

How the British Raj in India brightened the palette of artist JMW

Turner - Mridula Chari (Jan 24, 2017).

Turner's striking use of Indian yellow in his paintings was made possible by new colours from across the empire, says Tate Britain curator David Blayney Brown.



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The turn of the 19th century was a time of great change for European countries. Even as they expanded their influence in colonies around the world, new technologies, such as the steam engine, were transforming lives at home.

One of the greatest artists to record these changes in Britain was the painter JMW Turner. Turner, who was born in 1775 in London, is best known for his use of unusual colours to depict light in striking yet ephemeral tones.

Though Turner never ventured beyond Europe, he is famous for his dramatic depictions of scenes at sea, from storms and shipwrecks to quiet moments such as burials. It is this aspect of his work that David Blayney Brown, Manton curator of British art at Tate Britain in London, is in Mumbai to discuss at the 19th Vasant J Sheth Memorial Lecture on Tuesday.

In an interview with Scroll.in, Brown, who is responsible for Tate Britain's Turner collection, the largest one in the world, spoke about the influence of empire on Turner and other artists of the time and on Turner's role as a political artist. Edited excerpts below:

Turner lived in a time of great change for the empire. What was London like at that time, influenced as it was by the wealth of the East India Company?

It was not just the East India Company, though of course that was an enormous engine of wealth – so much was extracted from here and brought over there. It's not something to be proud of, but it's just historical fact. It's what happened. Britain wasn't the only country building a big empire. The Spanish empire was in decline at the time. Napoleon wanted to build up and these empires were fighting to get an advantage. For one reason or another, Britain turned out to be more successful than the others and built an empire that was a maritime empire connected by sea routes. And the biggest port was London. Turner was born in London, not very far from the [River] Thames. In those days, ships came right up into the heart of the city and loaded and unloaded there. You couldn't live in London and not see ships or

sailors. For someone like Turner, growing up at the end of the 18th century, he would have taken for granted that ships were important. The ocean and the wider world was a presence in his mind. And of course Turner was not just painting coastal cities but scenes far from the shore...

What's interesting is that though Turner did start travelling in later life once the Napoleonic wars were over and it was possible to travel again. Before that he had to imagine what it would be like out in the open sea. He did so very dramatically.

He did sail the Thames. He had a little sail boat he had designed himself. This boat would have been able to get to the mouth of the Thames estuary, so he would have seen big ships in the port, in London itself and ships coming up the Thames from the sea. They would have included Royal Navy ships and what we used to call the Indiamen of the East India Company, which were then the biggest cargo ships in the world. And the Thames, as it approaches the sea, gets quite wide and at certain times in the year gets quite rough.

He started painting things like shipwrecks and dramatic incidents in the sea and there I think he used his imagination to hype up the drama of it, to give a sense of what he thought it must have been like. These gave him some very dramatic subjects.

One of these was one of a slave ship. An epidemic broke out among slaves on board the ship. The captain had them all thrown overboard because he could claim insurance for fit slaves who drowned by falling overboard, but could not claim it for slaves who fell ill. The incident that picture shows took place many years earlier. Turner painted it in 1840 for an international anti-slavery convention that year that was opened by Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband. The purpose of that was to get the whole world committed to abolishing slavery.



The Slave Ship, JMW Turner, 1840. Image credit: Wikimedia Commons

Did it really have that effect on viewers at the time?

It was a spectacular but horrific picture. Some critics, rather than examine their consciences, chose to

make fun of the picture and the way it was painted. Others admired the painting enormously and thought it was Turner's masterpiece.

It showed that as an artist you could have a moral conscience to move your ideas forward. I would not say that Turner was a critic of Empire as such, because somebody of his generation would have accepted it as fact, but he could be critical of aspects associated with empire, like the slave trade. I think that's very interesting because in a maritime country where the sea is so important, he uses the sea to get people to think about how differently things might be run. You could use art to campaign for amendments to the law, or new attitudes in the insurance industry, just to try and get new social values adopted.

Was he in this political respect like his contemporaries?

I think he was quite distinctive in that respect. He was the first artist to make trains and steam ships the subjects of really important pictures as works of art, not just documentary ones. Just as he was the first artist to paint the material aspects of the modern world, he was also the first artist in Britain to start thinking of new values and a new morality that is appropriate for the modern world. That is one of the things that makes him a great painter. His ideas move forward. He changed the idea of what an artist could do.



Rain, Steam and Speed, JMW Turner, 1844. Image credit: Wikimedia Commons

There is the famous apocryphal story of Indian yellow (a colour sourced from India that was reported to be made of the urine of cows fed on a diet of mango leaves). How did the palettes of European artists change because of the British empire?

Turner was a great and inventive colourist. If you look at his work from the beginning to the end of his life, the early works are quite dark and sombre, but the later ones are full of colour – brilliant yellow, red, blacks, crimsons, blues. Even if he hadn't been to somewhere like India, he lived in a place where a lot of people had and they were bringing back descriptions of a more colourful place than England, which was smoky and dark and dull and raining all the time. People were coming back to this England with memories of a place that was full of colour. This was bound to change people's ideas.

This was a time when in interior décor, for instance, people who could afford it were decorating their homes with much more brilliant colour. Science and technology was keeping up with that. New paints and new pigments were coming up in markets, so the range of colours available for an artist were getting much more varied, more intense, much brighter. Turner used them enthusiastically.

In Sir John Soane's museum in London, there is a bright yellow living room, almost an Indian yellow. That was a yellow that was introduced in Turner's lifetime, much brighter than anything available before. The tastes for those colours would definitely have been brought back from the empire.

David Blayney Brown will deliver the 19th Vasant J Sheth Memorial Lecture titled J.M.W. Turner: A Marine Master in a Modernising World, which will look at Turner's lifelong love of the sea and practice as a marine artist and examine the impressive Turner bequest at Tate Britain, at 7 pm on January 24 at Auditorium, Visitors Centre, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai.