

Rachel Yurman: Seeing Turner & the Sea at the Peabody Essex Museum

At the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem through September 1.

The Peabody Essex Museum's major summer exhibition, **Turner & the Sea** is, in the broadest sense, about the maritime painting tradition. It is also about the evolution of this great artist's particular vision of earthly elements, and the extent to which that vision influenced – and was influenced by – others.



Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), a star of the academic system and a rebel against its constraints, was an artist who annoyed contemporary critics even while inspiring champions like John Ruskin. Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (1843), which became a classic of Victorian literature in its own right, helped to place Turner in the Pantheon of British painters.



Concentrating on sea paintings, the PEM show includes a number of major canvases, several on loan from UK institutions, a roomful of astonishing watercolors, and a handful of works by such influencers as Claude Lorrain and admirers like Constable, Sargent, and

others. Grand picture postcards like *Venice: The Dogana and San Giorgio Maggiore* (1834) and monumental historical works

like *The Battle of Trafalgar* (1805), paired with De Loutherberg's *Lord Howe's Action* (1793), provide a pleasing degree of "ooh" and "aah."

Turner, inducted into the Royal Academy at a youthful 26, is associated with the age of Romanticism, with its penchant for "the sublime" and its dual consciousness of the terror and fragility of the natural world. The Venice and Trafalgar paintings – one all glassy beauty and the other complete turmoil at sea – are appropriate touchstones of the academic as well as the romantic. Turner, however, is an artist who seems to have mastered convention in order, eventually, to flout and override it.

His early devotion to watercolor, his spectacular abilities in that supposedly lesser medium, are apparent in an array of sketches and studies from the *Liber Studiorum* (1807-16) that greet us in one of the first galleries. Looking at his later works in oils, the light and transparent underpainting suggest the remarkable, even triumphant, adaptation of watercolor technique.

We have the chance to see how others – 17th-century Dutch painters like Ruysdale and Willem van de Velde the Elder – approached the seascape and maritime subjects, applying restrained palettes and exquisite control to create moody works of great precision and detail. In an essay on Turner in *Looking at Pictures*, Kenneth Clark discusses the difficulty of capturing the constant movement of waves. Whether in the stylization of Chinese painting or Japanese prints, the almost algorithmic precision of DaVinci, or these Dutch seascapes, one is conscious of an attempt to regulate, to govern the ungovernable.

Turner was, in his own right, a commander of the seas, to say

nothing of notoriously difficult water-based media. The watercolor and gouache **Pembroke Castle** (first exhibited in 1806) sets detailed renderings of the daily catch – mussels and fish scattered on the sand – against a majestic expanse of sky. There is virtuosity here, but also a sense of freedom and a suggestion of the infinite that takes us far beyond the limits of the Dutch horizon.



Motion defines Turner as light does the Impressionists. His depiction of moving water, along with the even more evanescent steam and fire, set his work apart. Flicking paint with the aplomb and seemingly random motions of an abstract expressionist, Turner was an action painter no less than Jackson Pollock.

The principal subject of Clark's chapter, **Snowstorm – Steamboat off a Harbor's Mouth**, is actually on loan for this exhibition. In this 1842 work, a ship is nearly engulfed by steam, snow, mist, and foam. Clark hints that **Snowstorm** may reflect the painter's mental state. He says, curiously, that "no one ever saw him at work," as though there was some chicanery or secret amanuensis that history has kept hidden from us. But the mystery of Turner's painting is really the miracle of perception – not how he painted, but how we see. That mere flecks of color can suggest so much to the eye and brain, and that we can translate them so readily, is what astonishes.

The late paintings have, of course, confounded many viewers. Here, the PEM show offers a response in the form of Turner's

late watercolors. Washes of color with a few figurative dashes, their simplicity seems to offer a key to the minimalism and near-abstraction of the late paintings. They also bring us full circle, back to the medium that so inspired this artist and was the initial proving ground for his technique.



The exhibition feels substantial yet doesn't overwhelm, and its efforts to contextualize Turner through the work of others are instructive. It makes its points deftly and without overstatement – that, and a rare chance to see this range of work, should point the way to Salem before the summer's end.

–c. Rachel Yurman, 2014

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