

# Out of Hours

## Art

### IN HIS ELEMENTS

#### Late Turner: Painting Set Free

*Tate Britain, London,  
until 25 January 2015*

JMW Turner was born in 1775 in Maiden Lane, near Covent Garden in London, where his father was a barber. His mother, always unpredictable, eventually went mad and died in a lunatic asylum. His father lived with him for many years, becoming not only his greatest admirer but also his assistant and business partner in his studio and gallery. His father died in 1829 and for the last decade or so of his life Turner lived with his long-term partner, Sophia Booth, in relative secrecy in a cottage in Chelsea.

This marvellous exhibition at Tate Britain surveys the paintings that Turner completed or exhibited during the period from 1835, when he was already 60, up to his death in 1851. It is quite remarkable that so many wonderful works, which are now part of the national DNA, were created during these last years of his life, when his health was beginning to decline.

The relatively homely introductory room at the Tate, with Turner's spectacles,

Chelsea palette, and the haunting, toothless death mask, along with the famous portrait of him on varnishing day at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition by William Parrott, does not prepare you for the astonishing masterpieces in store. In the Venice room, the stunning *Sun of Venice Going to Sea* and the imagined vista of San Benedetto leave you breathless, but wait until you encounter, in one corner of the next room, *Snowstorm – Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth*, *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* and *Rain, Steam, and Speed – the Great Western Railway*, one after another. It

made me go weak at the knees. An entire room, 'Squaring the Circle', is devoted to the



**JMW Turner, Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) — the Morning after the Deluge — Moses Writing the Book of Genesis 1843 . Tate. Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856.**

**JMW Turner, Rain, Steam, and Speed — The Great Western Railway 1844. © The National Gallery, London.**



remarkable circular studies of light, wind, water, and sky, including the extraordinary meditation on the origin of colour, inviting the viewer to choose between the optical theories of Goethe and Newton.

The genius of these late masterpieces is probably unsurpassed and unsurpassable. Turner made the historical timeless and universal, and transformed the merely dramatic into the cataclysmic. *Waves Breaking on a Lee Shore at Margate* does not simply depict, but becomes, the elemental forces of light, wind, and the ocean.

Mike Leigh's film *Mr Turner*, in which Timothy Spall is said to portray Turner as a 'corpulent penguin', will soon be on general release: two unmissable treats for the Autumn.

**Roger Jones,**

Editor, *BJGP*.

**E-mail: [roger.jones@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:roger.jones@kcl.ac.uk)**

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp14X681973