

## **Snow Storm, Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth by Joseph Mallord William Turner: painted around 1842**

Welcome to this audio guide in which we'll be spending some time getting to know this picture a little better.

How do we look at this image with its wild and impressionistic textures? It's quite abstract isn't it, and although it could seem modern, it's interesting to think that it was painted way back in 1842.

It's perhaps a challenging picture to take in at first, as although it's packed with colour and marks, it's strangely empty of detail. Notice what your eyes are doing – are they sliding around the canvas trying to grasp something, or has your attention been caught by some particular portion of the canvas?

The title of the painting explains a lot about what's being depicted, but first of all, let's just look at the picture as a whole, at the shapes and the colours and the way the paint has been laid down onto the canvas. What mood or emotions does it awaken in you? Descriptive words like 'violent', 'swirling' or 'dramatic' may come to mind. What other words would you use to describe the mood of the painting?

When we read the title of this work, which is 'Snow Storm, Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth', what detail there *is* becomes easier to see. What can you make out? We know that the smudge in the centre of the canvas must be the boat. Looking closer, we discover that actually there *are* some details to see. Can you recognize the paddle wheel, with light bouncing off some of its paddles? There's the spindly-looking mast with a flag on top, bending with the force of the gale, a hint of rigging, and can you make out a smoke stack or two? These are the chimneys used to expel the steam and smoke from the boat's boiler.

Across the whole painting, the artist blends colour, shape and texture so that we don't need to be able to see a lot of detail to get the gist of what's happening. From the tall chimney stack, there's a great column of fiery, sooty smoke snaking up into the sky. Follow that up with your eyes and see how the colours change. What happens to the yellows? When do the dark reds appear? Notice that the column of

smoke get darker towards the top as it spreads dirtily across the top of the canvas. Considering the size of the boat, this is a big and dramatic column of smoke. What do you think this suggests to us about how hard the boat's engine is working?

All around the boat is the frenzy and violence of the storm. It swirls around the small boat as if it's going to crush it. It looks almost as if the boat's breaking up, dissolving into the storm. Can you see how the painter shows the sea spray on the left hand side arcing up off the sea into the sky, and on the right, perhaps the suggestion of snow and rain pouring down. There's no horizon, just the water and the sky, one merging into the other. What feel does this give?

Right at the heart of the canvas, there's a dramatic slash of light. Could this suggest a lightning bolt, or sunlight breaking through the clouds? Does that give a hopeful feeling that the storm will pass, or do you think it's the eye of the storm passing over the boat, and the boat will plunge back into peril again? What about the scatter of lights to the right of the mast? Are these the lights of the harbour? Do they hint at a safe landing, or that the boat is dangerously close to the harbour wall?

Now, take a look at the brush marks in the sea. Notice all the directions the painter has laid the paint to suggest the shifting, swirling water. Have you spotted how the smoke stack's reflection spreads out right across the bottom of the canvas as a dark smear on the water?

If you half close your eyes, you can see how the canvas is balanced with darkness at the top and the bottom and also a streak of darkness in the centre, whilst the bright light in the middle of the picture really stands out. This half closing of the eyes is a good way to look at a picture if you want just to see the tones in it.

We can't see any people on board this boat, but we assume they're there. Imagine you're there alongside them. What are they doing? They might be stoking the boiler, nursing the laboring engine, or hanging on to the boat's steering. Imagine what it might be like on deck, trying to keep upright as it heaves and tilts. What would the noise be like on the boat? Could you hear the engine over the storm, or only the scream of the wind and the pounding of the waves?

Imagining ourselves on board is not such an idle thought. An inscription on this painting states 'The Author was in this Storm on the Night the 'Ariel' left Harwich'. Because of this, a story spread that the painter Turner, aged mid 60s, ordered himself lashed to the mast of a boat for four hours during the storm, so as to gain a full understanding of how to paint it. Historians dispute the truth of this, but it's passed into legend and many believe it.

Looking at the painting now, and thinking about this story, does it change your feelings or thoughts about the picture?

We've come to the end of this audio guide now, although you're welcome to spend more time looking at the painting on your own.

Next, you might like reflecting on what you most enjoyed about this brief activity so scroll down to **Wrap up your painting** to have a go at this.