LIGHT
LARGE FORMAT LABELS

acmi

Spiritual Light

According to Judeo-Christian belief, God's first act was to create light. In the Old and New Testaments, light represents goodness and purity. Darkness, meanwhile, signifies destruction and evil. In the late 18th and early 19th century, religious art became popular in Britain. Artists started using light and dark in their painting to represent profound spiritual themes. They often explored the interplay between literal and metaphorical light and dark: flickers of light in the gloom suggesting hope amid suffering.

In this group

The Deluge

JMW Turner, 1805
Tate: Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856

The Angel Standing in the Sun

JMW Turner, 1846
Tate: Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856

The Creation of Light

George Richmond, 1826
Tate: Purchased 1986

The Deluge

Jacob More, 1787
Tate: Purchased with assistance from Tate Patrons and Tate Members 2008

Scientific Light

English painter J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851) has been called the ‘painter of light’. He developed new artistic techniques to capture natural phenomena, evoking the intensity and transience of light.

Turner’s works were simultaneously intuitive and scientific. He drew on the colour theories of German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who argued that every colour was a unique combination of light and dark. Goethe’s ideas influenced Turner’s painting as well as his teaching. For his students, he prepared diagrams showing the reflection and refraction of rays of light and the production of shadows. His approach enabled him to capture visual sensations that had never been reproduced in visual art before. In the companion paintings shown in this room – Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory)… and Shade and Darkness… – Turner opposes cool and warm colours and light and dark to capture fleeting atmospheric effects and explore contrasting emotional associations.

In this group

Lecture Diagram: Reflections in a Single Polished Metal Globe and in a Pair of Polished Metal Globes Part of II. Various Perspective Diagrams

JMW Turner, c. 1810
Tate: Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856

Lecture Diagrams: Reflections in Transparent Globes c. 1810

JMW Turner
Tate. Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856

Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) - the Morning after the Deluge - Moses Writing the Book of Genesis

JMW Turner, 1843
Tate: Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856

Shade and Darkness - the Evening of the Deluge

JMW Turner, 1843
Tate: Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856

Sun Setting over a Lake

JMW Turner, c. 1840
Tate: Accepted by the nation as part of the Turner Bequest 1856

Sublime Light

During the 17th and 18th centuries, Europe saw a flourishing of philosophy and science. Artists responded to this 'Age of Enlightenment', addressing new scientific and technological subjects. However, later artists would reject this movement's rational ideals to instead emphasise the role of emotions in understanding the world.

Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–1797) was influenced by his encounters with British industrialists at the forefront of technological progress. He treated scenes of ordinary human life and the natural world in the same grand and dramatic style. His compositions are structured around strong contrasting effects of light and dark. Mount Vesuvius, which erupted several times throughout the 18th century, gripped his imagination. Although he never witnessed the volcano in Italy erupt himself, he returned repeatedly to the subject.

Enlightenment thinkers promoted reason and order as ideals. In the late 18th and into the 19th century, artists in Europe and North America began to challenge these values and in their place expressed humankind's connection to nature. John Martin (1789–1854) was one such artist. His paintings portray nature's immense power and unpredictability, aiming to evoke a feeling of the sublime—awe mixed with terror—in the viewer.

In this group

A Moonlight with a Lighthouse, Coast of Tuscany

Joseph Wright of Derby, 1789
Tate: Purchased 1949

The Destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum

John Martin, 1822
Tate: Purchased 1869

Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples

Joseph Wright of Derby, c. 1776-c. 1780
Tate: Purchased with assistance from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, the Art Fund, Friends of the Tate Gallery, and Mr John Ritblat 1990

Liquid Reflections

Liliane Lijn, 1968

Liquid Reflections is a complex moving sculpture that combines water, Perspex and light to evoke the movement of light particles. Lijn's kinetic artworks stem from her interest in the relationship between art and science. Like Turner, she applies an imaginative approach to the physics of light and matter. This sculpture is the result of five years of experimentation. Lijn's aim was to capture light and 'keep it alive' within a sculpture. The rotating balls can be seen as moving lenses, projecting an array of reflections and shadows across the room.

Liquid Reflections is one of several modern and contemporary artworks displayed adjacent to historical works in this exhibition. Their inclusion highlights artists' common interest in light across time and the diverse ways this theme has been explored.

Natural Light

John Constable (1776–1837) created close studies of nature and the changing effects of the sky. Together with Turner, he transformed the genre of landscape painting in England.

Constable's late monumental paintings sealed his reputation as one of Britain's greatest landscape artists. In the last decade of his life, he devoted great effort to creating a series of prints based on works from across his career. In the text he wrote to accompany these prints, Constable presented himself as 'an innovator' who had transformed visual art by adding to it 'qualities of Nature unknown to it before'.

Younger artist John Linnell (1792–1882) became a prominent rival of Constable. He aimed to record the world around him as accurately as possible, paying careful attention to the effects of light. Rejecting bucolic scenes, his choice of subject matter was unusual for the period.

In this group

Branch Hill Pond, Hampstead Heath, with a Boy Sitting on a Bank

John Constable, c. 1825
Tate: Bequeathed by Henry Vaughan 1900

Harwich Lighthouse

John Constable, 1820
Tate: Presented by Miss Isabel Constable as the gift of Maria Louisa, Isabel and Lionel Bicknell Constable 1888

Landscape (The Windmill)

John Linnell, 1844-1845
Tate: Presented by Robert Vernon1847

Various Subjects of Landscape, Characteristic of English Scenery ('English Landscape') Mezzotint on paper

John Constable
Tate. Purchased 1985

Interior Light

The works in this room explore undramatic manifestations of light in interior settings, demonstrating its subtle influence on how we experience the world, represented in a way not dissimilar to the work of cinematographers.

Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916) is known for his subdued portraits and meditative interiors which record the details of his everyday life. William Rothenstein (1872–1945) was similarly concerned with portraying domestic environments. In his portraits of family and friends, he gives the surrounding spaces as much attention as the figures. Both artists took great care in accurately portraying light, from the highlights on the figures' hair, skin and clothing in Rothenstein's paintings to the effects of light and shadow on the walls and floor of Hammershøi's home.

These deceptively simple but enigmatic paintings are paired with a contemporary work by Philippe Parreno (born 1964). The title 6.00 PM implies that the pattern at the centre of the carpet depicts the play of light and shadow cast through a window at six o'clock in the evening. But the carpet is always displayed in a windowless gallery and the image itself never changes. We can walk across and leave marks on the carpet, meaning we are unlikely to be tricked by the illusion. By fixing a particular moment of light, the work draws attention to connections between light and our perception of time.

In this group

6.00 PM

Philippe Parreno, 2000-2006
Tate: Purchased using funds provided by the 2006 Outset / Frieze Art Fair Fund to benefit the Tate Collection 2007

Interior

Vilhelm Hammershøi, 1899
Tate: Presented in memory of Leonard Borwick by his friends through the Art Fund 1926

Interior, Sunlight on the Floor

Vilhelm Hammershøi, 1906
Tate: Purchased 1930

Mother and Child

William Rothenstein, 1903
Tate: Purchased 1988

Light Impressions

In later 19th-century Europe, many artists reacted to rapid technological and societal change with a renewed interest in the natural world.

Artists such as John Brett (1831–1902) captured the effects and emotive qualities of light. His meticulous depiction of sunlight on the sea built on ideas promoted by the Pre-Raphaelites earlier in the century.

With the group of French artists known as Impressionists, light became a subject in itself. Claude Monet (1840–1926), Camille Pissarro (1830–1930), Alfred Sisley (1839–1899) and others ventured into the countryside to paint outdoors. These artists worked in nature to record the fleeting effects of light, atmosphere and movement, finishing their works outside. This was very unusual at a time when most landscape artists just made sketches and returned to their studios to develop them into carefully finished works. The Impressionists broke from illusionistic traditions, emphasising the paint on the surface of the canvas, flattening perspective and cropping their compositions in striking ways.

In this group

Poplars on the Epte (Les Peupliers au bord de l'Epte)

Claude Monet, 1891
Tate: Presented by the Art Fund 1926

The British Channel Seen from the Dorsetshire Cliffs

John Brett, 1871
Tate: Presented by Mrs Brett 1902

The Passing Winter

Yayoi Kusama, 2005
Tate: Purchased with funds provided by the Asia Pacific Acquisitions Committee 2008

The Path to the Old Ferry at By

Alfred Sisley, 1880
Tate: Bequeathed by Montague Shearman through the Contemporary Art Society1940

The Pilots' Jetty, Le Havre, Morning, Cloudy and Misty Weather

Camille Pissarro, 1903
Tate: Presented by Lucien Pissarro, the artist's son 1948

The Seine at Port-Villez

Claude Monet, 1894
Tate: Purchased 1953

The Small Meadows in Spring

Alfred Sisley, 1880
Tate: Presented by a body of subscribers in memory of Roger Fry 1936

School of Light

Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) hailed photography and film as bringing a new ‘culture of light’ into art.

Moholy-Nagy saw photographic experimentation overtaking even the most innovative aspects of painting. He began teaching at the Bauhaus, an avant-garde art school in Germany, in 1923. His influence reached far beyond Germany to include artists like György Kepes’ (1906–2001) and Luigi Veronesi (1908–1998), whose photographic work focused primarily on darkroom experiments and abstract imagery. Moholy-Nagy’s fellow teacher at the Bauhaus, Josef Albers (1888–1976), taught his students not to use shading, but pure lines, arguing that colour is relative to the viewer’s perception. The images they made investigate how light reflects, refracts and scatters in response to different objects.

These ideas spread as artists around the world experimented and thought about light through the medium of photography. Moholy-Nagy celebrated photography's ability to transform the appearance of reality – whether structure or texture – into pure light phenomena. This approach is reflected in the emphasis on light and shadow in experimental photography during this time.

In this group

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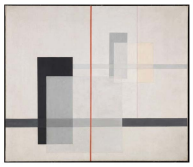


Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1922
Tate: Purchased 1961

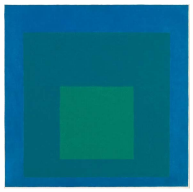
Kinetic Study 1941 Photo n.145 1940, printed 1970s Photo n.152 1940, printed 1970s Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

Luigi Veronesi
Tate. Accepted under the Cultural Gifts Scheme by HM Government from Massimo Prelz Oltramonti and allocated to Tate 2015

Left to right: Light Reflection 1941 Circles and Dots c.1939–1940 Structure Photogram c.1939–1940 Branches c.1939–1940 Blobs 3 c.1939–1940 Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

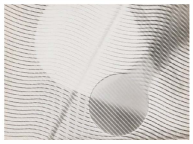
György Kepes
Tate. Purchased with funds provided by the Russia and Eastern European Acquisitions Committee and the Photography Acquisitions Committee 2013

Study for Homage to the Square: Beaming 1963 Study for Homage to the Square 1964 Oil paint on fibreboard



Josef Albers
Tate. Presented by Mrs Anni Albers, the artist's widow and the Josef Albers Foundation 1978

Untitled (Spiral) 1938 Construction 1938 Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper



Luigi Veronesi
Tate. Accepted under the Cultural Gifts Scheme by HM Government from Massimo Prelz Oltramonti and allocated to Tate 2015

Light and Colour

The works in this section use colour in different ways to create impressions of light and movement.

Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) wanted his art to go beyond straightforward representation, giving viewers a more participatory experience, like listening to music. He aimed to create a sense of movement in his work and saw colour as an essential tool in this. These same principles can be seen the work of Bridget Riley (born 1931), who uses geometric shapes and colour to explore the nature of perception. Riley describes her use of different tones as a change ‘tempo’, pitching shades of colour ‘against the structure of the formal movement’. Nataraja 1993 refers to the Hindu god Shiva, who is usually depicted with many arms in his form as the cosmic dancer.

Combining projected light with a painted surface, Peter Sedgley (born 1930) creates the illusion of movement on the canvas. A series of spray-painted concentric circles of different colours are arranged to present a visual diaphragm capable of the most radical colour changes. Sedgley sees these adjustments in colour to be akin to tuning a musical instrument.

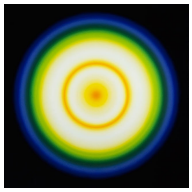
In this group

Swinging

Wassily Kandinsky, 1925
Tate: Purchased 1979

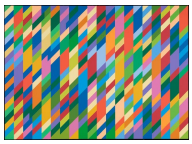
Colour Cycle III

Peter Sedgley, 1970
Tate: Purchased 1970



Nataraja

Bridget Riley, 1993
Tate: Purchased 1994



Disappearance at Sea

Tacita Dean, 1996

Filmed at a lighthouse in northern England, this work consists of seven shots that alternate between the rotating lighthouse bulbs and footage looking out to sea. Dean was inspired by the story of Donald Crowhurst (1932–1969), an amateur sailor who died while attempting a solo voyage around the world. The ‘disappearance’ referred to in the work’s title can be seen as a reference both to Crowhurst’s death and to the sunset the film depicts.

Expanded Light

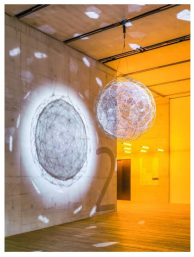
The invention and popularisation of electric light was an essential characteristic of modernity that revolutionised life in the 20th century. Artist's use of light became increasingly expansive and architectural, enveloping the viewer with light to become a part of the work as they engage with it.

In the 1960s, Dan Flavin (1933–1996) was a pioneer of light art in America, working only with commercially available fluorescent light tubes to create sculptures and installations. This new potential of light quickly evolved into new types of sculptural space and light environments, becoming the sole medium of artists such as James Turrell (1943–). While Flavin preferred to assert the ordinariness of light in his work, Turrell's installations are intended to produce a state of self-reflection and contemplation, encouraging viewers to become aware of the process of looking and the limits of perception. Olafur Eliasson (born 1967) similarly uses strategies that change the appearance of the gallery architecture depending on the position of the viewer, reminding us that our actions, however small, have an impact on the world around us.

In this group

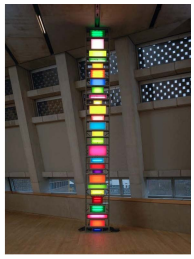
Stardust Particle

Olafur Eliasson, 2014
Tate: Presented by the artist in honour of Sir Nicholas Serota 2018



Spectrum of Brick Lane 2

David Batchelor, 2007
Tate: Presented by Tate Patrons 2009



‘monument’ for V. Tatlin

Dan Flavin, 1966-1969
Tate: Purchased 1971

Raemar, Blue

James Turrell, 1969

In his ‘Shallow Space Constructions’, James Turrell combines architecture, sculpture, light and space to completely envelop the viewer in a coloured atmosphere. Raemar, Blue 1969 is one of the earliest and most significant of these. This immersive spatial environment plays with our experience of perception and the effect of light in space. Blue light radiates from LED light placed behind a partition that consequently appears to float at the back of the gallery space.