

# TEACHERS' NOTES

2021–22



## A Shipwreck in Stormy Seas

Claude-Joseph Vernet,  
1773

If paintings could make sounds, this one would be deafening! A crack of thunder as lightning splits the sky, gale-force winds howling across a roaring sea, groaning timber as ships struggle to stay afloat, and the terrifying snap of broken masts as the vessels become overwhelmed by the storm.

Despite the danger, we can view this scene safely from dry land – it's an imaginary landscape we can experience without the danger of being swept out to sea. It presents a different kind of beauty: one that is also a little terrifying.

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Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714–1789) was born in Avignon in France and his father was an artist too. As a young man he helped in his father's workshop painting decorative panels for furniture, but soon had bigger ambitions.

He travelled to Marseille and then to Rome in Italy to see great Renaissance artworks and learn from the artists working in the Italian capital. Here Vernet became influenced by artists known as *vedutisti* (view painters) who made panoramic paintings of beautiful Italian cities. He would borrow their sweeping views and attention to detail and apply them to a different subject: the sea.



## The painting and artist

*A Shipwreck in Stormy Seas* was first called '*Tempête*' (storm in French). It was made as part of a pair with another painting called *A Landscape at Sunset* ('*Calme*') by the French artist Claude-Joseph Vernet.

Vernet was nearly sixty when he painted '*Tempête*' and '*Calme*'. By then he'd become internationally famous for his seascapes, showing the sea in all types of weather. He had even travelled around France, painting seaports for the King of France himself, Louis XV.

The place this painting shows is not real, although it looks like it could be. Vernet used the places he had seen on his travels to help create imaginary scenes in very precise, realistic detail. Being able to use his imagination allowed him to construct the painting in exactly the way he wanted, balancing one side with the other to create the best look.

On the right-hand side, the dark clouds are illuminated by two forks of lightning, the great ship leaning to the left in the wind. On the left-hand side, the clouds part, showing blue sky above a distant port, the smaller ship leaning to the right.

On the right we see the open sea, on the left, a towering cliff and a lighthouse. In the background, an endless, empty expanse of water; in the foreground, craggy rocks with people washed ashore, having survived a shipwreck. We can see in the bottom right where bits of a broken vessel have washed up against the rocks. Every inch of this painting has something for you to look at. Even the vast sky has been filled with diagonal streaks of distant rain and two seagulls battling against the wind.

While Vernet used his imagination to conjure up this chaos, he might also have had some first-hand experience. One newspaper reported that the artist had strapped himself to the mast of a ship during a storm so that he could personally experience the thrill and danger that he painted. This 'strapped to the mast' story was often used to enhance the reputations of painters of stormy seas, including Turner. You

can 'believe' the pictures because it seems as if the artists risked life and limb to paint them. Whether this really happened or not, Vernet's audiences felt his paintings had an unmistakably realistic feel which set him apart from many other artists of the time.

## The beautiful and the sublime

What do you consider beautiful? When this painting was made, landscape scenes of nature were becoming more and more popular. If you had a lot of money to spend, a landscape by Vernet was one of the most fashionable paintings you could buy. But compared to its partner (or pendant), '*Calme*', with its peaceful sunset, could this painting be considered beautiful?

In the 18th century, artists and art lovers in Europe were starting to talk about a different kind of beauty, something that made you want to look with wide eyes, but that was also frightening. The writer Edmund Burke called it the 'sublime'.

This painting is not just a pleasing picture to look at, it is an experience with something powerful and terrible: nature. Human beings may think they are intelligent and resourceful, creating huge ships which can cross vast oceans, but nature can destroy them in a moment. To stand in front of something so powerful is to be reminded how small we really are in this vast universe. Vernet's painting tries to help us to feel this, but without getting wet! We are not really in danger, but we can imagine what it might be like. We can experience the sublime and live to tell the tale.

Importantly, Vernet adds a small ray of hope amid the chaos – a closer look at the stormy sky shows some light breaking through the clouds and a lighthouse standing strong against the tempest. Not only are we safe viewing this scene from dry land, but we are also being told that this terrible weather may not last long. A peaceful tranquillity, like that in '*Calme*', might just be around the corner. The two paintings were designed to hang together so viewers could enjoy comparing and contrasting the dramatic storm with the serene sunset.





## The age of sail

For some, the 18th century was a time of exploration and adventure. Since the establishment of international shipping routes following the European arrival in America, countries including England and France had discovered new ways to increase their power and become very rich. Expensive goods like tea, coffee, spices, and silks were shipped from one side of the world to the other, making fortunes. However, many countries looked for more land by forcibly colonising distant countries, often using violence against the people already living there. Millions of people were shipped from one side of the world to the other as slaves, so that those who enslaved them could become even more rich and powerful.

The ships in this painting are not slave ships, but are very accurate depictions of merchant ships, the sort that would carry goods from country to country. The ship on the left is a single-decker with what looks like a British flag, a 'Red Ensign'. The ship on the right is a larger two-decker. Both ships would have been heavily armed with cannons to either protect themselves or fight – you can see the gunports on the right-hand ship, closed to keep the crashing waves from flooding the decks.

From the look of the ships, they would be about fifty years old by the time the painting was made; old models, but still seaworthy and capable of travelling far at great speed. Within a decade after this, the first steam ships were produced. Over the next century the wooden sailing ships shown here would be replaced by powerful coal-burning metal vessels.

Sea travel and the risk of being shipwrecked were much talked about during the late 18th century, making this a common subject for paintings and literature. Popular books both celebrated and satirised Europeans and their thirst for travel and colonisation, such as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Many poems were written about the sea, capturing both the excitement and dangers of travel. Newspapers would have frequent reports of ships lost at sea, sometimes even first-hand accounts from the survivors of shipwrecks. There were also terrible accounts of enslaved people being thrown overboard when the ship was running out of food and water, or occasions when people were left shackled below decks, unable to swim away if the ship sank.

## The patrons

Due to his popularity, Vernet's paintings could only be afforded by the wealthiest people. Both this painting and its partner were originally painted for the King of Poland, Stanislas Augustus Poniatowski. However, the King was slow to pay and as Vernet worked to finish them, the artist wondered if the money would arrive at all. When a British buyer, Robert Clive, became interested, Vernet sold them to him instead!

Robert Clive had made his fortune with the British East India Company, his travels abroad and relationship to sailing a likely reason for being so keen on these two paintings. He had been looking for something by Vernet for a few years, and after he bought them, the paintings stayed with the Clive family in Britain for the next two

centuries. When they were eventually sold, they were bought for the public thanks to donations to the National Gallery.

Robert Clive, also known as 'Clive of India', is a controversial historical figure. He became the first British governor of Bengal, laying the foundation for the British occupation of India. He helped establish the East India Company's military and political power through force and, after a decisive victory in Bengal, he looted an estimated £2 billion in today's currency from its treasury, some of which went into his own pocket.

Historians have linked Clive's actions to contributing to the Bengal Famine in 1770 where over one million Bengalis died. His political rivals at the time vilified both him and the East India Company, and he was put on trial in Parliament. However, controversially, the resulting vote went in his favour: he was exonerated of all charges and commended for his service.

## Discussion points

The painting is an excellent starting point to get children thinking and talking, sharing ideas with each other, building on the ideas of others, and using new vocabulary.

### *Humanity and nature*

- Can you think of a time when you have experienced nature? What was it like?
- Can you describe some things that are natural, and others that are man-made? What is the difference? Do you know any things that are a combination of both?
- What do you like in nature? Is there anything in nature that scares you? Can you think of a time when nature made you feel small?
- When can we control nature, and when can nature control us? What sort of ways can we affect nature?
- Can we experience nature without going outside?

### *Beauty and terror*

- What do you find beautiful? What do you find frightening? Does everyone in your class agree?
- What makes you feel safe? Are there any times when it is fun to be frightened? Can something be beautiful and frightening at the same time?
- In what sort of ways do artists alter things to make them appear more beautiful, or frightening? Are there other ways people alter things to affect the way people feel?
- Are natural and man-made things beautiful in the same way?

### *Imagination and reality*

- What do you like to use your imagination to think about? Do you find it easy to imagine things? Is it possible to imagine something you have never actually experienced? What helps you to use your imagination? When do you use your imagination the most?
- Do you prefer realistic or imaginary pictures, or a combination of the two? Have you ever imagined something only to find out it was disappointing in real life? Have you ever found the real thing better than what you imagined?

- What kind of pictures feel most 'realistic' to you? Is a photograph the most realistic a picture could ever be? Can a picture feel real even if it doesn't look realistic, and how?

### *Journeys and travel*

- What different types of transport have you travelled on? What was it like travelling on them? Which type of transport do you like best, and why?
- What's the longest journey you have been on? What do you like to take with you when you travel? How do you feel when you set off on a journey?
- If you could ask one person in this painting about their journey, what would you ask? What might they reply?
- What different reasons might there be for travelling from one place to another?
- What might it have been like to travel hundreds of years ago? What would be the same, and what would be different compared to now? How might it have been different for different people?

### *Pairs and sets*

- What sort of things usually come in pairs or sets, and why? What different ways could you use to group things together?
- Can you think of things in pairs which are identical? Are there any things that look different but are still in a pair? What is it that links them?
- Why do paintings sometimes come in pairs or sets?

### *Agree or disagree?*

- Art should always be beautiful.
- Imagination is better than reality.
- You can't feel excited and scared at the same time.
- Everyday life can't be exciting.
- Dark colours are always better for scary scenes.

## Related artworks

### Past

Claude-Joseph Vernet, *A Landscape at Sunset ('Calme')*, 1773, the National Gallery

Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Calais Pier*, 1803, the National Gallery

Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Dutch Boats in a Gale ('The Bridgewater Sea Piece')*, 1801, on loan from The Capricorn Foundation

Claude, *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*, 1648, the National Gallery

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *The Four Times of Day*, about 1858, the National Gallery

Joachim Beuckelaer, *The Four Elements*, 1569, the National Gallery

### Present

Yinka Shonibare, *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*, (2010), National Maritime Museum, Greenwich

Lubaina Himid, *Work from Underneath* (2019)

Jessica Warboys, *Sea Painting, Birling Gap* (2017)

John Akomfrah, *Vertigo Sea* (2015)

Kehinde Wiley, *Ships on a Stormy Sea (Jean Julio Placide)*, (2017), Stephen Freidman Gallery

*Kehinde Wiley at the National Gallery* is an exhibition which will run from 10 December 2021 until 18 April 2022. Through new artworks, including film and painting, Wiley will look at European Romanticism and its focus on epic scenes of oceans and mountains.