

Van Tromp, Going About to Please His Masters



Joseph Mallord William Turner
English, 1844
Oil on canvas
36 x 48 in.
93.PA.32

Background Information

In this narrative history painting, Joseph Mallord William Turner expressed the power of nature and the heroism of man through the eyes of a Romantic painter. Turner used quick, slanting brushstrokes to describe the stormy sky. The application of scumbled white paint suggests churning, turbulent seas and the heavy spray of waves hitting the ship's bow. Tones of brown paint near the bottom of the canvas give a sense of the sea's violent power.

On the foredeck of a ship that strains against the waves, a man stands in a white uniform and waves with confidence. While scholars are uncertain of the exact historical event Turner described, one probable interpretation is that the man depicted here is Dutch naval officer Cornelis Van Tromp, who was dismissed from naval service in 1666 after failing to follow orders. Van Tromp was reinstated in service and reconciled with his navy superiors in 1673. In perhaps a symbolic overture signaling his submission to authority, Tromp is shown, in Turner's words, "going about to please his Masters."

Van Tromp, Going About to Please His Masters, 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 20,000 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 figures. What do you think they are doing?

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