

# Turner: In Light and Shade: Luminous proof that printing is a genuine art form

Look at Turner's mezzotints, and it can be hard to believe they're just dots of ink in the grooves of a copper plate

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Orfordness c 1827 by JMW Turner Credit: The Whitworth, The University of Manchester

Prints rarely get as much respect as other kinds of art. Generally, they're considered an often cheaper way of replicating existing works, not creating new ones. There's a historical basis for this. The technique of mezzotinting, for instance, was initially used in the mid-17th century to reproduce oil portraits by Old Masters, and later taken up by artists wanting to promote their own work in other mediums. No matter that the process – roughening a copper plate with a toothed blade and then burnishing areas of it before etching or engraving lines, applying ink, and transferring the design to paper – is incredibly time-consuming and difficult to execute.

Turner: In Light and Shade, at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, builds a counter-case in defence of the mezzoprint as art form. The centrepiece of the show – which kicks off a year of exhibitions and events marking the 250th anniversary of the English artist's birth – is Turner's Liber Studiorum, a collection of 71 mezzotint prints of landscapes and seascapes published between 1807 and 1819. Together, the views offer a typology of different styles of landscape art: mountainous, historical, architectural, and so on.

Turner was inspired by Claude Lorrain's Liber Veritatis, a book of drawings (reproduced later as mezzotints, a couple of which are on view here) of completed paintings by the French master of landscape. Only 19 of Turner's mezzotints, however, were based on his existing works; the rest are original compositions. In another unusual move, Turner also engraved some of the plates himself, instead of always handing his designs over to a professional engraver. In 1924, one writer described the Liber as containing “the pith of all that is best in his life and work”.



Basle (part I, plate 5) from Liber Studiorum series Credit: The Whitworth, The University of Manchester

The mezzotints – a rare full set – are presented across two galleries. In one room, they are paired with watercolours or oils by Turner that explore similar subjects. It's an opportunity to bring out some of the most popular works in the Whitworth collection, such as a charming watercolour view of the Chamonix valley with the snowy peaks of Mont Blanc in the distance, shown here alongside a mezzotint depicting the gushing source of the nearby Arveron river.

Strangely, though, the mezzotints are displayed to the right of the watercolours and paintings, creating the (inaccurate) impression that they are copies “after” an original picture. What this exhibition otherwise makes clear is that mezzotint, for Turner, was a highly productive technique for deepening his artistic exploration of atmospheric effects in nature. Looking at a print like Ships in a Breeze (1808), it's astonishing to think that this roiling seascape, with its shaft of glowing light breaking through clouds in the sky, is made up of nothing more than dots of brown ink held in the grooves of a copper plate.



Valley of Chamonix, France, Mont Blanc in the Distance (1809) Credit: The Whitworth, The University of Manchester

One of the best bits of the show is a section tracking the stages of the rigorous process that results in a single print: Lake Thun, Switzerland (1808). We follow the dramatic image of the Alpine lake agitated by a storm from graphite-and-watercolour study to preliminary etching on paper, engraved proof with hand-written notes and, finally, etching and mezzotint printed in brown ink. It would have been nice, perhaps, to see more of this technical side of things – such as multiple “states” (ie printed impressions) of the same plate, showing the different effects made possible by reprinting. That would certainly put paid to the idea that a print is just an infinitely reproducible image.

From Feb 7-Nov 2; [whitworth.manchester.ac.uk](https://www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk)

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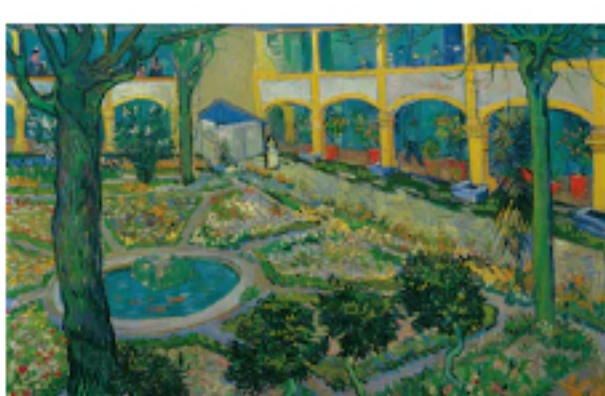
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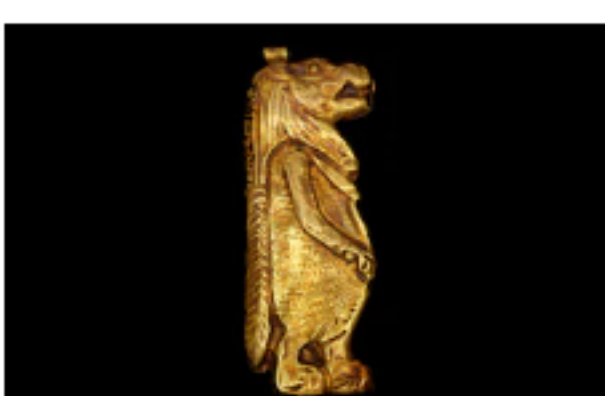


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