

# The New Criterion

## Features

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## Seeing Turner whole

by [David Yezzi](#)

On J. M. W. Turner at the National Gallery of Art.

During the varnishing days for an exhibition at the British Institution in 1835, J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), a squat, unprepossessing, difficult man, stood before his canvas at dawn with an array of brushes and vials at his feet. Turner had a tendency to submit for exhibition barely roughed-in paintings, then rework them on the wall in the days prior to the opening. This was not fecklessness on his part but a calculated tour de force, a piece of theatrical one-upmanship staged for the benefit of his fellow artists. An account, by E. V. Ripplingille, of Turner completing his iconic *Burning of the House of Lords and Commons, 16th October, 1834* (Philadelphia Museum of Art), appears in James Hamilton's biography of the painter, recently out in paperback:[\[1\]](#)

For the three hours I was there—and I understood it had been the same since he began in the mornin ...

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