

Turner: In Light and Shade

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The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester

Curated by Imogen Holmes-Roe. The exhibition is supported by the Manchester Accommodation BID.

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The twenty-third of April 2025 marked 250 years since the birth of Britain's most famous landscape painter, Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851). This year, institutions across the country are celebrating the artist by giving visitors the chance to discover his work anew and, hopefully, see the painter from fresh perspectives. This is the central aim of *Turner: In Light and Shade*, on display in Gallery Three at The Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester. The exhibition examines Turner's artistic practice and legacy through the lens of his *Liber Studiorum*, a fourteen-part series of landscape and seascape prints published between 1807 and 1819. *Liber Studiorum*, a Latin title which translates to 'book of studies', has often been overlooked, making this exhibition all the more important. For the first time in one-hundred years, the Whitworth presents all seventy-one published prints alongside a selection of watercolours from the gallery's collection, as well as loaned works from public and private collections. The result is an enlightening dialogue that leads the viewer to reflect and review preconceived notions of Turner as an artist.

The exhibition begins by setting up the conversation that will unfold between Turner, the painter, and Turner, the printmaker. We arrive at the plate, *Drawing of the Clyde* (1809), hanging alongside a larger, evocative watercolour, *The Fall of the Clyde, Lanarkshire—Noon* (1802), from which it derived. This juxtaposition of watercolours and plates continues throughout the show, encouraging viewers to consider the relationship between the *Liber* and Turner's better known paintings from the start. The accompanying labels draw attention to the way in which the artist was able to translate his signature atmospheric effects and *chiaroscuro* from watercolour into print, evoking an equally animated and emotive image.

As we move onto the next wall of pictures, we are reminded that this creative exchange could not have been achieved without the skill and experience of the mezzotint engravers, who assisted Turner in his project. The plate of *Lake Thun, Switzerland* (1807-1808) is presented in six different iterations, which provide a glimpse into the laborious and time-intensive process of printmaking. This includes the initial graphite sketch that became the watercolour, followed by Turner's sepia-toned painted reproduction for the engraver. Out of the six examples, the rare surviving engraver's proof is especially eye-catching with annotations from the artist to the engraver, Charles Turner (fig. 1, c. 1807-08). As the label suggests, these comments reveal the increasingly fractious relationship between the two men, thus colouring our perception of the kind of collaborator Turner could be. Such details provide insight into Turner's leadership within the *Liber* project, revealing him to be something of a micro-manager who was involved in every step of the process, including engraving eleven of the seventy-one prints himself, despite having a limited working knowledge of the mezzotint technique.



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Figure 1. J. M. W. Turner, *Lake Thun, Switzerland*, c. 1807-08, touched proof, installation view. The Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, 2025. Author's photograph.



As much as this exhibition is concerned with recognising Turner's activities as both a printmaker and publisher, it also asks us to reconsider our preconceptions of printmaking as an art form. Similarly to landscape painting, printmaking was considered an inferior art during the time of the *Liber Studiorum*'s conception. Turner, however, saw the creative potential of both mediums and repeatedly brought them together throughout the *Liber*'s fourteen iterations. As mentioned above, there is some discussion of Turner's fellow collaborators on this project. Nevertheless, the exhibition could have told us more about the lives and contributions of the engravers who made the *Liber* possible.

In the second room, the prints are allowed to speak for themselves. Here, the majority of the *Liber* contents are hung in two spacious rows on the walls of the airy gallery, giving the sense that, finally, the *Liber* has been granted the space it deserves and so be celebrated as a work of art in itself (fig. 2). This room showcases the innovation of Turner's printmaking, characterised by the expressive fluidity and variety of landscapes on display, which include scenes from rural farm life, the Bible, literature, mythology, marine scenes, and church interiors.



Figure 2. J. M. W. Turner, *Liber Studiorum*, installation view. The Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, 2025. Author's photograph.

Alongside the artworks, the exhibition features large display cases that highlight the physicality of printmaking through objects including engraver's tools, a scale ruler, and Turner's handwritten notes on his original method of landscape categorisation and the planned structure for the book (fig. 3, 4). Other displays underline Turner's influences, notably that of the influential French painter Claude Lorrain (c. 1604/5-1682), whose *Liber Vertatis* was the main inspiration for Turner's own iteration.

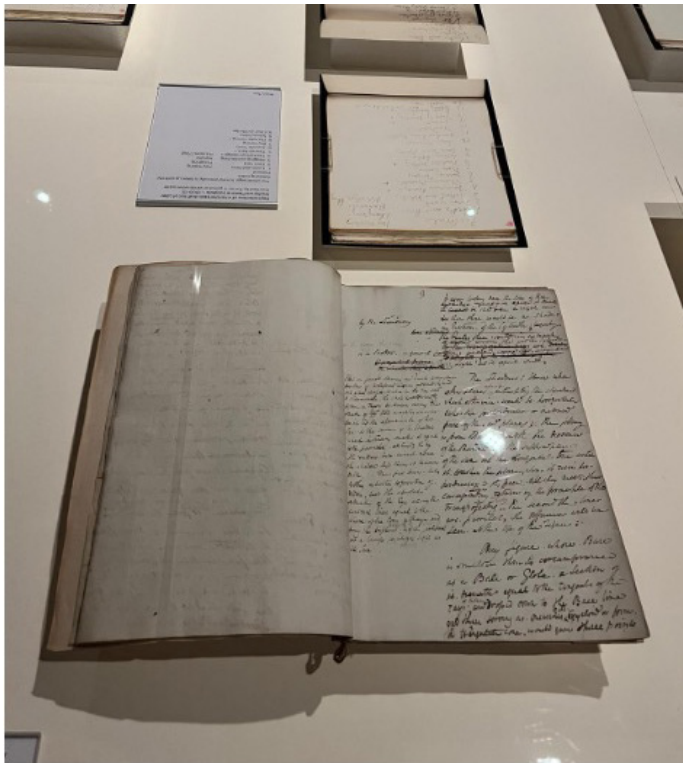


Figure 3. J. M. W. Turner, *Light and Shade*, Handwritten Lecture Manuscript while Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy, installation view. The Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, 2025. Author's

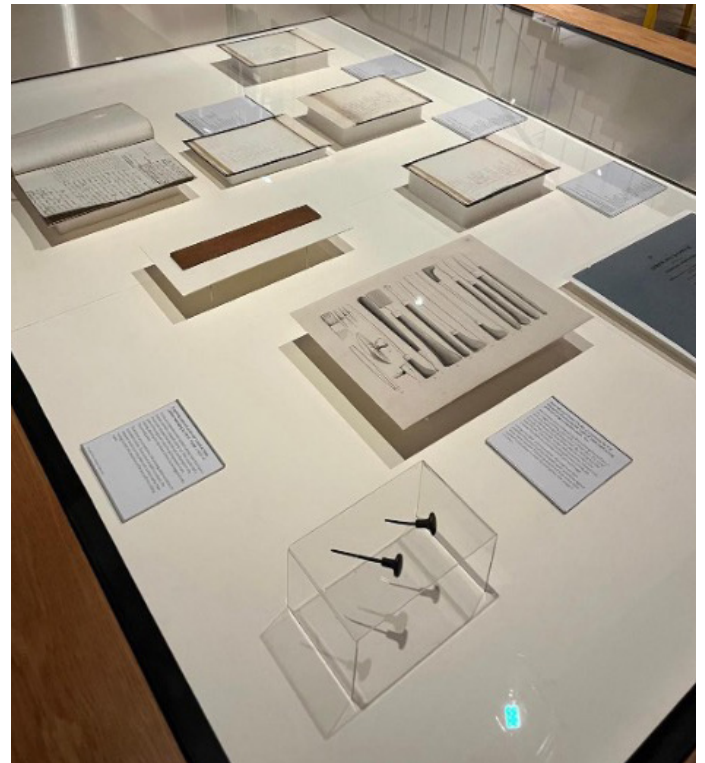


Figure 4. Turner: *In Light and Shade*, installation view. The Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, 2025. Author's photograph.

The exhibition is filled with images, and, most notably, it is full of voices. In allowing the *Liber* prints to take centre stage in the dialogue, we are offered a rare glimpse into Turner as a collaborator in his art, which expands his legacy beyond the famous oil and watercolour paintings. After this exhibition, there is no doubt that many people will have more to think—and say—about J. M. W. Turner: the printmaker and the painter.