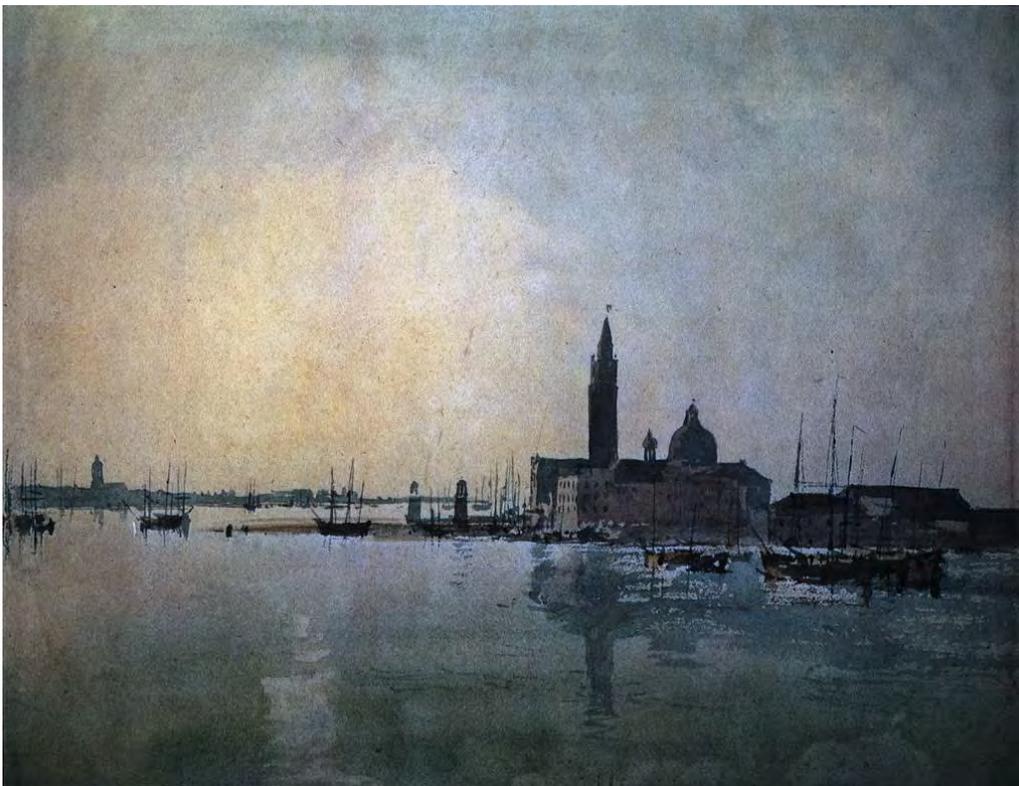


Turner in Italy & Colour Beginnings

Before setting off for his first visit to Italy in August 1819, Turner had been to the continent briefly during the Peace of Amiens in 1802 and again in 1817, when he travelled from Belgium to Germany, travelling along the Rhine between Cologne and Mainz and on his return journey through Holland. During the four months Turner spent in Italy between August 1819 and January 1820, he used no less than nineteen sketchbooks. The sheer quantity of the studies, which they each contain, bear witness to the immense importance he attached to this long awaited journey. The majority, fourteen of them, are fairly small and are packed with pencil studies recording every every aspect of the landscape, architecture, habits and costumes of Italy and its people, as well as details of works of art of all kinds, encountered in museums and public buildings, especially the Vatican. This first visit to Italy was a seminal moment in the evolution of his art. The visit led to a magnificent outpouring of watercolours and drawings. Like many painters before and after, he was utterly beguiled by the beauty of Italy, especially Venice, with its beautiful architecture and wonderful churches all within this magical setting of sea and canals.



San Giorgio Maggiore from the Dogano, watercolour, 1819, British Museum

San Giorgio Maggiore from the Dogano is generally regarded as one of the first watercolours painted by Turner whilst in Venice on this first visit.

Whilst he did not on this visit execute any finished watercolours, his sketches, notes and above all his vivid memories of what he had seen, informed a significant development in the power and subtlety of the watercolour compositions completed soon after.

These works produced first in Venice and then in and around Naples are among his masterpieces. However, when it came to using this material for exhibition pictures, he seems to have encountered great difficulty. In part, this must have been due to the fact that having established a new scale for his Academy pieces, exhibited before he left for Italy, he felt he had to maintain this. In fact, he only exhibited three Italian subjects before returning to Italy in 1828.

The second visit was very different from his first. Turner travelled first to Rome and spent much of his time there, painting in oils, as well as watercolours. Besides the works that he exhibited in Rome, there was a continuous flow of paintings of Italian subjects exhibited at the Academy, at least one each year, from 1829-46; after 1840, his focus was on Venice, rather than Rome and the Campagna.

This observation of a young Englishman, travelling on business from Rome to Bologna is especially enlightening with respect to Turner's endless curiosity:

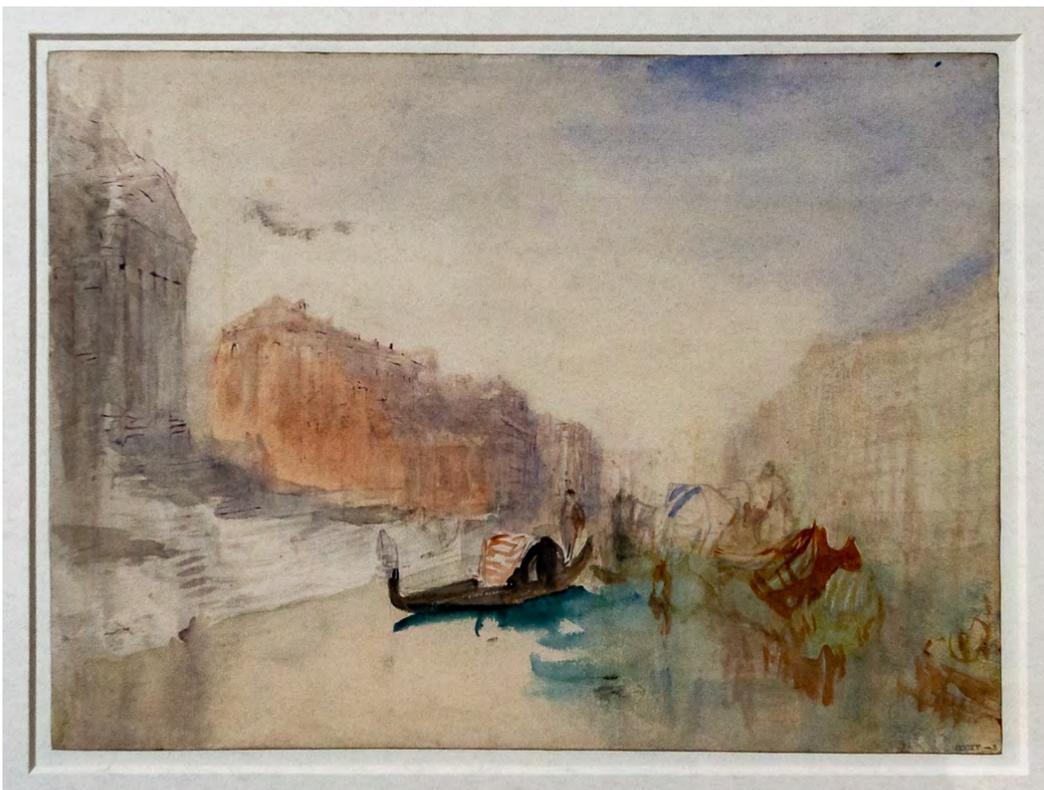
I have fortunately met with a good-tempered, funny, little, elderly gentleman, who will probably be my travelling companion throughout the journey. He is continually popping his head out of the window to sketch whatever strikes

his fancy, and became quite angry because the conductor would not wait for him whilst he took a sunrise view of Macerata. From his conversation he is evidently near kin to, if not absolutely, an artist. Probably you may know something of him. The name on the trunk is, J.M.W. Turner!

When Turner saw an interesting motive, he lets the carriage stop. Meanwhile, the coachman sits on a boulder and waits just like the rest of the travel companions. The practicalities of such a journey across the Alps was not to be taken lightly. It was not until 1775 when the first carriage completed the journey on an improved road and it was not until 1834, that a coach travelled regularly through the Gotthard Pass, after a new road was completed in 1830. Only on the return journey did Turner take the time to study the Old Masters in the Louvre.



San Giorgio Maggiore at Sunset from the Hotel Europa,
1830-40, graphite,
watercolour and
gouache on paper,
Tate Britain



The Steps of Santa Maria della Salute looking up the Grand Canal, 1830-40, graphite, watercolour and ink, Tate Britain

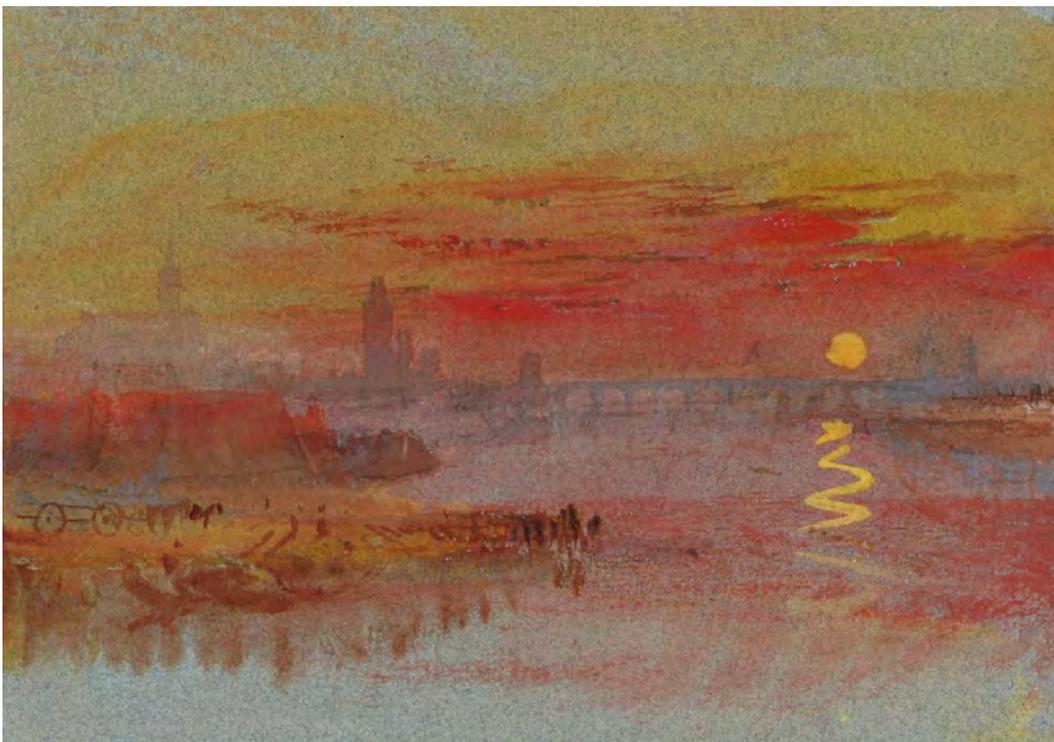
These watercolour compositions are taken out of one of Turner's many sketch books completed during his visits to Italy between 1819 -40. They demonstrate the quite astonishing ability of Turner to capture these scenes of Venice with such spontaneity and vitality.



Norham Castle on the River Tweed, 1822, watercolour,

He was also fascinated by Norham Castle on the River Tweed and visited and sketched it regularly throughout his life, first in 1797, 1801, 1815 and most importantly in 1822-4. It's been proposed that this watercolour completed in 1822 marks the beginning of Turner's application of prismatic colour theory to his work, in juxtaposed touches of red, blue and yellow.

In 1831 he made fresh sketches and the resulting watercolours demonstrated yet another development. The colour scheme and the representation of the sun are characteristic of 'colour-beginnings' that Turner was making in the late twenties and early thirties and it seems to lead directly to the oil paintings of the same subject painted between 1835-40.



Scarlet Sunset, Rouen, 1829, watercolour and gouache on tinted paper, in the British Museum

Scarlet Sunset, Rouen is painted with a limited range of colours, organized to give strong contrasts between primary colours. It also incorporates the pale blue woven paper, so that it makes a significant contribution to the image.

Is it just a coincidence that Claude Monet's, *Impression Sunrise* of 1872, the painting often regarded as the 'Talisman' of Impressionism, exhibited at the First Impressionist Exhibition in 1874, is so similar in conception and appearance to Turner's *Scarlet Sunset*. Although in fact *La Grenouillere*, in the Metropolitan and *Bathers at la Grenouillere*, both painted by Monet in 1869, are in my opinion the paintings, which really introduced Impressionism to the Art World. A comment in a letter from Camille Pissarro to his son Lucien in 1888 is informative, when considering the extent to which the Impressionists may have been influenced by Turner. This was at the time in Pissarro's painting, when

he had become disenchanted with the painstaking Pointillism technique advocated by Seurat, typical of his own works between 1885-8:

I ponder incessantly how I could paint without using dots. The question is constantly on my mind, I should visit the Louvre to view the works of certain painters, who are of interest in this respect. But surely it is useless if there are no Turners hanging there.



Impression Sunrise, 1872, oil on canvas, Claude Monet, 19x24 inches, Marmatton

In an interview for *la Revue Illustrée*, Monet reflected on his handling of this painting of the port of Le Havre: *A landscape is only an impression, instantaneous, hence the label they've given us, all because of me, for that matter. I'd submitted something done out of my window at Le Havre, sunlight in the mist with a few masts in the foreground. They wanted a title for the catalog; it couldn't really pass as a view of Le Havre, so I answered: put it down as Impressionism!*



Bathers at La Grenouillere, 1869, oil on canvas, 29x36 inches, Claude Monet, National Gallery, London



The Bridge of Sighs, Duccal Palace and Dogano, 1833, oil on canvas, 20x32 inches, Tate Britain

The Bridge of Sighs, Duccal Palace and Customs House was intended to be a tribute to the great vedute master Canaletto, who is himself depicted working on a painting in a heavy gilt frame, on the immediate left of this painting, but it may also have been a tribute to Richard Parkes Bonington, whose death in 1828 had been followed by a large sale of his works in London the following year. However, a more immediate and equally likely reason for the painting, is the friendly rivalry with one of his contemporaries, William Clarkson Stanfield, who exhibited a similar painting the same year. According to the *Morning Chronicle* for 6 June 1833, Turner painted his picture:

‘it is said, in two, or three days, on hearing that Mr Stanfield was employed on a similar subject, not in the way of rivalry of course, for he is the last to admit anything of the kind, but generously, we will suppose, to give him a lesson in atmosphere and poetry’

The critics readily accepted Turner as the winner of the contest. For *Arnold’s Magazine*:

‘the juxtaposition brought out more glaringly the defects of Stanfield and illustrated more strongly the fine powers of Turner. For, viewed from whatever distance, Turner’s work displayed a brilliancy, breadth and power, killing every other work in the exhibition.’

For the *Athenum*, in comparing the painting to the work of Canaletto:

‘it is more his own than he seems aware; he imagines he has painted it in the Canaletto style: the style is his and worth Canaletto’s ten times over.’

The picture was bought at the Academy by Robert Vernon, a member of the new manufacturing class, from whom many of Turner’s later patrons were to come, as opposed to the aristocracy, who bought his earlier works. Vernon was building up a collection of contemporary British painting, which he donated to the National Gallery in 1847, by which time it included four Turners.



Grand Canal from the Porch of Madonna della Salute, 1835, oil on canvas, 36x48 inches, Metropolitan

The Grand Canal, exhibited at the Academy in 1835, must have been painted after Turner's return from his second visit to Venice in 1833, presumably using his drawings and watercolours as source material. The title is Turner's own, the use of the word "porch" simply refers to the area in front of the entrance to Baldassare Longhena's Baroque church of Santa Maria della Salute. The artist introduced various discrepancies of scale and topographical detail to the composition, in order to intensify the effect of the vista. Turner also brought his wealth of experience as a marine painter and the brilliance of his watercolour technique to the problem of merging the foundations of the palaces of Venice into the waters of the lagoon with its delicate reflections. However, it must be said that it owes something to Bonington's earlier interpretations of Venice. Notwithstanding, it is interesting to see how Turner has introduced an even more Romantic feel to a similar scene. The painting was engraved twice, in 1838 and 1850 and Ruskin owned an engraving he greatly admired, mentioning it often in his writings.

What is immediately obvious in the following works by Turner, is quite the extent to which Turner's oil painting technique was influenced by his work on paper. *The Bridge of Sighs* of 1840 is especially interesting in its concentration on a discrete, but iconic part of Venice. It was exhibited with the following lines from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

*I stood upon a bridge, a palace and
A prison on each hand.*

The quotation shows that Turner saw even the beauties of Venice as a sham, concealing the grim realities on which her now departed glories had depended. This is an unusually close-up, architectural view, matched only by the vast unfinished picture of the Rialto of 1820.



Venice Grand Canal, Sunset, 1826, oil on canvas, Richard Parkes Bonington, Private



The Bridge of Sighs, 1840, oil on canvas, 20x32 inches, Tate Britain



The Dogano, San Giorgio, Citella, from the Steps of the Europa, 1842, oil on canvas, 62x93 cms, Tate

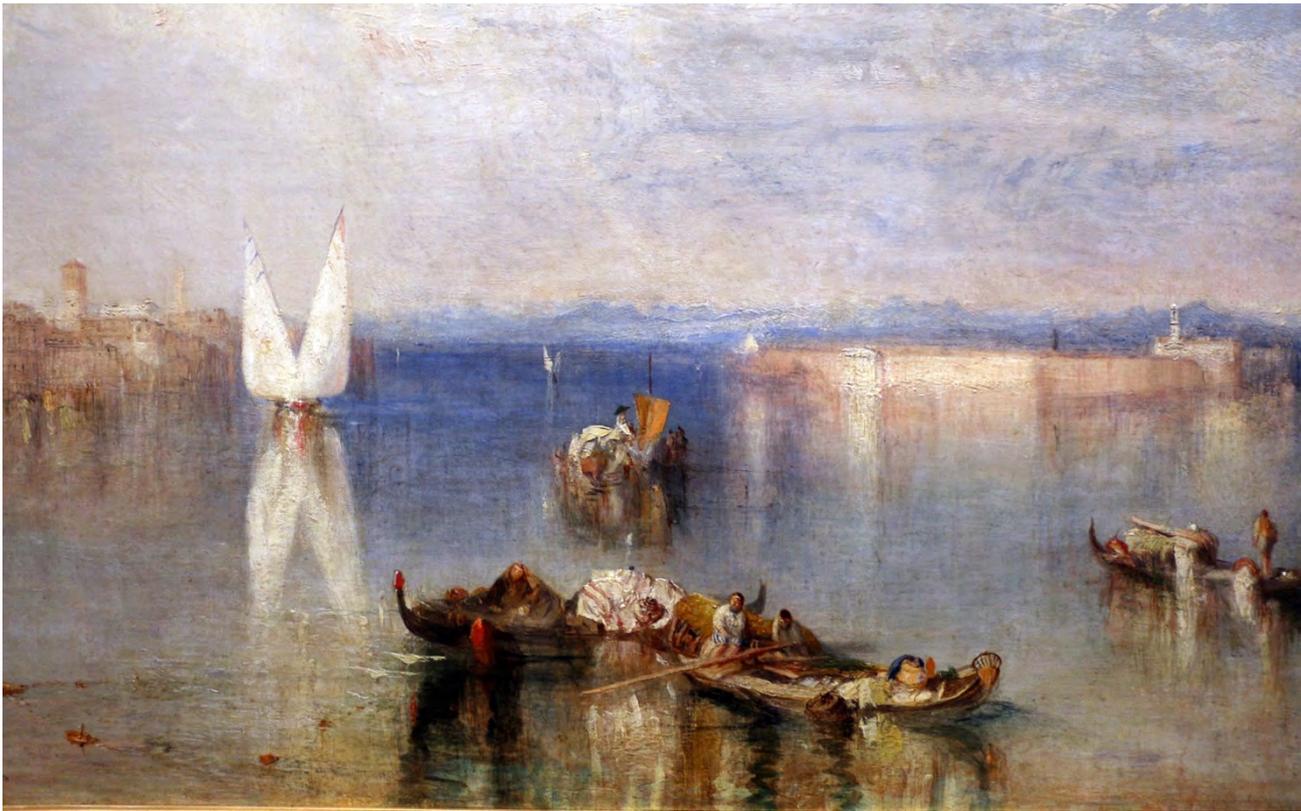
Turner stayed at the Europa Hotel on some, if not all his Venetian visits. Exceptionally among Turner's later oil paintings of Venice, *The Dogano, San Giorgio, Citella from the Steps of the Europa* appears to have been developed from a drawing made on his first visit to Venice in 1819. This painting along with *Il Campo Santo* were on the whole highly praised, when exhibited together at the Academy in 1842. For the *Spectator*, they were 'two lovely views of Venice, gorgeous in hue and atmospheric in tone.' Whilst for the *Athenaeum*, 'they were among the loveliest, because least exaggerated pictures, which this magician (for such he is, in right of his command over the spirits of Air, Fire and Water) has recently given us. Fairer dreams never floated past poet's eye; and the aspect of the City of Waters is hardly one iota idolized.'

Across the Lagoon and viewed from the North, *Il Campo Santo* depicts on the left, the city and on the right in the distance, the cemetery island of San Michele. Not a view often painted, Turner may have regarded the cemetery, a relatively recent addition to Venice, as a fitting symbol of the fading splendor of this Imperial city. The brilliant white sails of the twin-masted felucca are greatly elongated and further extended by their reflections, their resemblance to angel's wings perhaps stressing the theme of mortality. The colours are brilliant, but delicate, the whole made more luminous by the paint's translucency over a white ground, similar to that which the Pre-Raphaelites and the Impressionists would later use. As John Constable remarked of Turner, 'He seems to paint with tinted steam, so evanescent and so airy.'

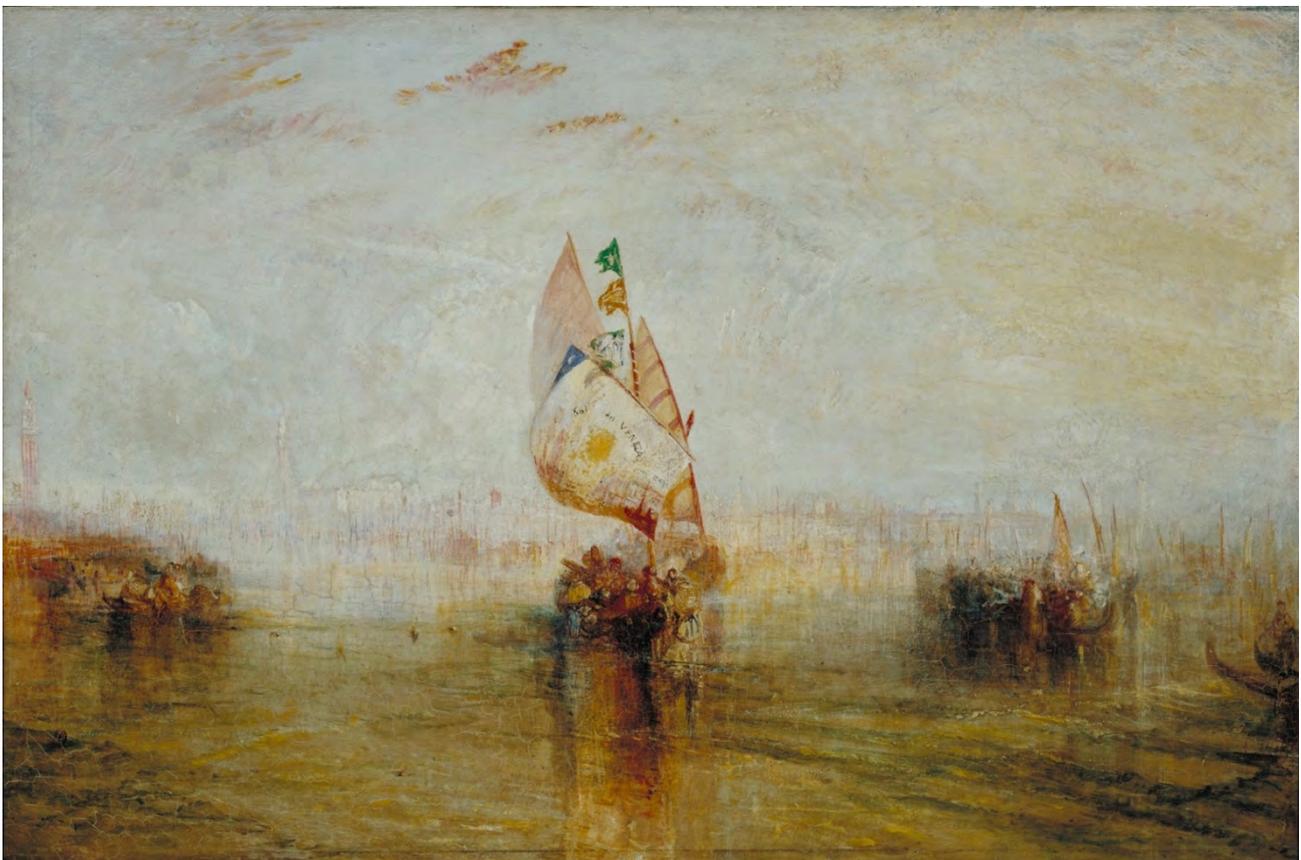
The Sun of Venice Going to Sea, was accompanied in the catalogue, by these adapted lines from Thomas Gray's poem, 'The Bard:'

*Fair shines the morn and soft the zephyrs blow,
Venezia's fisher spreads his sail so gay,
Nor Heeds the demon that in grim repose
Expects his evening prey.*

This painting was one of Ruskin's favourites. In a letter to his father of 14 September, he wrote: 'delighted to see a fishing boat with its sail full to the wind, the most gorgeous orange and red, in everything, form, colour and feeling, the very counterpart of the *Sol di Venezia*.



Il Campo Santo, Venice, 1842, oil on canvas, 24x36 inches, Toledo



The Sun of Venice Going to Sea, 1843, oil on canvas, 62x92 cms, Tate Britain



Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus – Homer's Odyssey, 1829, oil on canvas, 52x80 inches, Tate Britain

Of the works painted in response to his visits to Italy, *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus* is one of the most mystical, confirming Turner's ability to miraculously translate mythological narrative onto canvas. The subject is from Book IX of the *Odyssey* and the picture is based on one of the sketches on coarse canvas almost certainly painted in Italy in 1828-9, though the hollowed-out arches of rock, probably based on those around the Bay of Naples, are only found in another of the sketches.

John Ruskin called this the central picture in Turner's career, noting the painter's fidelity to Pope's translation of the text in the portrayal of the Morning light, though his suggestion that the Sun God, Apollo (Phoebus) is formless because 'he is the sun', is countered by Thornbury's statement that 'thanks to sugar of lead, Phoebus has vanished.' John Gage has also pointed out Turner's fidelity over such things as Ulysses' ship being in 'the shallows clear' and the way in which Polyphemus almost forms part of the 'lone mountain's monstrous growth,' but he suggests that Turner went further by using the mythological subject in his pursuit of the 'Sublime', in his representation of the forces of Nature. The smoke rising from the mountain gives it a distinctly volcanic appearance and Polyphemus' fellow Cyclops were associated with thunder and lightning, which had themselves been associated with volcanic activity in the later 18th century.

Ulysses is depicted standing at the back of his galley, deriding Polyphemus, whom he has blinded, after getting him into a drunken stupor and driving a stake through his eye. On the galley are displayed two large flags on the mast and rigging. The orange flag bore the word for 'nobody', which was the name Ulysses had given Polyphemus as his own, whilst the other flag carries the scene of the Trojan Horse. The incapacitated, man-eating giant is enraged that Ulysses has escaped from his cave after tricking him and is faintly seen through the clouds on the left of the composition, hurling huge boulders at their ship. The Nereids playing around Ulysses' ship are not mentioned in Homer's text and seem to have been introduced as embodying the idea of phosphorescence, as in Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* of 1791. Here Turner appears to be moving closer to the purely scientific mythography of

Shelley. As frequently was the case, the critics responses were mixed. However, the commonly held view was that despite the painter's excess of riotous colour, the painting represented a 'gorgeous vision of the imagination, as a splendid dream of practical fancy and as such highly captivating.' Other critics too felt that the painter's excesses were justified by his poetical feeling.



Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, 1832, oil on canvas, 142x248 cms, Tate Britain

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage is considered to be one of the grandest and finest of the glowing Italianate landscapes that Turner produced regularly after his return from his second visit to Italy. It is a wholly imagined scene, based on the epic poem of the same title by Lord Byron and the debt to his hero Claude is unmistakable. The painting was first exhibited in 1832 and was so popular that people were advised to visit it as soon as the gallery opened to avoid the crowds. The painting was exhibited with these lines from Byron's poem:

*And now, fair Italy!
Thou art the garden of the world...
They wreck a glory, and thy ruin graced
With an immaculate charm which cannot be defaced.*

One critic at the time remarked, 'it is one of the noblest landscapes of our gifted artist; it has all the poetry of his best pictures, with all the true colouring of his less imaginative compositions.'

Ten years after his final journey to Rome, Turner envisioned the Eternal City through a veil of memory, in his *Modern Rome-Campo Vaccino* of 1839. Baroque churches and ancient monuments in around the Roman Forum seem to dissolve in iridescent light shed by a moon rising at left and a sun setting behind the Capitoline Hill at right. Amidst these splendours, life goes on as normal. The scene evokes both the enduring beauty of Rome, but also its fading glory; the Campo Vaccino, so called as the area of the Roman Forum that was used as pasture for cows up to early 19th century. When first exhibited it was accompanied by a modified quotation from Lord Byron's masterpiece, 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage', 'The moon is up and yet it is not tonight; the sun as yet divides the day with her'

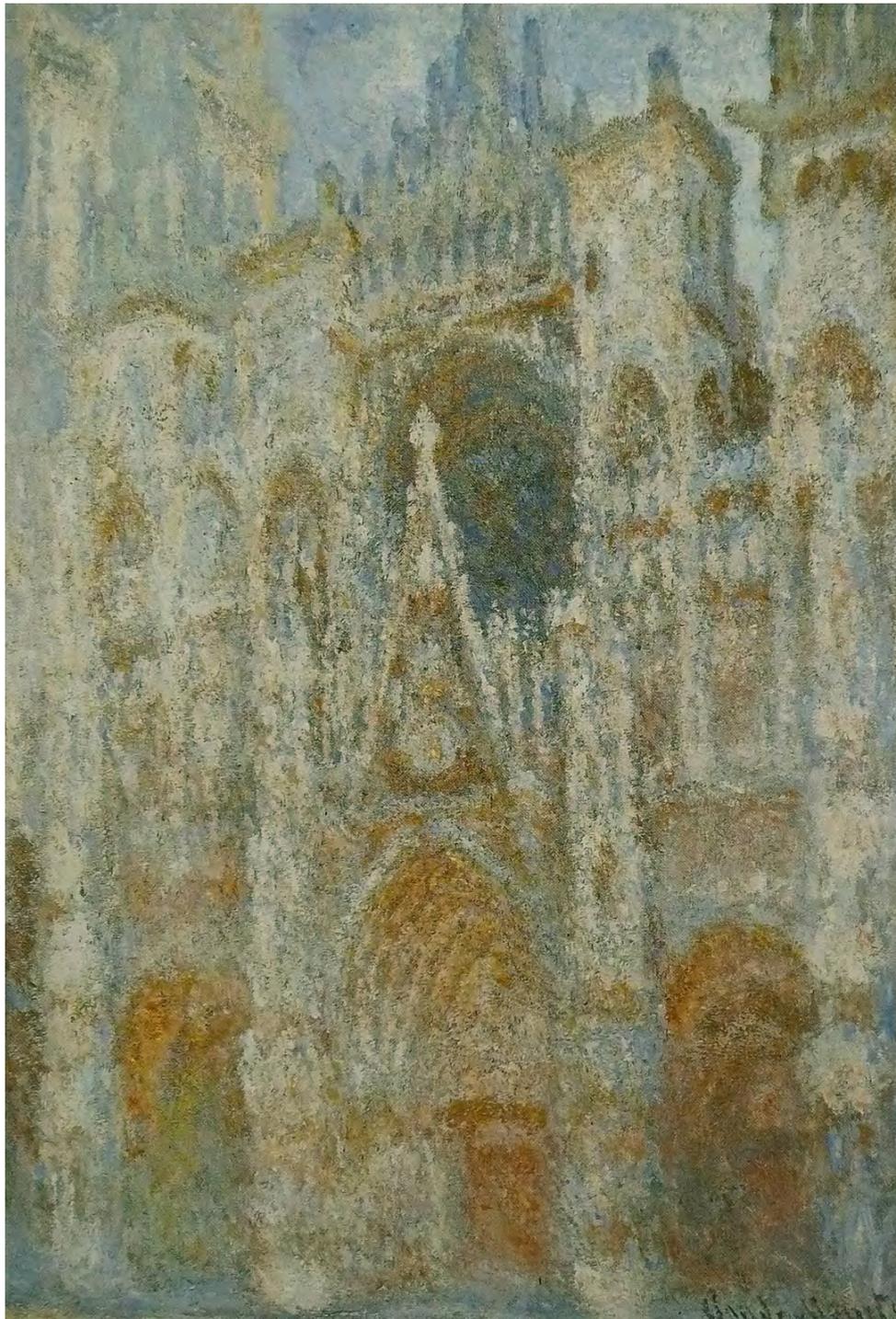


Modern Rome-Campo Vaccino, 1839, oil on canvas, 36x 48 inches, J. Paul Getty Museum



Norham Castle, 1835-40, oil on canvas, 36x48 inches, Tate Britain

Norham Castle, an exceptionally well preserved painting for a Turner, was almost certainly not meant for exhibition. It marks the extreme of Turner's development from the topographical watercolour and as such is regarded as one of his most important and influential works on canvas. The pale colour scheme, conditioned by diffused light radiating through mist from a low sun was developed from the *Rivers watercolour* and the later 'colour beginning.' The forms of the landscape are still further fragmented, with even the tower of the castle, so important in previous iterations, lost in view. One can only make out the low wall with its square perforations, a minimal indication of the architectural structure. Turner has dissolved his subject in sunlight, but he has not created an abstraction; the cow in the river, which he has retained from his earliest portrayal, reminds us that he is painting the real world and that here, as always, he understood light and colour as the means by which we perceive nature and that it is as natural forces that they are capable of moving us most profoundly.



Rouen Cathedral, Harmony in Blue, 1892/3, oil on canvas, 36x24 inches, Musee d'Orsay

Surely its not too much of a leap of faith to compare this painting to Monet's extensive Rouen Cathedral series, where Monet's exceptional visual acuity, has also enabled him to translate his visual perception of changing light at different times of the day and in different weather conditions on the architecture of the West Portal, into a series of canvases of varied colours and textures.

The Blue Rigi, painted in 1842, together with ***The Red Rigi*** and ***The Dark Rigi***, together with sixteen related watercolour sketches, arguably represent the peak of Turner's achievement in watercolour. In their focus on a specific motif, they anticipate Hokusai's relationship with Mount Fuji, Cezanne's obsession with Mont Sainte-Victoire and Monet's intense focus on the West Portal of Rouen Cathedral.

The Rigi dominates the view to the North-East of Lake Lucerne and the view of the

sunrise from its summit was one of the high points of a visit to Switzerland in the 18th and 19th centuries. The group of finished works was the result of his visit in the late Summer of 1841.



The Blue Rigi: Lake of Lucerne, Sunrise, 1842, watercolour, 30x45 cms, Tate Britain

Ruskin recounts the story of how Turner came back from his tour with a wealth of studies, out of which he chose fifteen to be worked up so that his agent Thomas Griffith could show them to the clients and as he hoped, secure commissions for fully finished watercolours. In so doing, he was following the habit of a lifetime, working in series on commission from publishers and engravers. Although Griffith was skeptical, Turner, ever the businessman, pressed ahead, actively encouraged by Ruskin and produced four specimens to demonstrate what the finished works would look like, in the end selling nine out of ten finished watercolours, including the views of the Rigi.

The Rigi works became not so much an object of study in themselves, but as a vehicle for ideas about light, colour, atmosphere and the place of humanity in a world that seemed distilled to its essentials in that wonderful place. In *The Blue Rigi* the mountain is swathed in diaphanous mists beneath a pale primrose sky and the sense of transcendental calm is underlined with a typical example of Turner's humour by the episode in the foreground, where two dogs leap into the water after a covey of waterfowl. Martin Hardie, himself a skilled watercolourist, wrote:

'In the Rigi drawings Turner is the insuperable master of technique. He uses every possible manipulation of brush, colour and paper, every device, every weapon in his armoury, sponging, rubbing, washing, stippling, hatching, touching and retouching, to express the vibration and radiation of light. Light was his theme.'

John Ruskin, who owned several of the series asserted that, 'Turner had never made any drawings like these before and never made any like them again...he is not showing his hand here, but his heart.' And after Turner's death, he wrote to his father advising him that the 'first Swiss series-ours, Bicknell's and Munro's are quite priceless.'

The last time that all three paintings were united was in 2014, for an exhibition at Tate Britain.



The Red Rigi, Sunrise, 1842, watercolour, 30x45 cms, National Gallery, Victoria



The Dark Rigi: Sunrise over Lake Lucerne, 1843, watercolour, 30x45 cms, Private Collection