

J. M. W. TURNER, 1775—1851.

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(*Picture study for the Spring Term, 1926.*)

TURNER: "The Fighting Temeraire,"—"sunsets"—"rough seas"—"Rain, Steam and Speed,"—"Modern Painters"—what a host of pictures that name calls up! Always have we known it, and always has there been some elusive allure about it. The dab of vivid scarlet, the dazzle of orange and gold, the heavy gloom of storm and cloud and black sail,—picture after picture rises to our minds as we think about the work of this greatest of landscape painters. Can we, I wonder, get back to the first impressions we received in the "Turner Room"? First bewildered, then absorbed, and finally so satisfied that even tea in a shop and home by the Underground—two thrills in ordinary life—were quite unnoticed and uncommented upon, because we were still floating beneath the awful form of Polyphemus, still gazing down the river of light in search of Æneas, still running with that little hare before the lumbering 1845 engine. And later, much, when we first saw the "Deer in Petworth Park," did we not think, "At last here is someone who does things as they *look*, who catches the glimmer of long shadows, the wonderful mysterious half light of sunset after rain, the unreal exaggerations that distance and atmosphere give to quite common forms, and is not hampered by things as they are, being too busy with how they appear." Never was there an artist who so disregarded reality, and by thus doing, made things so real. He seems to paint the impression one gets by what one sees, and so his pictures are life,—the terror of the storm, the delicacy of the morning, the mystery of the sunshine. Because sensation and emotion make life, not material or events or even knowledge. "Though I have all knowledge and not love, I am a hollow sound of no worth," says St. Paul. Turner had not knowledge, but he had love—love of beauty, love of God, and His wonderful manifestation in light. He spent his long life striving to express the joy of light, of sunshine, of flaming sunset rays, and veiled moonbeams, and who shall say he did not succeed? His shyness

prevented him from learning from his brother artists, and his curious, almost mad, jealous secrecy militated against the triumph of his efforts. His life was solitary, and although fame and recognition came to him early, his temperament prevented him from taking the position he might have done. Always there seems the shadow of something in his pictures.

Someone has said Turner knew no way of making his light lighter but by making his shadow darker. Certainly he knew the value of shadow and used it freely. But I think one feels his thought was so immense, that it was a kind of impatience with the material in which he worked that led him to disregard accepted conventions. Read the titles of some of his great pictures:—"Dido building Carthage," "Ulysses deriding Polyphemus," "The Ship Aground," "The Return of Æneas," "Norham Castle," "Tivoli." Do not think of the pictures, but of the ideas they call up. The Æneid, the Odyssey, storm and shipwreck, all the might of Norman barons, all the wealth of Roman Emperors. And think of one man trying to express even one of those ideas on three square feet of canvas with a handful of brushes and a box of paints. The task is colossal. And only a man possessed of a colossal imagination and energy, of infinite patience, and tremendous zeal would attempt it.

Then all these glorious seas and landscapes, these shadowy palaces, giant trees, over-hanging cliffs, and measureless distances, are a background—a playground for figures of the heroic age—and compared with their background, these figures are insignificant—tiny, of no account. They are not the scene, yet they give point to it. The tiny Apollo and Daphne make the reality of their olive groves; and in just the same way the deer make real the sunrise in "Petworth Park." Can you imagine Turner painting this? It is one of many: "Petworth Park, with Bucks fighting"; "Petworth Park, with Deer and Swans"; "Petworth, dewy morning"; "Petworth Park and Tellington Church." Out long before the dawn, that he might miss no moment of it, the painter watched morning after morning, the creeping light, the lessening shadow, the attitudes of the deer, making innumerable sketches, and gradually the final pictures grew. In this one, can you not see the movements of the just awakened hinds, their heads down to snuff the dawn? The dogs race across the dew-spangled turf after the shepherd, and the line they make heightens the slope in a wonderful way. Notice

how one white deer breaks the prevailing darkness of the picture on the right, and how the slow moving vegetable cart on the left makes the gallop of the dogs more rapid. Notice, too, the beautiful balance of the trees, grouped so as to enclose this hill of pasture, and rightly placed to give the eye the feeling of a far horizon. But the wonderful thing in the picture is the shadows. Some of you will have seen shadows like this on the sea shore, noticed without noticing, or noticed inarticulately perhaps, and found when looking at the sea, that it was hard to tell where reality stopped and shadow began. Does not this happen here? One can see almost the wave of the stags' heads, the stiff movement of the hinds' legs, all due to the wizard's use of shadow!

Though never a poor man, Turner practised many irritating economies, such as using the back of one sketch for another, or painting one picture on top of a former one. This "Petworth Park" is a case in point. The original picture on the canvas was an interior, possibly one of the rooms at Petworth; and the lower left-hand corner contains much of the first picture. That is a chair standing there, upholstered in striped satin, and a piece of blue and white porcelain stands beside it. Those straight lines are the boards of the floor. Probably he meant to paint a cart on the road or something like that in that corner, and use the colour of the boards in the gravel or road of his foreground; but the picture was never finished. It seems as if, when he had created that marvellous sky, the rest did not interest him; the incongruity of a chair merely made him chuckle—and he left it! I have called it a vegetable cart because that is what it looks like in our reproduction, and I think that is what was meant to fill that corner, but after going again to look at the picture I feel obliged to tell you it is a chair.

In "A Frosty Morning" the artist has not been in the same mood. This might almost have been painted by one of the pre-Raphaelites, although I think there is a mystery about all Turner's work that is entirely absent from theirs. The only modern I have seen who catches it is Matthew Maris. It is just a country cross road here, with two people waiting for the mail, and some labourers working at a clearing. Perhaps that is all we might see. But Turner saw far more. He saw and painted every dainty jewel hoar frost can put on the dulllest deadness of any branch or weed or cart rut. He saw the poverty of the poor, and their industry, and uncomplaining

steadfastness. Some of them seem to take the character of the soil—stiff, silent, unyielding. On this cold morning the waiting sportsman leans on his gun, and the child beside him rubs her cheek on the dead hare to get a fictitious warmth from its soft fur. Does not the action bring home to us the chill of the autumn morning? So does the horse, blowing the frosty ground, smelling the rime. Spades are stuck fast—frozen where they were left with other abandoned tools till thaw shall make work possible again. This is a hard frost, and it is presented to us from two points of view: first, for its beauty; and secondly, for its pain. Winter is a time of pleasure to the young, the active, the well fed and warmly clad. But more than half the world is not vigorous and active and well fed, and to them winter means pain and hardship and toil and suffering. "Look at both," says Turner, "and don't be smug." The world of movement and youth will come and go as the stage coach in the distance, but these slow old cripples will stack up their cart-load of faggots and toil on in their slow-moving country way, and its arrival and departure are no more than the passing of a wild goose overhead. It will not touch their life, only pass it by, as the high road passes this little country lane. The picture was developed from a sketch made in Yorkshire while the artist waited for the coach. Those of us who know the Yorkshire moors will at once feel that their brooding melancholy and wild charm has been faithfully reproduced. Not the least beautiful part of the picture is the wonderful foreground—those sprays of hog-weed, stiff, brown, crowned with their empty seed vessels, and the warmer brown of bracken beside them are perfect. Just above the horses a slender distant tree trunk breaks the sky-line. There are still a few withered leaves on it, though here they hardly show. It is exactly in the right place, and no one but Turner could have put it there. The two horses were drawn from the same model—the old chaise horse that drove the artist daily from his house in Twickenham to the scene of his day's sketching. The little girl in the picture often served as a model.

"Chichester Canal" is a very different subject. It seems full of peace and beauty. The setting sun is reflected in the still waters, which are as yet unruffled by the coming of the little schooner. The barge on the left hardly rocks, so motionless are the people within it. It is a characteristic culmination of darkness, put there in just the right place to make more vivid

the light on the water. The trees on the bank are repeated by their shadows—it is hardly possible to say where the bank ends and the reflections begin. The balance of the picture is perfect, and the sky has withstood the smoke of London in a most wonderful way. There is a wonderful stillness as well as a wonderful light about the picture, and the gentle, noiseless approach of the little schooner seems part of the “Spring of the morning.” It is a picture to return to again and again, and each time to find a new beauty and a new peace.

I expect few of us know this example of Turner’s studies of Venice, but let us remember it is only one of many—I was going to say hundreds, and I don’t think I should be wrong. Turner’s “Venice” glows for us on the walls of the National Gallery and of the Tate Gallery. A city of palaces, of “cloud-capped towers,” of still water and wonderful reflections, it is a city of dreams, and the sketches and pictures seem pages of poetry expressed in colour and light. The gondolas just seem to hold the place down to earth, with their suggestion of man and movement, and their dark shapes heighten the glory of pale yellows and shining golds. This one seems a mixture of water colour and pen and ink. Turner broke every convention and rule and custom in his work. He mixed any and every medium with a kind of fierce absorption in getting the effect he desired by any means whatever. Yet there is no feeling of haste or careless work—only an impression of the tremendous energy and seeking. I hope if any teachers take their children to the National Gallery and the Tate they will take them into the little Room IX. and there let them wander round that wonderful collection of drawings and water colours. The cases are too bewildering, but these are well arranged and full of inspiration. And here I might mention that “The Frosty Morning” is now at the National Gallery, and “Petworth Park” and “Chichester Canal” both at the Tate. If you have to choose between them, I don’t know what to say. It would seem dreadful to miss the “Fighting Temeraire” and the “Burial of Wilkie” and “Rain, Steam and Speed”; and there are two “Norham Castles” at the Tate I love to think about. I should say, go there first; then walk across Lambeth Bridge and take a bus right up to the National Gallery. It will not take long, and you can have a good look at Lambeth Palace as you go.

“The St. Michael’s Mount” is one of the less familiar pictures, and one of the most wonderful. A vast canvas;

it seems at least four subjects. The first time I saw the real Mount was on one of those typical Cornish days, when the sun and the mist alternate. On the cliff there was sunshine, at sea a lavender mist. Suddenly it seemed to melt or part, and out of it faintly grew a fairy island. Shimmering, glittering, alluring, it hung there, poised above the hidden sea. Then the mist rolled over it again and it was gone. The ecstasy of that sight I shall never forget, and an echo of it stirs me now when I watch the clouds unrolling from the Mount in Turner’s picture, and the beautiful thing dawns again on my sight. A palace in fairyland it seems, gleaming in pale gold across the wet beach. On the left the catch is spread out; not a very good one, as the boat is being pushed off for another trial. Buoys are scattered about, some lobster pots lie on the sand in the right foreground, and a derelict boat on the left is half buried in the sand. But let your mind dwell on the clouds; watch them melting and imitating battlements and buildings. Look at the heavy one, drifting out to sea. Can one not almost feel the wind and taste the spray?

Those of you who pilgrimage to South Kensington to look at this beautiful scene will be rewarded not only by it, but by a lovely “Venice” that hangs below it.

I have hardly left myself any space to write about the “Fighting Temeraire.” She is one with the sky and the river, one with the heroes of old, one with the dreams of youth. The fussy little tug which tows her is just a tug. But as such, a symbol of relentless utility. When you go to look at it, look at “Ulysses” first, and then this. The “Ulysses” sky is sunrise, hope, youth, success. The “Temeraire” sky is sunset—the end of a life, and a violent end. It has been called the last picture Turner painted with perfect power. It may be the last he finished, but I cannot find any thing but perfect power in any of his sketches. Sometimes a groping power, often a dissatisfied power, but always power. Cut this picture in two, in any direction, and the fraction is perfection. No wonder his fellow artists stood round him on varnishing day—though at a safe distance—and muttered to one another, “How does he do it?”

I heard two artists asking the very same question this week. We cannot tell, we can only enjoy the result, and go away with these memories of grace and beauty to brighten many a grey day through the gloom of a London winter.