

# Class 2 : Retreat

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## A. The Distant Image

1. Section title A (Turner: *The Departure of the Fleet*)
2. Turner: *Mercury Admonishes Aeneas and Departure of the Fleet* (1850, Tate)

In the first class, I referred to the last paintings of **JMW Turner** (1775–1851) as Visions of Light. That is also true of these two, the very last large-scale works he painted, at the age of 75. What interests me, though, is their subject: two episodes from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Aeneas has been lingering with Queen Dido in Carthage, so Mercury is sent to summon him to his true destiny in Rome. So he sets sail, leaving Dido to die in her burning palace. These both date from 1850. Turner had not exhibited any paintings of actual landscapes since 1845; he painted less frequently in his last five years, and the subjects he chose had mostly to do with literature, myth, or the past. *My class today will be about artists who, in later life, turned their backs on the world around them to retreat to a more distant time.*

3. *Grandma Moses: Sugaring Off* (1955)
4. *Grandma Moses: Halloween* (1955)

As I said last week, it is actually quite hard to find examples that exactly fit the premise of the course, and I have to be flexible in interpreting it—though I hope you get more variety as a result. For example, if you view the topic as work done by artists late in their lives, how could I possibly leave out **Grandma Moses** (Anna Mary Robertson Moses, 1860–1961), who did most of her work in her eighties and nineties? On the other hand, if you confine it to *LateStyle*, the changes that occur at the end of a long career, Moses does not fit at all. For she only started painting at 78, when her arthritis put an end to her embroidery. There was *no* early style or middle style; late style is all she had.

5. *Grandma Moses: Morning on the Farm* (1951)
6. *Images of the fifties*

Here is one more of her paintings, *Morning on the Farm*, also from the fifties. Compare it with two more images from the same decade, and ask yourselves: Why was she so popular? Of course there was the feel-good story of the old woman taking to painting so late in life; people liked her bright colors, and she herself was a charmer. But the real key, I think, is that she was taking us back into an American rural past, one that she had lived through in her own life, but was no more than a memory for younger people. In thi case, it was the public rather than the artist who was retreating into the past, but without really knowing it, she catered to their needs. must say that I myself assumed that Grandma Moses’ works came from the beginning of the century; it was a shock to realize that they coincided with postwar consumerism and the baby boom!

### 7. Picasso: *Musketeer with Pipe* (1969/70)

Another artist who should surely qualify for inclusion on the grounds of longevity is **Pablo Picasso** (1881–1973), who went on painting into his nineties. On the other hand, how can you talk of Late Style when he was flipping between styles throughout his entire career? Certainly, some of his late works go back to mine the distant past, but so do some of his early and middle ones. All the same, there is a group of paintings he produced in his last few years, when he was generally regarded as being well past his prime, that show a richness of color and sheer joy in painting that cannot be matched by his earlier innovative but more austere work. And pictures like the three *Musketeers* shown here do indeed involve a return to an earlier time, variations on themes from the Dutch Golden Age.

### 8. Comparisons by Wauthier and Hals

Rather than talk further about this myself, let me play you a rather wonderful video from Sotheby's expert **Simon Shaw** on the middle *Musketeer* painting. He explains it far better than I could.

### 9. Simon Shaw: *The Last Great Paintings by Pablo Picasso* (Sotheby's 2019)

## B. I'll Drown My Book

### 10. Section title B (Dulac: *Prospero in his Cell*)

**William Shakespeare** (1564–1616) was not yet fifty when he wrote his last complete play, *The Tempest*, yet all his last few plays show *LateStyle* fingerprints—formal experiment, a broader conception of time, and a striving for reconciliation and synthesis—and it is impossible not to see Prospero's speeches at the end of this last play as the author's farewell to the stage. Here is **Simon Russell Beale**.

### 11. Shakespeare: *The Tempest* 5/1, Prospero (Simon Russell Beale)

### 12. Shakespeare: *The Tempest* Act IV scene 1 (RSC 2016)

*The Tempest*, among many other things, is a love story, involving the young and innocent couple Miranda and Ferdinand. To bless the marriage of his daughter, Prospero—and Shakespeare—go back to classical mythology and an older form of theatre, to summon the goddesses Iris, Ceres, and Juno in a **masque**. In this 2016 Royal Shakespeare Company production, director **Greg Doran** matches this with the most modern computer-generated effects, but given the music of **Paul Englishby**, it would still be magical without them.

### 13. Shakespeare: *The Tempest* Act IV scene 1 (RSC 2016)

## C. The Absent Helen

### 14. Section title C (London Blitz)

The American modernist poet H. D. (**Hilda Doolittle**, 1886–1961), sailed to England in 1911, and remained in the Old World for the rest of her life. She was thus living in London during both World Wars. I chose her for this class because it struck me forcibly that this woman in her later sixties should have responded to the Blitz by writing a book-length poem about the Trojan War from a feminist perspective, claiming that it was about nothing at all, because Helen was never really there.

### 15. H. D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1886–1961)

But first, who was Hilda Doolittle? The daughter of a professor of astronomy at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, she attended Bryn Mawr to study Greek Literature. She did not complete her degree, but she met the poets Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and most importantly Ezra Pound, who published her first poems, using her initials rather than her full name. Her early poems are short and pithy; here, for example, is one of her first takes on the theme of Helen:

### 16. HD: *Helen*, text

What do you think? I am struck by the way the three stanzas, each one line longer than the verse before, move forward this negative, bitter view of Helen, refusing to honor her until she is “laid, white ash amid funereal cypresses.” Her contradictory feminist take on mythological women is seen even more potently, I think, in the longer poem *Eurydice*. Here is its opening section:

### 17. HD: *Eurydice* reading

### 18. HD: *Eurydice* text

That doesn't quite work, does it? It may be the speaker's Asian inflections, it may be that her voice is just too sweet, too submissive. I hear an *anger* in this poem that she doesn't capture. Let me try myself.

### 19. HD: *Helen in Egypt*, cover and comments

Here is the book, *Helen in Egypt*, HD's last publication, issued after her death in 1961, but written in the 1950s. The description is from an online article by Oliver Teale that I have linked on the website. The whole poem is based on an idea from the *Helen* of **Euripides** that the Helen abducted to Paris and taken to Troy was in fact a double, an *eidolon*, and that the real Helen was taken to Egypt. In HD's poem, she is in the temple of Amen, in a liminal state between death and living. There she encounters the spirit of Achilles, presented also liminally, both before and after the events in Troy. It is a curious poem, epic in scope, lyric in detail. HD provides prose introductions to each section, but they only confuse it further. So the best thing to do is to let the music wash over you, and not worry too much about understanding. And even HD herself, recording a few segments, lets herself drift freely from section to section.

### 20. HD: *Helen in Egypt* reading

## D. No Trivial Ending

### 21. Section title D (*Capriccio*)

**Richard Strauss** (1864–1949) was 78 at the premiere of his last opera, *Capriccio*. It is set in an aristocratic house in 1775, roughly the time and setting of Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*. So was this old man also retreating into the past? Not as far as time-period is concerned. Most operas are set in the past, and Strauss had consistently mined classical myth and stories set in previous centuries—with only one exception, his autobiographical comedy *Intermezzo*, which is very much set in the present. So there was nothing unusual about going back in time, as he had done in his most successful opera, *Der Rosenkavalier*. No, what is distinctly *LateStyle* about *Capriccio* is its refined chamber texture and its self-referential topic: it is an opera about opera, and the age-old debate of which is more important, the words or the music.

### 22. Scene from *Capriccio* at the Met, 2011

Here is a scene from the 2011 Met production by **John Cox**. The set, as you see, is sumptuously 18th-century; the costumes and some of the furniture update the action to the 1920s. The situation is this: rather as in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, the impresario in the middle is presenting an opera at the house of the **Countess Madeleine** and her brother, not as an employee but more or less a friend of the family. Also present are the two gentlemen on the right: the poet **Flamand** and the composer **Olivier**. Both love the Countess, and both beg her to choose between them. The opera ends with an aria for the Countess, in which she looks into a mirror and tries to find “an answer which is not trivial.” The duel between them starts when the poet reads a sonnet as a personal declaration of love for the Countess; in the middle of it, the composer sits at the harpsichord and begins improvising.

### 23. Strauss: *Capriccio*, the spoken sonnet

#### 24. — still from the above

There now follows a love scene between Flamand and the Countess, but I need to cut to the moment when Olivier enters, brandishing the completed composition, which he then sings from the harpsichord. Strauss seldom wrote kindly for tenors, but this is an aria surely anyone would love to sing!

### 25. Strauss: *Capriccio*, the sung sonnet and trio

#### 26. — still from the above

In the final scene, as I said, the Countess pauses before a mirror and asks for an answer that will not be trivial. She leaves, and the Major Domo turns off the last lights. But I ask you: has Strauss answered his question, or is it still up in the air?

### 27. Strauss: *Capriccio* ending

#### 28. Title slide (So how *does* it end?)

## E. A Sicilian Saga

29. Section title E (A Sicilian Saga)

30. Lampedusa and Visconti

Edward Said devotes half a chapter of his book *On Late Style* to the novel *Il gattopardo* by **Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa** (1896–1957), which was published posthumously in 1958, and the film *The Leopard* by **Luchino Visconti** (1906–76), which appeared in 1963. Visconti’s film was made 13 years before his death, so cannot truly be called a late work, but it inaugurated a series of films such as *Death in Venice* and *Ludwig* which have to do with the decline of an old aristocratic order, and which together comprise a late period totally different from the Communist realism of his earlier work. Lampedusa was also an aristocrat, a Sicilian Prince in fact, and his only novel was truly his swansong; he never lived to see it in print. It is a brilliant novel, though, right from the first page. Let’s hear a reading of that page by David Horovich, and then compare it to the opening sequence in the Visconti film.

31. Lampedusa: *The Leopard*, opening (read)

32. Visconti: *The Leopard*, opening

33. — still from the above

What did you think of the language in the book? What did Visconti add in his film treatment? He has jumped forward to a little later in the book, to where the forces of the **Risorgimento**, led by **Garibaldi**, invade Sicily to defeat the forces of the Bourbon King and make the former Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (Naples and Sicily himself) part of a united Italy ruled by **Vittorio Emmanuele** of Turin.

34. Battle scene from *The Leopard*

Visconti puts more fighting into the movie than there is in the novel, perhaps 5 minutes of it, but it is really irrelevant. For the fighting is little more than a catalyst; it leads to a plebiscite in which the population votes overwhelmingly for unification. The Leopard himself, **Prince Fabrizio of Salina**, urges his people to vote for the new order, even though it will start the inevitable decline of his own class, because he realizes that things will have to change if anything is to stay the same.

35. Scene menu: all

*The Leopard* is not a modernist text, but it is divided into discrete sections with months or sometimes years between them. Visconti picks from among them, but he devotes almost the last hour of his film to just one chapter out of the eight. This is a grand ball in Palermo in which most of the themes of the novel are summed up, visually and aurally, rather than through plot development. I shall show you the last 25 minutes of it, but first I want to put in two shorter scenes, one showing, as it were, the Salina family in their old glory, and the other marking the moment of change.

36. Scene menu: Church

The first clip shows the family arriving for their annual visit to their summer house at Donnafugata in the country. They are greatly honored, both in the town and in the church, but theirs is a faded glory. Visconti captures it in sound, more than anything; listen to the music and tell me what you think.

37. Visconti: *The Leopard*, church

38. — still from the above

What did you hear? The absurd town band playing **Verdi** out of tune; the organist playing more Verdi, and the excruciating singing of the congregation. Meanwhile the family look like dusty statues in their family stalls.

39. Scene menu: Dinner

Before going on, I should say something more about the family dynamics. Don Fabrizio has little time for his useless sons and vapid daughters, but is genuinely fond of his nephew Tancredi. Concetta, his eldest daughter, is in love with Tancredi, but she fades totally out of the picture when Don Calogero Sedara, the mayor of Donnafugata, brings his daughter Angelina to dinner. Socially inept though he is, Don Calogero is on track to become richer than the Prince himself; it is Don Fabrizio's aim to secure the marriage of Angelina to the relatively impoverished Tancredi, even though he knows this will be the first step towards the drowning of his aristocratic caste in the rising tide of the bourgeoisie. The actors are **Burt Lancaster** as the Prince, **Alain Delon** as Tancredi, and **Claudia Cardinale** as Angelica—all speaking their own languages and overdubbed later in Italian.

40. Visconti: *The Leopard*, dinner

41. — still from the above

42. Scene menu: Ball & ending

I am not even going to try to explain any more back-story to the ball, because I think Visconti meant it to work visually and through the music (**Nino Rota** using an unpublished waltz by Verdi). Pick up what you can, and let the rest wash over you.

43. Visconti: *The Leopard*, ball & ending

44. Title slide (Lament for an Era)