work, became an anachronism. Because of his love of the sea, Turner was most interested in innovations affecting seafarers. Steam as a source of power in ships, lighthouses and in life-saving equipment is celebrated in his work. James Hamilton points out that all Turner's shipwrecks happen to sailing ships while steamships are shown triumphing over the elements. Although in fact boilers blew up, ships caught fire and paddlewheels shattered, none of these disasters are illustrated in his work.

Look at a late painting with a long title, *Snow Storm: Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead. The Author was in the Storm on the Night the Ariel left Harwich.* Turner claimed that, at the age of sixty-seven, "I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it (the storm); I was lashed for four hours and did not expect to escape, but I felt bound to record it if I did." This sounds like a factual account of a dramatic incident – but it is not. Curators have discovered that no ship called the Ariel ever sailed from Harwich.



Snow Storm – Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth exh1842

- It is quite difficult to make things out in this painting. What can you see in the harbour? Where does the white light come from? Do you think that Turner blurred the forms to make us feel confused and frightened like the people on board?
- It seems doubtful that even Turner would have submitted himself to the ordeal of being tied for so long to the mast when he was quite an old man. So why did he tell such fibs? Perhaps his use of the word 'Author' supplies a clue. He is telling us a story to involve us in his picture. Do you think this is necessary? Would you have become involved anyway?

Look at *Snow Storm – Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth*

The influence of the invention of photography on Turner's practice as an Artist

When the invention of an early form of photography called the daguerrotype was announced in 1839, it must have alarmed those artists who made a living by recording appearances, as it provided a cheap and apparently more accurate alternative to their work. Turner, for whom the representation of appearance was only one ingredient in art, was fascinated by the chemistry of photography and was immediately able to see its benefits to the artist. He visited the studio of an American daguerrotypist, JJE Mayall, several times and even lent him £300, showing that his reputed meanness could only have been intermittent.

At the time, the lack of lightweight equipment made painting outside almost impossible. The Tate owns boxes containing Turner's dry pigments, which had to be mixed with oil before they could be used. Tubes of ready-made paint were only invented about the time of the artist's death. He made his own pocket book of watercolours, which could easily be carried, and allowed him to make sketched notes out of doors. Most of his outdoor work consisted purely of outline drawings, however, while his painting took place indoors. Even finished watercolours were quite elaborate works, requiring hours of work.

Like John Ruskin, Turner realised that some of the labour involved in recording appearances could disappear due to the development of the new invention of the daguerrotype. He foresaw that the camera could become a timesaver instead of a threat and that it could sometimes be used in place of a sketchbook, saying "We shall only go about the country with a box like a tinker, instead of a portfolio under our arm."

War and Peace

Turner was fourteen at the time of the French Revolution of 1789. The turmoil it created only came to an end with the battle of Waterloo in 1815. By then Turner was forty and had waited for several decades to be able to resume travelling on the continent. His enforced confinement within England had encouraged an intense interest in the events in France, which concentrated on the rise and fall of Napoleon. This interest is reflected in the painting of *The Battle of Trafalgar* 1806–08 and *The Field of Waterloo* exh1818. When HMS Victory was moored at Greenwich, he went to see it, making sketches of uniforms and rigging and talking to the men. He made descriptions of individuals, noting, for example, that one had “small good teeth.” His own teeth had caused him trouble and by 1847 he had lost them all and wore dentures made of wood! Not surprisingly, this was so uncomfortable for his painful gums that he rarely used it, preferring to suck the sustenance out of meat. On his first journey abroad after 1815, he toured the battlefield at Waterloo.

Art as Metaphor for Life

Meditating on the emperor Napoleon’s symbolic importance, he saw in him an experience common to us all. We all increase in strength and mental ability until maturity, after which comes a gradual decline, leading eventually to death. Turner extended this metaphor of decline and fall to the growth in importance of his own country, which would inevitably be followed by a decline. This warning for all ambitious people and nations was to be a recurring theme in Turner’s work, expressed in many paintings, among them *Hannibal crossing the Alps* exh1812 and *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* exh1817. To Turner, Carthage was the paradigm of a noble civilisation, built in hope and determination, but which was bound to decay through greed, human weakness and folly.

- Look for Turner’s war paintings. Imagine what it must have been like to be alive at the time of Waterloo – the feelings of relief that war was over and triumph at the Duke of Wellington’s victory. How would you have felt, faced with Turner’s scene of carnage?

***The Field of Waterloo* exh1818**

Turner explored the field of Waterloo on foot on 16 August 1817, carrying with him an account of the battle in Charles Campbell's *The Travellers' Complete Guide through Belgium and Holland*. He made notes in his sketchbook and a plan of the main sites. Even more important in establishing his emotional response to what he saw was Byron's third Canto of *Childe Harold* containing the Waterloo stanzas. Just one line from these is sufficient to give a feeling of the carnage: "Rider and horse – friend, foe, in one red burial blent!" Turner, like Byron, felt differently from those who saw the battle chiefly in terms of British heroism. A week after the battle, Lord Castlereagh, the Prime Minister, had proposed that there should be a monument to the Duke of Wellington. Prizes were offered for commemorative medals and patriotic pamphlets and songs composed. Turner's attitude to the event was not one of hero worship. For him the battle was, more than anything, a scene of death and the wastage of young life. He shows the human tragedy of women hunting among the corpses for their husbands and lovers.

The painting is of its time because of its dark colours. It is a Romantic image in which darkness stands for that side of human nature, which can lead humans to massacre one another in the name of war. Because of his emphasis on human suffering, Turner's painting shocked, as did Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* in 1945, after the second world war. Both artists forced their public to face some grim facts which they would have preferred to forget.

***War: The Exile and the Rock Limpet* 1842**

Napoleon is shown in exile meditating, perhaps regretting the bloodshed of his campaigns. His gaze is fixed on a limpet enclosed in a tent-like shell. Like the one-time emperor, its protective casing cuts it off from its fellows as well as shielding it from the sea of blood around it. This is a melancholy emblem for the end of a triumphant career. It allows Turner to meditate on man's limitations. He is said to have been a pessimist. He was certainly keenly aware of instances of inhumanity, for instance, in the possession of slaves.

- In room 9, compare Turner's portrayal of Napoleon in *War: The Exile and the Rock Limpet* 1842. With WQ Orchardson's *Napoleon on Board the Bellerophon* exh1880, what kind of a man does Orchardson depict? Does he seem any less lonely aboard ship than in exile? What differences are there in the way the pictures are painted? How does Turner make symbolic use of the setting sun?

The Abolition of Slavery

The abolition of slavery took place in 1833. Turner may have read T Clarkson's *History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* which describes the captain of the Zong ordering the sick and dying to be thrown overboard so that he could claim insurance money for them. He could not do this if they died on board ship. This is possibly the horrific subject of *Slavers throwing overboard the dead and dying – Typhon coming on 1840* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Turner's champion, the critic John Ruskin, owned the painting at one time. He later sold it, finding it too painful to look at every day in his dining room.

Turner's painting methods

Turner was a genius who recognised his own worth, but also a hard-working one. He produced an enormous number of watercolours and paintings between the ages of twelve and seventy-six, and painted almost to the last. He spent almost all his time during his teenage years in sketching and producing watercolours, and in later life he produced dozens of pencil sketches of changing scenery as he explored Europe. He travelled by sea during storms, and by stage-coach over the Alps in winter, as well as walking about with a sketchbook or several in his pockets. The sketching probably fixed ideas in his head, and some elements of sketches can be recognised in oil paintings which he produced many years after the sketch was made.

Some artists of his time drew a small pencil sketch, then painted a small version of the subject in canvas, before transferring their ideas to the final canvas. Turner went straight to work on a canvas, and must have had a very clear image in his head of what he wanted to paint. Quite probably he was not completely happy with the finished result, but only stopped so that he could start to work out another and better idea on a new canvas. The Tate has some paintings which he abandoned at an early stage, and we can see from these how he worked. *Shipping at the Mouth of the Thames* c1806–07, and others, show us that he nearly always worked on a fairly white ground, and began by putting on transparent washes of paint, just as he would have done to produce a watercolour. (Some artists in his day worked on a warm-coloured ground, and this is an easy way to paint a portrait, for example). Turner's father applied the grounds, varnished the paintings, and sent them off to customers when they were finished. He and Turner both had a reputation for meanness, but some of Turner's materials were expensive nonetheless. For example, Turner always used natural ultramarine, even when he could have bought the man-made variety at almost a hundredth of the cost, after about 1830.

As the painting developed, he applied the same colours, more strongly and more opaquely, to build up the image. Bright colours, like the red of the sailor's hat, overlie the white ground, because this makes them look very

intense. Turner worked fast, and he liked an absorbent ground that allowed the paint to soak in, and dry fast. Then he would mix more oil into his sky paint, to stop it drying before he had finished, and he added extra medium to the paint on his palette. One of his paint additives was called megilp, and it made the paint easy to handle, rather like mayonnaise in fact. Pure oil paint, stored in the awkward little bladders which can be seen in his paint box at the Tate, felt like peanut butter when it came out, and if it was diluted with too much turpentine it flowed around like runny honey. So he added driers to it, and other materials, such as bitumen (which gave wonderful dark, transparent shadows in his landscapes) and beeswax with spermaceti wax (from whales). This last gave a paint which dried with a soft, plump texture, good for clouds and foamy water. When too many of these mixtures are applied one on top of another, they soon crack because they dry at different rates. Cracks are very visible in Turner's late paintings. You have to paint very systematically with such materials to avoid cracking, and Turner didn't. He was described as applying paint 'like a tiger', and he was more interested in the immediate pleasing effect, than in the long-term survival of his paintings.

Turner was not alone in using megilp, wax and bitumen in his paint. What was more unusual was that he used newly-invented pigments as soon as he could get hold of them, and in important paintings as well. Other artists waited years, to see how they would last in practice. New pigments such as cobalt blue, emerald green and chrome yellow gave bright and opaque colours when they were used alone over a white ground, or mixed with white. He used them in watercolours too, and his contemporaries, and later generations, began to use them as well. Turner's greens and yellows in particular were criticised for being too bright, and too unlike the natural world he was painting. Some of the red and pink colours which he used have faded so completely that we only know they were there from critics' reviews of his paintings soon after they were painted.

The unfinished paintings which we admire so much today were not seen by anyone while Turner lived. They are the best-preserved of all: through them we can see almost exactly what Turner intended to paint.

1820s

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| 1820 | By now most major towns have gas light in streets and shops. |
| 1821 | Death of Napoleon on St Helena. |
| 1825 | The first railway lines are laid. Trade Unions are made legal. |
| 1827 | The death of William Blake. |
| 1829 | The death of Turner's father. The formation of the police force. Hokusai <i>The Wave</i> . |

1830s

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| July 1830 | Popular uprising in Paris against the monarch, Charles X, who wanted absolute power. Louis Philippe comes to the throne. E Delacroix <i>Liberty Guiding the People: The 28th July, 1830</i> . |
| 1832 | The Reform Bill gives the vote to middle class men but not to women and working class men. |
| 1833 | The total abolition of slavery. |
| 1836 | Euston station designed by Philip Hardwick. |
| 1837 | The Coronation of Queen Victoria. Opening of the National School of Design at Somerset House to train craftsmen in the principles of design. The death of John Constable. |
| 1838 | The first crossing of the Atlantic by steam alone. |
| 1839 | The announcement of the invention of the daguerrotype (an early form of photography). |
| 1839–59 | The building of The Houses of Parliament by Charles Barry and AWN Pugin. |

1840s

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| 1840 | Rowland Hill introduces the penny post. |
| 1841 | The founding of the first Art School for women at Somerset House. |
| 1842–8 | Riots by the Chartists who wanted universal suffrage. Alfred Lord Tennyson <i>The Lady of Shalott</i> . |
| 1846 | The Irish potato famine. Repeal of the Corn Laws leads to free trade. |
| 1847 | Charlotte Bronte <i>Jane Eyre</i> Emily Bronte <i>Wuthering Heights</i> 1850. Gustave Courbet <i>Burial at Ornans</i> . |
| 1848 | Marx and Engel's Communist manifesto. Louis Philippe overturned and second republic set up under President Louis Napoleon. |

1850s

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| 1851 | Turner dies. The Great Exhibition is held in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. JE Millais starts painting <i>Ophelia</i> . |
| 1859 | Darwin's <i>On the Origin of Species</i> . |