

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

What J.M.W. Turner Saw, and What We Still Can See

In the 250 years since the artist was born, the natural world he loved so much has changed. But he still reminds us to look with truth, clarity, and feeling.

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Reporting from London and Margate, England

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He looms larger than life in Britain's imagination; he's even on the 20 pound note.

Yet as museums across the country celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of J.M.W. Turner — the English Romantic painter known for his images of violent sea squalls, bucolic landscapes and otherworldly sunsets — the facts of his biography are sparse and frequently contested.

Records show Turner was baptized on May 14, 1775, but the date on which he was born is unknown. He often told people it was April 23, the same as William Shakespeare. Other times, he said he shared his birth year with Napoleon and the first Duke of Wellington, both of whom were born in 1769.



A self-portrait by J.M.W. Turner, painted when he was 24.
Universal History Archive/Getty Images

In his later years, Turner adopted the title Mr. Booth, using the last name of his long-term companion, Sophia. Neighbors assumed that he was a retired officer, because of his navy greatcoat, and called him “The Admiral.”

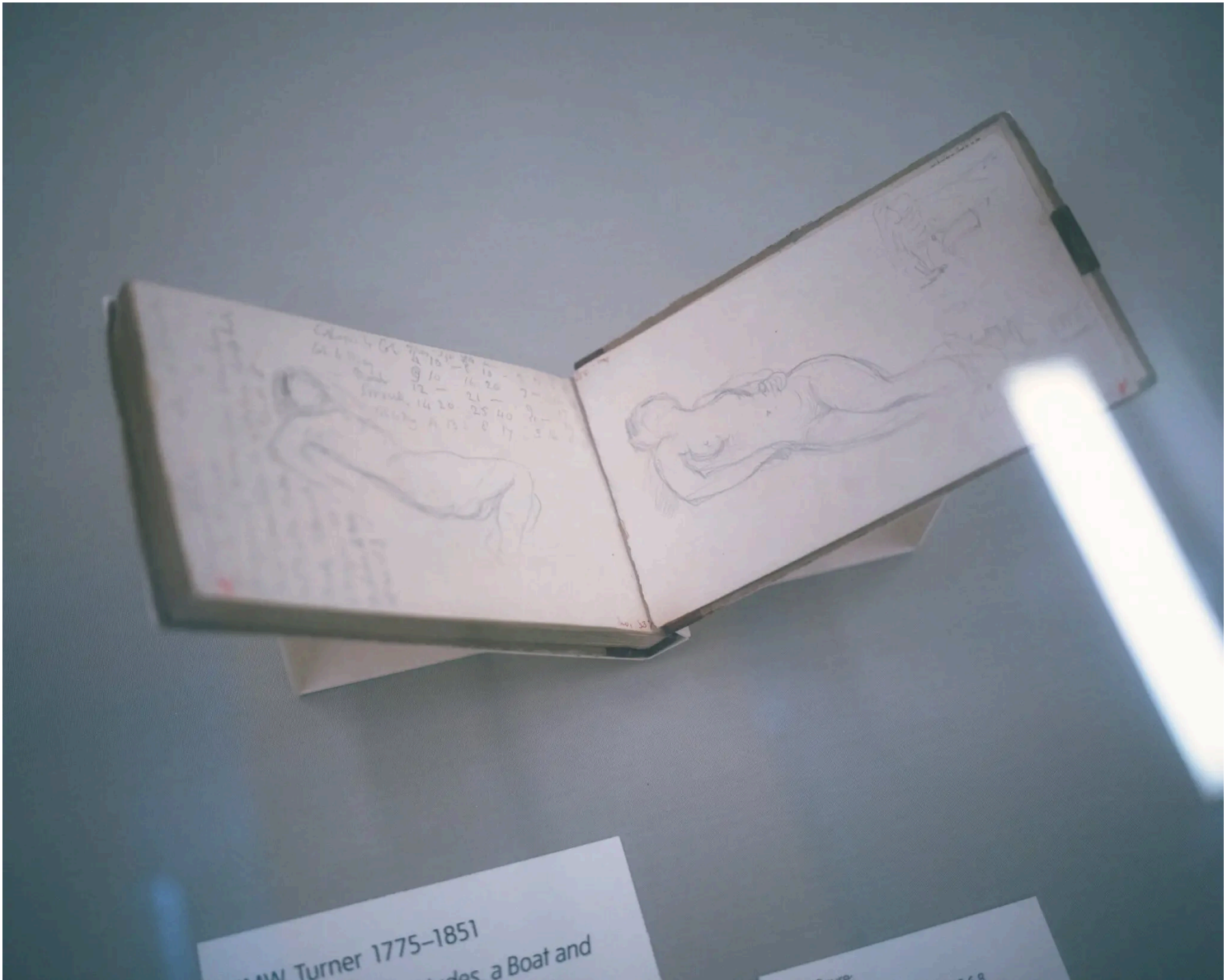
Some say that on his deathbed in 1851, Turner’s last words were “The sun is God,” and who wouldn’t want to believe that of an artist whose medium was paint, but also light? Light through clouds, light on water, light fiery and golden through skies that blur into a vast field of color, light from flames engulfing the Houses of Parliament, light through rain, steam and speed.

“He probably didn’t tie himself to the top of a mast to be exposed to the elements,” said Amy Concannon, a senior curator at Tate Britain, which has the world’s largest Turner collection, referring to another possibly apocryphal tale about the artist. “But his claims tell us something about what he was trying to do with his art, which was not just to depict, but to express, the feeling of a scene.”

The story relates to “Snow Storm — Steam Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth” a canvas from around 1842 that’s filled with muscular swathes of gray, white, black and blue, the sea nearly indistinguishable from the sky as both threaten to engulf a steamboat just visible at the center of the image. The artist told his friend, the art historian and critic John Ruskin, that he “got the sailors to lash me to the mast” to observe the storm for four hours, a scene that is dramatically replayed in Mike Leigh’s 2014 biopic, “Mr. Turner.”



“Snow Storm — Steam Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth” at Tate Britain in London.



Turner left many works to the British state when he died. About 37,500 items on paper are now in Tate Britain's collection.



Tate Britain holds the world's largest collection of Turner works.

In the movie, lightning crashes, a storm rages and the large boat is pitched to and fro as we watch a sailor tying a thick rope round and round the portly Mr. Turner's waist, his back flat against the mast as he grins and chuckles, enjoying the spectacle of the elements.

Turner was known to court the public with performative showmanship, which sometimes included finishing his paintings in public. During the pre-opening "Varnishing Day" at a Royal Academy exhibition in 1832, he added a splash of red to a painting that hung next to a work by his sometime rival John Constable. "He has been here and fired a gun," Constable is said to have declared, feeling his own painting overshadowed.

For a painter of his time, Turner had a remarkable sense of building and preserving his oeuvre: Toward the end of his life, he bought back sold works and assembled an estate to donate to the nation when he died, perhaps with the sense of solidifying a permanent legacy.

That collection is now held by Tate Britain, including about 37,500 items on paper and nearly 300 paintings, that — according to Turner's stipulation — are exhibited in a specially built wing of the museum. Across several rooms, whose displays are periodically rehung, visitors can see how varied and ambitious Turner's output was.

Early rooms show his success as a painter of classical landscapes and agricultural landscapes, giving way to scenes of Europe, where he painted Venice, Rome and the Alps. One room gathers tempestuous works filled with snowstorms, rough seas, whalers and boating disasters; others show Turner's boundary-pushing virtuosity, with his late works resembling what we might today call abstraction. As Concannon, the curator, said: "There's a Turner for everyone."



"London from Greenwich Park" at Tate Britain.



A view from the Greenwich area of London today. Despite the more modern cityscape with skyscrapers and densely packed buildings, Turner's setting is still recognizable.

Although Turner was born and died in London, he traveled widely across Britain to capture its varied natural landscapes. In 1813, seeking a more permanent countryside escape, the artist designed Sandycombe Lodge as a retreat from the pressures of capital. When lived there from 1814-26, it would have had grand views over surrounding fields; today, it is in the London suburbs, and a busy road runs nearby.

The cottage-style home, now a museum called Turner's House, is celebrating his anniversary with an exhibition of his rarely seen watercolor studies of birds and animals.

The upstairs bedrooms of the modest dwelling display works on paper that show Turner's interest in the natural world — cows, a cat, a flying mallard — sketched in the margins of his correspondence. Watercolors from the “Farnley Book of Birds” (from around 1816) are delicate and detailed: the lapis head of a peacock, the white and gold heart-shaped face of a barn owl, a lively heron with a fish in its mouth.

These unexpected, quiet works show how precise Turner could be when observing the natural world — his dedication to detail and the desire to make whatever he was depicting not only look, but also feel alive.

Turner's interest in the environment stretched well beyond the borders of his own island nation. He traveled to the great cities of Europe and beyond, to their wilder outer reaches. Between 1802 and 1844, Turner visited to the Alps six times, filling sketchbook after sketchbook with sublime views.

In 2018, the British artist Emma Stibbon, who works in photography and drawing, followed Turner's footsteps to Mont Blanc, on the border of France and Italy. She found that the Mer de Glace glacier near Chamonix, France, which Turner depicted dozens of times across decades, was irrevocably changed. The glacial valley, once brimming with snow and ice, was unrecognizable from Turner's depictions: The glacier had receded more than a mile, leaving a floor of dark sediment with just the faintest traces of ice.



Turner's bedroom at Sandycombe Lodge, his country residence in an area that is now in a London suburb.



In Turner's day, the view from his window would have looked out over fields.



For the 250th anniversary of Turner's birth, the museum that now occupies the house is presenting an exhibition of his rarely seen watercolor studies of birds and animals.

"These drawings are now of incredible importance to scientists," Stibbon said in an interview. "They are records of the area before the existence of photography, forming crucial evidence of the effects of climate change over time," she said.

"Now, Turner's landscapes are filled with pathos," Stibbon added. "They show what has been lost."

In his lifetime, Turner experienced significant industrial change, but that upheaval pales in comparison to the speed of what we are currently witnessing. "We need to understand what we're doing and what we lose as a result, part of which is beauty,"

Stibbon said. “Turner looks with awe at the spectacular and puts you in the frame with him.”

For other artists, it is Turner’s application of paint that makes his work so modern.

“He was molding the paint, kneading it onto a flat surface; it was a bodily experience,” the painter Frank Bowling said at his studio in South London, where he was at work on a suite of paintings in a hot palette of crimson, mauve and yellow — not unlike Turner’s own. Born in British Guiana in 1934, he moved to London in 1953 and studied art for several years. Visiting the Tate Gallery (which is now home to Tate Britain), he was drawn to British Romantic painters like Constable and Turner.

When I told Bowling a quote from Mark Rothko, whose gold and lilac composition “Untitled” hangs alongside Turner’s late works at Tate these days — “This man Turner, he learned a lot from me” — Bowling wasn’t surprised. “I was always aware of the abstract elements of landscape painting, figurative painting, whether it was Titian or Turner,” he said.



A sculpture by the British artist Andrew Gormley near the Turner Contemporary exhibition space in Margate, England, is visible at low tide.



The coastal path between Margate and Broadstairs. Turner painted sea views from both towns.

Turner, he added, “captured the emotional intensity of whatever it was — you know: the sea, the storm, sunset, whatever — because he *felt it*.”

“The thing still excites me most about Turner today is his engagement with the material,” Bowling said. “The paint is all churned up, being hauled or spread across the canvas, taking risks.”

Though many regions of Britain lay claim to the itinerant Turner, it is perhaps Margate — a seaside town roughly 60 miles southeast of London — that held the most emotional significance for the artist. From age 11, he was sent there to live with his uncle after his mother’s mental health deteriorated. (She was admitted to St. Luke’s Hospital for Lunatics in 1799.)

He returned to Margate throughout his life, at first to court his young love Elisabeth White, who married another man and then died young; and later, from 1827-47, when he lived at the guesthouse of Booth, who became his companion after her husband’s death in 1833. Their home together is long gone, but on the site now stands the striking David Chipperfield-designed Turner Contemporary exhibition space, looking out to the North Sea.



At age 11, Turner was sent to Margate to live with his uncle.



“Waves Breaking on a Lee Shore at Margate (Study for ‘Rockets and Blue Lights’)” is on display at Turner Contemporary for the anniversary commemorations. Tom Jamieson for The New York Times



Turner Contemporary opened in 2011, in a building designed by the British architect David Chipperfield.

“Turner embodies a radical creative spirit, an attitude, a way of thinking about being in the world and the freedom to do things differently,” said Turner Contemporary’s director, Clarrie Wallis. That spirit, she added, guides its program of exhibitions, which are all free to enter and which bring contemporary art to one of Britain’s most economically deprived areas.

The artist painted over 100 coastal views from Margate, including the loose and wild “Waves Breaking on a Lee Shore at Margate (Study for ‘Rockets and Blue Lights’),” which is currently on display at Turner Contemporary for the

anniversary commemorations. It seems to have been painted from a position just east of the gallery, looking toward the town's curving pier, with its distinctive lighthouse.

When I walked east along the coast last month to retrace Turner's footsteps, I did it in record-breaking high temperatures. The wide water and skies continued, exposed and dramatic as the land curved around to the towns of Broadstairs and Ramsgate, whose sea views Turner also captured. It might have been the heat, but the skies, so vast that you feel you're stretching your eyes to take them in, really did seem, as Turner once said, "the loveliest in all Europe."

A Turner for everyone seems the most wonderful inheritance from an artist whose work reminds us to look at the world around us with truth, clarity and feeling — to record what we see for posterity, but also to make something new.

