

J.M.W. Turner: Quest for the Sublime

Educator Resource Guide

February 20–May 31, 2020



J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851). *Grenoble from the River Drac with Mont Blanc in the Distance*, ca. 1802. Oil on canvas, 14 1/4 x 25 1/4 in. Tate: Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856. Photo © Tate, 2019

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Tennessee Academic Standards

Fine Arts Standards

By analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating artworks, students fulfill the respond domain of the Tennessee Fine Art Standards. Synthesizing information and contextualizing the works applies to the connect domain.

Writing Standards

Writing activities based on artworks and themes presented in this exhibition may connect to Tennessee writing standards.

W.TTP.2 Cornerstone: Write informative/explanatory texts to analyze, synthesize, and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection and organization of content.

W.TTP.3 Cornerstone: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

3rd Grade Science Standards

3.ESS2: Earth's Systems

- 1) Explain the cycle of water on Earth.
- 2) Associate major cloud types (cumulus, cumulonimbus, cirrus, stratus, nimbostratus) with weather conditions.

4th Grade Science Standards

4.PS4: Waves and their Application in Technologies for Information Transfer

- 2) Describe how the colors of available light sources and the bending of light waves determine what we see.

4.ESS3: Earth and Human Activity

- 6) Explain how relationships between the movement and interactions of air masses, high and low pressure systems, and frontal boundaries result in weather conditions and severe storms.

Social Studies Standards

World History

W.05 Identify the major causes of the French Revolution, including the impact of:

- The American Revolution
- Enlightenment political thought
- Conflicting social classes
- Government corruption and weakness
- Economic factors

W.06 Summarize the major events of the French Revolution (e.g., storming of the Bastille, execution of Louis XVI, reign of terror), and trace the evolution of France's government from constitutional monarchy to democratic despotism to the Napoleonic Empire.

W.07 Analyze the geographic, political, and social factors that contributed to the rise and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte's empire.

W.08 Identify how the ideas of the Enlightenment inspired Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence, and compare the American Revolution with the French Revolution.

W.09 Explain the effects of the French Revolution on Europe and the world, including the influence of: the Napoleonic Code, Concert of Europe, and Haitian Revolution.

W.11 Explain the geographic and economic reasons why the Industrial Revolution began in England, including: natural resources, entrepreneurship, labor, and access to capital.

W.12 Analyze how geographic and cultural features were an advantage or disadvantage to the diffusion of the Industrial Revolution.

Introduction to *J.M.W. Turner: Quest for the Sublime*

One of England's greatest artists, Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) was a leading figure in the **Romantic movement** of the late 18th- through mid-19th centuries, which arose in response to the Enlightenment emphasis on reason over emotion. For Turner, psychological expression and the liberation of the imagination were of paramount importance. He achieved these goals by portraying extreme contrasts of intense light and gloomy clouds, dramatic topographies, and energetic brush-strokes.

The oil paintings and watercolors in this exhibition span Turner's career, from the 1790s to the 1840s. Storm and flood are shown as compelling forces unto themselves, while also serving as settings for historical and modern dramas. Mountains and sea show the world in a state of flux: the slow creep of glaciers in the Alps, the sudden fall of an avalanche, the swell and heave of the ocean. Human transition is captured as well, with images of steamships and other suggestions of industry heralding the ascendant machine age. Late in his life, Turner painted elemental images of sea and sky, which appear nearly abstract.

The Sublime

As industrialization progressed, people gradually began to develop a longing for untouched nature. This culminated in the concept of the **Sublime**: in heated living-rooms, far removed from the actual threats of nature, viewers could delight in the pleasant shiver to be experienced when looking at a painting of a stormy sea, a steep cliff, or a narrow ravine. This interest in the Sublime—in the power of natural forces—is catered to by Turner in his landscape paintings. The concept of the Sublime was central to Romanticism.

Harnessing Nature: Steam Power

The onset of steam power in the 1820s allowed faster travel by steamship and train, technology that was important to the ever-itinerant Turner. At the same time, coal-burning industries contaminated the atmosphere, leading Turner's admirer, the critic John Ruskin, to write gloomily of the "storm cloud of the nineteenth century," referring to industrial pollution and environmental damage. To some observers, the smoky, smog-bound cities of Britain suggested a coming apocalypse—a technological Sublime to which Turner's luminous views of a less industrialized country-side offered a welcome respite. Yet Turner himself seems to have been fascinated rather than repelled by such developments as trains, factories, and steamships. He showed a world being remade by human endeavor.

Discussion questions:

- Why was the Sublime important to people during this time of industrial growth?
- The growth of industrialization became known as the **Industrial Revolution**. Name some of its benefits and drawbacks.
- What are similarities and differences between our current age of technology and the industrialization that took place during the 18th and 19th centuries? Think about how individuals' lives have been impacted during both time periods.

Fishermen at Sea, exhibited 1796



Figure 1
J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851). *Fishermen at Sea*,
exhibited 1796. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 1/8 in.
Tate: Purchased 1972. Photo © Tate, 2019

A child prodigy, Turner entered the **Royal Academy** Schools in 1789, aged fourteen, and exhibited his first watercolor, a London scene, in 1790. In 1802 he became, at twenty-six, the youngest artist yet to have the high honor of being elected a full Academician. Traditionally, art academies insisted on a clear hierarchy of the genres: history painting ranked uppermost, and still life was least important. In between were portrait painting and the depiction of landscapes. With his emphasis on combining landscape painting with history painting, Turner tried to do nothing less than to rewrite the way art was categorized and evaluated.

The first oil painting Turner exhibited at the Royal Academy, showing fishing boats riding a gentle swell off the south coast of England, follows the tradition of Philip James de Loutherbourg, Horace Vernet, and Joseph Wright of Derby, painters who often created nocturnal scenes, which were considered to be among the most sublime subject matter. The potent moonlight contrasts with the delicate vulnerability of the flickering lantern, emphasizing nature's power over humanity. The jagged silhouettes on the left are the treacherous rocks called "The Needles" off the Isle of Wight. Painted during a time of war between France and Britain, when the coastline was a defensive front and fishermen were prey to the press gangs that roamed the coast conscripting men for the Royal Navy, the painting may reflect vulnerability not just toward nature but to the vast sweep of human affairs.

Discussion questions:

- Describe the setting, and talk about what is taking place in this painting.
- How does this painting make you feel? Why?
- How does Turner use light to focus on the most important parts of the painting?

Grenoble from the River Drac with Mont Blanc in the Distance,
ca. 1802



Figure 2
J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851). *Grenoble from the River Drac with Mont Blanc in the Distance*, ca. 1802. Oil on canvas, 14 1/4 x 25 1/4 in. Tate: Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856. Photo © Tate, 2019

Since the Renaissance, the so-called Grand Tour had become established as an educational trip across the Alps to the South to be taken by young artists and aristocrats. At that time, the Alps were considered merely a tedious hindrance on the way to Italy. It was only with the emergence of Romanticism that tourists became enthusiastic about the mountains themselves. Traveling freely in Europe, however, was severely restricted by the turmoil of wars after the **French Revolution** and **Napoleon's** ascent to power. As a result, Turner could satisfy his curiosity about mountains only on trips to Wales and Scotland until the brief **Peace of Amiens** in 1802, when Turner, like thousands of other Britons, traveled to the continent—and, for the first time, to Switzerland.

This oil sketch of Grenoble in France, with Mont St. Eynard and the snow-capped Mont Blanc in the distance, was painted after Turner's 1802 tour, while his recollection of the landscape was fresh. The tour yielded over a hundred drawings of Grenoble and surrounding mountains. In his Grenoble sketchbook, Turner made vigorous drawings in pencil and white and black chalk on tinted brown paper—opaque media that allowed him to work with dramatic light and dark tones—in preparation for finished oil paintings.

According to Wikipedia, Mont Blanc “is the highest mountain in the Alps and the highest in Europe west of the Caucasus peaks of Russia and Georgia. It rises 4,808 m[eters] (15, 744 feet) above sea level and is ranked 11th in the world in topographic prominence.”

Discussion questions:

- Look closely at *Grenoble from the River Drac with Mont Blanc in the Distance* and identify the colors, textures, and shapes that you see.
- Identify the foreground, middle, and background of the painting. How has the artist used color to give the painting a sense of depth?
- Why was travel in Europe restricted during this time? How did restricted travel impact Turner and others?



Figure 3
J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851). *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, exhibited 1842. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in. Tate: Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856. Photo © Tate, 2019

Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth, exhibited 1842

This work captures the unbridled fury of a winter storm, in which details are barely visible through the dense swirl of snow. One of Turner's most profound explorations of the fearsome Sublime, the painting emphasizes humanity's struggle to cope with a violent and chaotic world. The curves of the wind and raging sea merge together to envelop the tilting ship, seen at the center of the vortex through an open circle of light.

It is famously said that Turner conceived this image while lashed to the mast of a ship during an actual storm at sea. This is likely untrue, but the story has endured as a way of demonstrating Turner's full-blooded engagement with the world around him.

Discussion questions:

- This painting is meant to represent "humanity's struggle to cope with a violent and chaotic world." What artistic choices did Turner make to express this idea?
- Why would Turner make up a story about conceiving of this painting while being tied to the mast of a ship? Would you think differently about the artist or the painting if that story were true? Why?



Figure 4
J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851). *The Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons*, exhibited 1810. Oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 47 1/4 in. Tate: Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856. Photo © Tate, 2019

The Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons, exhibited 1810

Many of Turner's landscapes can be viewed as natural evocations of human drama and history. Earlier scenes of Switzerland and Italy are often somber or stormy in mood and coloring, such as in this work, reflecting a region that was as unstable politically as it was in its geology and climate. In later works, Turner communicates a sense of rapture and harmony that may be related to the return of peace to Europe after the Napoleonic Wars.

Dramatic Alpine scenes were a stock feature of Sublime landscape. Though Turner had visited the Alps in 1802, there is no evidence that he went to the area represented in this picture or that he actually witnessed an avalanche. Instead, the stimulus for this scene may have been reports of an avalanche that occurred at Selva in the Grisons in December 1808, killing twenty-five people. Instead of providing reportage, Turner creates an almost abstract scene of overwhelming elemental force.

Discussion questions:

- The subjects chosen for many of his paintings emphasized the power of nature. How has Turner done so in this painting?
- Turner probably created this painting based on reports of an avalanche rather than witnessing such an event firsthand. How is painting from imagination different from painting from direct observation?



Figure 5

J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851). *The Blue Rigi, Sunrise*, 1842. Watercolor on paper, 11 3/4 x 17 3/4 in. Tate: Purchased with assistance from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, the Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation and including generous support from David and Susan Gradel, and from other members of the public through the Save the Blue Rigi appeal), Tate Members and other donors 2007. Photo © Tate, 2019

The Blue Rigi, Sunrise, 1842

As he explored sublime scenery during all his European tours, Turner often made return trips to favorite places, producing sketches and studies under different conditions or times of day, an approach taken by the Impressionists later in the 19th century. Records of topography and natural history, these views also provide vivid interpretations of light, color, and atmosphere in transition.

Discussion questions:

- Describe this landscape. What colors do you see? Do you see different shades of the same color?
- How does Turner use paint to show the sun and sunlight?



Figure 6
J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851). *Venice, the Bridge of Sighs*, exhibited 1840. Oil on canvas, 27 x 36 in. Tate: Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856. Photo © Tate, 2019

Venice, the Bridge of Sighs, exhibited 1840

Turner made at least three trips to the city of Venice—one in 1819, another in 1833, and a final trip in 1840. Like other artistic chroniclers, Turner loved the floating city's distinctive architecture and atmosphere. In both finished works and studies, his aqueous images of Venice are often considered to be among his most poetic, capturing the luminous majesty and alluring decay that characterized this once great mercantile power. From famous sites such as the **Doge's Palace**, the **Basilica of San Marco**, and the **Bridge of Sighs** to intimate views of the canals crisscrossing the city, these works draw the visitor deeper into the city's complex and shifting moods.

As a young artist, Turner had made money as an architectural draftsman, and at age thirty-one he was named Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy. This background is evident in this carefully delineated depiction of the Bridge of Sighs, one of the most famous landmarks in Venice, which connects the Doge's Palace on the left with the prisons of the Palazzo dei Prigioni to the right. When Turner exhibited the painting in 1840, he accompanied it with lines based on Byron's poem "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage":

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

Indeed, it was Byron who allegedly coined the name of the bridge, deriving its title from the mournful image of convicts taking their last glimpse of the city before being led down to the darkness of their cells.

Discussion questions:

- How is this painting different from the others highlighted in this guide?
- How would you describe Venice based on Turner's painting?

Activities

VISUAL ART

Expressive Painting

Have students look closely at *The Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons* and *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, paying particular attention to the expressive application of paint and the selection of colors. Discuss Turner's artistic decisions. How did his approach to painting and his choice of color and composition communicate the desired message?

Then, give students watercolor or tempera paints, large sheets of paper or canvas, and nontraditional paint tools such as sponges, texture tools, toothbrushes, combs, or plasticware (anything other than paintbrushes). Ask students to create expressive paintings that include a variety of colors and textures, applying the paint in ways that effectively express a message. Finally, have students give their completed works titles that convey their ideas.

Landscape Collage

Using *Grenoble from the River Drac with Mont Blanc in the Distance* as inspiration, students will produce a landscape collage using cut or torn paper in a variety of colors. Talk about how artists create a sense of depth or distance with foreground, middle ground, and background.

- The foreground of a landscape is usually closer to the bottom of the composition. Because this part of the scene is closest to the viewer, the objects are rendered in greater detail and appear larger, and the colors are brighter.
- The middle ground is the space between the foreground and the background.
- The background of a scene is the farthest away. Because items in the background are meant to appear more distant, they are much smaller in size, duller in color, and contain less detail.

Invite students to select warm colors, cool colors, or a combination of both. They should consider which shapes they want to tear or cut, and how the pieces will overlap to form their landscapes. When they finish, have each student come up with a title that properly conveys the setting.

WRITING

Narrative Writing

Have students picture themselves in the environment portrayed in *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, and ask them to write about their imagined experiences, using these prompts:

- How would you feel mentally, physically, and emotionally?
- What smells would you sense in the air?
- What sounds would you hear?
- What would you explore while you are there?

SCIENCE

Turner was aware of the science relating to the perception of nature. He knew of advances in the understanding of clouds, color, and light as he developed his compositions. When he painted landscapes, he observed natural forces at work.

Clouds

Turner was influenced by the work of Luke Howard (1772–1864), a scientist who spent some of his free time documenting clouds and weather conditions. Clouds were rarely officially classified by type until 1802 when, in an essay, Howard identified three main categories of clouds—**cumulus**, **stratus**, and **cirrus**.

Describe these primary cloud types to students:

- **Cirrus** clouds are generally characterized by thin, wispy strands. They can form at any altitude between 16,500 feet and 45,000 feet.
- **Cumulus** clouds have flat bases and are often described as “fluffy” in appearance. Cumulus clouds are low-level clouds, forming at generally less than 7,000 feet in altitude.
- **Stratus** clouds are low-level clouds characterized by horizontal layering with a uniform base.

Ask the students to look at the paintings in this guide that show clouds, and to identify the types of clouds in each painting. Set aside a few minutes each day for one to two weeks for students to stand at a window or go outside with sketchbooks and pencils, to observe and draw clouds in the sky. They should include notes with their sketches that identify the clouds and what weather patterns they would look for based on the clouds.

Light and Color

J.M.W. Turner was familiar with the work of the noted astronomer William Herschel (1738–1822), who pioneered observation of light waves and the sun's surface. It is believed that Turner's method of painting the sun was directly influenced by Herschel's findings.

Turner frequently painted the sky at different times of day. Explore the following concepts with your class and consider how they relate to Turner's work:

Light waves and the science of color

- **Additive color** refers to light and the color spectrum and means that all colors combine to make white. The light from the sun appears white, but it is really made up of all the colors of the spectrum (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet). Additive primaries are red, green, and blue.
- Light energy travels in waves, and different waves travel at different lengths. For example, red light waves are longer than blue light waves.
- **Subtractive color** mixing means that color pigments such as paints show color by absorbing or subtracting certain parts of the spectrum and reflecting or transmitting the parts that we see. For instance, if we see red paint, it is absorbing or subtracting all colors except red, which is being reflected. Colors also get darker as they are mixed, becoming black when all three primaries—magenta, yellow, and cyan—are mixed together.

Why do we often see a blue sky during the day?

- Sunlight reaches Earth's atmosphere and is scattered in all directions by all the gases and particles in the air. Blue light is scattered more than the other colors because it travels as shorter waves. This is why we see a blue sky most of the time.
- Visit NASA's Space Place (spaceplace.nasa.gov/blue-sky/en/) to study this topic further.

After talking with your class about the science of light and color, pass out white paper and markers. Direct students to use at least three different marker colors to draw landscape landscapes on the paper.

Then, hand out colored cellophane or premade color filters. Ask students to place different pieces of cellophane or filters over their drawings, one at a time. As students look through different color filters, have them note how the landscapes change as some colors become invisible.

Sources for this section:

Mark Brown. "Turner 'used science to paint the sun.'" *Guardian*, November 13, 2011, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com)

Alison Meier. "How the Naming of Clouds Changed the Skies of Art." *Hyperallergic*, January 7, 2016. hyperallergic.com

Cloud definitions adapted from Wikipedia.

Glossary

Definitions taken or adapted from the sources listed in parentheses.

Basilica of San Marco	A church in Venice originally founded in 829 to house and honor the remains of St. Mark. (britannica.com/topic/San-Marco-Basilica)
Bridge of Sighs	A bridge in Venice, Italy, built around 1600 by the architect Antonio Contino, spanning the narrow canal between the Doge's Palace and the prisons. The enclosed passageway was so called from the "sighs" of the prisoners who passed over it. (britannica.com/topic/Bridge-of-Sighs)
Doge's Palace	The official residence of the doge, the elected leader of the Venetian republic. (britannica.com/topic/Doges-Palace)
Enlightenment	A European intellectual movement of the 17th and 18th centuries in which ideas concerning God, reason, nature, and humanity were synthesized into a worldview that gained wide assent in the West and instigated revolutionary developments in art, philosophy, and politics. Central to Enlightenment thought were the use and celebration of reason, the power by which humans understand the universe and improve their own condition. (britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history)
French Revolution	A period of major social upheaval between 1787 and 1799. It sought to change the relationship between France's rulers and those they governed and to redefine the nature of political power, in a back-and-forth process between revolutionary and reactionary forces. (britannica.com/event/French-Revolution)
Industrial Revolution	In modern history, the process of change from an agrarian and handicraft economy to one dominated by industry and machine manufacturing. This shift began in Britain in the 18th century and from there spread to other parts of the world. (britannica.com/event/Industrial-Revolution)
Napoleon	A French military general and statesman. Napoleon played a key role in the French Revolution, served as first consul of France (1799–1804), and ruled as the first emperor of France (1804–14/15). Today Napoleon is widely considered one of the greatest military generals in history. (britannica.com/biography/Napoleon-I)
Peace of Amiens	An agreement signed in Amiens, France, by Britain, France, Spain, and the Batavian Republic (the Netherlands), achieving peace in Europe for 14 months during the Napoleonic Wars. (britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Amiens-1802)

Romantic movement

An attitude or intellectual orientation that characterized many works of literature, painting, music, architecture, criticism, and historiography in Western civilization over a period from the late 18th to the mid-19th century. Romanticism can be seen as a rejection of the precepts of order, calm, harmony, balance, idealization, and rationality that typified Classicism in general and late 18th-century Neoclassicism in particular. It was also to some extent a reaction against the Enlightenment and against 18th-century rationalism and physical materialism in general. (britannica.com/art/Romanticism)

Royal Academy

An art institution based in London. It was founded through a personal act of King George III on December 10, 1768, with a mission to promote the arts of design in Britain through education and exhibition.

Sublime

A theory developed by Edmund Burke in the mid-18th century, where he defined sublime art as art that refers to a greatness beyond all possibility of calculation, measurement, or imitation. (tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/sublime)

J.M.W. Turner: Quest for the Sublime was organized in cooperation with Tate.



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