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REVIEW

Turner: In Light and Shade review — a gorgeous display of astonishing scenes

This exhibition at the Whitworth focuses on Turner's prints rather than oils, but you won't feel short-changed by the magnificent depictions of sky and sea



Upnor Castle, Kent, 1831-2
THE WHITWORTH, THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

Nancy Durrant, Contributor | Thursday February 06 2025, 12:01am, The Times

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John Ruskin was a funny old stick, but when it came to his hero JMW Turner, whose 250th birthday falls this year, he really knew what he was talking about. “He paints in colour, but he thinks in light and shade,” he wrote in 1843, and in this exhibition at the Whitworth in Manchester, which focuses on Turner’s prints – in particular the *Liber Studiorum* series, which, despite the gallery’s significant Turner holdings, hasn’t been shown here in full since 1922 – this is borne out gloriously.

Turner held prints and watercolours in as high regard as oil paintings. Rather than mere copies, he considered them artworks in their own right and embarked on the *Liber* project (1807-19) at the height of his fame, working with nearly a dozen different engravers to achieve astonishing effects.

It’s unclear why Turner decided to create this 71-strong set, but it seems likely that it had an educational intent. At the time mezzotint was commonly used to reproduce portraits; Turner argued for this monochrome printmaking process in his Royal Academy lectures as a sensitive, effective medium for landscape.

It’s hard to contradict him in the face of this gorgeous display, which spans two galleries. One focuses almost entirely on *Liber* prints, which vary in subject from the pastoral to the marine, “historical” (mythical or biblical) to architectural and mountainous.

• [Painting submitted to Christie’s revealed to be by Turner](#)

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And yes, the trees are exquisite and the peaks soar, the piglets are glossy and the listing ships make you queasy, but oh, it’s the clouds and the foam and the fine sea spray, the shadows and reflections, the puffs of smoke and bursts of flame, the streaks, sunbeams and flashes of lightning that really take your breath away. Light was his subject, always.

The delicacy of mezzotint – and the skill of the artists involved – is such that, though the tired donkey in the foreground of Mount St Gothard arouses your sympathy, the misty, powdery peaks in the distance pique your awe. How is it possible, in this monochrome scene *Near Blair Athol, Scotland*, that I know instantly those rocks are slick with water?



Coast of Yorkshire, Near Whitby, from the Liber Studiorum series
THE WHITWORTH, THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER



Peat Bog, Scotland, from the Liber Studiorum series
THE WHITWORTH, THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

The second room pairs other Turner works from the Whitworth collection – mostly watercolours, but also *View of the Beach at Margate* (c1840), the gallery’s only Turner oil – with *Liber* prints of similar subjects. You have to adjust your eyes when you first enter; the colours – a golden evening glow illuminating a cathedral interior; purple moonlight on Lake Lucerne – seem almost gaudy after half an hour luxuriating in the warm brown depths of the mezzotints next door, but it does show clearly how the artist flitted between media, developing ideas and coaxing magical effects with his etching needles or brushes. On the train home the rolling sky seems painted just for you.

★★★★☆

Feb 7-Nov 2, Whitworth, Manchester, [whitworth.manchester.ac.uk](https://www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk)



Orfordness, c 1827
THE WHITWORTH, THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER



Valley of Chamonix, France, Mont Blanc in the Distance, 1809
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Old Welsh Bridge, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, 1794
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