Oil painting - Life-Boat and Manby Apparatus Going Off to a Stranded Vessel Making Signal (Blue Lights) of Distress

Object: Oil painting

Place of origin: Great Britain (painted)

Date: ca. 1831 (painted)

Artist/Maker: Turner, Joseph Mallord William, born 1775 - died 1851 (artist)

Materials and Techniques: oil on canvas

Credit Line: Given by John Sheepshanks, 1857

Museum number: FA.211[O]

Gallery location: Paintings, Room 87, The Edwin and Susan Davies Galleries, case EAST WALL

Public access description

The Manby apparatus was a lifesaving device consisting of a rope fired from a mortar. Captain George Manby invented it after a shipwreck in 1807 at Great Yarmouth, Norfolk. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society in the year that this work was exhibited.

Descriptive line

Oil painting, 'Life-Boat and Manby Apparatus Going off to a Stranded Vessel Making Signal (Blue Lights) of Distress', J. M. W. Turner, ca. 1831

Physical description

In the first Catalogue of paintings in John Sheepshanks' collection and in later catalogues, the title given to this piece was not as in the RA catalogue and as given by the V&A, but as "Vessel in Distress off Yarmouth". Although Turner's own title does not specifically cite Yarmouth, the location has never been doubted. The Manby apparatus, named after its inventor George Manby (1765-1854), was a method of lifesaving from a shipwreck by firing a stone at the end of a rope from a mortar on the shore, and was developed after he witnessed a disastrous wreck at Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, in 1807.

Dimensions

Height: 91.4 cm estimate, Width: 122 cm estimate

Museum number

FA.211[O]

Object history note

FA 211 (like 'East Cowes Castle' FA120), was painted for the architect John Nash, or perhaps bought by him at the Royal Academy, where it was exhibited in 1831 (no. 73); John Nash; his sale, Christie's 11 July 1835 (89, as 'Blue Lights off Yarmouth'), bought Tiffin presumably acting as agent for John Sheepshanks; by whom to the museum 1857

[John Sheepshanks]

John Sheepshanks (1784-1863) was the son of a wealthy cloth manufacturer. He entered the family business, but his early enthusiasms were for gardening and the collecting of Dutch and Flemish prints. He retired from business at the age of 40, by which time he had begun collecting predominantly in the field of modern British art. He told Richard Redgrave RA, then a curator in the South Kensington Museum (later the V&A) of his intention to give his collection to the nation. The gallery built to house the collection was the first permanent structure on the V&A site, and all concerned saw the Sheepshanks Gift as forming the nucleus of a National Gallery of British Art. Sheepshanks commissioned works from contemporary artists, bought from the annual RA summer exhibitions, but also bought paintings by artists working before Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837. The Sheepshanks Gift is the bedrock of the V&A's collection of British oil paintings, and served to encourage many other collectors to make donations and bequests.

Historical significance: In the first Sheepshanks Catalogue and later catalogues, the title was given not as in the RA catalogue and above, but as 'Vessel in Distress off Yarmouth'. Although Turner's title does not specifically cite Yarmouth, the location has never been doubted. The Manby apparatus, named after its inventor George Manby (1765-1854), was a method of lifesaving from a shipwreck by firing a stone at the end of a rope from a mortar on the shore, and was developed after he witnessed a disastrous wreck at Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, in 1807. The marine painter Nicholas Pocock exhibited 'Captain Manby's Methods of Giving Relief to a Ship in Distress' at the RA in 1815 (presumably the work now in the Castle Museum, Norwich); there is also a watercolour of 1811 in the National Maritime Museum (see D Cordingly Nicholas Pocock 1986, pp96, 108).

Turner passed the Norfolk coast on his way to Scotland in 1822, and visited Yarmouth in 1824. Butlin and Joll refer to the 'Norfolk, Suffolk and
Essex’ sketchbook (British Museum, Turner Bequest CCIX), and two watercolours also in the British Museum (CCLXII-10 and CCCLXIV-134); Reynolds suggests that the latter work, ‘Firing Rockets at Yarmouth’, is a study for the present painting, but Butlin and Joll express doubt on the grounds that the handling of paint is so loose that it could well date from after 1831.

The Library of the Fine Arts critic (1 June 1831) thought FA.211 ‘a magnificent picture, warm and all life’. and La Belle Assemblee (xiii, p289) called it ‘a fine picture, full of nature and truth, and more in his manner of the older time, than anything we have seen of late’. Reynolds comments that this greater conventionality in Turner’s art in this work would have appealed to its eventual owner Sheepshanks. E B Chancellor in 1910 (Walks among London’s Pictures, p263) wrote: ‘Waagen remarks on it that it is “very spiritedly conceived, but the water very conventional”. One hesitates to fall foul of so great a critic, but he seems, in this instance, to be less sympathetic in his judgement than the beauty and vigour of the picture deserve, and I confess the rendering of the sky and sea appears to me to reach as high a level as almost anything Turner ever produced.

John Constable also exhibited a painting of ‘Yarmouth Pier’ at the RA in 1831 (123, present whereabouts unknown; among other versions of the subject is a painting in a private collection dated 1822: see G Reynolds The Later Paintings and Drawings of John Constable 1984, cat nos 22,36, p1362). Butlin and Joll comment that ‘This may have been simply a coincidence but it seems possible that Turner, having got wind of Constable’s plans, decided to exhibit this picture by way of competition’. Reynolds also compares the present work with the later ‘Rockets and Blue Lights ... ’ of 1840 (now Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts).

Historical context note

JMW Turner was born Covent Garden, London, 23 April 1775, son of a barber. Entered Royal Academy Schools 1789. In a long and exceptionally distinguished career, exhibited 259 works at the RA between 1790 and 1850 and 17 at the BI 1806-1846, predominantly landscapes, sometimes with historical themes. Generally considered the greatest painter in the history of British art. Died Chelsea, London, 19 December 1851 and buried in St Paul's Cathedral. Bequeathed his extensive collection of oil paintings and watercolours to the nation, now principally housed in the Clore wing of the Tate Gallery.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O79605/life-boat-and-manby-apparatus-oil-painting-turner-joseph-mallord/