

## IN BRIEF

- Describes one of the most important historical records of dentistry surviving from the Georgian period.
- Enlarges on the meaning of J. M. W. Turner's painting of a dentist's rooms.
- Suggests real life models for his characters.
- Discusses the place of dentistry in Georgian society.

## J. M. W. Turner's painting *The unpaid bill, or the dentist reproving his son's prodigality*

M. Bishop,<sup>1</sup> S. Gelbier<sup>2</sup> and J. King<sup>3</sup>

In November 2002, the BDA News carried an item,<sup>1</sup> illustrated with a colour reproduction, describing a painting of a Georgian dentist's rooms by Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), one of the most respected of English artists, which was shortly to come up for auction at Christies' Rooms in London. This work, first exhibited in 1808, was entitled *The unpaid bill, or the dentist reproving his son's prodigality* (Fig. 1), and had originally been commissioned by the connoisseur Richard Payne Knight (1750-1824). *The examiner*, a contemporary London journal, identifies the 'cradle-piece' for the commission as being a Rembrandt which Payne Knight owned, and the journalist Robert Hunt said that Turner had more than come up to the task of showing that a modern could handle light as well as the old master,<sup>2</sup> 'for a picture of colouring and effect, it is... inestimable.'<sup>3</sup>

It seems, as the cataloguers of an exhibition at which the Turner painting was shown in Manchester in 1982 spotted,<sup>4</sup> that Turner may have been prompted to his subject for this virtuoso display by another painting in Payne Knight's extensive collection, *The alchemist's laboratory*, which, like the *...dentist reproving his son's prodigality*, shows an older man at odds with his family. This painting has recently been attributed to Gerard Thomas.<sup>5</sup>

It was probably Turner's satirical wit which was both tickled by the theatrical possibilities of the subject and suggested the dentist as the modern equivalent of the *Alchemist*, rather than the more obvious chemist, who at the beginning of the nineteenth century was replacing the apothecary in the laboratory. Turner has also borrowed the bird out of its cage and the exasperated hand gestures of the father from the

*Alchemist* painting, and it looks as though he flattered Payne Knight's collection by combining ideas and lighting from his patron's art possessions, rather than just using a single model in the Rembrandt or the Thomas.

Turner's painting at first sight gives a picture of the well equipped rooms of a dentist at the top of the profession at the end of the great eighteenth century period of professional development, somewhat 'antiqued' to fit the requirements of his commission.



Fig. 1 *The unpaid bill, or the dentist reproving his son's prodigality*. J M W Turner R A (1775-1851) Oil on panel. 59.4x80 cm 1808. By kind permission, Christies' Images Ltd.

<sup>1</sup>Queen Anne House, 2a St Andrew Street, Hertford, SG14 1JA; <sup>2</sup>The Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine, 24 Eversholt Street, London NW1 1AD; <sup>3</sup>St Bart's and the Royal London, Department of Human Science and Medical Ethics, Turner Street, London E1 2AD.

\*Correspondence to: Malcolm Bishop, Queen Anne House, 2a St Andrew Street, Hertford, SG14 1JA.

### Refereed Paper

DOI: 10.1038/sj.bdj.4811906

Received 6.10.03; Accepted 15.1.04

© British Dental Journal 2004; 197: 757-762

Even to the contemporary Georgian viewer the combination of a near pastiche of the seventeenth century, of gossipy narrative, and elements of an up-to-date dental operatory must have been a puzzle, and it had a mixed reception, even if as a work it satisfied Payne Knight by showing that Turner could indeed equal the old masters. To today's viewer, the finished painting, while full of fascinating detail, has to be treated with caution as an historical record, for it shows too much of what the auction house Christies', in their description, termed 'the seventeenth century Netherlandish manner' to be taken at face value.

This, however is to judge the painting by the wrong criteria. It was not intended to be a realistic picture of a Georgian dentist's rooms. The work is, rather, a stage based on such rooms, set in bygone times for a purpose, and it is as a work of narrative meaning that it succeeds in holding the modern interest, and it is as a landmark in bringing dentistry as a serious occupation into the public eye that it is central to the history of the profession.

In making it a narrative painting, Turner was at least in part responding to the great success that his fellow Royal Academician David Wilkie had had with *The village politicians* in 1806, and with *The rent day* of the next year. Wilkie was, as Turner's biographer Finberg said, consciously 'influenced both in technique and subject matter by the great seventeenth century Dutch and Flemish Realists, especially Teniers and Ostade'.<sup>6</sup> Turner was both asked by Payne Knight to paint in a similar manner, and in the words of the Christies' information sheet 'Perhaps for the first time in his career, ... was disconcerted and inspired by the success [of Wilkie]'. Unlike Wilkie, Turner was most comfortable and successful with land and seascapes, and did not stay with genre pieces, and this work is one of just four which he painted between 1807 and 1809.

It is for other reasons that the painting is important to the history of dentistry in England. Dentistry in the second half of the eighteenth century was marked by the advance of the discipline to the status of a true profession, as an increasing number of practitioners aimed at a high state of individual excellence, with high incomes, and with an emerging concern for intra-professional ethics, and professional dignity. Turner's painting is the first, and at present seems the only contemporary artistic reference to take this advance seriously.

While the historian is very grateful for the survival of the rare contemporary caricatures of the sort which provided the material for a previous paper,<sup>7</sup> the illustrations themselves do no favours to the dignity of the individual operator. Prominent practitioners like Bartholomew Ruspini, and

technical innovators like Martin Van Butchell and Nicholas Dubois de Chamant, (de Chémant, Dechemant), if taken seriously at the least by their patients, were also granted the doubtful honour of notice by caricature, Van Butchell anonymously on his painted pony, Ruspini by Dighton and Harrison, and Ruspini (probably) and de Chamant both by Rowlandson (1756-1827). The age was much given to mockery, before the great collaborative movements of dentists in the nineteenth century formed a new, collective, and more solemn and respectable view of the profession.

### Previous exhibition and publication of the painting

Unlike some of Turner's works, which received greater public circulation in the form of prints, *The unpaid bill, or the dentist reproving his son's prodigality* was not exhibited or reproduced widely in the nineteenth century. It has however, come in to much wider notice since 1977, when it was exhibited in London at the Tate Gallery. A black and white print of good quality appeared in Andrew Wilton's *The life and work of J. M. W. Turner* which was published in 1979,<sup>8</sup> though without any textual analysis, and without a link being made with the preparatory drawings which Turner made for the painting in his *River and margin* sketchbook. Further exhibitions included the work, in London again (1981, Agnew's) Manchester (1982, The Whitworth Art Gallery) Paris, (1983-1984, Grand Palais) San Francisco and Kyoto (1986, National Museum of Municipal Art, Kyoto Museum of Art), Stanford, California (1986-1987 Stanford University Museum of Art), and the painting has been in San Francisco's De Young Museum, Palace of Legion D'Honneur on loan until 2002.<sup>9</sup>

### Models for the viewer to apply to Turner's cast of three

The first model to be considered for Turner's visual account of a financial drama in a dentist's family life is the artist himself, and can be related to his own 'closeness' with money, drawing on a subject about which he was well informed. Finberg, in his *Life* records various instances of Turner doing good by stealth, but Turner himself is reported to have said '*Dad never praised me except for saving a shilling*',<sup>10</sup> and his reputation in general was of a man over-well aware of the value of money. While repeating Gerard Thomas's general subject matter of a father remonstrating with his family, Turner's caption has made the dispute explicitly one of a financial nature, and this allows for the comparison to be made also with near contemporary word pictures, which show dramatic events in the lives of prominent

real life dentists, and in particular of Dubois de Chamant.

Somewhat later, de Chamant was the subject of an attack in footnotes added when *Real life in London*, a collection of articles written earlier, was published in two volumes in 1820 and 1821. Three prominent dentists feature in these articles. In the main text and in the footnotes of volume II, Martin Van Butchell (1735-1814), although a remarkable eccentric whose laboratory will be proposed in a subsequent paper as a type of the model for Turner's preparatory sketches, appears in a favourable light, being privileged to see the volume out as the last character to appear. In this he is more fortunate than James Bladen Ruspini, (aged 40 in 1808, and son of the better known first Chevalier, Bartholomew, who died in 1813 aged 85), or de Chamant, who was 61 in 1808. These well known dentists are singled out for particular attention in a chapter entitled *Medical quacks* in Volume I. The original articles are unfortunately undated, but independent evidence shows that de Chamant definitely had the financial troubles described before 1808, when the painting was exhibited. The 'Chevalier' de Chamant (as the author(s) of *Real life in London* sarcastically term him) faced financial difficulties at the time, having lost a very large sum on the stock exchange; '*owing to a sudden fluctuation in the market, a considerable depreciation took place between the time of purchase and that of payment; a circumstance which made the Chevalier grin and show his teeth*'. During the court case, while trying to get out of the obligation to pay the broker 'Old' Tom Bish, he was informed that: '*the Defendant would find the law could bite sharper and hold tighter than any teeth he could make*'.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Bish, of 4, Cornhill, is listed as a broker between 1802, when the old system of daily subscription to the stock exchange (of 6d) was replaced by annual applications, and 1817, when his name no longer appears and Tom Bish the Younger took over, using the identical elaborate calligraphic signature.<sup>12</sup> He features in the 1806 minutes protesting at being jostled to such an extent by two other brokers that he could not do business, which led to the other brokers being '*recommended to preserve peace and order in the S. Exch.*', and he was obviously not a man to be trifled with.

The account of de Chamant's trouble is corroborated and dated by a contemporary source, for between 1806 and 1808, a bitter and very public dispute blew up between de Chamant and his erstwhile 'menial servant' and 'footman' and 'valet', Mr Faleur, who had set up in rivalry in the production of mineral paste teeth. In 1808 Faleur inserted an advertisement in the public press to say: '*Mr Faleur feels it again his duty to caution the Public against the Scurrilous publica-*

tions of an old, envious & irritable competitor ... persevered in for years. The old man should keep well in mind that his conduct has already obtained for him *honourable* mention in the records of the Court of King's Bench, and on the minutes of every respectable member of the Stock Exchange.<sup>14</sup>

The financial and domestic difficulties in the Ruspini family which are described in gloating detail in *Real life in London* came to a head too late to be Turner's inspiration. James Bladen was gazetted bankrupt in 1820,<sup>15</sup> at that time being recorded as being a *Medicine Vendor, Dealer and Chapman*, and not a dentist, and the fine premises at number 11 Pall Mall opposite the royal residence at Carlton House were disposed of in 1821 to pay the creditors.<sup>16</sup> Some indication of financial difficulty might have been known at an earlier date. Menzies Campbell records that when James Bladen Ruspini inherited the title of Chevalier and his father's estate in 1813, this estate amounted to less than £450, which he puts down to Ruspini senior's very generous habits of hospitality.<sup>17</sup>

Of the dentists singled out by *Real life in London*, Van Butchell is least likely to have provided Turner's model for the father, as he had endured the tragic loss of his second son, Isaac, in a boating accident on the Thames in 1806, and in spite of his unpromising manner, Turner was not wholly insensitive.

Though it cannot be proved that de Chamant or any other real-life dentist provided Turner's inspiration, by 1808 dentists and their personal as well as their professional lives were acknowledged parts of the London scene. It is known that Turner had a permanent ear to the ground in financial affairs, particularly those relating to the

stock exchange, as throughout his life he used a stock broker as his man of business, Mr William Marsh, of 5 Sweeting's Alley, buying stocks when payment for a painting was made, and selling them when he needed money. In this he was altogether more successful than poor de Chamant or James Bladen Ruspini. At least it can be said both that he had models enough in the gossip of the London of the day, and that the viewers of the finished painting in 1808 could well also have found the subject topical, however cleverly the scene itself was disguised as an 'Old Master'.

#### Who saw the painting?

For an indication as to whether the painting could have had any influence on the opinion of the public about dentists, the extent to which it was exhibited to public view needs to be estimated, and an idea of how important, as opinion formers, were those who went to such exhibitions. Finberg's *Life* shows that throughout his working life, any painting by Turner drew attention, and *The unpaid bill...* etc was the only work he exhibited at the Royal Academy (no.116) in 1808. As to the importance of the 'society' who visited, Finberg's account is more than adequate to show that they included many of those important opinion formers. As to numbers, Rowlandson's celebrated ribald caricature of the gentry having an unexpectably jolly time on *The exhibition stare case* shows the dangerously overcrowded stairs of the Strand Gate-House to Somerset House. These stairs still exist, up and down which those visiting to see each other and the art had to pass to reach the rooms, now occupied by the Courtauld Institute Gallery, to which the Royal Academy had moved in 1780. It was one of the fixed points in the London 'season', and the crowds could

indeed be impossible, so that of Wilkie's *The Village Politicians* it was recorded: 'There was no getting in sideways or edgeways' to see it.<sup>18</sup>

If indeed the dental subject of the drama portrayed struck a chord in the public mind, it would have fixed itself in their consciousness very effectively by eliciting wry smiles from those 'in the know' about any difficulties members of the profession were having with their families or their finances, carrying dentistry along subliminally with it as something absolutely normal in town life. There is, however, something deeper than gossip in the narrative, and here Turner's true intelligence and wit are shown, for he needed a very specific subject for his drama to work. He had to show a profession which was sober and hard working, and also prosperous, even *nouveau riche*, and he had to show it taking place in one room. At the same time the occupation had to be one from which his viewers would understand that the son would wish to remove himself, as much later in the century the fictional Pooter's son Lupin wished (Clerk in 'the City'),<sup>19</sup> and much earlier, as the title of the painting reminds the viewer, the biblical prodigal son, (land owning farmer) wished.<sup>20</sup> We have to believe that the son could fail and be welcomed back like the biblical prodigal, and at the same time to wish him to succeed, as a bit of a cad if necessary, as does Lupin Pooter. It is no good if we fail to understand and sympathise with both the young and the old man. This is the genius of Turner picking true dentistry for his subject, rather than the chemist's shop which would be the natural successor to Teniers' Alchemists, (and indeed until 1921 the inheritor of half the numbers in dental business).<sup>21</sup> It is the unexpected appropriateness of it which works now as it worked then.

#### Numbers and status of Georgian dentists

The informed insider can take issue with one detail in Christie's descriptive piece on the painting, otherwise usefully informative. It is only as a legally controlled activity that it is true to say that '*In the early years of the nineteenth century, dentistry was not a recognised profession*' and not at all true that '*...even among the rich, it was not a popular service*'. Not liked, maybe, and some practitioners were, no doubt, in Menzies Campbell's wonderful description of Patence, 'Pachydermatous quacks', but certainly they were recognised as a social entity popular enough to be kept in business in good numbers. In 1989, D.W. Wright of the Wellcome Museum of the History of Medicine at the Science Museum, was able to list 76 dentists operating in London between 1800-1808,<sup>22</sup> many, as he says, from addresses in the best parts of town. As to



Fig. 2 Sketch for left side of finished painting, with notes: *Papers books crucible pipkins vials* in the artist's hand. J M W Turner R A p.77(a) from *River and Margate* sketchbook. Pencil on paper. 115x190 mm. c. 1806-1808. By kind permission, Tate Picture Library.



Fig. 3 Interior of a dentist's workroom. Showing machine and hand tools. J M W Turner RA p.76 from *River and Margate* sketchbook. Pencil on paper. 115x190 mm. c. 1806-1808. By kind permission, Tate Picture Library.

their patients, only the royals are specified in Wright's list, but a valid impression may be gained from this of the recognition of the profession. George Spence (Old Bond Street) was Dentist to His Majesty (King George III) and Thomas Spence (Hanover Square) was Dentist Extraordinary to His Majesty's Household, Scarman (George Street, Hanover Square) was Dentist to her Majesty and the Duke of Clarence. Dumergue (Piccadilly), whose assistant Samuel Cartwright was to be Turner's dentist, was Dentist to the Prince of Wales, Ruspini (opposite Carlton House) was Dentist to the Prince of Wales and Duke of Clarence, Brotherson (Charlotte St. Bloomsbury) was Dentist to the Dukes of Kent and Cumberland, Fowler (Prince's St. Hanover Square) and Hutchins (New Bond Street) were Dentists to the Duke of York, and Moor (Palsgrave Place, Strand) was Dentist to the Duchess of York. From Menzies Campbell we learn that the Chevalier Ruspini not only lived opposite to the Prince of Wales, as *Real life in London* stressed, but was a close associate, though this was not itself a guarantee of wider social acceptance.<sup>23</sup> These numbers of dentists attached to various royal households are astonishing, when it was only 100 years earlier in 1707 that the first recorded dentist (as Operator for the Teeth in Ordinary, and not a barber or surgeon) was appointed to the household of Queen Anne.<sup>24</sup>

#### Other interesting points in the finished painting

Turner has included an early example of his characteristic use of a small patch of intense colour, in this case the red of a document box on the stool at the workbench beside the old man. This should probably be considered as part of the narrative of the painting, for

this is where, in a comfortable family relationship, he is indicating that the son and inheritor of the business would have sat, rather than his debts. Turner appears to have enjoyed himself with little details absent from his other genre paintings, including the parrot or macaw, not sitting on its open cage as in the Thomas *Alchemist* painting, but climbing up the work bench above the coal hod while eyeing an amusingly painted cat at the base of the bench, which returns the look with interest. At least the bird is not a duck. Rowlandson in his caricature of 1787, considered by some to show Ruspini transplanting teeth,<sup>2</sup> sketched two birds at the top of his trade placard on the wall, which have been interpreted as ducks hinting at quackery. The frontispiece of *Real life in London* continues this convention, showing a top-hatted gentleman holding a duck aloft. Turner's dentist also has a certificate of some sort fixed to the wall, with a seal at the base. Unfortunately the detail is not enough to show whether it represents a master's charter, or a Freedom of the City.

Lest there be any doubt that it is a dentist portrayed, two tusks have been painted in the foreground. These could be elephant ivory, but walrus ivory was preferred as it kept its colour better. When the famous dentist Samuel Rutter died in 1761 he left his *Sea horse teeth* to his partner and successor William Green.<sup>25</sup> These tusks, like the forceps etched by Rowlandson in the foreground of his caricature, are not realistic in their placing, but symbolic, the forceps of the extraction and loss, and the ivory of the restitution, of the furniture of the mouth.

Turner has painted a copper and brass coal hod, (in pattern if not in material identical to that employed by the innovative engineer James Watt in his private workshop,

and now preserved in the Science Museum in London), which is also accompanied by a small patch of intense red paint. This is an anachronism for the wood and charcoal burning days in which he is setting the scene, and is put where it is possibly to draw attention to what looks like an alembic still above it covered with a cloth, with a brown pot receiving the drops of distillate. This is a deception, for although, as will be described in the subsequent part of this paper, the presence of such a still is to be expected, close examination of the painting shows that what is painted is a bench vice with a coat thrown over it in this position in the vulnerable centre of the workshop, and the working sketch (Ruskin 76) confirms this, as well as showing how the hod has been 'moved'.

#### The literate dentist

Thomas's *Alchemist* sits at a table laden with books and papers, and Turner has almost over-emphasised the papers in his painting. There appear to be three groups, those, possibly technical relating to the laboratory, which spill from the workbench; the financial documents which form part of the narrative of the family drama; and the third group, bearing most resemblance to those of the *Alchemist*, and accompanied by pen and ink on the floor which imply active literary activity by bulging out of a portfolio leaning against the armchair on the right.

#### Turner's sketchbook

While the painting is important to dentistry's social history, the survival of Turner's sketchbook which contains the preparatory drawings for the painting, is equally important to dentistry's technical history, while adding a great deal to the understanding of the painting. Ruskin, acting as executor to Turner's estate, disbound and numbered those notebooks of Turner's which eventually came to the nation, and A. J. Finberg later compiled a *Complete inventory of the drawings of the Turner bequest for the National Gallery in 1909*.<sup>26</sup> The relevant sketchbook, Finberg XCIX, 1806-1808, *River and Margate* is now rebound in its original cover, and preserved at the Tate Britain. It shows that nearly all of the painting was transferred from the sketchbook, itself taken from life. Of the seven relevant drawings, there are three pencil sketches of the workroom which was used as the model for the painting, the others relating to the figures and the layout of the finished painting.

The first sketch (Fig. 2), Ruskin no. 77a, is in a soft pencil with Turner's legend identifying, or probably suggesting for inclusion in the painting in the case of the papers and books, '*Papers, books, crucible, pipkins, vials*'. It is reproduced almost exactly on the

left side in the finished composition, though with the right hand machine seen in the next sketch replaced by the family group, and with changes made to fit the 'antiqueing' of the appearance of the room. On the back, drawing no. 77 is now so faint as to be hardly legible, though Finberg describes it as being 'group figures'.

The next drawing (Fig. 3), as currently bound, appears to be the master sketch, made from life in the dentist's rooms. It is much more detailed than the previous sketch, and appears to have been made using a harder pencil. It was not described by Finberg, who listed it as '76, missing', in 1909. It has now been rebound with two printed identifiers, (cxcv(a)-1/cxcvi(a)-1) added at some stage between Ruskin's disbinding of the volume and its re-assembly, and it is possible that its original position in the sketchbook was before what is now identified as page 77. The unfaded margins show that the sketch had been mounted in a frame and spent time in the light, though where and when this happened, and how the page was rediscovered is at present unknown. The answer to the intriguing question of who was so interested in a dentist's workroom interior that the sketch should have been treated in this way might reveal the identity of the dentist's rooms portrayed. This page, Ruskin 76, is well illustrated as *Interior of a workshop in Turner and the scientists*, the catalogue raisonnee produced for the exhibition of the same name held at the Tate Gallery in 1998,<sup>27</sup> though without being associated with *The unpaid bill... etc...*

#### Turner's working method

The appearance of Turner's sketches for the painting in a single sketchbook allows us the privilege of seeing how he went about composing his finished painting. There is the economy of method of a master to be seen, but also the viewer gains confidence that Turner was working from life, and not from imagination, in composing the scene in which he set his characters. Although the sketchbook is identified in Turner's own writing in ink on the cover as '*River and Margate*', this is unfortunately not material to the location of the dental scenes, since the pages of the sketchbook relating to the 'Dentist' painting have been used 'upside down' in relation to the majority of the topographical and maritime sketches on the other pages, showing that the sketchbook had been opened by Turner with no primary front or back. It may safely be inferred that the dental drawings are independent of the trip to Margate even though Ruskin in his numbering has taken the identified cover as the 'front'.

To follow Ruskin's numbering rigidly is unsatisfactory as a guide to Turner's work-

ing method. The detailed sketch in hard pencil of the workshop interior, (number 76), is the logical starting point, since the fluid sketch (77a) is in the same soft pencil as the other sketches and is clearly derived from no.76. It is almost exactly the same as the workshop section to the left of the finished painting, and includes a ghostly outline of a figure seated at the workbench under the window where the 'father' sits in the painting, as well as Turner's aide memoire notes written in at the bottom. Apart from this, though, reading the pages in the reverse Ruskin numbering does give Turner's working pattern for the painting. The soft pencil workshop interior (77a), has on the back (no.77), a sketch of a figure group which is no longer clear enough in reproduction, but follows the arrangement of the finished painting. Then follows 75a, which is a working drawing of another part of the room, recognisably the model for the right side of the finished painting. In the sketch a rather severe high backed chair faces away from the viewer beside a fireplace. This chair is a typical example of the chairs used by dentists at the time, and in the painting it has been elaborated and rounded off a little to fit it to the age intended, though it is still recognisable as to type. For composition reasons, it has been turned to face the viewer, with the result that a patient sitting in it would no longer benefit from either illumination from the door or from the firelight. A foot-stool for the patient can be seen in the painting, and also an upholstered bench stool rather like a piano stool. It or its twin may be seen in sketch 77a at the workbench under the window, with the ghostly occupant. Turner has 'moved' it, to improve the composition, to give the dentist a higher seat, and to make room for the unoccupied stool which replaces a Georgian chair, seen lightly outlined in the sketch. To add to the mood of

calm in this right hand part of the painting, which contrasts strongly with the drama of the family group in the centre, Turner has painted the soft firelight of a wood fire in the painting, with the reflected light illuminating a comfortable looking bottle warming in front of it, where in the sketchbook a coal grate is lightly pencilled in.

Sketch 75, and 74a, are again no longer clear, but seem to show further refinements in the placing of the components of the painting.

#### The story Turner tells

Sketch 74 (Fig. 4), shows four figures, with one standing, and is recognisable as the group in the centre of the painting. Turner has chosen the more effective of the two positions outlined for the figure of the old man, with his back to us, turning his head to his son rather than facing him across a table. By doing so Turner has ensured that everything is arranged to emphasise the sober hard-working character of the father, alone in his laboratory at his workbench. As noted earlier, the stool where the son might have been expected to sit is empty except for the tell-tale red box. The setting may have been artificially aged, but the message enlarged on earlier in the paper, of youth needing to spend itself and get away from perceived inherited drudgery, is timeless.

Turner was not noted for his handling of realism in his human models, ('*miserably bad*', West in 1808 and Farington in 1806, '*All the figures are flat...*' the Sun in 1803), and the dentist and his son and daughter-in-law were described by Robert Hunt, the critic of the *Examiner*, as being '*wretchedly drawn*'.<sup>28</sup> This may be, but it is to lose the point of the painting if this is regarded as too important, for if Turner generally does not handle his figures with the confidence of a Chardin, the narrative body language of



Fig. 4 Sketch for the figures. J M W Turner R A p.4 from *River and Margate* sketchbook. Pencil on paper. 115x190 mm. c. 1806-1808. By kind permission, Tate Picture Library.

each of the three characters in this painting is quite exceptional. The chance to follow the thought processes of an artist is always to be valued, and here we can see that between the sketch and the painting the prodigal 'son' has kept his position unchanged, while the expensive daughter in law has acquired a hound with a splendid jewelled collar, and a 'who me?' expression to go with the finger to the chin, as she no longer looks towards the old man, but towards the viewer. Only the flow of her drapery stays the same.

If the rest of the painting is of a stage, the lighting of the group is purely painterly. The father, dressed in sombre black is painted 'contre-jour' while the son, elegantly clothed, and somewhat arrogantly posed, is a mere shadow barely distinguishable from the wall behind, with his stockinged legs alone illuminated by light from the door. The daughter-in-law is the only one to shine, and this is a self-illumination resulting from the obviously expensive material of her dress. The russet coat of the hound looking up at her, his jewelled collar already mentioned, is just distinguished in the light from the hall.

The insertion of these figures into the composition of the painting, which may blend two rooms, for in real life one suspects the patient would be kept away from the secrets, smells, and noise of the laboratory, has resulted in a much more spacious area than probably existed in reality. Sketch 75a in particular shows a compact arrangement for the patient's accommodation. Turner was appointed Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy in 1807, and the tricks of perspective and lighting native to the theatre may have given him the idea for the painting as a stage set. It would seem, for example, that this is the only time he made use of the 'frame within a frame' which the carpet, strongly suggesting the front of the stage, gives to the lower edge of the painting. Meanwhile the open door leading to the sunlit hall beyond, both breaks the claustrophobic atmosphere of the scene, and allows for the necessary entrances and exits of the actors who have assembled to tell Turner's story of everyday dental life; a story more important in its truth-telling of family life than the literal truth of a Georgian surgery. It is this selection of a story implying a lifetime in dentistry which makes the painting so important to the iconography of the profession.

An ensuing part of this paper will show what further treasure Turner has left to the profession in the science and technology to be found in his sketch-book.

### The fate of the painting

Two of the other three narrative genre paintings which Turner completed between 1807 and 1809, *A country blacksmith disputing upon the price of iron, and the price charged to the butcher for shoeing his pony* of 1807, and *The Garreteer's petition* of 1809 may be seen in the Tate Britain where they are currently hung separately. It is to be hoped that *The unpaid bill, or the dentist reproving his son's prodigality*, does not disappear from view, having been on loan to the San Francisco De Young Museum, Palace of Legion D'Honneur until it was offered at auction.

An emergency fund-raising exercise was started by Roxanne Fea, former Head of Museum Services at the BDA, to raise funds to meet the estimated price of £250,000 to £300,000 which the painting was expected to reach at auction. No grants from outside were available, since the move to recognised museum status, started by Ms Fea, and now achieved, had not yet been completed. The funds were not raised, and so the opportunity to acquire this 'Mona Lisa' of the dental profession, as the fund raising document described it, was missed. It is also a shame that the Tate Britain collection did not add it to its other two examples of Turner's genre paintings, where dentists could see it in its wider context in Turner's oeuvre.

### Postscript

It would be agreeable to be able to report that the dental profession proved able to serve Turner as well in return as Turner has served us. Unfortunately it could not do so, for in 1846 Turner had started to decline, 'the cause was the loss of his teeth; Cartwright did his best to make him a set of false ones, but the tenderness of his gums did not allow him to make use of them; so his digestion gave way and he suffered much from this to the end of his life' Samuel Cartwright (1789-1864) was the first president of the Odontological Society in 1856, and he retired in 1857. He was in practice at 32, Old Burlington Street, and Lilian Lindsay in her brief *Personalities of the past* relates that he treated many important people, being renowned for his skill in carving ivory. He was also a fellow of the Linnaean Society, and a Fellow of the Royal Society.<sup>29</sup> A further attempt at dentures was made by Mr. W. Bartlett, Surgeon Dentist and Cupper, of 15 Park Place South, Chelsea, but this too failed. Mr W. Bartlett then continued to attend Turner, (whom he knew only as 'Mr. Booth'), as his medical adviser during his last illness. By then Turner was drinking prodigious quantities of rum and milk, and, using the excuse of his lack of teeth,

eating nothing. Bartlett was present when Turner died on 19 December 1851.

*The assistance of Emma Strouts of Messrs Christies, Sara Taft at Tate Britain, Julian Tomlin of The Whitworth Art Gallery, the librarians of the Athenaeum, and especially of Roxanne Fea, formerly of the British Dental Association, is gratefully acknowledged.*

1. BDA News 2002; 5: 11: 25.
2. Hunt R. *The Examiner* 15 May 1808, p316.
3. Hunt R. *The Examiner* 15 May 1808. In: Hamilton J. *Turner and the scientists*. pp 51. London: Tate Gallery Publishing Limited, 1998.
4. Clarke & Penny. Catalogue to: *The arrogant connoisseur* Manchester; Whitworth Art Gallery. Feb-Apr 1982. No. 197.
5. Christies'. 4 May 1979 (99).
6. Finberg A J. The life of J M W Turner, R A... 1939. In: *The Oxford companion to art*. pp 1163. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970.
7. Bishop M, Gelbier S, Gibbons D. Ethics – dentistry and toothdrawing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England. Evidence of provision at all levels of society. *Br Dent J* 2001; **191**: 575-580.
8. Wilton A. *The life and work of J M W Turner*. London: Academy Editions, 1979, p 113.
9. From Christie, Manson & Woods Ltd. Descriptive document for *The unpaid bill...* 2002.
10. Finberg A J. *The life of J M W Turner, R A...* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939, p 26.
11. *Real life in London; or the rambles and adventures of Bob Tallyho, Esq. and his cousin the Hon Tom Dashall...* London: Jones & Co 1820. Vol. 1. British Library C.70 e1. p 160.
12. Stock Exchange. *Applications for admission*. Guildhall library. Ms 17,957.
13. Stock Exchange: Committee for general purposes *Minutes*. Vol. 4 1804-6 No.3 p.212. Guildhall Library 14600.
14. Monthly Compendium of Advertisements for London: Nov 1808. In: The Townend Mss. At the British Dental Association.
15. *The London Gazette for the Year 1820. Vol II*. London; Published by authority, 1820. pp 1311-1312. British Library OGE 70.
16. *The London gazette for the year 1821. Vol I*. London; Published by authority, 1821. p 638. British Library OGE 70.
17. Campbell J M. Bartholomew Ruspini, 1728-1813 In: *From a trade to a profession*. Private printing, 1958. p 33.
18. Haydon B. Autobiography. Vol I, p.36. In: *Christies' notes 2002*.
19. Grossmith G, Grossmith W. *Diary of a Nobody*. Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1892.
20. The Bible: Luke 15 vss. 11-32.
21. Bishop M G H, Gelbier S. Ethics. How the apothecaries Act of 1815 shaped the dental profession. Part 2. The chemist-dentists and the education of dentists. *Br Dent J* 2002; **193**: 683-686.
22. Wright D W. London Dentists 1800-1811: a listing from the trades directories in the Guildhall Library. *Dental Historian* April 1989; **16**: 17-29.
23. Campbell J M. *From a trade to a profession*. Private printing, 1958. pp 27, 115.
24. Hargreaves A S. *White as whales bone*. Leeds: Northern Universities Press. 1998, p 86.
25. PRO PROB 11/870, sig. 406. In Hargreaves A. *White as whales bone*. pp 123, 144, 149.
26. Finberg A J. *A complete inventory of the drawings of the Turner bequest*. Vol. 1. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1909.
27. Hamilton J. *Turner and the scientists*. London: Tate Gallery Publishing Limited 1998, p 50.
28. Finberg A J. *The life of J M W Turner, R A...* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939; p 150.
29. Lindsay L. Personalities of the past. IX Samuel Cartwright 1789-1864. *Br Dent J* April 5, 1955; p 259.