

Longships Lighthouse, Lands End



Joseph Mallord William Turner
British, about 1834–1835
Watercolor and bodycolor
11 1/4 x 17 5/16 in.
88.GC.55

Background Information

The Romantic painter and draftsman Joseph Mallord William Turner often revealed nature reigning supreme and obliterating human presence. Waves dash to pieces a barely visible ship in a storm several miles beyond Land's End, the westernmost point of England, guarded by a lighthouse called "Longships Lighthouse." Aesthete John Ruskin wrote of this drawing that Turner captured "the whole surface of the sea . . . undirected, bounding, and crashing, and coiling in an anarchy of enormous power."

To convey the experience of nature's turbulence, Turner used the full range of watercolor technique, from transparent washes in the sky to thick bodycolor in the water and rocks. He added highlights to enrich the texture and atmosphere, blotting the wash to reveal the white of the paper in the lighthouse and scratching directly into the paper to render the flecks of light in the waves crashing over the boat. With these bold techniques, Turner came close to modern abstraction in his efforts to expand the expressive and stylistic range of landscape painting. He made this watercolor for a series of engravings entitled *Picturesque Views in England and Wales*, published between 1827 and 1838.

Longships Lighthouse, Lands End, Joseph Mallord William Turner

About the Artist

Joseph Mallord William Turner
b. 1775 London, d. 1851 London
painter; draftsman
British

Joseph Mallord William Turner's father, a barber and wigmaker, recognized 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. 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

Describe the setting.

What do you notice first, what more can you say about this picture? (Almost abstract marine scene, strong contrasting and complimentary colors.)

What do you think is happening in this painting? What visual evidence leads you to your response?

What has this painter captured in this scene?

Identify and describe the areas with translucent layers.

Identify and describe the areas that are more opaque. (Dark blue area on the left hand side.)

Identify areas with dramatic movement . Discuss what makes this area of the picture more dramatic.