

PRIMARY TEACHERS' NOTES

**THE FIGHTING TEMERAIRE TUGGED TO HER LAST BERTH TO BE
BROKEN UP, 1838** BY JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER, 1839,
OIL ON CANVAS, 90.7 X 121.6 CM.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851) is one of Britain's best-known landscape painters. During his long career he produced a huge body of work including more than 500 oil paintings, hundreds of watercolours and an incredible 19,000 sketches. Turner was born in 1775 in Covent Garden, London, the son of a barber. His father's shop was a two-minute walk away from the Thames, which was then a busy highway serving one of the world's finest ports. From an early age, ships held a strong fascination for Turner and, combined with a preoccupation with the power of nature, the subject of the sea became of great significance to him.

In 1789, he enrolled as a student at the Royal Academy of Arts, which was then the only art school in England. He soon became a regular exhibitor of watercolours and later oils, showing his first work at the age of 15. Turner became a full member of the Royal Academy in 1802. Aged just 26, he was one of the youngest members ever.

Turner died at the age of 76, following a successful career. He was buried at his own request 'among my Brothers in Art' in St Paul's Cathedral, alongside Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first President of the Royal Academy. Under the terms of his will he bequeathed all finished oil paintings still in his possession to the nation. *The Fighting Temeraire* was included among these.

ABOUT THE PAINTING

The painting shows the final journey of the *Temeraire*, a celebrated gunship which had fought valiantly in Lord Nelson's fleet at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Thirty-three years later, decaying and no longer in use, she was towed 55 miles up the Thames from Sheerness to be broken up in a Rotherhithe shipyard. The *Temeraire* was a 98-gun, three-decked battle ship that had been launched in 1798, during the French revolutionary war. Her name means bold or fearless in French.

Turner's painting pays tribute to the *Temeraire's* heroic past. The gunship, painted delicately in light tones, seems to float effortlessly on the calm waters, giving it a ghostly appearance. The glorious sunset behind is a fanfare of colour in her honour. Just as the day is drawing to a close, so too is the life of the *Temeraire*. The nostalgic and melancholy mood of the painting is emphasised by the fact that she can no longer travel by the power of her own sails; they have been furled for the last time and a steamboat tugs her in to shore. Turner paints the two boats in stark contrast to one another: the steamboat moves ahead of the grand gunship, squat, dirty and ugly by comparison.

ARTISTIC LICENCE

In reality, the *Temeraire* looked very different. Her fighting days had been over for some time: for the last 13 years she had been moored off Sheerness, serving as a supply ship. By the time she was auctioned off for the value of her timber, everything that the Navy could recycle had already been removed, including her three tall masts. However, Turner decided to depict the ship with the masts and rigging still in place. He also used white and pale yellow paint, rather than the darker yellow and black that she actually was. He created a deliberately idealised memory of the ship, showing her as an elegant and noble vessel.

One steam tug would not have been powerful enough to move such a heavy ship. In fact, two steamboats would have tugged the *Temeraire*, with one ahead pulling while the other acted as a brake from behind. There is also a discrepancy in the appearance of the steamboat; it does not comply with the customary design of such tugs at the time. The funnel is at the front of the boat instead of amidships, and the mast, which should be at the front, is shown at the rear. Tugging such a large ship up a busy stretch of river would have required a great deal of care and planning, and would never have been carried out at dusk. Daylight would have been crucial to the smooth and successful completion of the operation.

Turner would have been aware of these historical inaccuracies in his work. He chose to deliberately distort reality in order to heighten the mood of the moment.

There are several stories that claim Turner witnessed the event and then committed his experience to canvas. The precise details of these anecdotes differ and they are generally thought to be untrue. If Turner did not see the event firsthand he may well have read about it in the newspapers, as reports of a famous ship being decommissioned would have been of public interest.

THE BATTLE OF TRAFALGAR

The Battle of Trafalgar is probably the most famous sea battle ever fought by the British Navy. It was a battle of enormous importance, which ended the threat to England of a French invasion under Napoleon. In securing British domination of the seas, it also allowed for the expansion and protection of the British Empire.

It was during the Battle of Trafalgar on 21 October 1805, under the command of Captain Eliab Harvey, that the *Temeraire* had a chance to prove herself as a bold fighter. When Nelson's flagship, *HMS Victory*, came under heavy fire from the French, the *Temeraire* came to her defence. After a series of daring manoeuvres, she not only saved Nelson's vessel but also captured two French ships. The part the *Temeraire* played in the action was commended as 'most noble and distinguished'.

The battle lasted four and a half hours and was a resounding victory for the British. One enemy ship was destroyed and 17 captured, although many of these had to be abandoned in the storms that raged for days after the battle. Of the 15 French and Spanish ships that escaped most were never able to sail again. Among the British dead was Nelson himself. He was shot by a sniper during the early stages of battle. Nelson's body, rather than being thrown overboard with the rest of the dead, was brought back pickled in a barrel of brandy on the *Victory* and buried with great pomp in St Paul's Cathedral.

After the Battle of Trafalgar the French offered no further serious threat to British supremacy at sea and many ships of the Royal Navy, including the *Temeraire*, were laid up and never again saw active service.

Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, London, is an iconic monument to the battle. Built between 1840 and 1843, it is a constant reminder of the British victory over Napoleon. The square pedestal is decorated with four bronze panels, cast from captured French guns, depicting Nelson's great victories.

THE END OF AN ERA

Until the development of steam power in the mid-19th century all ships were subject to the unpredictability of the weather. When self-powered ships took over with the invention of steam, the whole nature of shipping changed.

During his lifetime Turner witnessed a period of extraordinary technological development. One year after his birth, in 1776, James Watt produced his first two working steam engines. By the time of the artist's death, steam engines had revolutionised industry, steam ships were crossing the Atlantic, and over 7,500 miles of railway track had been laid in Britain alone.

The development of steam power was recognised at the time as enormously important, but as with any new technology, responses ranged from the wildly enthusiastic to the deeply pessimistic. These diverse reactions in a time of change are reflected in *The Fighting Temeraire*, where Turner exaggerates the stark contrast between the two vessels, which stand for the old order and the new. As the sun sets on the horizon to the right, the new moon rises in the sky.

USING THE PICTURE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

SOME IDEAS FOR CROSS-CURRICULAR WORK

Use the picture as a 'text' for a speaking and listening exercise to develop skills in visual literacy.

Ask open questions to initiate discussion, such as:

- How many vessels can you see?
- Which one do you think is the most important to the story and why?
- How are the two vessels in the foreground different to one another?
- What time of day is it and how do we know this?

Speaking and Listening

Create two contrasting soundscapes incorporating noises recorded by the children or downloaded from the Internet – one based on what the children imagine they would hear if they stepped into the painting and the other based on the Battle of Trafalgar.

Music/ICT

Look at the way Turner uses colour and texture. Compare the quick, smooth squiggly marks in the water beneath the steamboat with the thick, crusted areas of paint (impasto) in the clouds above the setting sun. Notice the way the paint has cracked over time. Ask the children to experiment with the application of paint for differing effects – use a variety of tools other than a paintbrush.

Art

Take photographs or video footage of different skies around home and school – see how many contrasting colours and shapes of clouds the children can capture and create a montage on the classroom wall.

Art/Geography/ICT

Research other artists who have been inspired by the sea. Compare and contrast the work of artists from different times and cultures, e.g. Katsushika Hokusai, Robert Smithson.

Art/Geography

Design and make model steamboats, using card or wood to make two simple components – a flat hull with a propeller at its rear. Attach a rubber band as a means of propelling the toy vessel through the water. Use the models to discuss movement. Identify other forces at play in the painting: wind power, pulls and pushes.

Science/DT

Research the Battle of Trafalgar. Find out about life on board a battle ship in the 1800s – for example, look at food, sleeping conditions, clothing and health. Link to National Maritime Museum Royal Observatory Greenwich online collection <http://www.nmm.ac.uk/collections>

History/ICT/PSHE

Discuss the close proximity of Turner's painting to Trafalgar Square. Plot the National Gallery and Nelson's Column on a map or locate the square on Google Earth <http://earth.google.com>

Geography/ICT

PRIMARY TEACHERS' NOTES



TAKE ONE PICTURE

Since 1995, through the **Take One Picture** scheme, the National Gallery has been promoting the use of a single image as a resource for cross-curricular work in primary schools. The scheme enables teachers to share good teaching and learning practice and the principles of cultural enrichment using an holistic approach which highlights how subject areas support and inform each other. This aligns closely with the DfES Primary National Strategy: Excellence and Enjoyment.

The **Take One Picture** DVD, available from National Gallery shops (www.nationalgallery.co.uk). The DVD also contains 10 exhibition films and short talks by Gallery experts on past featured paintings.

RESOURCES

A digital image of the painting is available on the website. It can be used in the classroom on an interactive whiteboard or projector, or by individuals on PCs. It has a zoom facility which enables the viewer to see small details in the painting which are sometimes even difficult to see in the original with the naked eye.

A printed reproduction of the painting can be purchased from National Gallery shops, by mail order at mailorder@nationalgallery.org.uk or by telephone on 020 7747 2870. A copy will also be given to teachers attending the Gallery's Continuing Professional Development courses 2007/8, which introduce the **Take One Picture** approach. Details of these courses, and availability, can be found by telephoning 020 7747 2844.

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Trafalgar Square Telephone: 020 7747 2424
London WC2N 5DN Email: education@ng-london.org.uk

www.nationalgallery.org.uk

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