

# Peter Milton's *Tsunami*: Turner, Constable, and Ruskin at Sea in a New American Print

*James Heffernan*

To the general international public, J.M.W Turner is probably now best known as the protagonist of a film that bears his name. In Mike Leigh's *Mr. Turner* (2014), Timothy Spall portrays the artist as 'crude, rude, [and] porcine, yet sensitive and tender,' in the words of Andrew Wilton. Whether or not Spall accurately reanimates Turner, a question Wilton himself has raised, his performance shows that Turner's own person and personality remain just as fascinating as any one of his paintings, especially in episodes such as the one that led to *Snowstorm: Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth* (RA 1842), which was reportedly based on a storm he experienced while tied to the mast of a ship. Since Leigh's film, another version of this episode has been created by Peter Milton, an 88-year-old American printmaker whose magisterial draughtsmanship and unflinching inventiveness – lavishly displayed on his website (<https://www.petermilton.com>) – have lately reached new heights of audacity.

In spite of his age, Milton is nothing if not up to date. In 2008, after etching prints for more than fifty years, he started producing them by means of digital technology. But for Milton, this turn to the digital is really just a delicate new

bend. Digital technology allows him to do more easily what he had been doing for more than thirty years before turning to the mouse: assembling, transforming, and synthesizing individual pictures – many of them photographs – by means of *collage*, which is the constant factor in virtually all of his work. Strictly speaking, a collage is a work of art assembled not from hand-drawn figures but from pre-existing objects – such as photographs and news clippings – that are pasted onto a flat surface, and most collages are spatially incoherent, simply juxtaposing one object – such as a text or photograph – with another on a two-dimensional plane. But Milton's prints are radically different. While often assembled from the juxtaposition of individual pictures and photographs that are now digitally integrated, they are both spatially coherent and meticulously drawn. Their composition depends quite as much on Milton's draughtsmanship as on the maneuvers of the mouse.

The content of his work is as remarkable as its style. Ever since *Mary's Turn* (1994; fig. 1), which shows Mary Cassatt playing billiards with Edgar Degas while observed by young girls drawn from her paintings, Milton has been etching nineteenth-century artists such as John Singer



Fig. 1 Peter Milton, *Points of Departure I: Mary's Turn* (1994), etching and engraving on paper. By permission of the artist



Fig. 2 Peter Milton, *Tsunami* (2015), digital print on paper. By permission of the artist

Sargent working in their studios. Milton's *Tsunami* likewise shows Turner at his easel, but far from his studio: he paints on the deck of a three-masted schooner that is perched on the crest of a gigantic wave that might have been wrought by Hokusai (fig. 2).

In turning from Degas, Cassatt, and Sargent to the depiction of Turner, Milton also turns from serene interiors to the sea—Turner's favorite subject – at its most turbulent. *Tsunami* was prompted by a story that Milton credits to Mike Leigh's film but that originates from John Ruskin's well-known report of what Turner said to a clergyman about the genesis of *Snow Storm: Steamboat*. 'I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe [the storm],' he said; 'I was lashed for four hours, and I did not expect to escape, but I felt bound to record it if I did.' In doing so, he not only impersonated Ulysses, as critics have often noted, but also re-enacted the celebrated feat of Claude-Joseph Vernet, the eighteenth-century French seascape painter whose work Turner knew very well and whose feat was depicted in 1822 by his grandson, Horace Vernet, in a painting entitled *Joseph Vernet Attached to the Mast Studying the Effects of the Storm*.

In this depiction of a painter at work on a stormy sea, the artist is commandingly poised. Disturbed by neither the dramatically steep diagonal of the hull nor the slant of lightning at upper right, he stands boldly upright at the intersection of the one nearly vertical mast and the perfectly level horizon behind him. The stability of the artist in the picture corresponds to the stability of the artist who painted it. He carefully preserves his own vantage point from the upheaval that he tries to represent.

In Turner's *Snowstorm: Steamboat*, all traditional bases

of visual stability slide away. The horizon itself tilts, and instead of a vertical line in the center we find a bowed and slanted mast. The bent mast signifies Turner's struggle to find a form that could represent what he saw from a pitching vessel in the midst of a storm. Around the anti-sun of the dark paddle wheel in the center everything else revolves, but not, significantly, in concentric circles. Instead a series of nearly straight lines radiates from the center, including the continuous line made by the mast and the right side of the triangular shadow in the foreground. By making the bent mast participate in a line that is essentially straight, Turner demonstrates his capacity to define and delineate elemental turbulence even while representing its radically destabilizing effect.

In *Tsunami*, which evokes Vernet as well as Turner, the English painter is at once a witness to the storm and the artist at work on a painting, standing with palette and brush in a *plein-air* studio that has been magically installed on the deck of a three-masted schooner named *J.M.W. Turner* (fig. 3). On an easel to the left of him is the painting in progress, which looks something like Turner's *Shipwreck* (1805), a possible model for the print as a whole; in front of him two palette stools hang slanted in mid-air, like a pair of dancers forming a V in mid-jump; to the right of him—also eased – is *The Fighting Temeraire* (1839), and to the right of that, pitched off their easels, are *The Harbour of Brest: The Quayside and Château* (c.1826–8, reversed) and *Rain, Steam, and Speed* (1844). But Turner stands securely with feet set apart, and miraculously enough, the ship named for him rides the crest of a giant wave – the tsunami itself – on a level so true that it parallels the horizon.

Along with the presence of studio furniture and several



Fig. 3 Peter Milton, *Tsunami*, detail

of Turner's paintings on the deck, this dead-levelling of the schooner on the crest of a wave exemplifies the kind of liberties that Milton often takes. While meticulously delineating a set of spatially coherent objects, he sometimes frees them from gravity, as he does with the billiard balls floating over the table in *Mary's Turn*.

Milton also takes considerable liberties with the figure of Turner himself (fig. 4). Though gravitationally steadied with

both feet on deck, he bears little resemblance to the bulky, top-hatted figure in long black coat that we typically find in pictures drawn during his lifetime, such as S.W. Parrott's *Turner on Varnishing Day* (c.1846). Besides making him much leaner, giving him a low-crowned hat, and stripping him to a shirt and vest, Milton magically fuses the bound, sea-tossed artist – unable to do anything but *see* the storm around him – with the studio artist freely using his arms and

Fig. 4 Peter Milton, *Tsunami*, detail



hands to paint. Though the work-in-progress is not clearly based on what we can see in the rest of the print, we may well imagine that Milton's Turner may be taking some liberties of his own.

On the left side of the print, well below the crest of the wave that threatens to overwhelm it, John Constable (fig. 5) gazes calmly back at the schooner while holding the long tiller of a sloop named for Effie Gray, who married Ruskin in 1848 and then – with the marriage unconsummated – left him for his pupil, John Everett Millais. Above, floating behind sails stamped with his name, a bearded and top-hatted Ruskin (fig. 6) waves the flag of the Royal Academy (RA) and stretches out his arms toward Turner, whose later works he ardently celebrated in the five volumes of *Modern Painters* (1843–60). Hovering over the bow of the sloop – perhaps thrown up by the waves – are three other men in black top hats, one of whom struggles to get control of the mainsail. And while a fourth man has just tumbled out of the boat beside Constable, he seems to be not so much sinking into the waves as floating on them. All five of Constable's fellow passengers, in fact, may be construed as somehow capable of flight, or at least of resisting gravity.

What does it all mean? As a whole, the print roughly recalls the composition of Turner's *Shipwreck* (1805), wherein a shallow trough of foamy waves stretches out between the sinking wreck at left and the gaff-rigged sloop at right: leaning over precariously, the sloop may or may not be able to rescue the passengers crowded into the lifeboat heaving in the foreground. But rather than leaning over, the schooner named for Turner in Milton's print seems as airborne as the shadowy pelicans gliding across the waves



Fig. 6 Peter Milton, *Tsunami*, detail of Ruskin

Fig. 5 Peter Milton, *Tsunami*, detail of Constable



below it. Defying gravity, its prow shoots straight ahead into thin air. Also, while several shadowy vessels seem to be sinking near the horizon, there is no shipwreck in the foreground, or at least not yet: no sinking vessel, no packed lifeboat. Constable's sloop remains afloat for now, and his calm demeanor as he sits at the tiller with his legs spread easily apart shows not the slightest trace of anxiety. He could be one of Constable's own boatmen quietly guiding a barge along a canal.

As for Ruskin, his outstretched arms not only suggest homage or appeal but also recall the upraised arms of Turner's Ulysses in *Ulysses deriding Polyphemus* (1829). In defying the monster that he and his men have just escaped, Ulysses also defies Poseidon, god of the sea as well as father of the monster, and though Poseidon later destroys nearly all of the Greeks to avenge their blinding of his son, Ulysses himself survives. Could Ruskin be likewise defying the power of the tsunami? While Milton's notes on the print describe the sloop as 'disintegrating,' neither of its

two chief passengers has yet capitulated to the waves.

In an instant, of course, both of those passengers and their boat may be overwhelmed by the tidal wave, which Milton's notes identify with Turner himself. Yet since we know very well that Constable's art was not obliterated by Turner's, that it has calmly survived for more than two hundred years, we may speculate that the one-sided contest ostensibly staged by the print is something of a draw. On the one hand, Milton's Turner reigns supreme, mastering the mightiest waters of the universe in something like the way that the Moses of Turner's *Light and Colour .... The Morning after the Deluge – Moses writing the Book of Genesis* (1843) masters – by the very act of writing about it – the orb of light that breaks through the vortex of the flood. On the other hand, Constable was never killed by Turner's art. He somehow found a way to steer his sloop to calmer waters, or take flight into the radiant realm of his magnificent clouds. To that extent, Constable found his own way of mastering the waters of the universe.

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# News and Notices

## Keiko Jennings (*née* Yamaguchi, 1941–2018)

Keiko Jennings was born in Japan. She was a respected practitioner there of Ikebana, the Japanese art of formal flower arrangement, which has special regard for balance, harmony and form. On her arrival in London she hoped to establish her practice here on a professional basis but, sadly, that proved to be an economic impossibility. Accordingly her working life in London related to Japanese financial institutions in the City and then for Cordon Bleu.

On retirement she attended art classes in portrait, watercolour and oils. She was a talented artist and the skills she learnt from Ikebana allowed her to produce artworks suffused with both light and colour and balanced in composition. Unsurprisingly still life (with flowers) and landscape were among her favourite subjects. She loved to travel in Europe and to Japan and her painting benefited from her real appreciation of the countryside she was able to view. Her style involved careful and controlled brushstrokes and each piece had a long gestation and was constantly reworked.

Painting as improvisation was not her personal watchword. She preferred the depiction of the picturesque and the ideal. What we each see is coloured by our own memory and feelings: her own visual universe was undoubtedly grounded in Japan and the Japanese aesthetic. Whilst she was no great fan of contemporary art she could, from time to time, be persuaded to change her view. For instance, she delighted in the balance and pictorial delight of the mobiles exhibited in the recent Alexander Calder exhibition at Tate Modern.

Perhaps the artist that inspired her most was Turner and she studied his art with considerable enthusiasm. She was a valued and devoted member of the Turner Society, rarely missing any event.

Margaret O'Neill

## Turner Studies

As mentioned in TSN 129, many individual issues of the invaluable journal *Turner Studies*, published by Tate in the 1980s, are available from the Society; please contact our Publications Secretary Ian Guy at 53 Woodside Road, Tonbridge, Kent, TN9 2PD.

## Ruskin To-day

Turner-lovers will hardly need reminding that the bicentenary of Ruskin's birth falls on 8 February 2019. For the forthcoming exhibitions in London, York, Sheffield and Kendal, see the **Gazetteer** on the inside back cover. Meanwhile, our hearty congratulations go to the doyen of Ruskin studies, Dr James S. Dearden, who was awarded an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours in June. An impressive listing of Ruskin-related exhibitions, conferences, lectures and other events, all over the world, can be found on the Calendar page of the website [www.ruskinto-day.org](http://www.ruskinto-day.org).

## Sandycombe Lodge, Twickenham

The conservation work of Butler Hegarty Architects for Turner's House Trust has earned many plaudits since Sandycombe Lodge reopened to the public in the summer of 2017. It was a 'Highly Commended' runner-up in the 'Country House' category of the Georgian Group's 2017 Architectural Awards. It won one of the RIBA 'London Awards' for 2018 and was also the outright winner of the RIBA 'London Conservation Award'. The project was highly commended in the 2018 Civic Voice Design Awards 'Historic Buildings' category and was the winner of the Civic Voice 'People's Award'. Renewed congratulations to all concerned!