

The director of the National Art Museum of China, Fan Di'an, had always wanted to see a J.M.W. (Joseph Mallord William) Turner show on the mainland. After all, the English painter was one of the first western artists the country learned about at the beginning of the 20th century, and his watercolours and landscapes have influenced generations of Chinese artists, he says.

The director's wish finally came true when the majority of the 280 oil paintings and thousands of watercolours and sketches that Turner bequeathed to Britain – some of which are kept at London's Tate Gallery – recently went on show for the first time in Asia at the National Art Museum of China.

Turner from the Tate Collection, which runs until the end of this month, is the result of a partnership between the two museums that was facilitated by the British Council in Beijing.

The exhibition, which is divided into five sections, showcases 112 pieces of art that follow Turner's career in a chronological sequence. It begins with an unusual *Self-Portrait* painted in 1799 that demonstrates Turner's ambitions from the start to rise above his humble origins as a London barber's son, join the Royal Academy of Art and emulate 17th-century masters such as Nicolas Poussin.

The second room reflects Turner's preoccupation with the Napoleonic wars that Britain waged with France at that time, including his masterpieces *The Battle of Trafalgar* (1806), depicting Admiral Nelson's death, and *Snow Storm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps* (1812), an allusion to Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Italy by crossing the Alps in 1797.

Snow Storm is also considered a prime example of Turner's embrace of the Romantic movement, which exulted in people's relationship with the natural world.

The third room concentrates on his techniques, including a short film detailing his use of watercolour. Turner's work in this medium, especially the unfinished pictures, show the closest affinity to Chinese landscape painting even though his brush technique is different.

Turner's watercolours developed out of the British topographical tradition of blue and grey washes, but he wanted to give watercolour



Snow Storm: Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth (1842)



Norham Castle, Sunrise is among J.M.W. Turner's most influential works

The works of influential British artist J.M.W. Turner are finally showing in Asia, writes **Kristina Perez**

Gate to genius

the same power as oil painting on the largest sheets of paper available. The air sketches on view highlight the process behind Turner's momentous oil paintings and the experimentation that led to his more famous works.

The next section demonstrates Turner's mature and most familiar work following his trip to Italy in 1819 and the transformation of his painting when new colours became available to him. Throughout the 1830s, Turner's work was increasingly viewed as radical, or eccentric, for its abstract nature.

The exhibition concludes with Turner's later work, in which form dissolves into light and colour. The most important piece is *Snow Storm: Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842), which contemporary critics described as a work in which Turner had thrown eggs and chocolate at the canvas. The painting demonstrates Turner's breaking of lines and forms to show the emotion of his subject.

"Monet, Whistler, Pissarro – all of these artists came to London in the 1870s and were amazed that Turner was doing such extraordinary

[Turner's] use of light and colour remain topics that are very much talked about by Chinese artists

Fan Di'an, director, National Art Museum of China

things," says Tate Britain curator Ian Warrell. "Both in terms of the subject matter he was painting – steam boats, steam engines – and absorbing them into his painting in the 1840s, much earlier even than they were doing it.

"So there was a huge impact both in terms of style, subject and the belief in yourself as an artist. I think that had an impact on the next generation because Turner was always prepared to trust his own self-worth."

At the centre of the exhibition is *Norham Castle, Sunrise* (circa 1845), a tribute to 17th-century painter Claude Laurent, which was found in Turner's studio after his death and

first exhibited in 1906. The painting's abstraction has been validated by impressionists, focusing on the moment we see: how the eye breaks down and assimilates forms, Warrell says. However, contemporary art critics have complained that Turner's work is defiantly modern and can be shown upside down.

If only Turner's contemporaries had access to his more atmospheric work, such as *Norham Castle, Sunrise*, then his impact on later 19th-century artists would have been even greater, Warrell says. In the 20th century, many artists used Turner as a reference point; he is regarded as a model for innovators, which is why Tate Britain has named its annual prize for the most pioneering young British artist, the Turner Prize, in his honour.

"[Turner's] use of light and colour still remain topics that are very much talked about by Chinese artists," says Fan. "I believe the impact of Turner will continue in present day China."

To help the Chinese public gain a fuller understanding and appreciation of Turner's work, the National Art Museum has worked

very closely with Tate Britain to offer comprehensive educational programmes designed for families, students and adults, according to its deputy director of public education, He Lin.

More than 100 local volunteers have undergone academic training on guiding visitors around the exhibition. The museum has also created an audio guide and produced a bilingual exhibition catalogue and a map of 48 key works considered most consistent with the tastes of a Chinese audience.

In addition it has organised a series of academic lectures, activities to engage children and their parents, and a separate programme aimed at university students.

This programme is setting a new standard for art museums on the mainland, where art education has often been under-represented, according to the organisers of the Turner exhibition.

Turner from the Tate Collection, National Art Museum of China, No 1 Wusi Dajie, Dongcheng District, Beijing. Daily, 9am to 5pm. Inquiries: [86 10] 6400 1476. Ends June 28