
THE ENGLISH TRAIL AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY

Introduction

The National gallery was opened for all, like the Louvre in Paris and le Prado in Madrid at the beginning of the 19th century. The goal was to educate people and entertain at once, and more unrealistic “to take away people from drinking” as said a draft bill about the museum in 1834.

The NG owns a collection of paintings dating from the 13th century (middle-age) to 1900 (Impressionism). In the NG you may find plenty of landscapes but you may notice that they're mostly used as backgrounds in the mythological and religious paintings of the Renaissance. Indeed, it's only in the 17th century that they become more important and the main inspiration of artists in the 19th century.

Example of landscape becoming important but not the main topic.

ETON COLLEGE, CANALETTO – ABOUT 1754 – ROOM 38

Here is a view of Eton College, next to Windsor where lives the royal family. Canaletto was an Italian painter very appreciated by English collectors. This view of Eton College is flattering England. 'Eton' is indeed an elitist boys' school founded by Henry VI (15th century) that has educated nineteen British Prime Ministers and generations of aristocracy!



The painting is remarkable for its precision in the details and the depiction of the landscape thanks to the use of a camera obscura. However, some details were probably invented.

THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH, *MR AND MRS ANDREW*, 1750



Questions to the participants.

To your opinion, is it a portrait or a landscape?

Does it look like one of your countries' landscape? Could that be France, Germany?

Here is a painting by Gainsborough, one of the most important painters of England. It represents the recent union of 2 fashionable people (British bourgeoisie).

You may notice that half of the painting is a British rural landscape. This landscape evokes Robert Andrews's estate, to which his marriage added property. The emphasis on the landscape here allows Gainsborough to display his skills as a painter of convincingly changing weather and naturalistic scenery, still a novelty at this time.

And indeed, in the Academic system (the Royal Academy), landscapes still hold the fourth place in the hierarchy of the genres:

- | | | |
|---------------------|------------------------|---------------|
| 1. History painting | 3. Genre painting | 5. Animals |
| 2. Portraiture | 4. Landscapes painting | 6. Still life |

CONSTABLE, *STRATFORD MILL, AROUND 1820*



['Great Britain, 1750-1850' room nb 34.](#)

Constable and the Suffolk (North East of London)

Questions to the participants:

What do you see?

Do you like it?

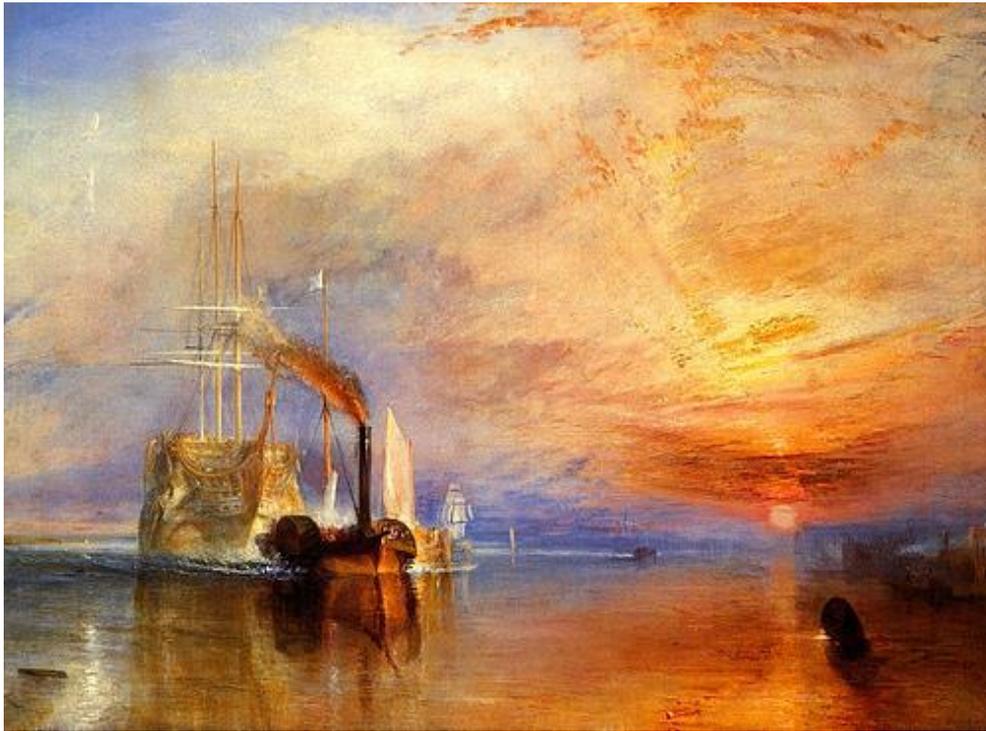
Is this typical from what you think of England? Is it a chocking painting for you?

The painting is rather peaceful although the rural life at that time was rather difficult. The painter idealises on purpose the landscapes of his native Suffolk.

If the painting doesn't seem chocking for us nowadays, it was really provocative at that time, because of the genre hierarchy, and that was Constable's goal. He wanted to prove that he could master his art through landscapes (effects of light, weather, contemplation).

Although this painting is typically British, Constable wasn't very popular in his country. However, Constable's novel approach to landscape was received with more enthusiasm in France.

TURNER, *THE FLIGHTING TEMERAIRE*, 1839



Questions to the participants

What kind of emotion do you have in front of this painting? Sadness, nostalgia, joy, euphoria?

Or which adjective would you use to describe this painting?

Do you see imperfections?

The painting shows the *Flighting Temeraire*, a ship that played a role in the victory of the Great Britain over France during the Battle of Trafalgar (1805). 1838, the boat is now returning on the Thames to be destroyed.

Turner evokes the loss of the Britain's naval power. There is a sense of nostalgia while the sun fades away...the light/power is now behind.

Here again, the painter masters the effects of light and of the water.

[Room 41-42: The Academy. We will reach directly the Room 43.](#)

VIEW OF THE THAMES,
CHARING CROSS BRIDGE, SISLEY, 1974



ROOM 43: Impressionism

Can you recognise where it is, what it is?

Sisley is also a member of the Impressionists painters. He was born in Paris from British parents.

The painting is kind of fuzzy, like a glimpse on a busy scene. It's the Modern life. The Thames is full of steamboats. Here again, the painter tries to capture the effects of light (some pink in the sky, like the morning), the abstract city from far away, the reflects of the sky on the water, the steam from the boats.

THE THAMES BELOW WESTMINSTER, MONET, 1971



Questions to the participants

What are the main colours of this painting?

Do you see any warm colour?

What do you think is the main theme of this painting?

Monet managed to capture the effects of the famous London fog! Monet used to say that *London would be a pretty city without its*

fog. The fog is hiding the Houses of Parliament but we can still guess its shape. However Westminster is not the main topic of this painting, it's just a pretext to paint the sky, the river, and the atmospheric effects. The main topic is merely paint.