

Turner: the master of the sea

[Kenneth Rosario](#)

January 23, 2017 00:26 IST



Tate Britain's curator discusses the UK's finest marine artist who paved the way for 20th century art

Known as the painter of light, J.M.W. Turner is regarded as one of the greatest masters of British watercolour landscape painting. As the artist's works evolved during his lifetime, his paintings became free and loose, with forms almost dissolving in light, especially in his latter work.

David Blayney Brown, the Manton Curator of British Art (1790-1850) at Tate Britain, London, with particular responsibility for the J.M.W. Turner collection, will speak at the 19th Vasant J. Sheth Memorial Lecture, looking at Turner's life-long love of the sea and practice as a marine artist.

The artist's marine paintings bore witness to sea battles, invasion threats, the rise of the empire, storms and shipwrecks, the horrors of the slave trade and deportation to the colonies.

At a time when marine artists were often former sailors, according to Brown, what distinguished Turner from the others was that he saw marine art as a branch of landscape, which depended on the sea and the sky. Later on in his career, Turner painted the sea or the coast without any ships whatsoever. Turner was not just a marine artist but also painted history and modern life. "So his marines are part of a bigger picture and they changed perceptions of marine art."

Brown discovered Turner's works as a young boy while looking through books at home and in the house of a school friend whose parents were artists. "I could see even then that he was special." He admired Turner's paintings for their colour, portrayal of history and abundance of drama.

Brown went on to study art history where a professor, who was a Turner specialist, took him under his wing.

Intepreting Turner

Having written and lectured widely on British art of the 18th and 19th centuries and associated with many exhibitions, Brown believes there are several interpretations of Turner still to be considered. Most recently, Brown was involved with showcases such as *Late Turner: Painting Set Free* shown in London, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Toronto, and *Artist and Empire: Facing Britain's Global Past* shown in London and Singapore. Every time he is involved with a Turner project, he finds himself challenging his assumptions and finding new angles. "Turner was such a complex artist that I don't think one can ever truly know him."

Turner's work has been viewed differently over the years, through various schools of philosophy and understanding. In the final phase of Turner's career — from 1835 to 1850 — his paintings became more vigorous, intense and liberated than ever before, which led to the artist often being referred to as the forerunner of modern art. But according to Brown, it became fashionable in the 1960s and 70s to see Turner in modernist terms. The impressionists and the mid-20th century abstract expressionists admired Turner.

Brown believes that there is more to the artist than just the modernist reading of his works. "I don't dismiss the modernist comparison. But I get worried when people think that was all that mattered about him, that whole swathes of his work can be forgotten and left buried in the past."

Brown is rather wary of retrospective interpretations. For the curator, it is more interesting to look at what made Turner modern in his lifetime, thereby creating a paradigm for the modern artist, than what today's modern artists have or have not taken from him.

While Turner's latter works were considered radical for his time, some of his earlier paintings like *The Battle of Trafalgar* (1824) have been criticised for historical inaccuracy.

Is it fair to judge an artist through the prism of facts? "Turner was more concerned with what he thought might be the essence of a subject than he was with its precise details." According to Brown, the artist was not always painting things he had seen; he had to imagine them. That said, for some of his most important pictures of actual historical events, Turner conducted substantial research and contacted people who had witnessed the events. "He tried to be accurate, but he was not pedantic or literal."

Tate Britain houses the largest collection of works by the artist, which are from the Turner Bequest. "Despite its name, it was not quite what Turner intended to leave to the British nation," says Brown. Turner had planned to leave 10 finished pictures, but his will was disputed by his

family. After going through the Court of Chancery a new settlement was made, whereby all the contents of his studio were passed on to the nation, which included not just the finished paintings but sketchbooks, drawings, watercolours and works in progress. “It is almost all at Tate nowadays, save for a group of pictures, including *The Fighting Temeraire*, that represent him at the National Gallery.”

As Brown looks forward to his lecture, he anticipates a varied reading of Turner by the Indian audience. “Obviously on those few occasions where Turner deals with issues of the empire or the colonial aspects of British power, there will be differences and sensitivities, although our viewpoints have actually probably moved much closer over time.”

Brown hopes to find common ground in Turner’s universal values rather than promote a British view.

The 19th Vasant J. Sheth Memorial Lecture by David Blayney Brown, 7 p.m., January 24, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Fort.