

# The Slave Ship

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*The Slave Ship*, originally titled *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on*,<sup>[1]</sup> is a painting by the British artist [J. M. W. Turner](#), first exhibited in 1840. Measuring 35 3/4 x 48 1/4 in. in [oil on canvas](#), it is now in the [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#). In this classic example of a [Romantic maritime painting](#), Turner depicts a ship, visible in the background, sailing through a tumultuous sea of churning water and leaving scattered human forms floating in its wake.

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J.M.W. Turner, *The Slave Ship* (1840). Oil on canvas. 90.8 × 122.6 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

## History

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J.M.W. Turner was inspired to paint *The Slave Ship* in 1840 after reading *The History and Abolition of the Slave Trade*<sup>[2]</sup> by [Thomas Clarkson](#). In 1781, the captain of the [slave ship \*Zong\*](#) had ordered 133 slaves to be thrown overboard so that insurance payments could be collected. This event probably inspired Turner to create his landscape and to choose to coincide its exhibition with a meeting of the [British Anti-Slavery Society](#). Although slavery had been outlawed in the [British Empire](#) since 1833, Turner and many other [abolitionists](#) believed that slavery should be outlawed around the world. Turner thus exhibited his painting during the anti-slavery conference, intending for [Prince Albert](#), who was speaking at the event, to see it and be moved to increase British anti-slavery efforts. Placed next to the painting were lines from Turner's own untitled poem, written in 1812:

"Aloft all hands, strike the top-masts and belay;  
Yon angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds  
Declare the Typhon's coming.  
Before it sweeps your decks, throw overboard  
The dead and dying – ne'er heed their chains  
Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!  
Where is thy market now?"

## Description

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The first impression that the painting creates is of an enormous deep-red sunset over a stormy sea, an indication of an approaching typhoon.<sup>[3]</sup> Upon closer inspection one can discern a ship sailing off into the distance. The masts of the ship are red, matching the blood-red colour of the sky and the sickly copper colour of the water, which serves to blur the lines between various objects in the painting.<sup>[2]</sup> The ship's sails are also not unfurled, revealing that the ship is preparing for the typhoon. In the foreground can be seen a number of bodies floating in the water; their dark skin and chained hands and feet indicate that they are slaves, thrown overboard from the ship. Looking even more carefully, one can see fish and sea monsters swimming in the water, possibly preparing to eat the slaves, and sea gulls circling overhead above the chaos.

Consistent with Turner's emphasis on colour in many of his other works, the painting's central focus is on the interactions of various colours. Few defined brush strokes appear in the painting, and objects, colours, and figures become indistinct. Rather, objects are defined by their colours in the painting, and some objects (like the bodies of the slaves and the incoming storm) have no real border at all, being solely defined by the contrast with the pigments around them. The most prominent colours are the red of the sunset which encroaches into the water and ship as well, and the maroon of the bodies and hands of the slaves.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Style and interpretation

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Turner's emphasis on colour rather than design is typical of many Romantic works of the time. The indistinct shapes and the pervasiveness of the sunset's blood-red colour serve to convey a focus on nature and illustrate the idea that nature is superior to man. Other colours in the painting, such as the cool blue of the ocean and the black caps of the water, bring the ocean's hues to life and give the viewer a sense of the true emotions of the natural world. The fact that the figures in the painting are depicted as minuscule and that even the ship is shunted to the background in favour of the water and the sun further serve to decrease the emphasis on humanity and transfer it to nature.<sup>[2]</sup>

By placing the emphasis on nature rather than on figures or objects, Turner evokes the concept of the "sublime", coined by Edmund Burke. The idea of the sublime is of the utter powerlessness and terror of humanity in the face of nature; by dramatising the strength of the waves and sun, Turner uses *The Slave Ship* to encapsulate, perfectly, Burke's definition of the term. Turner's decision to paint the work with a series of quick, frenzied brush strokes rather than carefully defined lines adds to the intensity of the painting, serving to make the viewer feel even more overwhelmed.<sup>[2]</sup> Though the painting's size is relatively small compared to many Romantic landscape paintings, it still captivates the viewer in arguably a more powerful way.

Some viewers have argued that *The Slave Ship* actually represents Turner's reaction to the Industrial Revolution. The painting might be viewed as an allegory against the exploitation of slaves and other human labour in favour of machines and economic advancement, represented by the coming storm engulfing the cruel captain. However, the storm could also be viewed as a representation of nature's dominance over man and of the ultimate futility in trying to industrialise and advance society.<sup>[2][4][5]</sup>

## Critics

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Mark Twain said, in *A Tramp Abroad*, Volume 1, Chapter XXIV:<sup>[6]</sup> "What a red rag is to a bull, Turner's "Slave Ship" was to me, before I studied art. Mr. Ruskin is educated in art up to a point where that picture throws him into as mad an ecstasy of pleasure as it used to throw me into one of rage, last year, when I was ignorant. His cultivation enables him—and me, now—to see water in that glaring yellow mud, and natural effects in those lurid explosions of mixed smoke and flame, and crimson sunset glories; it reconciles him—and me, now—to the floating of iron cable-chains and other unfloatable things; it reconciles us to fishes swimming around on top of the mud—I mean the water. The most of

the picture is a manifest impossibility—that is to say, a lie; and only rigid cultivation can enable a man to find truth in a lie. But it enabled Mr. Ruskin to do it, and it has enabled me to do it, and I am thankful for it. A Boston newspaper reporter went and took a look at the *Slave Ship* floundering about in that fierce conflagration of reds and yellows, and said it reminded him of a tortoise-shell cat having a fit in a platter of tomatoes. In my then uneducated state, that went home to my non-cultivation, and I thought here is a man with an unobstructed eye. Mr. Ruskin would have said: This person is an ass. That is what I would say, now."

The art critic John Ruskin, who was the first owner of *The Slave Ship*, wrote, "If I were reduced to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work, I should choose this."<sup>[4]</sup>

The painting was the subject of an extended poetic sequence or verse novel by David Dabydeen, *Turner* (1994; reissued 2002).

## References

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1. Turner's title, with period spelling of typhoon. [1] (<http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/slave-ship-slavers-throwing-overboard-the-dead-and-dying-typhoon-coming-on-31102>)
2. Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages A Global History*, Volume II. Belmont: Wadsworth, 2008, p. 795.
3. "Early warning signs of an approaching tropical cyclone" (<http://www.heraldtribune.com/article/20070513/NEWS/705130496>).
4. "Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)" (<http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/slave-ship-slavers-throwing-overboard-the-dead-and-dying-typhoon-coming-on-31102>). 25 March 2017.
5. George P. Landow, *J.M.W. Turner, The Slave Ship* (<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/crisis/crisis4e.html>)
6. "A TRAMP ABROAD, BY MARK TWAIN, COMPLETE" (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/119/119-h/119-h.htm>). [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org).



# External links

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- [Artchive—large image \(http://www.artchive.com/artchive/T/turner/slave\\_ship.jpg.html\)](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/T/turner/slave_ship.jpg.html)
  - [Turner's \*Slave Ship\* \(http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/4c/turner.004.htm\)](http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/4c/turner.004.htm)
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