



## Slave Ship

(Slavers Throwing Overboard  
the Dead and Dying—  
Typhoon Coming On)

(1840)

*Joseph Mallord William Turner*



Owning an original painting by an artist one greatly admires can be a thrill of immense proportions. But over time, could that painting have an ill effect on the enraptured owner and bring about a change of heart?

NEW YEAR'S DAY 1844 was a felicitous occasion for the Ruskins of Denmark Hill. The family was settled in at their stately new mansion outside London, to which they had moved just a year earlier from Herne Hill. The senior John Ruskin's wine distribution business continued to flourish, and son John, lately recuperated from a debilitating illness and graduated from Oxford, was enjoying remarkable success with his recently published tome on art and nature, *Modern Painters*. At this propitious time the father

lavished on his beloved twenty-four-year-old son a gift that sent him into ecstasies of delight. The object of this elation was an oil painting by Joseph Mallord William Turner.

Young Ruskin was a devotee of Turner's work, and any canvas by the artist would doubtless have been sufficient to elicit the young man's joy and excitement. When he was thirteen, he had received from his father's business partner a gift to which he attributed "the entire direction of my life's energies." It was the new illustrated edition of *Italy* by the English poet Samuel Rogers, and it contained vignettes by Joseph Mallord William Turner. Turner's artwork moved the boy deeply. As he would later write, no matter what the subject, he was fascinated by the pure artistic quality of Turner's work. It inspired the schoolboy to draw from it his own lessons, and he became an ardent admirer of the artist.

The gift from his father, *Slave Ship*, had special meaning for the blossoming art scholar. Ruskin's first volume of his seminal *Modern Painters* had grown out of his eloquent defense of Turner in an essay in *Blackwood's Magazine* in response to a scathing article that had appeared in the publication after Turner displayed three pictures—*Juliet and Her Nurse*, *Mercury and Argus*, and *Rome from Mount Aventine*—at the 1836 Royal Academy exhibition. In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin continued his focus on Turner, writing a rich and perceptive passage about Turner's *Slave Ship*, which had been disparaged by critics when it was first unveiled at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1840:

It is a sunset on the Atlantic after prolonged storm; but the storm is partially lulled, and the torn and streaming rain-clouds are moving in scarlet lines. . . . The whole surface of sea . . . is divided into two ridges of enormous swell . . . a low, broad heaving of the whole ocean, like the lifting of its bosom by deep-drawn breath after the torture of the storm.

Between these two ridges, the fire of the sunset falls along the trough of the sea, dyeing it with an . . . intense and lurid splendor. . . . The tossing waves by which the swell of the sea is restlessly divided, lift themselves in dark, indefinite, fantastic forms . . . leaving between them treacherous spaces of level and whirling water, now lighted with green and lamp-like fire, now flashing back the gold of the declining sun, now fearfully dyed from above with the indistinguishable images of the burning clouds, which fall upon them in flakes of crimson and scarlet. . . .

Purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the mist of the night . . . advancing like the shadow of death upon the guilty ship as it labors amidst the lightning of the sea, its thin masts written upon the sky in lines of blood, girded with condemnation.

For Ruskin, to write about a work of art he revered and then to become its owner must have been an unparalleled joy. His father, knowing well how to please his son, had bought this New Year's gift directly from the gallery where Turner's pictures were being

sold. The young man could barely contain his excitement. "I had it at the foot of my bed the next morning," he later declared. And although he could empathize with the pleasure that comes with acquiring a first work of art, his new possession was nothing less than a collector's acme of bliss. "The pleasure of one's own first painting everybody can understand," he wrote. "The pleasure of a new Turner to me, nobody ever will and it's no use talking of it."

Ruskin's vivid panegyric on *Slave Ship* in *Modern Painters* showed prodigious insight into the painter's creative process. His interpretation of Turner's artistic imagery as the painter's commentary on the slave trade underscored his awareness of the painting's harrowing theme: the transportation of Africans aboard a slaver.

The bright, glowing canvas depicts a skeletonlike slaver in the middle distance being tossed about violently on raging waves. Mangled bodies struggle to stay afloat in the foreground, desperate hands outstretched above the water amid improbable tangles of chains. A viciously livid sun dominates the chaotic sky, searingly illuminating the sea below. The painting portrays the horrific practice of slave jettisons.

What inspired Turner to paint this ghastly scene?

One source was Thomas Clarkson's *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, which was originally published in 1808 but had been reprinted in 1839, the year before Turner painted *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On*, as the painting was titled when he exhibited it at the Royal Academy. The "typhoon" in the title referred not just to the typhoon at sea,

but also to the furious storm of public indignation at the atrocities of the slave trade. Clarkson's book contained an account of the court case concerning the infamous *Zong* jettison, a widely circulated story that Turner, born in 1775, no doubt heard as a youth.

In early September 1781, the slaver *Zong* set out from the coast of Africa for Jamaica. More than four hundred Africans were stowed on board in chains, to be disposed of in the New World as slaves. As the ship neared Jamaica toward the end of November, Captain Collingwood called a few of his officers together. Illness on board ship was rampant; some five dozen slaves had perished, and it appeared that many others were not likely to survive. The captain was concerned about the economic loss.

ILLNESS WAS A major concern for slave traders; due to the austere conditions on board slave ships, Africans routinely became sick on the harsh Middle Passage voyages. Alexander Falconbridge, a British surgeon who served on slave ships in the late eighteenth century, was an eyewitness to the horrendous conditions. He wrote that when the slaves were brought on board, they were "immediately fastened together two by two, by handcuffs on their wrists, and by irons riveted on their legs." In their quarters they were "frequently stowed so close as to admit no other posture than lying on their sides."

The hardships suffered by the slaves, Falconbridge continued, were unimaginable. Perhaps most unbearable was the lack of fresh air; under these crowded conditions, the slave compartments were intolerably hot. When slaves became ill, said Falconbridge, the floors were so covered with blood and mucus that

the deck "resembled a slaughterhouse." He described one slaver that had taken on almost seven hundred Africans, such a great number that they were "obliged to lie upon one another." Nearly half the slaves died before the ship arrived at its destination in the West Indies. The sick slaves were put in a special compartment to lie on bare boards. Those who were emaciated, he wrote, frequently had "their skin, and even their flesh, entirely rubbed off, from the prominent parts of the shoulder, elbows and hips, so as to render the bones in those parts quite bare." The suffering slaves would be "obliged to continue in so dreadful a situation, frequently for several weeks," if they lived that long, and their excruciating pain was "not to be conceived or described."

WITH HIS OFFICERS, Captain Collingwood hatched a plan to throw the sick slaves overboard for the insurance money. The value of slaves lost at sea would be reimbursable, while that of slaves who died of sickness contracted on board would not.

Collingwood selected from his human cargo who would remain on board, and who would be cast over the side. From the ailing slaves, he chose more than 130 of those who were most gravely ill. Of this lot, 54 were immediately tossed to their deaths. The next day, 42 more were jettisoned.

Over the next three days, the remaining slaves selected by Collingwood were brought on deck. Some did not resist their masters and went overboard compliantly. Others would not go to their deaths at the hands of their murderers, and in this despair-

ing moment found the courage to join their massacred brethren by leaping into the ocean of their own volition.

The *Zong* put in to Jamaica and off-loaded the surviving slaves, then returned to England, where the ship's owners put in a claim to the insurer for the full value of the jettisoned slaves, contending their loss was coverable by the underwriters. The ship's underwriters, however, claimed that the ship's crew threw the slaves alive into the ocean in order to fleece them.

In 1783 the *Zong* case was brought to trial. According to Clarkson:

The plea, which was set up in behalf of this atrocious and unparalleled act of wickedness, was, that the captain discovered, when he made the proposal, that he had only two hundred gallons of water on board. . . . It was proved, however, in answer to this, that no one had been put upon short allowance; and that, as if Providence had determined to afford an unequivocal proof of the guilt, a shower of rain fell and continued for three days immediately after the second lot of slaves had been destroyed, by means of which they might have filled many of the vessels with water, and thus have prevented all necessity for the destruction of the third.

Although the excuse about the shortage of water was demolished, the jury surprisingly ruled in favor of Collingwood and the ship's proprietors.

TURNER, A PAINTER of landscapes and sea scenes, also drew inspiration for his painting from a poem by James Thomson. Thomson's was one of the few voices to speak out against the thriving British slave trade in the first half of the eighteenth century. Human bondage in various forms had long been a scourge of civilization, but perhaps never had so many people been so cruelly subjugated as under the colonial European slave trade. To many, slavery itself was appalling enough. But throwing slaves to their deaths in the ocean was the nadir of human cruelty.

In his 1727 poem "Summer," which became a section of his long poem *The Seasons*, Thomson bewailed the practice of ejecting slaves from ships, even hinting at divine fury over this vile act. In Thomson's summer day, "the aerial tumult swells," as if a harbinger of disaster. The storm is so awesome that the heavens seem to open, "exhausting all the rage of the sky." But the waters below hide a menace even more fearsome: a monster lurks in the roiling waters, "lured by the scent of steaming crowds, of rank disease, and death."

*Behold! he rushing cuts the briny flood,  
Swift as the gale can bear the ship along;  
And from the partners of that cruel trade  
Which spoils unhappy Guinea of her sons  
Demands his share of prey . . . their mangled limbs  
Crashing at once, he dyes the purple seas  
With gore, and riots in the vengeful meal.*

The content of Turner's *Slave Ship* was clearly painful to those who saw slavery as immoral, and Ruskin, a religious man, abhorred slavery. The *Zong* verdict was appealed, but surely the new outcome was hardly satisfying to the abolitionists. Charles Stuart described the arguments for and against the appeal in his 1836 *Memoir of Granville Sharp*:

A Mr. J. Lee, the counsel for the ship's proprietors, rejected the idea of taking the case further. The master, he asserted, had an unquestionable right to take the actions he did. "This is a case," he said, "of *goods and chattels*. . . [The Africans] are goods and property—*whether right or wrong*, we have nothing to do with it."

Mr. Pigot, on the part of the underwriters, said, "The life of one man, is like the life of another man, whatever the complexion is. . . I contend, that as long as any water remained, these men were as much entitled to their share, as the captain, or any other man whatever."

Lord [Chief Justice James] Mansfield, regarding the matter with a legal eye, declared, "The matter left to the jury, is 'was it from necessity'?—for they had no doubt (*though it shocks one very much*) that the case of *slaves*, was the same as if horses had been thrown overboard!! *It is a very shocking case.*"

Lord Mansfield granted a new trial.

Eventually the underwriters in the *Zong* case received a favor-

able verdict. But sadly, as Stuart pointed out, "so thoroughly corrupt and ferocious . . . was the state of legality then in England, that no prosecution could be had of the murderers."

Turner's painting was a strident reminder of the barbarity of the international slave trade, which had finally been outlawed in Great Britain, and its theme came to weigh heavily on its owner. For all the artistic merit Ruskin saw in it, the misery and injustice evoked by Turner's brushstrokes haunted him. After owning *Slave Ship* for a quarter of a century, Ruskin, who had so distinguished himself over the years that he would become perhaps the nineteenth century's most influential art critic, found that this graphic representation of cruelty and suffering was simply too painful to live with. He would have to relinquish the painting of which he had written, "I think the noblest sea that Turner has painted, and, if so, the noblest ever painted by man, is that of the *Slave Ship*, the chief Academy picture of the exhibition of 1840."

Ruskin turned the painting over to Christie's, but in the auction it held on April 1869, the bidding failed to meet its reserve. It occurred to Ruskin that America, which only a decade earlier had been in the throes of its own internecine battle over slavery, might be a proper place for it, and he had it shipped to Samuel P. Avery, a prominent art dealer in New York. In 1872 Avery arranged for his friend John Taylor Johnston, a railroad magnate, to acquire the painting from the British art critic. Johnston was also an avid art collector and a cofounder of New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art, of which he served as president.

When the sale was concluded, Ruskin was unburdened of Turner's frightful vision.

Ruskin had, however, already immortalized his opinion of the work. By this time, his dazzling passage about *Slave Ship* in *Modern Painters* had become world famous. It concluded:

I believe, if I were reduced to rest Turner's immortality upon any single work, I should choose this. Its daring conception—ideal in the highest sense of the word—is based on the purest truth, and wrought out with the concentrated knowledge of a life; its color is absolutely perfect, not one false or morbid hue in any part or line, and so modulated that every square inch of canvas is a perfect composition; its drawing as accurate as fearless; the ship buoyant, bending, and full of motion; its tones as true as they are wonderful; and the whole picture dedicated to the most sublime of subjects and impressions—(completing thus the perfect system of all truth, which we have shown to be formed by Turner's works)—the power, majesty, and deathfulness of the open, deep, illimitable Sea.

From Harvey Rachlin's  
 Scandals, Vandals, & Da Vincis  
 A Gallery of Remarkable Art Takes.  
 ISBN 978-0-14-303851