

Le tableau de J M W Turner de 1808 intitulé « La facture impayée ou le dentiste réprimandant la prodigalité de son fils »

J. M. W. Turner's painting of 1808: 'The Unpaid Bill - or - the Dentist Reproving his Son's Prodigality'

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Résumé

Le tableau de J M W Turner de 1808 intitulé « La facture impayée ou le dentiste réprimandant la prodigalité de son fils ». Un tournant dans l'histoire de l'Art, un tournant dans l'histoire de la Dentisterie.

Keywords

- Turner
- Dentist
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Abstract

JM W Turner's painting of 1808: 'The Unpaid Bill - or - the Dentist Reproving his Son's Prodigality'. A turning point in the history of Art, a turning point in the history of Dentistry.

In 1808, the artist J.M.W. Turner RA (1775-1851) exhibited a painting that puzzled people at the time and has to a degree perplexed viewers since. (Fig.1) When the painting came to the attention of the British Dental Association Museum in 2002, in particular thanks to Roxanne Fea who was working there at the time, there was an initial response 'but that is not 'a Turner''. And indeed, the painting did not fit with preconceptions of what 'a Turner' looked like - and this essay identifies a possible reason for the artist leaving behind him the style of genre picture to pursue the impressionist seeking of light and movement for which he is now known, and for which he became famous. So much so that in 2020 the Bank of England portrayed him on their new £20.00 note.

The very rich and influential Connoisseur Richard Payne Knight had admirable ideas about Art in Britain. He claimed that 'The Moderns (in Britain) could stand with the Old Masters, and that he would show that this was the case by mounting a modern British painting (in this case by Westall "Moses in the Bulrushes") between two of the Old Masters in his Collection (Note 1). More than that - he would commission new works to prove his point - offering Old Masters as models. For example, he had a Rembrandt, purchased from the Orleans Sale, and what he thought to be a Teniers (now attributed to Gérard Thomas or his studio). It would appear that it was the Teniers/Thomas painting that provided the key theme for the Turner Commission.

In the context of Turner setting the scene in the workshop and operating room of a dentist, it is possible to wonder whether Payne Knight had seen one of the other very similar scenes painted by Thomas or his Circle (or as he thought, Teniers) of an Alchemist's rooms of which at least three have a vignette of a dental operation in the background, and that this suggested the idea.

Whatever the inspiration or content of the original 'Old Master' may have been, as we will see later, Turner adapted it, and antiqued his contemporary observations to produce his 'Mona Lisa' (Roxanne Fea's judgement) of dental paintings. And a very good image of the painting is now available in the Musée Virtuel de l'Art Dentaire (Note 2). The public flocked in to see the Royal Academy Exhibition held in 1808, where Turner's painting was exhibited in a prominent position and at eye level. The exact number of visitors was recorded - at 59,384 (Note 3).

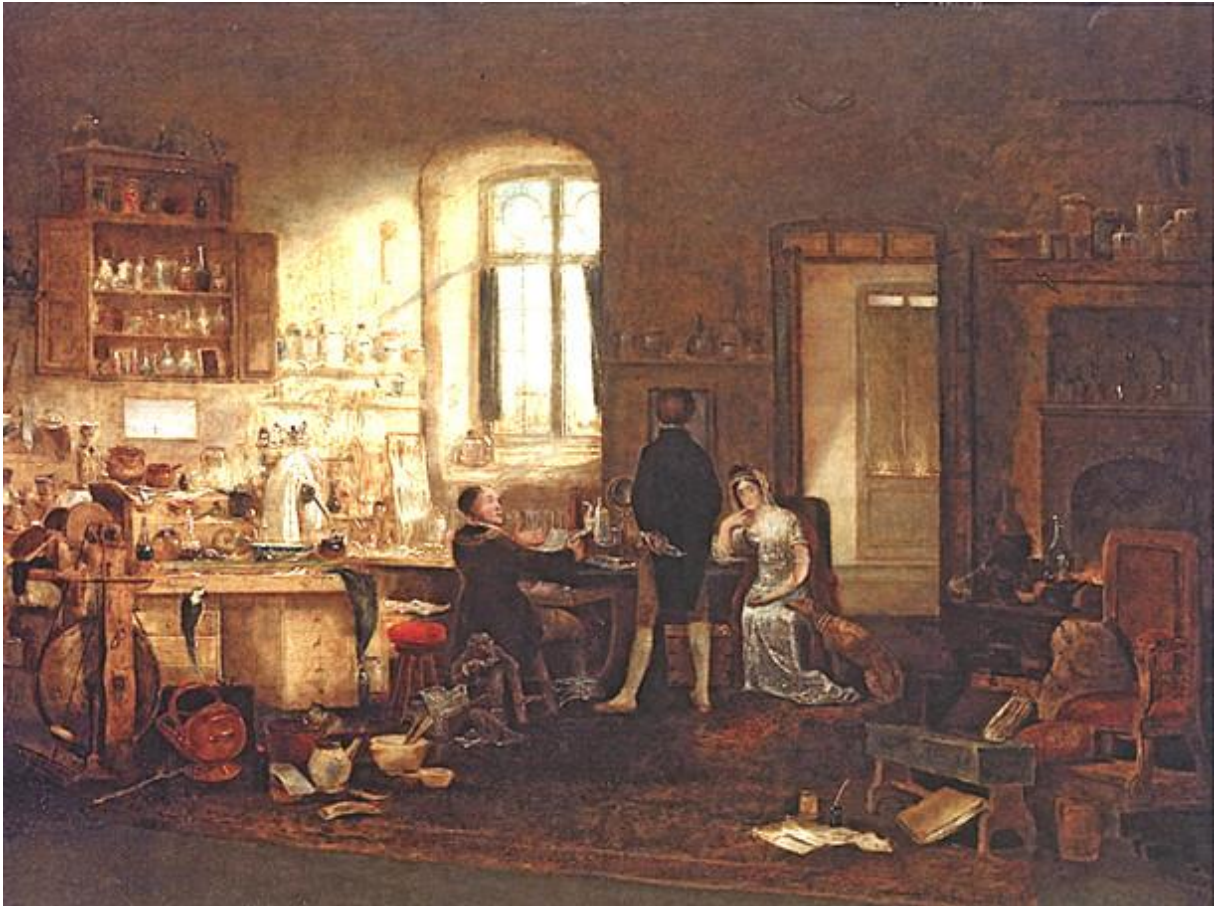


Fig.1. . 'The Unpaid Bill - or - the Dentist Reproving his Son's Prodigality' J.M.W. Turner RA 1808. By Kind Permission, the Schindler Family.

However, whatever we may think of the painting now - it was not understood or appreciated at the time. The crowds wanted to be impressed by pictures of great houses or great cities, wildness or grandeur in scenery (The Sublime), for all of which Turner already had made a name for himself. Also, society portraits of great men and women were admired, and scenes portraying the common man at his amusements could be enjoyed 'de haut en bas' (Note 4).

General criticism, which in the words of the critic of the 'Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser' admired the 'harmonious distribution of its light and shade' found, for example, the 'Lady' difficult to understand 'what part of the play she enacts does not appear; indeed, the whole story is very obscurely told'. And although 'The doctor is a good quizzical figure enough, and his anger is well expressed by his action and grimace' he is variously an Apothecary in his shop, a 'disciple of Galen' and 'the doctor' and the critic describes the details as 'a few articles scattered here and there in wild disorder'. There is no mention of dentistry (Note 5).

A painting of village "Card Players" by the young Scottish artist David Wilkie (1785-1841) was the star of the show (even if Benjamin West, the President of the Royal Academy, thought it inferior to his previous year's "The Village Politicians" (Note 6). The most detailed criticism of Turner's painting was aimed at the 'drawing' of the

figures - and indeed if comparison is made with Wilkie's 'characters' Turner's figures are not finely painted. The critic of the Examiner was certainly outspoken about them, saying they were "wretchedly drawn" (Note 7). Turner's and Wilkie's paintings were hung close together, so comparison was inevitable, and there would have been no indication for the viewing public that Turner's painting appeared largely as it did because that is what Payne Knight's commission had required - it was meant to look like an 'Old Master', and the critic who described it as giving the appearance of been put together from old prints of apothecaries' shops can be forgiven (Note 8). It was definitely not meant to be, as Wilkie's was, a modern genre painting of rustics.

There is a further important point to be mentioned. A fairly new development in the art world of the time was that successful paintings would be copied and prints made for sale to a mass market - and in this Wilkie was particularly successful - prints of "The Card Players", "The Village Politicians" (1806), and "The Rent Day" (1807), for example sold widely, increasing greatly the amount of money that an artist could make from a painting. It is possible to make the case for Turner abandoning this genre style (He produced just one more - "The Garreteer's Petition" in 1809 - skilfully lighted, but in no way 'popular') as a consequence of the failure of "The Unpaid Bill" to achieve this sort of public exposure - even if as we

know the work was painted to commission, and not primarily - if indeed at all - as contemporary critics had it - to rival Wilkie.

The extent of the friendship which developed between Turner and Wilkie, who was later knighted, which Turner never was, is reflected in Turner's 1842 painting recording the death and burial at sea off Gibraltar of Wilkie, who was returning to England from a painting excursion abroad.

A beautiful companion painting to his tribute to Wilkie (also 1842) is Turner's tribute to Napoleon, wonderfully lighted, which shows very well his requirement for the viewer to think through the meaning of a painting, and to look inward to the viewer's own reaction. Compare this, for example with the 1801 'Napoleon Crossing the Alps' by Jacques-Louis David.

As for the figures, even today there is disagreement in identifying them - Andrew Wilton and the Tate stating that the female figure is the wife of the dentist. We may however disagree with this interpretation of the female figure as being the mother - it fits better with the narrative to see her as a high maintenance wife - in the most fashionable dress, with an expensive hound with its jewelled collar, and above all in Turner's acutely observed posture, expressing both her distaste for being present in the scene, and her disengagement from it.

For Turner to have shown the son from the back is, again, a stroke of genius. His expression is not relevant to the narrative, his position, posture, and clothing are. Turner has emphasised the position of the head by giving it a frame, that of a mirror or picture on the wall - but not a simple outline, for the head of the young man is level with the top, or even projects a little above it. This does not at first sight appear 'neat', but it serves two functions - we, the viewers, are made aware that this is a tall, upright young man, the height measuring defiance, not a moral position. Also, dare we admit, a wish in him to be "The gentleman" and to distance himself from the profession of his father.

In 1807 Turner had been appointed Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy, and here he uses perspective to establish precisely our viewing position, not from below in this theatrical setting, (as seen earlier one critic recognised it as a 'stage') but rather as it would be from an audience box, at something above head height from the floor of the stage as defined by the front edge of the carpet, and from the right side of the theatre. So our viewpoint is at the same height as the father's head, and a little below that of the son's, throwing his image up against the top of the 'frame'. This would be apparent for any hanging of the picture when tilted a little forward, as was probably the case at the Summer exhibition, though we cannot know how Payne Knight himself hung it.

The key expression, and the lineaments of anger and disappointment, are those of the father. If the painting had been limited to these three figures alone, it would be a masterpiece of observation, although from our point of view a shame, since no mention of a dentist need then have been made in a timeless scene of family drama.

Turner was known to be fond of long titles for his paintings. In this case, the key figure is clearly identified as 'The Doctor' and is interesting that it took some thirty years before his title was changed to 'The Dentist'. It does not seem unreasonable to place Turner's painting in the line of personages and events that changed the public perception of the profession at the beginning of the 19th century by showing the dentist, not as so frequently occurred, as a figure of caricature, but as a qualified professional in a highly skilled vocation.

The change in the title of Turner's painting is undoubtedly significant, and by 1858 a popular publication names 'The Dentist' rather than 'The Doctor ...' (Note 9), although still in 1859 the correct title for the painting was being given (Note 10). Now it is always referred to under the Dentist title.

Clear evidence for both titles is to be found in the painting. Just legible is the Diploma above the workbench, showing that the practitioner is a Licentiate of the 'College of Physic' - a doctor. It is signed by two physicians and dated 1776. While the presence of false teeth, probably human in walrus ivory plates, just possibly de Chémant porcelain, on the workbench shows equally clearly the practice of dentistry. As do the two walrus tusks, ready to be made into denture bases.

The operating chair is particularly interesting because of its position on an elevated stand. It otherwise matches (if more ornate) a high-backed chair shown by George Cruikshank in use in 1821, and can only have been copied in this position by Turner from an original used by a practitioner for very specific practical purposes. It is certainly not ideal for dental operations, and probably reflects the specialty of the operator in other directions. This gives a strong suggestion as to whose rooms Turner used as his model.

Several of the Dentists prominent in London at the time could have furnished Turner with his model. Interesting that Cartwright (who was Dumergue's pupil, and a friend of Turner) is shown in a portrait leaning against the back of, and almost welcoming someone into, what could well have been his own operating chair. Also to be considered from amongst the prominent dental practitioners who might have opened their operatories to Turner are two French - de Chémant and Dumergue, one Italian - the Chevalier Ruspini, and one Flemish (though born in London and studying under the Hunter brothers) - van Butchell, and one English, even if details in their personal lives probably prevented Turner from identifying any one of them as his model for the dentist himself.

Their locations in the most fashionable streets in London give some idea of their status. Sir Walter Scott used to stay with Dumergue when in London. And Turner studied art with William Frederick Wells just a few doors down in Mount Street from Martin van Butchell - an extremely well known, and not a little eccentric figure.

Van Butchell had also made a name for himself for the surgical treatment of anal fistula, and this perhaps gives the strongest clue to his operator being the model for Turner, as the chair on its dais, with the stool before it, would fit well with that specialty.

For further clues we can look at Turner's working method. In bound sketchbooks - preserved for the Nation by John Ruskin - Turner made rapid sketches of his subjects, which, together with his exceptional visual memory, furnished the material for any subsequent painting. The sketchbook, labelled River and Margate to reflect the bulk of the content, holds the sketches for the dental workshop and surgery.

There are nine sketches. John Ruskin disbound them, and at some stage the central one, the master drawing, (Fig.2), was framed, and exposed to light, which has discoloured it. One can guess that the dentist who had this page might well have been Cartwright, who was renowned as a discriminating art collector, and who treated Turner. Fortunately, it was recovered to be rebound in its correct position, where it may now be examined in the Tate Gallery. In order to comply with his commission to emulate or outdo the old masters, Turner deliberately 'antiqued' the machinery and fittings of the

operating room and workshop. The sketches are thus an invaluable record.

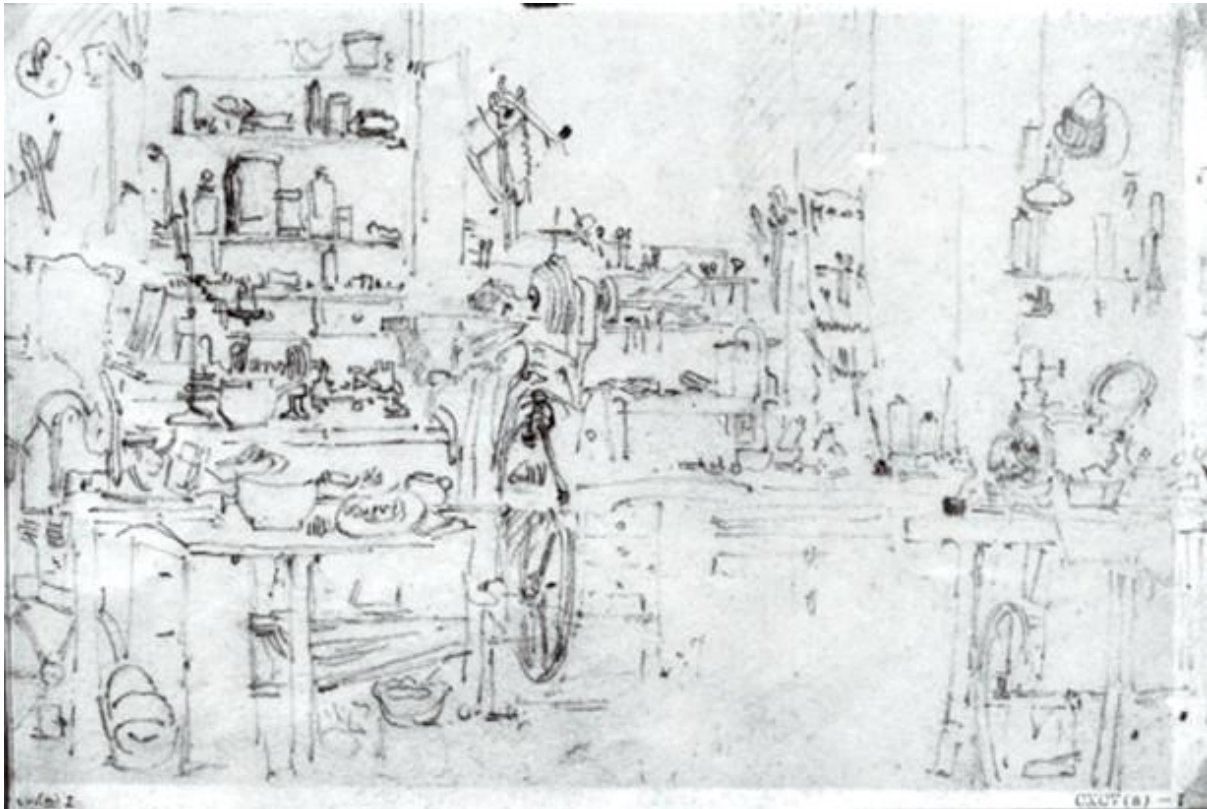


Fig.2. Interior of a dentist's workroom. J M W Turner R A p.76 from River and Margate sketchbook. Pencil on paper. 115x190 mm. c. 1806-1808. By kind permission, 'Tate. Photo: Tate.'

At this sketching stage the most fully realised of the family figures is the son - the father is very roughly indicated, and the wife is shown in two possible positions, and not at this stage facing forward. For the painting a door is added, and the window is moved, but the painting very clearly shows its origin in the sketches made from a real life operatory.

But above all, as noticed at the time - it is a study in light. "The chief merit of this production is in the harmonious distribution of its light and shade; the masses of which are broad, and the gradations happily preserved" (Note 11). And Robert Hunt said: "for a picture of colouring and effect it is not only exceptionable but inestimable" (Note 12).

Light was a prime subject for Turner. In 1797, just ahead of Napoleon's invading army, two paintings by Claude Lorrain (Claude or «le Lorrain») *Arrival of Aeneas at Palentaem*, (1675) and *The Father of Psyche Sacrificing at the Temple of Apollo*, (1662-3) escaped from Rome where they had been in the collection of Prince Altieri. For part of their journey, they were given an escort by Nelson, and they had reached London by Spring 1799, where they created a sensation (Note 13). Both were purchased by William Beckford for the very large sum of £7,000 and are now in Anglesey Abbey in the care of the National Trust.

It was at Beckford's London House that the 24 year old Turner saw them, and the experience changed his life as an artist. Farington records in his diary that with reference to one in particular "Turner said he was both pleased and unhappy while he viewed it, - it seemed to be beyond the power of imitation" (Note 14). In his will as drawn up in 1831, Turner specified that two of his

paintings "*Sun Rising through Vapour*", and "*Dido Building Carthage*" should be hung in the National Gallery between two other Claudes, "*Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*", (1648) and "*The Marriage of Isaac and Rebecca*", (1648) (Note 15).

Later French influence on Turner was acquired when, in 1802, in a brief interlude of peace, English artists flocked to Paris, and Turner was able to make studies in The Louvre - for example on a Poussin: "*Landscape with Diogenes*".

The search for light and subjects for his brushes absorbed Turner and took him again and again to France and Italy. In London too there was research into the abilities of paints to produce the 'Claude' effect of light. Even before he travelled to France, the so-called 'Orleans' Sales of art had taken place between 1792 and 1798, when much of the collection of Louis Philippe d'Orléans, duc de Chartres (duc d'Orléans, puis Philippe-Egalité) had reached England and Turner and other British artists could see the works of the Old Masters.

Much later, in 1836, Louis Philippe I Roi de France 1830-1848, whom Turner had known when he was in England, awarded him a médaille d'honneur. And subsequently a gold snuffbox and an invitation to dine (Note 16).

As seen in Turner's glorious sunset tribute to Napoleon, and in a delightful painting of Turner made while he was preparing a seascape, he had moved towards a style which once again confused his critics, and which may be described as impressionistic. He is recorded both as determined to capture the techniques of painting light in the Old Masters he had studied in Paris and London, and the light itself that he had travelled to France and Italy to experience. Whatever the contemporaries made of it,

Turner had at last achieved an oeuvre worthy of a successor to Claude.

In the words of the American Ralph Waldo Emerson, he was:

"...as true a worshipper of beauty in form and color as ever existed, ... profusely pouring over the cold mind of his countrymen creations of grace and truth, removing the reproach of sterility from English art, catching from their savage climate every fine hint, and importing into their galleries every tint and trait of sunnier cities and skies; making an era in painting" (Note 17).

The value of this masterpiece by Turner, where 'typical Turners' can fetch many millions, and also the preparatory sketches made by him in a dental surgery of the time, can not be assessed in monetary terms. Oscar Wilde's Cynic, who "knows the price of everything and the value of nothing" (Note 18) has no place in this surgery.

To conclude - it was stated at the beginning that this painting by Turner represented "A turning point in the history of Art, a turning point in the history of Dentistry". This style of painting was one to which Turner returned only once after 1808. Had The Unpaid Bill been a commercial and critical success as Wilkie's genre paintings had been, the move by Turner to the wonderful exercises in painterly skill and imagination so well expressed by Andrew Wilton, would have been distracted and delayed. As Wilton says "... Turner was, indeed, a virtuoso draughtsman ... and ...the sketchbooks which ... Came into the possession of the British nation are worthy of a place beside his paintings in both watercolour and oil as the products of an astonishing alliance of bravura skill and poetic imagination. ... they are testimony to a highly evolved professional and creative discipline and give evidence of the innermost working of one of the most original minds of Western art" (Note 19).

As for the dental profession - for a practitioner to be portrayed in 1808 as a medically qualified operator - and not as so often in art and caricature as a comical tooth-drawer, was probably unique - and recognised to be so as the title given to the painting changed to that by which we know it now: "The Unpaid Bill, or, the Dentist Reproving his son's Prodigality"

Note 4. E.g. "Beau Monde", *Literary and Fashionable Magazine*, 1808-07, vol 3 supplément, p. 350-351.

Note 5. *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser*, Exhibition - Royal Academy, Friday 06 May 1808.

Note 6. FARINGTON J., *Diary Feb*, 11th 1808.

Note 7. FINBERG A J., *The life of J M W Turner*, R A... Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 150.

Note 8. *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser*, Friday 6th May 1808.

Note 9. *Penny Cyclopaedia*, London, 1858.

Note 10. MURRAY H. Ed., *Turner and his Works*, London, 1859.

Note 11. *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser*, Friday 6th May 1808.

Note 12. *The Examiner*, 15th May 1808.

Note 13. MOYLE F., *The Extraordinary Life and Momentous Times of JMW Turner*, Viking, 2016, Penguin edn, 2017, p. 142-3.

Note 14. FARINGTON J., *Diary May*, 8th 1799.

Note 15. MOYLE F., *ibid* p. 441.

Note 16. MOYLE F., *ibid* p. 377.

Note 17. EMERSON R.W., *English Traits*, Chapter VIII "Character", Boston, Phillips Sampson & Company, 1856, p. 138.

Note 18. WILDE O., *Lady Windermere's Fan*, 1892.

Note 19. WILTON. A., *Turner as Draughtsman*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2006.

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Notes

Note 1. FARINGTON J., *Diary Feb*, 11th, 1808.

Note 2. MVAD, <https://www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr/mvad/003-01b.php>

Note 3. <https://chronicle250.com/1808#catalogue>

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Il dipinto di JMW Turner del 1808: " The Unpaid Bill - or - the Dentist Reproving his Son's Prodigality ". Una svolta nella storia dell'Arte, una svolta nella storia dell'Odontoiatria.

Membre SFHAD

Nel 1808, l'artista inglese Joseph Mallord William Turner non aveva ancora trovato il suo stile distintivo. Un amico e artista rivale, David Wilkie, aveva avuto successo con i dipinti di genere e Turner decise di cimentarsi in questi producendone solo alcuni. Non ebbero un successo di critica e forse per fortuna Turner andò avanti abbandonando questa corrente - ma uno dei dipinti di genere, commissionato dall'intenditore Payne Knight - 'The Unpaid Bill - or - the Dentist Reproving his Son's Prodigality' (il dentista che rimprovera la prodigalità di suo figlio) - venne descritto come la Gioconda dell' arte dentaria. Questa presentazione ci pone di fronte a due argomenti: il dipinto segna un punto di svolta nell'approccio di Turner alla sua arte e segnò il cambiamento dalla comprensione di "Operator for the Teeth" a "The Dentist" (Da operatore per i denti a dentista) nella coscienza inglese

Cuadro de J M W Turner de 1808: "'The Unpaid Bill - or - the Dentist Reproving his Son's Prodigality'". Un punto de inflexión en la historia del Arte, un punto de inflexión en la historia de la Odontología.

En 1808, el artista inglés Joseph Mallord William Turner aún no había encontrado su estilo definitivo. Un amigo y rival artístico, David Wilkie, había tenido éxito con las pinturas de género, y Turner decidió probar con ellas, realizando sólo unas pocas. No tuvieron éxito de crítica y, afortunadamente, Turner siguió adelante, pero uno de los cuadros de género, encargado por el conocido Payne Knight - 'The Unpaid Bill - or - the Dentist Reproving his Son's Prodigality' - ha sido descrito como la Mona Lisa de la odontología. En esta presentación se exponen dos argumentos: que el cuadro marca un punto de inflexión en el enfoque de Turner sobre su arte, y que señala un cambio en la comprensión de "el operador de los dientes" a "el dentista" en la conciencia inglesa