

TURNER: ART, INDUSTRY & NOSTALGIA, AT THE LAING ART GALLERY, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

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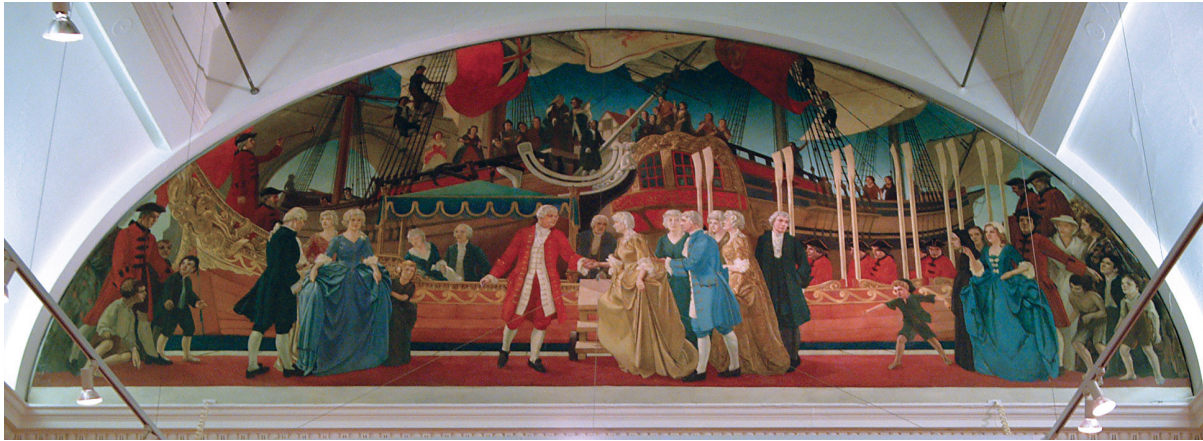


Figure 1. John Henry Willis, *Ascension Day on the Tyne in the Eighteenth Century*, before 1835, oil on canvas. Photo courtesy Laing Art Gallery

When I entered *Turner: Art, Industry & Nostalgia* at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle upon Tyne, I glimpsed sails, rigging, and a British naval ensign high above my head. Looking up, I saw John Henry Willis's *Ascension Day on the Tyne in the Eighteenth Century*, a semicircular painting set into the gallery's ceiling (fig. 1). This picture is a permanent fixture of the exhibition space, one of several lunettes commissioned to decorate the building in the 1920s and 1930s. Each represents a different aspect of Newcastle's history. In Willis's case, the subject is an annual civic ritual in which the Corporation of Newcastle would process along the tidal section of the River Tyne in a fleet of barges. Designed to emulate the Ascension Day festival in Venice, the ceremony symbolized Newcastle's marriage to the sea. It seems appropriate that Willis's nostalgic evocation of the city's maritime heritage is visible at the start of an exhibition that deftly weaves together local, national, maritime, and artistic narratives.

Turner: Art, Industry & Nostalgia (May 10–September 7, 2024) is part of National Treasures, an initiative organized by the National Gallery in London to celebrate its 200th anniversary. The gallery has loaned twelve celebrated paintings from its collection to regional museums and galleries around the UK. The project has presented each of the borrowing institutions with an opportunity to show a familiar picture in a new light through the creation of a carefully curated exhibition.

The National Treasure on loan to the Laing Art Gallery is one of the National Gallery's most iconic paintings, Joseph Mallord William Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire* (fig. 2). This picture forms the nucleus of *Turner: Art, Industry & Nostalgia*. Within the exhibition, a display of prints and postcards illustrates

the painting's widespread reproduction and circulation. It even appears on British currency, featuring alongside Turner's self-portrait on the back of the £20 note.

The Fighting Temeraire represents a paddle-wheel steam tug towing an old wooden warship along the Thames to a shipbreaker's yard at Rotherhithe on September 5, 1838. The sunset in the distance reinforces the sense of ending. The condemned vessel is the *Temeraire*, which was launched in 1798 and had a forty-year career in naval service. The appellation "fighting" in Turner's title alludes to the ship's participation in the Battle of Trafalgar on October 21, 1805. The painting as a whole is usually understood as an allegory of technological change, designed to herald the start of a new, steam-powered era and to mourn the passing of the age of sail. *Turner: Art, Industry & Nostalgia* gives this interpretation an innovative twist, highlighting its local and contemporary relevance.

As the exhibition demonstrates, the story of the *Temeraire*'s final journey resonates powerfully with Newcastle. The majority of paddle tugs working on the Thames in the nineteenth century had been built at shipyards on the Tyne. This included *London* and *Sansom*, the two tugs which towed the *Temeraire* to its final berth, although Turner was not concerned with specifics and only showed a single steamship in his painting.

Rather than representing a particular vessel, Turner's tug functions as a symbol of the Industrial Revolution and its transformative economic, social, and environmental effects. These effects were felt especially strongly in Newcastle, which was a hub for the mining and shipment of coal and became a center for related industries, including shipbuilding and locomotive manufacture. Heavy industry remained at the heart of the city's identity until the second half of the twentieth century. As shipyards, coal mines, and factories closed down, unemployment rose, communities fragmented, and large areas of the city center were demolished.

Today, many local residents feel nostalgic for Newcastle's industrial past, echoing the nostalgia for sail power and historic naval triumphs expressed in *The Fighting Temeraire*.

The exhibition is curated by Lizzie Jacklin, Keeper of Art at Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums, and includes over sixty artworks, ranging in date from the eighteenth century to the present day. More than twenty-five paintings and watercolors by Turner form the core of the exhibition. Other artists featured include John Constable, L. S. Lowry, and Tacita Dean. As well as *The Fighting Temeraire* from the National Gallery, the exhibition benefits from loans from a number of other UK institutions, including Tate, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Although there is no exhibition catalogue, a short companion book has been published to accompany the show, featuring thematic essays by Jacklin and maritime historian Ian Whitehead. Available from the Laing Gallery's online shop, the book is an affordable, useful, and well-illustrated guide.

Jacklin is keen to stress that *Turner: Art, Industry & Nostalgia* is neither specifically maritime nor exclusively focused on Newcastle. Instead, it is designed to contextualize *The Fighting Temeraire* within Turner's wider career and to explore how different artists throughout history have represented industrial and postindustrial landscapes. However, maritime themes run throughout the show.

The first section, "J. M. W. Turner: Painter of Seas, Skies & British Life," introduces the artist and his work through a selection of his watercolors showing inland and coastal locations from around the UK and Europe. Meanwhile, the second section tells the story of the *Temeraire*, focusing on its involvement in the Battle of Trafalgar. A highlight of this section is a large model of the ship, on loan from SeaCity Museum in Southampton, which was carved from animal bones by French prisoners of war in about 1805, during the Napoleonic Wars. The white bone looks luminous against the gal-





Figure 2. Joseph Mallord William Turner,
The Fighting Temeraire, 1839, oil on canvas.
The National Gallery, London: Turner Bequest, 1856 (NG524)

lery's dark walls, which are, appropriately, painted in a shade of dark blue redolent of naval uniform.

Visitors finally encounter *The Fighting Temeraire* in the third section of the exhibition. The painting hangs alongside Turner's later picture, *Peace – Burial at Sea*, in which he represented the funeral of his friend and fellow artist David Wilkie (fig. 3). Both pictures share a mournful atmosphere and feature a combination of sail and steam.

The exhibition then bids farewell to the *Temeraire* and refocuses on the paddle tugs that towed the old warship to its fate. The fourth section, "Thames to Tyne: Capturing the Age of Steam," explores the industrialization of both rivers, including a small subsection on the design and construction of Tyne-built tugs.

The fifth and final section, "Rise, Fall & Future," continues the story up to the present day, featuring artistic responses to industrial growth and decline. At the heart of this section is *ARC*, a film by John Kippin which documents the farewell visit of the aircraft carrier *HMS Ark Royal* to Newcastle in 2010 (fig. 4). *Ark Royal* had been built on the Tyne thirty years before and was about to be decommissioned. The film consists of one continuous shot, which lasts for eleven minutes, tracking *Ark Royal* as it follows a small pilot vessel along the river and out to sea. The visual and thematic parallels between this film and *The Fighting Temeraire* are emphasized through the placement of the two artworks, which face each other across the length of the gallery, bringing the nineteenth century into dialogue with the twenty-first.

While the exhibition expertly weaves together local and national narratives, the global dimensions of the histories represented are underexplored. One watercolor depicts a merchant ship belonging to the British East India Company, which, by Turner's time, had seized control of large parts of South Asia. Meanwhile, a wall text refers to the *Temeraire's* service in the West Indies in 1802, hinting at the colonial and imperial contexts for

British naval activity and maritime trade. A panel states that "Turner's attitude towards naval warfare and its role in the British Empire is difficult to ascertain," noting that some of his paintings seem to reflect patriotic sentiments about British naval triumphs, while others indicate awareness of the human suffering caused by war and imperialism. Yet the discussion goes no further. This feels like a missed opportunity to bring further depth and richness to the exhibition's exploration of the Industrial Revolution, building on existing scholarship that explores the complex interrelationships between transatlantic enslavement, colonization, and industrial development.

This point aside, the exhibition is thoughtful, thorough, and full of well-chosen objects. Particularly commendable is the nuanced and critical exploration of nostalgia, which is shown to involve imagination as much as—or more than—memory. *The Fighting Temeraire* provides a central example, since Turner's painting is a creative response to the old warship's final voyage, rather than a literal representation of the facts. In reality, the *Temeraire* was a hulk without masts and rigging when it was towed to the breaker's yard, but Turner has imaginatively restored these lost features to evoke the ship's former glory.

Other objects on display similarly demonstrate the blurred boundaries between memory and myth. A rare marine watercolor by John Constable, Turner's great rival, depicts an incident during the Battle of Trafalgar when the *Temeraire* had a seventy-four-gun French ship on either side (fig. 5). However, Constable has substituted Nelson's flagship *Victory* in place of the *Temeraire*. It is not clear whether this confusion of the two ships is intentional or accidental. Elsewhere in the exhibition is a model of the steam tug *Monarch*, which was built by shipbuilder William Watkins on the Tyne in 1833. There is a persistent tradition that the *Monarch* towed the *Temeraire* to its final berth, in spite of a total lack of historical evidence to support this claim.



Figure 3. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Peace - Burial at Sea*, exhibited 1842, oil on canvas. Tate, London: Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856 (N00528). Photo: Tate



Figure 4. Still from John Kippin, *ARC*, 2010, 11-minute video. © John Kippin



Figure 5. John Constable, *His Majesty's ship "Victory," Capt. E. Harvey, in the memorable battle of Trafalgar, between two French ships of the line, 1806*, watercolor on paper. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (169-1888)



Figure 6. Paul Dolan, *Flue Tower*, from *Foundations*, 2023, infrared photograph. © Paul Dolan. Series commissioned by South Tyneside Council, CoLab Sunderland, University of Sunderland, and Seascapes

Ideas of memory and nostalgia are further complicated in the final section. On the one hand, this section allows local visitors to relive and share their own memories of Newcastle's lost industries. Yet it also warns against over-romanticizing this history, highlighting both the plight of workers and the devastating environmental effects associated with heavy industry. A quote from artist John Kippin on one of the labels sums up the complexity. Coal mining, Kippin states, was "basically an unsafe industry," in which "many, many people lost their lives or were injured," but "it's also viewed nostalgically . . . it's something which, understandably, communities were built around."

The most recent works in the exhibition are two photographic prints by Paul Dolan, dating from 2023. Both depict renewable energy projects in South Tyneside, showing how efforts to regenerate the city are also addressing the impacts of climate change (fig. 6). They resemble the surrounding black-and-white photographs of Newcastle's industrial past, continuing the nostalgic feel of the exhibition. Yet closer inspection of the pictures reveals uncanny details, such as white leaves on the trees. This is because the pictures were in fact taken with an infrared camera, which records thermal energy rather than visible light. This imagery thus nods to the past while also subverting it and looking to the future, much like this thought-provoking exhibition as a whole.