



Art & Architecture

Information and Questions for Teaching

Modern Rome—Campo Vaccino

Joseph Mallord William Turner
 English, 1839
 Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 48 1/4 in.
 2011.6



Background Information

Ten years after his final journey to Rome, Turner envisioned the Eternal City through a veil of memory. Baroque churches and ancient monuments in and around the Roman Forum seem to dissolve in iridescent light shed by a moon rising at left and a sun setting behind the Capitoline Hill at night. Amidst these splendors, the city's inhabitants carry on with their daily activities. The picture's lustrous, rainbow-like palette and shimmering light effects exemplify Turner at his most accomplished.

When first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1839 with its pendant, *Ancient Rome; Agrippina Landing with the Ashes of Germanicus*, the painting was accompanied by a modified quotation from Lord Byron's masterpiece, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1818): "The moon is up, and yet it is not night, / The sun as yet divides the day with her." Like the poem, Turner's painting evokes the enduring sublimity of Rome, which had been for artists throughout history less a place in the real world than one in the imagination.

The painting is in a remarkable state of preservation and remains untouched since it left Turner's hands.

About the Artist

Joseph Mallord William Turner (British, 1775–1851)

Joseph Mallord William Turner's father, a barber and wigmaker, realized his son's artistic talents early, asserting that "my son is going to be a painter." Before enrolling in the Royal Academy, Turner gained some drawing experience in the offices several of London's leading architects. He first exhibited watercolors of architectural subjects and then experimented with scenes from literature and scenery designs for operatic productions.

In his early twenties, Turner's focus changed to historical landscapes. These large-scale paintings became increasingly divorced from nature and featured the loose, luminous brushwork and abstract conceptions for which he became known.

Modern Rome—Campo Vaccino, Joseph Mallord William Turner

At twenty-nine, Turner opened his own gallery in London while also painting, exhibiting his own work, and teaching at the Royal Academy. A trip to Italy at the age of forty-four, drastically altered his style, leading to his late emphasis on the power of color and light to create dramatic, evocative scenes. Turner's body of work includes around three hundred paintings and over twenty thousand drawings and watercolors, the majority of which were given to the English government upon his death. Most are now owned by the Tate Gallery in London.

Questions for Teaching

Take the time to look closely at the reproduction of the painting.

What words would you use to describe it?

What do you notice first? Where does your eye travel to next? What did the artist do to draw your attention to these areas?

What do you notice about the colors and depiction of light in this painting?

What do you notice about the architectural structures in the painting? How would you describe them?

This painting is titled *Modern Rome—Campo Vaccino*. What is Turner conveying about Rome as he saw it in the 19th century?

Turner and the poet Lord Byron both created works during the Romantic era, an artistic movement during the late 1700s. Romantic poets and artists valued imagination and the natural world instead of order. They also embraced individualism and emotion over rationalism. Which characteristics of Romantic art can be seen in Turner's painting?

Turner completed this painting ten years after his last visit to Rome. Based on how he depicted this city, how do you think the artist feels about Rome?

Compare Turner's painting to another depiction of architectural structures by a contemporary of Turner, such as Giovanni Battista Lusieri's *A View of the Bay of Naples*. How are the cities in each painting depicted differently? Consider the composition, emphasis, color, and light.

Consider the way people interact with the built environment. What are the figures doing? Also consider the relationship between the built environment and nature. How is the natural world painted? How do the paintings by Turner and Lusieri depict these subjects similarly or differently?

Which artist would you prefer to create a painting of Los Angeles? Why?