

# The Fighting Temeraire

---

*The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth to be broken up, 1838* is an oil painting by the English artist [Joseph Mallord William Turner](#). It was painted in 1838 and exhibited at the [Royal Academy](#) in 1839.<sup>[1]</sup> The 98-gun ship [HMS Temeraire](#) was one of the last [second-rate ships of the line](#) to have played a distinguished role in the [Battle of Trafalgar](#) in 1805. The painting depicts HMS *Temeraire* being towed by a paddle-wheel steam tug towards its final berth in [Rotherhithe](#) in south-east London in 1838 to be broken up for scrap. The painting hangs in the [National Gallery](#), London, having been bequeathed to the nation by the artist in 1851. In 2005 it was [voted the nation's favourite painting](#) in a poll organised by [BBC Radio 4's Today programme](#).<sup>[2]</sup>

*The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last Berth to be broken up, 1838*



<b>Artist</b>	J. M. W. Turner
<b>Year</b>	1839
<b>Medium</b>	Oil on canvas
<b>Dimensions</b>	91 cm × 122 cm (36 in × 48 in)
<b>Location</b>	National Gallery, London

## Contents

---

**Background**

**Symbolism**

**Artistic licence**

**History of the painting**

**In popular culture**

**Notes**

**References**

**External links**

## Background

---

When Turner came to paint this picture he was at the height of his career, having exhibited at the [Royal Academy](#), London, for 40 years.<sup>[3]</sup> He was renowned for his highly atmospheric paintings in which he explored the subjects of the weather, the sea and the effects of light. He spent much of his life near the River Thames and did many paintings of ships and waterside scenes, both in watercolour and in oils. Turner frequently made small sketches and then worked them into finished paintings in the studio.

He may or may not have witnessed the actual towing of *Temeraire* and used considerable licence in the painting which had a symbolic meaning for him, that his first audience immediately appreciated.<sup>[4][5]</sup> Turner had been eighteen years old when Britain entered the [Napoleonic Wars](#) and "had a strong patriotic streak". The *Temeraire* was a very well-known ship from her heroic performance at Trafalgar, and her sale by the Admiralty had attracted substantial press coverage, which was probably what brought the subject to his attention!<sup>[6]</sup>

## Symbolism

---

The composition of this painting is unusual in that the most significant object, the old warship, is positioned well to the left of the painting, where it rises in stately splendour and almost ghostlike colours against a triangle of blue sky and rising mist that throws it into relief. The beauty of the old ship is in stark contrast to the dirty blackened tugboat with its tall [smokestack](#), which scurries across the still surface of the river



Detail

Turner has used the triangle of blue to frame a second triangle of masted ships, which progressively decrease in size as they become more distant. *Temeraire* and tugboat have passed a small river craft with its gaff rigged sail barely catching a breeze. Beyond this a square-rigger drifts, with every bit of sail extended. Another small craft shows as a patch of white farther down the river. In the far distance, beyond the second tugboat which makes its way towards them, a three-masted ship rides at anchor. The becalmed sailing vessels show the obsolescence of sail.

On the opposite side of the painting to *Temeraire*, and exactly the same distance from the frame as the ship's main mast, the sun sets above the estuary, its rays extending into the clouds above it, and across the surface of the water. The flaming red of the clouds is reflected in the river. It exactly repeats the colour of the smoke which pours from the funnel of the tugboat. The sun setting symbolises the end of an epoch in the history of the British Royal Navy<sup>[7]</sup>

Behind *Temeraire*, a gleaming sliver of the waxing moon casts a silvery beam across the river, symbolising the commencement of the new, industrial era.<sup>[8]</sup> The demise

of heroic strength is the subject of the painting, and it has been suggested that the ship stands for the artist himself, with an accomplished and glorious past but now contemplating his mortality. Turner called the work his "darling", which may have been due to its beauty, or his identification with the subject.<sup>[9]</sup>

Sir Henry Newbolt wrote later a ballad titled *The Fighting Temeraire*, describing the same scene: "And she's fading down the river, But in England's song for ever She's the Fighting Téméraire."

## Artistic licence

Turner took some artistic licence with the painting. The ship was known to her crew as "Saucy", rather than "Fighting" *Temeraire*.<sup>[10]</sup> Before being sold to the ship-breaker John Beatson, the ship had been lying at Sheerness Dockyard and was then moved to his wharf at Rotherhithe.<sup>[11]</sup> As shown in a "prosaic drawing, made on the spot by a trained observer" (William Beatson, the ship-breaker's brother) and turned into a lithograph, her masts and rigging were removed before her sale and journey to the breaker's yard.<sup>[12]</sup> All of her cannon, anchors and assorted hardware had been removed and salvaged for the navy to use as spare parts.<sup>[13][14]</sup> She was towed by two tugboats, not just one,<sup>[15]</sup> and in the other direction (the sun sets in the west, while the Thames estuary is at the river's eastern end).<sup>[16]</sup>

## History of the painting

When exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1839 the painting was a considerable success, praised in various of the lengthy press reviews that the Summer Exhibitions then received as a "grand image of the last days of one of Britain's bulwarks" as *The Spectator* put it.<sup>[17]</sup> The novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, reviewing for *Fraser's Magazine* "in the form of mostly facetious letters" supposedly by "Michael Angelo Titmarsh Esq." abandoned his usual flippant tone when discussing "as grand a picture as ever figured on the walls of any academy, or came from the easel of any painter".<sup>[18]</sup> Turner displayed the painting in 1839 accompanied by an altered excerpt from Thomas Campbells poem *Ye Mariners of England* reading:

The flag which braved the battle and the breeze,  
No longer owns her<sup>[19][20][13]</sup>



Detail of bottom right corner

Turner kept the painting in his studio, which also functioned as a showroom for buyers, until his death. In 1844 he lent it as part of his deal for reproductions to the print publisher J. Hogarth, who exhibited it at his premises, but about a year later wrote a draft note replying to another request saying that "no consid[eratio]ns of money or favour can induce me to lend my Darling again...". Hogarth's steel engraving by James Tibbitts Willmore, who had often engraved Turners, was published in 1845 and was the first of many reproductions in various techniques.<sup>[21]</sup> In about 1848 Turner refused an offer to buy the painting reputed to have been £5,000, followed by a "blank cheque", having determined to leave it to the nation, and already being very well-off.<sup>[22]</sup>

It was evidently usually among the works on display in the studio, and is mentioned by several visitors.<sup>[22]</sup> He intended to leave his paintings to the nation but the terms of his will were unclear and after his death in 1851 his will was contested by relatives, and several years of litigation were only ended in 1856, when this and a large body of other work entered the collection of the National Gallery. Most of the "Turner Bequest" was turned over to Tate Britain when that was established in 1897, but the *Fighting Temeraire* remained in the National Gallery. It was in the Tate Gallery (as it then was) from 1910 to 1914 and 1960 to 1961, and for six months in 1987 to mark the opening of the Clore Gallery there, which houses the rest of the Bequest. In 1947–48 it went on a European tour to Amsterdam, Bern, Paris, Brussels, Liège, ending at the Venice Biennale. In 1952 it was exhibited in Cape Town.<sup>[21]</sup>

The picture remains in "exceptionally good condition", apart from slightly discoloured varnish, and seems never to have received conservation treatment beyond the removal of surface dirt in 1945 and a lining in 1963. X-ray images reveal that Turner seems to have used a canvas on which he had started another marine picture, with a large sail where the tugboat's above deck structures now are.<sup>[21]</sup>

## In popular culture

---

The painting is used in the 2012 James Bond film *Skyfall* to be symbolic of Bond's age and current standing within MI6:

Q: "Always makes me feel a little melancholy. Grand old war ship, being ignominiously hauled away for scrap... The inevitability of time, don't you think? What do you see?"

Bond: "A bloody big ship."<sup>[23]</sup>

## Notes

---

1. Willis. *The Fighting Temeraire*. p. 266.
2. Willis. *The Fighting Temeraire*. p. 268.
3. "*The Fighting Temeraire*" (<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/joseph-mallord-william-turner-the-fighting-temeraire>). National Gallery. Retrieved 6 January 2018.
4. Egerton, 310–314
5. Moyle, 383
6. Egerton, 309–310, 309 quoted
7. Venning, B (2003) "Turner" p. 241
8. Langmuir, 326
9. Wilton, p. 212; *citing* Hawes, pp. 34–38.
10. Reynolds, Nigel (6 September 2005). "Turner's *Fighting Temeraire* sinks the opposition" (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1497703/Turners-Fighting-Temeraire-sinks-the-opposition.html>) *The Daily Telegraph*.
11. Egerton, 309
12. Egerton, 309
13. "*The Fighting Temeraire*, tugged to her Last Berth to be broken up, 1838, 91×122 cm National Gallery" (<http://www.j-m-w-turner.co.uk/turner-temeraire.htm>) William Turner, Painter of Light j-m-w-turnerco.uk. Retrieved 8 February 2012.
14. Egerton, 308–309
15. Hawes. p. 24.

16. Hawes, noting that: "Also, the locale of the painting may possibly be "Lime House Reach," near Greenwich and Rotherhithe, which runs south for a brief stretch; this is the one area along the Thames where the setting September sun would appear, in actuality, to the right of the ship, albeit considerably farther to the right than in the painting". Hawes, p. 43, footnote 6. However, since it is unlikely Turner actually saw the journey from any vantage place, the point is moot.
17. Egerton, 313, edition of 11 May 1839
18. Egerton, 313, edition 1839, X for June
19. Adkin. *The Trafalgar Companion* p. 310.
20. Willis. *The Fighting Temeraire*. p. 274.
21. Egerton, 306
22. Egerton, 314
23. The Art of Film (20 November 2012). "[The Art of Film : Skyfall: The Fighting Temeraire](http://theartofilm.blogspot.com/2012/11/skyfall-fighting-temeraire.html)" (<http://theartofilm.blogspot.com/2012/11/skyfall-fighting-temeraire.html>) Theartofilm.blogspot.com Retrieved 22 September 2013.

## References

---

- Adkin, Mark (2007). *The Trafalgar Companion: A Guide to History's Most Famous Sea Battle and the Life of Admiral Lord Nelson*. London: Aurum Press. ISBN 1-84513-018-9.
- Egerton, Judy (1998). National Gallery Catalogues (new series) *The British School* ISBN 1857091701
- Hawes, Louis (1972). "Turner's *Fighting Temeraire*". *Art Quarterly*, XXXV, pp. 22–48.
- Langmuir, Erica (1997). *The National Gallery companion guide* (revised edition). London: National Gallery ISBN 185709218X
- Moyle, Franny (2016). *Turner: The Extraordinary Life and Moments of Times of J.M.W. Turner*. ISBN 0735220921
- Willis, Sam (2010). *The Fighting Temeraire: Legend of Trafalgar*. London: Quercus. ISBN 978-1-84916-261-6
- Wilton, Andrew (1979). *J.M.W. Turner: His Art and Life* Tabard Press. ISBN 0-914427-01-6
- *The Oxford Companion to J.M.W. Turner* (Evelyn Joll, Martin Butlin, and Luke Hermann, editors), pp. 106-07 New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. ISBN 0 19 860025 9

## External links

---

- [The Fighting Temeraire Analysis and Critical Reception](#)
- [National Gallery information](#)
- [Readbook Online](#)
- [BBC 'In our time' podcast, November 2016](#)
- [Discussion by Janina Ramirez and Dan Snow: Art Detective Podcast, 28 December 2016](#)
- [Lecture on The Fighting Temeraire by Matthew Morgan - National Gallery Lunchtime talk](#)

---

Retrieved from ['https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The\\_Fighting\\_Temeraire&oldid=862849809'](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=The_Fighting_Temeraire&oldid=862849809)

---

**This page was last edited on 7 October 2018, at 03:25(UTC).**

Text is available under the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License](#); additional terms may apply. By using this site, you agree to the [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the [Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.](#), a non-profit organization.