

LaBarge, Emily, *When Artists Found Beauty in London's Toxic Fog*, **The New York Times**, 1 October 2024

The New York Times

Critic's Notebook

When Artists Found Beauty in London's Toxic Fog

Monet and Turner found something sublime in the polluted 19th-century city — and maybe something darker, too.

By Emily LaBarge
Reviewing from London
Oct. 2, 2024

If you've been to London recently (or ever) you'll probably recognize Claude Monet's description: "Today the weather was maddening, gusts of snow, then sunshine, fog and dark weather and clear, it was magnificent but all too changeable."

Yet the French painter found London's moody climate an inspiration, and he purposely came in only the colder months. During three visits from 1899 to 1901, he produced dozens of canvases of the city's surging River Thames, 36 of which were shown to acclaim in Paris in 1904 but never exhibited in London.

One hundred and twenty years later, the Courtauld Gallery has brought a selection of the series home for the first time in "Monet and London: Views of the Thames" (through Jan. 19, 2025). The effect is as radiant and sublime as Monet might have hoped — though today we might see those unsettled skies in a different light.

"Every day I find London more beautiful to paint," he wrote to his wife Alice from the swish Savoy Hotel, where he stayed on those visits. From his riverside balcony, the artist could observe the working waterway, chugging with boat traffic and steaming with trains on bridges above, from sunrise to sunset. Here, he would fulfill his enduring wish to "try to paint some fog effects on the Thames."

At the Courtauld (less than half a mile from the Savoy), 21 canvases show the river in an atmospheric suite of cornflower blue, cobalt, dove gray and mauve. The choppy Thames glimmers in shades of silver and blue flecked with violet and pink, or flaming yellow, orange and crimson from the sun — "the little red ball," Monet called it — that's high above in a sky thick with "delicious fog." "The extraordinary fog so very yellow," he wrote, characterized the industrialized late-19th-century London. Locals already called it "the Big Smoke."

From the early 1800s, coal was a mainstay across Europe's major cities, used to power industrial motors and, particularly in Britain, to warm homes. The resulting dense smoke saturated the atmosphere and, in London, it was amplified by gas street lighting. The fog stank of carbon and sulfur and irritated inhabitants' eyes and noses. For the 19th-century art critic John Ruskin, it was a "plague-wind," but artists — then and now — have taken differing approaches to pollution and its visual effects.

To Monet, industrialization's miasma was a kind of aesthetic blessing for his Impressionist experiments. In "Charing Cross Bridge: Smoke in the Fog; Impression" (1902) the scene is awash in pearlescent hues, the piers of the bridge barely visible in spare teal lines. Billowing clouds of purple steam dominate the image, although no train is visible: All particulars have dissolved. "Waterloo Bridge, Sunlight Effect" (1903) is divided by the indigo monolith of the bridge, the sky above churning with violet clouds reflected in the water below.

The artist had previously painted series — haystacks, Rouen Cathedral — but these canvases are wild and tempestuous, otherworldly. The London works begin with modernity and end in dreamlike visions, but they are fundamentally about "a struggle with Nature," as he wrote to his wife — an interesting characterization of a poisonous environment.

Monet worked en plein air in London, but all of his canvases were finished at his studio in Giverny, France, where they took on new life. As much as they are representations of a city and its unearthly fog, they also show how art best captures nature when it transforms it. Critics described the 1904 Paris exhibition as a symphony of color, a whole work to be experienced at once; others praised “the prodigious views of the Thames by our French Turner.” Although the exhibition catalog says Monet never commented on the comparison, he was clearly influenced by the stormy landscapes, with their dramatic skies and rushing trains, of the British painter J.M.W. Turner.

Farther west down the Thames from the Courtauld, one of Turner's fiery canvases, “Sunset” (1830-35) hangs at Sandycombe Lodge, the artist's onetime country home, now a museum in the London suburbs. The painting is a standout work in “A World of Care: Turner and the Environment,” a small exhibition at Turner's House (through Oct. 27) that shows how the artist observed the changing 19th-century environment through a very different lens from Monet's.

Turner also witnessed unnaturally vivid sunsets caused by coal pollution, but unlike the Frenchman, he did not describe the effect in rapturous tones. A watercolor view of “London from Greenwich” (1808-9) shows the curving Thames obscured by what Turner described in an accompanying poem as a “murky veil” of pollution produced by the city's “commercial care and busy toil.” Another watercolor from beyond the capital's limits, “Crowhurst” (around 1816), shows a decimated East Sussex woodland where poor land management led to fuel shortages for local industry and to flooding that remains an ongoing problem.

Wall labels remind us that Turner lived through a time of rampant fossil fuel extraction, rapid deforestation and climate-altering natural disasters: 1816 was known as “the year without a summer” after dust from an Indonesian volcano drifted around the world, causing temperatures to plunge and harvests to fail. Rather than fantastical visions, Turner's images serve as records of his present — and, moreover, warnings about our future.

In a recent rehang of Tate Britain, another London museum, which owns one of the world's largest Turner collections, contemporary works were placed in conversation with the permanent collection. A room of Turner watercolors now has flickering at its center a work by **Yuri Pattison** called “sun[set] provisioning” (2019) featuring a virtual reality ocean sunset whose colors shift according to real-time local pollution levels. When I visited the museum recently, the sky was dark blue, the waters lapis with a hint of red light on the horizon. But on other days, the sky is Monet's eerie chartreuse, or Turner's violent streams of red and orange.

London's toxic fog has dissipated. The problem with pollution now is that it's largely invisible and easy to ignore, unless — like artists — we find new ways of looking.