



1834 or 1835

Oil on canvas

36 ¼ x 48 ½ inches (92.1 x 123.2 cm)

**JOSEPH MALLORD
WILLIAM TURNER**
English, 1775–1851

LET'S LOOK

What is going on in this picture?
Look at the **foreground, middle ground,** and **background.**

Describe the **setting.**
Where is this happening?
What time of day is it?

What parts of the painting seem hot? Cool? How can you tell?

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

Where do you see people?
What might they be thinking
and feeling?

Imagine you are on one of the boats in the river. What would you see, hear, smell, and feel?

THE BURNING OF THE HOUSES OF LORDS AND COMMONS, OCTOBER 16, 1834

On the evening of October 16, 1834, fire accidentally broke out in England's Houses of Parliament, the seat of the country's government. Tens of thousands of Londoners, including the **landscape** painter Joseph Mallord William Turner, watched as the buildings burned. Using both pencil and **watercolor**, Turner quickly sketched what he saw, capturing the scene from different **vantage points**, including from a rented boat. Back in his studio, he made this oil painting.

Turner created a captivating visual record of the event. Golden flames engulf the buildings and dominate the sky. The fire casts a reddish-orange reflection on the Thames River below and on the white stones of Westminster Bridge. As the bridge reaches across the river, it seems to melt from the fire's heat. Strong winds carry the blue-gray smoke across the night sky. People crowd together and watch the destruction from boats, the bridge, and the near riverbank. The spectacular yet terrifying event unfolds before their eyes—and ours.

Turner captured the drama of this event and also conveyed several messages. First, the painting speaks to nature's power over man. While the fire rages, the people seem helpless as they watch in amazement. Additionally, the small dots of light from the man-made gas lamps seem weak compared to the uncontrollable flames. The painting also hints at political unrest. The Houses of Parliament were built in the eleventh century and represented governmental stability. The fire occurred during a time of political change, and some regarded the event as a **symbol** of the need for further reform.

Philadelphia Museum of Art: The John Howard McFadden Collection, M1928-1-41