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The Frick Collection, New York, in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London
between 1824 and 1828, Joseph Mallord William Turner painted three monumental canvases depicting contemporary northern European ports. The first two, Harbor of Dieppe: Changement de Domicile (fig. 59) and Cologne, the Arrival of a Packet-Boat: Evening (fig. 60), made their debut at the Royal Academy in 1825 and 1826, respectively. Both were acquired by John Broadhurst, a little-known patron of Turner’s in the mid-1820s, after their appearance at the academy (see Appendix). The third painting, The Harbor of Brest: The Quayside and Château (see fig. 98), is of the same scale as Dieppe and Cologne and was probably envisioned as a continuation of a series of monumental European ports. Left unfinished, it remained in the artist’s studio after his death, as discussed in Rebecca Hellen’s essay in this publication. This trio of grand-scale paintings of the mid-1820s, which follow from Dort or Dordrecht: The Dort Packet-Boat from Rotterdam Becalmed exhibited in 1818 (see fig. 9), attests to the significance of the port in Turner’s work during the decade after the Continent had been newly reopened to British travelers at the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. Sea and river ports, whether of the present or past, exerted a powerful hold on Turner’s imagination as transitional spaces of arrival and departure, and as a country’s or city’s welcoming gateways or defensive barriers. While Turner drew upon various models of the past for his port scenes, he departed daringly from naturalism through his use of high-keyed color and effects of transparency and luminosity, provoking criticism and controversy when the works were first exhibited.

For Harbor of Dieppe: Changement de Domicile, Turner turned to the compositional formula of Claude Lorrain’s seaports, linking his work to that of the greatest representative of the genre (see p. 8). As in Claude’s Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba (see fig. 6), Turner’s canvas has two diagonal “wings” (in this case, sailboats, buildings, and townspeople) that frame the painting’s luminous core and lead the viewer’s eye back to the dome and tower of a church that hover on the horizon in a bluish haze. The church is framed by soft halos of light—the afternoon sun pulsing in a pale yellow circle into the light blue and rosy tints of the sky—and its mirror reflection in the water. On the sides of the painting, Turner depicted the everyday life of the town in all its vitality and diversity within its imposing architectural setting. The viewer is pulled into the shimmering world that Turner himself would have encountered as he stood in front of the harbor on his first visit to the French port in 1821.

Dieppe (the name derives from the Saxon word deop or “deep”) had gone through peaks of prosperity and power and devastating reversals of fortune over its eight-century history. Established in the eleventh century as a fishing community, the town is situated on the coast of upper Normandy, where the River Arques cuts through the tall white chalk cliffs fronting the English Channel (or La Manche) and forms an estuary. This was later expanded into a harbor connected to the English Channel by a canal, and around its protected basin a fishing port and town developed. Under Louis XIV, Dieppe became a major harbor and military base; however, in 1694, the town was almost completely destroyed in a