



## *Rain, steam and speed - the Great Western Railway (Turner 1844)*



In the nineteenth century, Britain was transformed, as railways forged paths through fields and over rivers to link towns and cities all over the country. Britain was building railways in – and supplying trains to – many parts of the world. Trains belched steam and smoke which filled the air, and sometimes joined with rain and fog to cover the landscape with a curtain of whites and browns. Here rain blends into the steam and smoke created by the train, creating the sort of mist that Turner loved portraying. Through the mist the River Thames glows under the bridge. The black engine of the locomotive is the one hard, sharp thing in this painting. It rushes towards the viewer like a violent iron fist pushing nature aside.

The scene is the railway bridge across the Thames between Taplow and Maidenhead. The bridge (top left), which was begun on Brunel's design in 1837 and finished in 1839, has two main arches of brick, very wide and flat. The view is to the east, towards London. The arch shown is known as “The Sounding Arch” because of its echo.

The photo top right is of the road bridge to the left of the painting:

Impressionists concentrated not on detail but on the general idea that the artists gained of a scene or object, using basic colours and small strokes to suggest the reflected light they saw. The term Impressionism is usually used of the work produced between about 1867 and 1886 by a group of mainly French artists who shared approaches and techniques intended to record the changing effects of light and colour. However it could be claimed that the English artist J. M. W. Turner was the first real “impressionist”.

Turner was regarded highly enough to be able to exhibit the painting at the London's Royal Academy in 1844. It is now in the National Gallery.

[www.ibiblio.org](http://www.ibiblio.org), [www.nationalgalleries.org](http://www.nationalgalleries.org), [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

### ASSIGNMENTS

1. How much detail is there in the painting? (How clearly can we see the scene?)
2. How does Turner convey a sense of movement?
3. The darker colours and stronger lines are reserved for the train and the bridge. Do you think Turner might be making a point here?

