

Kimbell Art Museum

TURNER'S
Modern World

An Acoustiguide Tour

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501. INTRODUCTION and FALL OF THE RHINE AT SCHAFFHAUSEN
c. 1805–6, oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



ERIC LEE:

Hello, and welcome to *Turner's Modern World*. I'm Eric Lee, director of the Kimbell Art Museum.

Today, you'll have the opportunity to see powerful works by J. M. W. Turner, one of Britain's most significant artists and one of the greatest landscape painters of all time.

Turner lived in a period of dramatic change, as the industrial revolution, war, and political and social turbulence transformed Britain and Europe. Turner's art reflected these changes head-on, in all of their complexity. Here's George Shackelford, deputy director of the Kimbell Art Museum and organizing curator for this exhibition.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

I hope you'll come away from this exhibition understanding Turner as an artist really engaged with his time. With the people, the ideas, the politics, the events that happened in Turner's modern world.

ERIC LEE:

But let's begin with the painting you're looking at now, which shows a famous waterfall in the Swiss Alps.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

And in pictures like this one, he was able to express the power of nature. The painting has a lot of classic details. Big rocks, falling water, beautiful foliage, figures in the foreground. And even a kind of a clichéd or sentimental element, which is the rainbow that appears in the mist that emerges from the falling water.

ERIC LEE:

But look how Turner paints that crashing waterfall. He's laid the paint on thickly, with a palette knife.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

What he's really interested in doing is putting painting first, so that we really notice how it's being painted.

ERIC LEE:

As you'll see, that's one of the reasons why Turner is so renowned today.

Throughout this tour, you'll also hear from Amy Concannon, senior curator of historic British art at Tate Britain, where the show originated. We hope you enjoy the exhibition.

**502. ENGLAND: RICHMOND HILL,
ON THE PRINCE REGENT'S
BIRTHDAY**

1819, oil on canvas. Tate



NARRATOR:

Here's Tate Britain curator Amy Concannon.

AMY CONCANNON:

This is one of the most remarkable pictures in the exhibition. It's a huge painting, and it was the biggest picture that Turner had painted up to this point.

NARRATOR:

With this scene, Turner demonstrates his mastery of the techniques used by Old Master painters. His contemporaries would have recognized this composition as a classic one inspired by the Italian painter Claude Lorrain.

AMY CONCANNON:

And the signs of this are the framing of this composition using the trees. So we've got trees to the right-hand side and tall trees to the left-hand side, which narrow your focus. They point your gaze inwards to the very heart of the painting, so that you focus on that glittering river and you see it meandering away into the distance. And so then you marvel at Turner's ability to depict a very dramatic depth of space.

NARRATOR:

Londoners seeing the painting would have recognized this famous view from Richmond Hill. Today, it's the only view in England that is protected by an Act of Parliament.

AMY CONCANNON:

Extra importance comes in this picture through its royal connection, being a depiction of the Prince Regent's birthday celebrations.

NARRATOR:

That was a calculated move, because Turner was hoping that the Prince Regent might buy this picture. And he seems to have titled the painting with that scheme in mind. Here's curator George Shackelford.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

The title of this painting is *England: Richmond Hill on the Prince Regent's Birthday*. And I think it's significant that the title begins with the word "England."

NARRATOR:

Turner seems to be suggesting that this is what England is like: the green and pleasant land celebrated in contemporary poetry. But with the industrial revolution well underway, this picture showed only one side of a much more complicated reality.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

The atmosphere of the cities was horrible with soot and smoke everywhere. And in the middle of all of this beautiful land, a manufacturing class was coming up; a manufacturing class that would become Turner's great patrons.

503. CHICHESTER CANAL

1828, oil on canvas. Tate

AMY CONCANNON:

So we're looking here down Chichester Canal, which was a remarkable landscape in Turner's time because it was entirely new.

NARRATOR:

During this period, a network of canals was built throughout the English landscape in order to facilitate the movement of goods. Turner painted this picture for the Earl of Egremont, a friend and patron who invested in the Chichester Canal project.

**AMY CONCANNON:**

This is a picture that Turner painted to celebrate this gentleman's enlightened investment in the future of Britain. In new technologies, new ways of making Britain a productive country, a country that could stand on its own two feet economically. So although it looks like a very peaceful, gentle landscape, it actually delivers an important message about Britain as a country that was wealthy, and it was innovative, and it was doing very well in this period of time.

NARRATOR:

Turner has made sure that the scene is specific; that it's readily identifiable as Chichester.

AMY CONCANNON:

On the right of the painting you can see the spire of Chichester Cathedral, and that's nicely echoed in the masts of the ship going down the canal. And I think what's very clever here is that Turner has enveloped the canal in the landscape, the natural landscape, and the town nearby of Chichester, to suggest that this canal has always been there, it's a natural part of the landscape, the sun is setting, the trees are glowing. This is a beautiful landscape, but it's a productive landscape, too.

**504. PLOUGHING UP TURNIPS,
NEAR SLOUGH ('WINDSOR')**
1809, oil on canvas. Tate



NARRATOR:

On one level, this painting seems to be a study in how light falls across a landscape . . .

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

So that we see the distant background as a kind of hazy mist, and the foreground up close in sharp detail.

NARRATOR:

But Turner is up to much more than that. Here's curator George Shackelford.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

What the viewer would have understood in 1809 is that the painting is also about the way land is used.

In the background is Windsor Castle, the home of King George III, who was popularly known as Farmer George, because he was interested in progressive agriculture.

NARRATOR:

During King George's reign, new laws allowed wealthy landowners to enclose land that had previously been considered common property. Peasants who had made their own living off that land now had to work for the landowners.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

So the people in the foreground would have been understood as, in a way, the dispossessed. These are farm laborers, who are shown not necessarily as happy peasants, but in fact as real workers.

NARRATOR:

And it's no accident that Turner shows these workers ploughing up turnips. Before Turner's day, in the eighteenth century, turnips were grown as food for livestock. But during the early nineteenth century, they started to get promoted as a cheap food for people, too.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

At the center, the women are sorting the turnips. Men are engaged in repairing farm implements. And closest to us, at the right, are a couple of cows who are munching on the turnips.

In fact, what Turner is showing here is what we in modern times would call wealth inequality. The very, very big difference between the landowners, who were rich and powerful, symbolized by Windsor Castle in the background, and the people who worked the land. There was an enormous gap between these two classes of society, and that is the hidden message of this painting.

**505. THE BATTLE OF TRAFALGAR,
AS SEEN FROM THE MIZEN
STARBOARD SHROUDS OF
THE VICTORY**

1806, oil on canvas. Tate



GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

The Battle of Trafalgar is legendary.

NARRATOR:

The year was 1805. The setting? Trafalgar, off the coast of Spain. And Britain's hero of the hour? Admiral Nelson, who rammed his boat, the *Victory*, straight into the heart of the combined French and Spanish armadas.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

In Turner's painting, it's as if we are standing on the deck of the *Victory*. Look at the way, for instance, the rigging goes up out of the painting, over our heads, as if we're standing right in the middle of the battle. We can almost hear the cannons going off.

NARRATOR:

The Napoleonic Wars continued until 1815. But Nelson's defeat of the French and Spanish navies at Trafalgar was an important victory, ensuring that Britain would not be invaded.

Still, Nelson lost his life in the battle.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

At right, high on a mast of a French ship, we can even see the sniper who's taking a shot and killing Lord Nelson, who has fallen and is dying at the bottom of the mast at center left.

To tell the story, Turner makes everything happen at once. We see the sniper fire his weapon. We see Nelson already hit and dying. And we see the surrender. And all of these happened in sequence, but in Turner's picture, they're all happening at once.

NARRATOR:

So Turner took some liberties. But he also did his research. When Nelson's boat returned to England for repairs, Turner traveled to the coast so that he could interview survivors. He also got on board so that he could make drawings, and you can see some of those drawings nearby.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

He wanted to know as much as he possibly could about what really happened, so that he could create a painting that, while being an elaborate kind of fiction about the battle, was nonetheless profoundly true.

506. THE FIELD OF WATERLOO

1818, oil on canvas. Tate

AMY CONCANNON:

Turner was inspired to paint this picture by a competition that the government opened up for artists to depict the Battle of Waterloo, which had been decisively won by Britain, so they wanted artists to celebrate this moment.

NARRATOR:

Turner didn't end up submitting this painting to the competition. But if he had, it would have looked very different from the other entries.

**AMY CONCANNON:**

This is not a celebratory picture, and it's not a particularly patriotic British picture, either. On the left-hand side, in the foreground, you can see piles of bodies of dead soldiers, the fallen soldiers who had lost their lives at the battle. But within this tragic heap, there are bodies of men from all different troops. So Turner had studied the uniforms of different troops and has depicted them with some accuracy. So you'll see amongst them some tartan, which is representative of Scottish troops. And you see French caps, as well.

So the statement that Turner is making here is that lives were lost on all sides of the battle, and that the win is almost futile when this is the cost. He backs up this message with the incredibly dark and dramatic tone of the painting.

NARRATOR:

It's nighttime, and much of the scene is in dark shadow. But Turner employs a few different sources of light: at right, a farm on fire. In the sky, a dramatic flare. And in the center foreground, a group of women holding a torch, perhaps as they search for the bodies of their loved ones.

Turner's earlier painting of the Battle of Trafalgar, hanging nearby, focuses on the excitement of the battle and the heroism of the victors.

AMY CONCANNON:

But in the Battle of Waterloo, there's a very different rendering of war and a very, very different feeling that we get about war from this picture. And here we see the tragedy of war, the human cost of war.

507. THE BURNING OF THE HOUSES OF LORDS AND COMMONS, OCTOBER 16, 1834

1835, oil on canvas. Cleveland Museum of Art



GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

In the middle of October of 1834, the Houses of Parliament caught fire. It was impossible for the fire brigades to put the fire out.

NARRATOR:

In the left and right foreground of this painting, we can see some of the thousands of people who rushed the banks of the Thames to watch the stunning conflagration. Turner was among them, and he may have paid a boatman to take him out on the water for an unobstructed view of the spectacle.

Here's Amy Concannon.

AMY CONCANNON:

This is one of my favorite paintings by Turner. Not only is it a very beautiful depiction of an event that was spectacular and historically important, but it also delivers an important message.

NARRATOR:

Turner was inspired by the fire on an aesthetic level ...

AMY CONCANNON:

... But also the symbolism of this event at this point in time, coming as it did after decades of public debate and campaigning for political change. With the centuries-old symbol of political power on fire, this is a painting that effectively says: "Out with the old and in with the new." So it's a painting of change.

NARRATOR:

And in more ways than one, because this painting also marks a turning point in Turner's career as an artist. Here's George Shackelford.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

He used color in a new way, bringing a kind of conflagration of warm tones—yellow, white, orange and red, pink—to the center of the canvas, and having the rest of the picture be in cool blues and grays. He let his brushwork go wild, particularly in the raging center of the painting.

And he creates a wholly new way of thinking about painting the landscape in which the paint itself, the artist's gesture, becomes paramount and becomes part of the meaning of the work. And it's this for which Turner is now world-famous.

508. A DISASTER AT SEA (WRECK OF THE AMPHITRITE)

1835, oil on canvas. Tate

NARRATOR:

This painting depicts the wreck of the *Amphitrite*, a ship that left England in 1833. It carried human cargo: 108 female convicts and twelve children, all headed for banishment in Australia.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

Days after it left England, it sailed into a gale, a huge storm that blew the boat onto the rocks.

The captain of the ship actually refused help from people on the shore because he was afraid that if his female prisoners got to safety on French soil, that he might lose them; that they might escape. In the end, only three crewmen survived. All of the women and children, the captain, and most of the crew were killed.



Turner orchestrates his picture as a kind of giant spiraling wind. We see the boat at the center of the painting, and, as if rising from the wreck, storm clouds move around the picture in a great swirling motion. Light is contrasted with dark. The brilliant whites in the waves that crash over the boat juxtaposed with the deep dark of the landscape beyond, and then the sense of hope in the light at the very back of the composition. All of these contrasts are meant to heighten the emotional atmosphere and to make this current event all the more horrific.

NARRATOR:

But Turner never completed this picture.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

We don't know why he stopped work on it. Was he dissatisfied with the painting? We can't imagine that, because it's such a moving depiction and such an enormously successful harnessing of natural forces and a great tragic story. But for one reason or another, he did not exhibit this painting.

509. THE FALL OF ANARCHY (?)

1833, oil on canvas. Tate

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

This may be the strangest painting that Turner ever made. What we're seeing is a white horse, which seems to be galloping away towards the right. And over its back is slumped a skeleton. All around is nothingness. The painting is certainly unfinished, and its meaning is far from clear.

NARRATOR:

One idea is that it refers to the Book of Revelations in the Bible, in which death appears on a pale horse.

**GEORGE SHACKELFORD:**

Turner seems to mix up the idea of death on a pale horse with an idea that comes from a poem he may have read in which the skeleton represents anarchy.

NARRATOR:

That poem is called "The Mask of Anarchy," and it was written by the English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. One stanza reads:

ACTOR:

*Last came Anarchy: he rode
On a white horse, splashed with blood;
He was pale even to the lips,
Like Death in the Apocalypse.*

NARRATOR:

Shelley's poem was written to commemorate the Peterloo Massacre, which took place a little over a decade before Turner made this painting. In the city of Manchester, people had gathered to peacefully advocate for political reform. But the police met them with force, and eighteen were killed. Curator Amy Concannon grew up in Manchester, so this painting has personal significance for her.

AMY CONCANNON:

But I think it shows also that Turner was always thinking about the events which most represent the changes that occurred in his lifetime. And political reform, which when the Peterloo Massacre took place seemed a very long way away; political reform did actually come eventually. And so this painting is thought to then mark the fall of the skeletal old system; and the coming of a new change, much like the burning of the Houses of Parliament.

**510. THE THAMES ABOVE
WATERLOO BRIDGE**
1830–35, oil on canvas. Tate

NARRATOR:

Here, Turner shows us London in the 1830s, which was almost more polluted than we can even imagine.

AMY CONCANNON:

We're looking down the Thames through the fog and the haze, thrown up by the industrial south bank on the right-hand side and the funnel of the steamboat on the left-hand side, all melding together in this very gray, murky depiction of a productive but very unhealthy London atmosphere. There are some specifics that tell us where we are on the Thames. Although it looks very foggy and difficult to make out, just along the middle of the painting you can see Waterloo Bridge. And then if you follow the bridge along towards the right-hand side, you see a tall cylinder poking up through the clouds. That's identifiable as the Shot Tower, which was erected to manufacture bullets and shot for guns.



NARRATOR:

There was also a white lead factory nearby, which sent out highly toxic fumes . . . but it also manufactured the white pigment used in Turner's paints.

This polluted London atmosphere was terrible for people. But it was inspiring to painters like Turner, who now had a whole new range of atmospheric effects to depict in their landscapes.

AMY CONCANNON:

And Turner is saying here that London's industry can be as beautiful and beguiling as a scene in the countryside.

And indeed, Turner was, we think, most probably inspired to paint this picture by way of competition with the painter who was fast becoming his rival in landscape, John Constable. John Constable had exhibited a view of the same stretch of river, but Constable's depiction is of a very bright sunny day and only a little bit of smoke from the industrious south bank of the Thames. So Turner here is making the statement that this is the real London and this is the London of the future.

511. STAFFA, FINGAL'S CAVE

1832, oil on canvas. Yale Center for
British Art

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

This is one of my very favorite paintings by Turner. And I think it's because he has succeeded in showing us the difference between what man can do and what nature can do in an extraordinarily poetic way.

NARRATOR:

At left is Fingal's Cave, located on a remote Scottish island called Staffa. The cave contains spectacular geological formations, and Romantic writers like Sir Walter Scott celebrated its beauty in both poetry and prose. As a result, it became a popular destination for tourists.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

But the cave was located on a coast where the sea was often very violent, and sometimes vessels couldn't even land to deposit the people on the shore. Turner expresses this in the way he treats light in this painting. The cliff at the left is bathed in beautiful, warm light. But the rest of the picture is dark and foreboding. The sun is setting on the horizon, but coming at us through what appears to be almost a storm that's brewing around the boat.

And there's the steamboat on the horizon, its engine belching out black smoke that, when it hits the sunlight, seems to evaporate into a kind of golden haze. The power of man in the steamboat and the power of nature are juxtaposed by Turner to remind us that nature is all-powerful. The inventions of man are nothing up against the power of the natural world.



**512. SNOW STORM – STEAM-BOAT
OFF A HARBOUR’S MOUTH**
1842, oil on canvas. Tate



AMY CONCANNON:

This was such a daring, out-there painting for Turner to have made. I think it’s quite spectacular, and it’s certainly one of the most dramatic pictures of a steamboat that’s ever been made.

It captures the energy of the sea by way of this vortexical composition. You have the steamboat in the center of the painting, struggling on the huge waves and against the wind. And then you have this swirling maelstrom of sea, melding into clouds, melding into smoke and then back down to sea.

NARRATOR:

But when Turner exhibited this canvas, the critics found it too radical; too confusing. One critic wrote . . .

ACTOR (CRITIC):

“This gentleman has, on former occasions, chosen to paint with cream, or chocolate, yolk of egg, or currant jelly. Here he uses his whole array of kitchen stuff. Where the steam-boat is; where the harbor begins, or where it ends . . . are matters past our finding out.”

NARRATOR:

Turner later made this reply:

ACTOR (TURNER):

“I did not paint it to be understood, but I wished to show what such a scene was like. I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it. I was lashed for four hours, and I did not expect to escape . . . but I felt bound to record it if I did. But no one had any business to *like* the picture.”

NARRATOR:

Scholars doubt that Turner was really tied to a mast in the middle of the storm. He was probably following in a long tradition of marine painters who had made very similar claims.

AMY CONCANNON:

But I don’t really think that matters. You know, whether or not he was actually tied to the mast in a snowstorm, Turner has really convincingly conveyed what it would feel like to be stuck on a boat out at sea in the middle of this dramatic weather.

NARRATOR:

To hear more about the way Turner uses paint in this picture, tap the “More” button at the bottom of your screen.

NARRATOR:

If you can, step in close to the painting. Here’s Tate curator Amy Concannon.

AMY CONCANNON:

It's actually one of my favorite paintings to really have a close look at. By this stage in Turner's career, he was using oil paint in a way that resembled watercolor. So he was using very thin layers of oil paint, and he would use layers of wax, too.

So if you look at the sea in the lower half the painting, you'll see it's actually made up of layers and layers of translucent colored glazes. So you have green coming through, you have blue coming through, gray and yellow and brown and red. And they all mix together to give this very realistic sense of looking at water in motion.

513. VENICE QUAY, DUCAL PALACE

1844, oil on canvas. Tate

VENICE WITH THE SALUTE

c. 1840–45, oil on canvas. Tate

**AMY CONCANNON:**

I absolutely love Turner's depictions of Venice, and going there for myself only a few years ago, I realized that I had completely imagined the place through Turner's paintings alone.

NARRATOR:

Turner traveled to Venice three times. But even after his final trip, he continued to paint the city from drawings, notes, and memory.

AMY CONCANNON:

Turner's imagination was completely fired up by this very special place. It was special not only for the architecture and the way that light bounces around the city because of all that water. But it was also special because it was a very lively, entertaining place to go and it had been made famous by the sexy man-of-the-moment, the Romantic poet Byron. So middle-class tourists who read Byron's poetry flocked to see this place that had inspired him, and Turner followed suit.

NARRATOR:

Turner knew that paintings of Venice would be easy to sell. But with this composition, we can see him moving away from salable, recognizable scenes, and towards a more personal vision.

AMY CONCANNON:

Light and color and atmosphere were far more important things to him than the depiction of architecture and a sense of knowing exactly where you are in this city.

**NARRATOR:**

To your right, take a look at the painting titled *Venice with the Salute*. At first glance, the subject is hard to make out. Here's curator George Shackelford.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

This painting is unfinished, and we think it may represent just the first couple of layers of what would have been or could have become a fully-finished painting by Turner with lots more detail. This kind of unfinished painting, all the same, was put on public view as part of the Turner Bequest after his death. And it's exactly the kind of

painting that artists like James McNeill Whistler or Claude Monet might have had in mind when they turn to painting both Venice and London, two capitals that were incredibly important for Turner.

NARRATOR:

To hear a famous poem by Lord Byron—which influenced Turner's depictions of both Venice and England—tap the “More” button at the bottom of your screen.

NARRATOR:

Turner's conception of Venice was influenced by Lord Byron's epic poem "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage." In the poem, Byron describes Venice as a place that is well past its glory days . . . and perhaps especially romantic because of it.

ACTOR:

*Her palaces are crumbling to the shore,
And music meets not always now the ear;
Those days are gone – but Beauty still is here.*

*Venice, lost and won,
Her thirteen hundred years of freedom done,
Sinks, like a sea-weed, into whence she rose!*

NARRATOR:

Byron is mourning the fall of the Venetian Republic. But he also issues a warning to England, or "Albion," suggesting that the mighty British Empire may decline one day, too.

ACTOR:

*Thy lot
Is shameful to the nations, – most of all,
Albion! to thee:
the Ocean queen should not
Abandon Ocean's children; in the fall
Of Venice think of thine.
Despite thy watery wall.*

514. WHALERS ('THE WHALE SHIP')
1845, oil on canvas. The Metropolitan
Museum of Art

AMY CONCANNON:

Turner's depictions of the whaling industry are some of the most surprising pictures in his entire career.

NARRATOR:

In the mid-1840s, he made four major paintings of whaling, all of which are included in this exhibition.



AMY CONCANNON:

And this painting from the Metropolitan Museum of Art is the most brutal, the most gruesome of the series of four paintings.

NARRATOR:

The whale has been struck by a harpoon. But he's not going down without a fight, and his massive tail has overturned the small rowboats at center.

Turner shows us how dangerous whaling was. But it was also big business, because in the mid-nineteenth century, lighting came from either candles or whale oil, burned in lamps. Still . . .

AMY CONCANNON:

It's a subject that not many other artists were depicting in Britain at the time.

NARRATOR:

That's probably because they couldn't observe whaling in action. Turner likely never saw a real whale. And he definitely never traveled to the remote Arctic waters where this scene takes place. Instead, he had to rely on descriptions from books, like Thomas Beale's *Natural History of the Sperm Whale*.

AMY CONCANNON:

What stands out for me is Turner's ability to create this atmosphere of ice and of cold light, cold air, in a place that he had never been before. So we go with Turner to this place entirely constructed of his imagination; an informed imagination, of course, as always. But we take from Turner that this is what it feels like to be out in the Arctic, stuck in the middle of icebergs, and engaged in this quite gruesome occupation of whaling.

NARRATOR:

Make sure you don't miss Turner's extraordinary watercolor of what we think is burning whale blubber. It's hanging on the wall behind you.

- 515. GLAUCUS AND SCYLLA**
1841, oil on canvas. Kimbell Art Museum
- WAR – THE EXILE AND THE ROCK LIMPET**
1842, oil on canvas. Tate
- PEACE – BURIAL AT SEA**
1842, oil on canvas. Tate

NARRATOR:

The three paintings on this wall all share an unusual format.

AMY CONCANNON:

Towards the end of Turner's career, he became increasingly experimental. And you see here the results of his experimentation with different shaped canvases.

NARRATOR:

The first painting, to your left, is from the Kimbell's collection. It depicts Glaucus and Scylla, a story from ancient Greek mythology. But Turner combines this classical subject with an unusual, circular composition . . . and his bold, modern brushwork and color.



Now, take a look at the two octagonal paintings to your right.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

Turner conceived these two paintings as a pair. One painting at left, *War – The Exile and the Rock Limpet*, focuses on the setting sun as the background for an enigmatic image of Napoleon.

NARRATOR:

Turner shows us a defeated Napoleon, in exile on the island of St. Helena. He gazes hopelessly at a tiny rock limpet, or barnacle.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

In the other painting, *Peace – Burial at Sea*, Turner tells the story of the burial of his friend, the painter David Wilkie. This painting becomes a very poetical and very private rumination on death.

NARRATOR:

Wilkie died of Typhoid, and his body couldn't be brought to shore. So here, Turner's black-sailed ship memorializes his lonely burial at sea.

In both paintings, Turner uses the octagonal format to focus our attention, almost like looking through a lens.

AMY CONCANNON:

I find these shaped canvases really, really exciting. I think they would have been a breath of fresh air. So I think Turner is using not only subject matter, but also format to really mark himself out as a modern painter for the modern world.

NARRATOR:

Here's curator George Shackelford with some final food for thought.

GEORGE SHACKELFORD:

We live in a time where artists are being called upon to be relevant, and to take a stand and make a statement about what's going on in our world. It seems to me that Turner was really remarkable among artists of the nineteenth century for visually speaking out about things that were happening around him. The industrial revolution. Political power and who has it. And human rights issues of the most fundamental kind. And this is why Turner's examination of the modern world is so powerful to us, nearly two centuries later.

