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History of London in 11 Objects

How did Turner make use of the sublime in his art?

J.M.W. Turner was one of, if not the greatest British Romantic painter. He was a student of Joshua Reynolds at the Royal Academy and was trained in the neoclassical style. However, the Romantics were rule breakers that wanted nothing to do with the ordered and precise neoclassical style that came before it. The romantic style emphasizes the wild and raw characteristics of nature. In an essay written for the Tate, Sarah Monks states that what "J.M.W. Turner set about suggesting, to an extent which is unprecedented in the visual representation of water, what it might be to be beneath – beneath the horizon, beneath the water and beneath paint."¹

Turner was born in 1775 in London to a working-class family. His father was a barber and had a shop in Covent Garden where they lived and worked. As a reserved person, Turner was only really open with his father and truly trusted him. Being so close to the Royal Academy, Turner's father was the barber to many of the artists at the Royal Academy. As a proud father, he showed off the amazing watercolors that his son was painting when he was around nine years old, like *St. Johns Church Margate* painted in 1784, and even sold a few paintings. The clients at the barber shop suggested that William go to the Academy and he found himself studying there by the time he was 14 years old. The traditions of the Academy were influential on the young Turner and he excelled very quickly, exhibiting annually by the time he was 16 years old.

London at the time, was in the middle of its industrial revolution. The construction of trains, canals, and ships filled the city with new and interesting architectural features that Turner took much inspiration from. Turner was a classically trained artist, winning awards such as *The Greater Silver Palette* in 1793, a landscape drawing competition². He frequently drew architecture and landscapes and after 1800 his style started to shift into the Romantic paintings with loose brushstrokes that he is known for.

Poets like William Blake, William Wordsworth, and many others created works that emphasize the use of the sublime. The sublime being something that is different from the ordered aspects of the beautiful and created a feeling of awe, terror, and danger. In 1757, an Irish statesman, philosopher, and member of Parliament named Edmund Burke wrote *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. To Burke, fear and pain was a stronger sensation than pleasure. In his comparison of the beautiful and the sublime, he states "the passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully is astonishment, an

¹ Monks, Sarah. "Suffer a Sea-Change': Turner, Painting, Drowning." Tate. Tate, January 1, 2013. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/sarah-monks-suffer-a-sea-change-turner-painting-drowning-r1136832>.

² Dominiczak, Marek H. "On storms, ships, and railways. J.M.W. Turner." *Clinical Chemistry* 58, no. 4 (2012): 800+. *Gale OneFile: Health and Medicine*.

astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror”³. A truly sublime sensation is being overwhelmed to the point of being frozen in time.

Nothing was more sublime to the Romantics than the raw power of nature and they created artworks that pushed the boundaries created by neoclassical style. One of Turner’s earliest works that was shown at the Royal Academy in 1796 was *Fishermen at Sea*. The work is dark and rich with a bright full moon breaking through the clouds and miraculously creating “two pools of reflected moonlight rather than one”⁴. Turner masterfully shown the effects of the moonlight turning the water into a glass reflection and how it shines through the water that is churning all around the boat in the foreground. Exhibition critics saw the painting as “a picture about how things ‘dimly seen through the gloom of the night’ are indistinct and almost undeterminable”⁵ and was able to “transcend the restrictions of literal meaning and cater immediately to it’s viewers’ capacity for aesthetic responsiveness”⁶. This painting was the start of Turner finding his own style, slowly manipulating landscapes to express the fear and terror of the sublime.

After 1800, Turner started to produce works such as *Snow Storm – Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps* (1812) and *The Field of Waterloo* (1818) that soon became regarded as unfinished paintings. With his training and sheer artistic talent, Turner could have painted any landscape to portray exactly what already exists in the world, but he would have never found true success as an artist. His landscapes are overwhelming to his small figures struggling their way through them. In *Snow Storm – Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps*, the viewer is looking at the very end of the military parade where the straggling cooks, children, and servants are being killed by a wild tribe of Alpine mountain men called the Banditti. The figure of Hannibal so far off in the distance that his elephant can only barely be seen on the horizon is so separated from the death that is happening miles behind him. Hannibal had his own agenda in battling the Romans for his name to become part of history that he can keep going without a second thought of what might happen along the way, and the poor souls fighting for their lives from the Alpine mountain men are doing it in vain. The cloud that is coming down on them like a tsunami is brining down death and destruction regardless of social standing. Burke wrote in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, “Having considered terror as producing an unnatural tension and certain violent emotions of the nerves; it easily follows, from what we have just said, that whatever is fitted to produce such a tension, must be productive of a passion similar to terror, and consequently must be a source of the sublime, though it should have no idea of danger connected with it”⁷. The snow storm that is forming is going to happen regardless if Hannibal and his men are there or not. The figures seem to have no idea of the impending doom that is forming above them, they are already in their version of hell on earth, and to them, it could not get much worse than being killed by Banditti. Turner decided to paint this scene so differently from the triumphant paintings that have come

³ Burke, Edmund, and James T. Boulton. *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful*. Vol. 2nd ed. Routledge Classics. London: Routledge, 2008.

⁴ Monks, Sarah. “Suffer a Sea-Change’: Turner, Painting, Drowning.” Tate. Tate, January 1, 2013.

⁵ Monks, Sarah. “Suffer a Sea-Change’: Turner, Painting, Drowning.” Tate. Tate, January 1, 2013.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Burke, Boulton, 132

before. Hannibal is nowhere to be seen, and on top of the unfortunate death that is occurring, what is curling down to block the sun is much more terrifying.

Turner's use of the sublime throughout his life comes through in his use of water. The ocean is vast and relentless and when there is a ship being cast about in the midst of a storm, its fate is sealed. Such a ship can be found in *The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying)* (1840). The sunset looks like the horizon is on fire, the ship can be seen through mist and shadow on the left side of the painting and strewn through the water can be seen the shackled arms and hands of slaves that have been thrown overboard by the captain in the storm so he will be able to get insurance money on the property that was lost during the storm. The paint is thick on the canvas illuminating the horror of what just occurred. At first glance, the painting is stunning. The sunset is blinding and the ship only barely visible with the tumultuous waves in the foreground. When actually looking at the water, suddenly the horror comes to the surface. Not just the bodies drowning in the waves, but the realization of the true evil that mankind can inflict on itself. The first owner of the painting was John Ruskin, an established English art critic, he wrote about the painting describing the "purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the midst of the night, which gathers cold and low, advancing like the shadow of death upon the guilty ship, as it labors amidst the lightning of the sea, its thin masts written upon the sky in lines of blood"⁸. Like the destruction in *Snow Storm – Hannibal and his army Crossing the Alps*, the power of the storm is going to overcome all who encounter it.

Turner is a master of the sublime. His paintings evoke true reactions when viewed and studied because of the "delightful horror"⁹ that is found in the landscapes. Each scene has power and it is not surprising that his master piece has become a symbol of pride and awe for so many in Britain. The *Fighting Temeraire* (1839) is the true essence of stoic grace. Although Turner took some artistic liberties in the way this scene actually occurred, something that is not new to Turner's style, the story of the ship is conveyed in a truly Turner way. The sun is close to the horizon and splashes color across the sky and reflects onto the Thames, the ship looks so elegant behind the black tug boat that belches smoke. It was a real event to see one of the last wooden naval ships being brought to its final destination and London was proud of the battles the ship had seen and how it had contributed to the formation of the Empire. Although this painting does not have an underlying sense of dread, Turner's ability to express power and awe is unmatched by any other.

⁸ Landay, Lori, and Beth Harris. "Turner, Slave Ship (Video)." Khan Academy. Khan Academy. Accessed April 23, 2020.

⁹ Burke, Edmund, and James T. Boulton. *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful*. Vol. 2nd ed. Routledge Classics. London: Routledge, 2008.

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How did Damien Hirst disrupt the London art world in the 1980s and 90s?

What Damien Hirst did to the London art world was more than just create art that will be remembered for years to come. He made a splash with his concepts, the reactions that his artwork had, and the amount of money people would pay for items that some wouldn't even consider art.

Hirst was born in Leeds in 1965. From a young age he always wanted to be a painter but was overwhelmed by the infinite possibilities of what he could paint¹⁰. He was quite close to his grandmother and the two of them discussed death frequently, it was when Hirst was around age seven that he realized that death was inevitable, no matter what you did with your life. This idea of death fascinated Hirst and he would draw from the bodies in the morgue in Leeds and this work with animals has created some strong reactions. When he moved to London, he worked as a builder until he realized that Goldsmiths was the only place for him to create art that he himself couldn't quite confine into a category. It was at Goldsmiths that he started to really understand what conceptual art is and that he could express an idea through an object, and the idea is the art.

During his second year at Goldsmiths, he decided to put on a show called Freeze in an unused port authority building. This show was a turning point for him because students had never exhibited their own art in such a way that made such a splash, and it didn't hurt that many of his fellow students have now become world renowned artists themselves. The show did so well that Hirst became known as the 'guy who organized Freeze', not one of the artists that had shown in it as well. In the show, he had shown an installation of cardboard boxes painted different colors and looking back, Hirst thought that he could produce something better. As a painter, Damien wasn't the most technically skilled artist and he was not able to produce what he really wanted to. What made his paintings interesting was his use of color, so he decided to only use colors and he created the spot paintings that for him were "pinning down the joy of color"¹¹. His first usage of spots was in 1986 and it was an idea that allowed him to create an infinite combination of colors. At the time, minimalism was rising to the forefront and there were many series of identical artworks done in a variety of colors. These spots can now be bought as a line of wallpaper, making the walls of homes around the world a work of art by Damien Hirst. This is part of his conceptual idea of art. If Hirst originated and designed the pattern, it doesn't matter who fabricates it or where it is. It is a Hirst artwork.

One of Hirst's first big successes was his series of medicine cabinets. He thought initially that for him to present this idea of just a cabinet full of medicine, that he needed to manipulate it in some way to make it his. But after seeing works like Jeff Koons's *Wet/Dry Double-decker*, he realized that that wasn't the case. He created a cabinet called *Sinner*, a kind of portrait of his grandmother done with the empty medicine bottles he had asked her to leave to him when she died. The medicines are arranged neatly and it's like a bit of shelving from a pharmacy has mistakenly found itself in a gallery space. The piece is an interesting version of a portrait because it does not capture the visual parts of his grandmother. It captures all of the things that she needed towards the end of

¹⁰ *Damien Hirst: Thoughts, Work, Life (2012) - Damien Hirst. Damien Hirst: Thoughts, Work, Life (2012) - Damien Hirst, 2012.* <http://damienhirst.com/video/2012/thoughts-work-life>.

¹¹ Damien Hirst cited in Damien Hirst and Gordon Burn, 'On the Way to Work', (Faber and Faber, 2001), 119

her life to keep her alive while she was battling lung cancer. There is so much to learn from the things that people keep and use in their lives. Medication is not the same as an object that is bought with a pleasant connotation so it resembles a different part of what she was going through in her life. Hirst continued to create *Medicine Cabinet* series and in 1996-97, he created a series of four cabinets called *The Sex Pistols* after his first series of cabinets, a total of twelve, were all named after the tracks on the album 'Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols' from 1977¹². This idea of minimalist and aesthetically pleasing arrangements is a commentary on the death that is such a normal part of daily life. Hirst said about the cabinets that, "you can only cure people for so long and then they're going to die anyway. You can't arrest decay, but these medicine cabinets suggest you can"¹³.

Hirst's commentary on death and how society, especially throughout the United Kingdom, like to sweep death under the rug as something that is inevitable and happens every day but is not spoken about. In 1993, Hirst embarked on the work that would win him the Turner Prize in 1995, *Mother and Child (Divided)*. This piece is a cow and a calf bisected and preserved in four glass tanks of formaldehyde. Walking into a gallery space it is shocking to see the carefully severed halves of a cow and calf, as well as wrapping one's head around the actuality that these farm animals are inside a gallery space, immersed in liquid, and quite obviously dead. The mother and child are a tragic sight, it is shocking to see them cut open, sad to see them dead, and even more sad that they will be in this separated state forever. For Hirst, it addresses many things. When talking about *Mother and Child (Divided)*, he said "in a way, you understand more about living people by dealing with dead people. It's sad but you feel more...my cows cut up in formaldehyde have more personality than any cows walking about in fields"¹⁴.

Hirst realized that preserved animals in minimalist glass tanks create reactions and feelings that make the viewer contemplate the fragility of life. In 1991, the work that has become one of the most iconic works of contemporary art, was exhibited in The Saatchi Gallery's YBA 1. This work was Hirst's way of explaining death to himself, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* is a 13-foot tiger shark preserved in three tanks of formaldehyde. The jaws of the shark are wide open, and when looking at the shark head on it is the view one would see just before death by tiger shark. The shark in formaldehyde is a little bit different from a cow or a bird that aren't typically found submerged in liquid. The blue around the tiger shark fools the eye into thinking that at any second the shark could thrash and shatter the glass holding it in place. Hirst wanted to introduce a shark into the exhibition, but not just a painting or image of a shark. He wanted it to be "real enough to frighten you"¹⁵. The shark is frightening even in pictures and truly conveys the feeling of being really scared, even though it really is physically impossible for the shark to ever come back to life. It feels like there is only a thin wall of glass between the viewer and death. This

¹² Science Ltd. "Damien Hirst." *The Sex Pistols* - Damien Hirst, 2017. <http://www.damienhirst.com/the-sex-pistols>.

¹³ Science Ltd. "Damien Hirst." *The Sex Pistols* - Damien Hirst, 2017. <http://www.damienhirst.com/the-sex-pistols>.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Quoted in 'The Truth About Art' (ZCZ Films, Channel 4, 1998); , 'I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now' (Booth-Clibborn Editions; Reduced edition, 2005), 32; Damien Hirst and Gordon Burn, 'On the Way to Work' (Faber and Faber, 2001), 19

became a staple piece in a series called Natural History that Hirst started in 1993 with a piece called Alone Yet Together that consisted of a group of preserved fish all facing the same direction. The simplicity of a dead animal can convey a lot when presented in the right way. Although bizarre at first, the tanks of dead animals that make up Hirst's Natural History series is more than just an exhibition of animals for educational purposes. These animals are each a "thing to describe a feeling"¹⁶.

Damien Hirst's art has become a topic for discussion because he has such success with artworks that so many people have a hard time seeing as art. Early in his career, the money that he was making from his art allowed him to continue to make bigger and more daring projects. Soon enough, money was never a hindrance for Hirst and his commentary on delaying decay and "pinning down the joy of color" are sold for millions of dollars. For Hirst, "art's about life and it can't really be about anything else...there isn't anything else". But for so many, his art is really about death and how close the two are related. Hirst's conceptual ideas range from spots to sharks to diamond studded skulls and all of the living and dead things that fall in between. He focused his art in creating things that describe feelings and related his personal thoughts and fears to viewers around the world that live among the death every day.

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¹⁶ Science Ltd. "Damien Hirst." Read More - Damien Hirst, 2017. <http://damienhirst.com/biography/damien-hirst>.