

James McNeill Whistler

(1834-1903)

'I am bored to death after a certain time away from Piccadilly! –

I pine for Pall Mall and I long for a hansom! - ...

I begin rather to wish myself back in my own lovely London fogs!

They are lovely those fogs - and I am their painter!'

(Whistler, 1880)

American born, French-trained, London-based, and fascinated with the art of both East and West, James McNeill Whistler occupies a pivotal position between cultures and artistic traditions. He was an artist of a cosmopolitan background; born in Lowell, Massachusetts, he grew up in America, England and Russia. He studied briefly at the United States Military Academy at West Point, learnt to etch at the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in Washington DC and left America in 1855 to study art in Paris.

As a child he visited his half-sister Deborah and the physician-etcher Francis Seymour Haden at 62 Sloane Street. In 1859 he settled in London, painting, etching,

exhibiting his work and acquiring patrons among the city merchants and shipping magnates. He worked on site down by the docks and painted the Thames bridges, old and new. He depicted the workers and whores, sailors and foreshore men, the decaying wharves, the ferries and wherries, clippers and cutters. He documented the industrial waterway in a realistic manner and recorded the commercial centre of the greatest port in Europe in all its dirty, crowded, bustling activity.

But over the years his subject matter, techniques and compositions evolved with his sites. He sought the essence of the river, the life-blood of the city, ebbing and flowing before his perceptive eyes and caught by his skilful brush. The search culminated in evocative images of the Thames around Chelsea and Battersea, and the creation of his 'Nocturnes' of the 1870s, the most distinctive and controversial of his works.

Whistler's works were exhibited across Europe but, despite the ambivalence of many critics, he focused on London venues – the Royal Academy until 1872, the Grosvenor Gallery and the galleries of leading art dealers like the Fine Art Society. Whistler depicted the city and the river Thames in many moods and media. As well as the powerful, impressionistic oils, and atmospheric nocturnes, he made vivid sketches in pencil and chalk, watercolours with expressive brushwork and delicate colouring, richly textured lithographs and lithotints, and finely detailed etchings and drypoints that showed his masterly draughtsmanship. His works bring to vivid life the city, the Thames, and the people of Victorian London. They were also immensely influential on both sides of the Atlantic, and a foretaste of modernism.

Whistler's Etchings and drypoints

Whistler worked on smooth copperplates, heated and covered with a thin acid-resistant ground. The surface

was smoked to produce a shiny black surface, on which the drawing showed up as bright lines. Whistler drew with fine-pointed steel etching needles. Lines were etched with nitric acid diluted with water, which bit into the lines, leaving blackened areas unaffected. After draining off the acid, he checked for scratches or mistakes. Sometimes the acid produced accidental effects ('foul biting') which Whistler could remove, modify or leave to create textures. To make changes he heated the plate, hammered out mistakes, and started again. Each change produced a new 'state'; some etchings went through 20 states before the artist was satisfied.

The copperplate was cleaned, warmed, and dabbed with ink. Surface ink was wiped off lightly, leaving ink only in the etched lines. Sometimes Whistler left a thin film of ink ('plate tone') over the surface, adding colour to the print.

Finally the plate was placed on damped paper and run through a printing press, forcing paper into the incisions to receive the ink and creating a plate mark around the edge of the plate. The print is a mirror-image of the plate: Whistler's views, drawn on site, appear back to front when printed. The first prints pulled from a plate are called proofs. Each print is known as an impression, and a defined number may be printed from any plate. A set of etchings can be published as an edition by the artist or a dealer, usually mounted or sold in an album. Whistler often printed under ten impressions from a plate, but editions could exceed 100.

Drypoints are drawn directly on a copperplate. The needle throws up a fine ridge of copper that holds ink, and, in printing, produces a fine, soft line, but the burr wears down quickly. Drypoint can be used on its own, or to add fine details. Whistler printed on various papers, from thin Japan to old laid papers. Many Thames etchings are on 'De Erven de Blauw' watermarked paper. Etchings were usually signed on the plate rather

than the paper, although after 1880 he trimmed sheets to the plate mark, leaving a tab for the butterfly signature derived from his initials 'JW'.

The Thames Set

'A marvellous tangle of rigging, yardarms and rope; a chaos of fog, furnaces and gushing smoke; the profound and complicated poetry of a vast capital'

(Charles Baudelaire, 1862)

A Series of Sixteen Etchings of Scenes on the Thames was published by Ellis & Green, London, in 1871. The earliest Thames etchings were *Thames Warehouses*, *Old Westminster Bridge*, *Limehouse*, *Eagle Wharf*, *Black Lion Wharf*, *The Pool*, *Thames Police* and *The Lime-Burner*. *Rotherhithe*, etched in 1860, was followed in 1861 by several smaller London plates, *Millbank*, *The Little Pool*, *Battersea Dawn (Cadogan Pier)* and *Old Hungerford Bridge*. Whistler, with the help of Delâtre, and, later, Frederick Goulding, printed and exhibited several in the 1860s.

Around 1868 the Greek merchant Alexander C. Ionides tried to form a company with an art dealer, Murray Marks, and artists - Dante G. Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris - to market Whistler's etchings. He bought the Thames copperplates, intending to publish an edition, but this fell through. The final plate, *Chelsea Bridge and Church*, was completed as Whistler and Frederick Ellis negotiated the scale and content of the set in 1871. The full set, printed from the steel-faced plates in London in 1871, consisted of 100 impressions. It included thirteen horizontal scenes and three in vertical format, 14 being of London (as exhibited here) and two French subjects.

This was followed by another edition printed by Goulding for the Fine Art Society: 'Goulding's impressions of these plates are very excellent', wrote Whistler in 1880. The plates were acquired by Frederick Keppel & Co., New York, in the late 1880s and published in yet another 'limited' edition. Later,

Goulding removed the steel-facing from the plates and printed proofs in 1894; the plates were then cancelled, and sold in 1896 to the American collector Charles Lang Freer who bequeathed them to the Freer Gallery of Art.

The etchings were widely exhibited and influential, establishing Whistler's reputation as a master printer and etcher.

Letter from Whistler to Henri Fantin- Latour (January/

June 1861

Reproduction

Box 1, Pennell-Whistler Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

Translation:

I would like you to be here in front of a picture which I am absolutely certain must become a masterpiece - here is more or less what it is like.
[drawing of *Wapping*]

Firstly it is on a balcony right above the Thames. There are three people - an old man in a white shirt the one in

the middle who is looking out of the window - then on the right in the corner, a sailor in a cap and a blue shirt with a big collar turned back in a lighter blue, who is chatting to a girl who is jolly difficult to paint! And that is why I wish above all to have you here so that we could discuss it - Well I have painted her three times and I do not want to get tired - besides if I fiddle about with her too much I will have hardly any time to do the rest - Well you can imagine! I have managed to give her an expression! Really my dear friend! a real expression - ah but if only I could describe her head - She has the most beautiful hair that you have ever seen! A red not golden but copper - as Venetian as a dream! - Skin golden white or yellow if you will - and with the wonderful expression I described to you - an air of saying to her sailor "That is all very well, my friend! I have seen others!" you know she is winking and laughing at him! - Now all that against the light and in consequence in atrociously difficult muted colours - but I do not think I shall paint her again. - ... Her neck is exposed - her blouse can be seen almost entirely and how well it is

painted moncher - and then a jacket you should see it!
In a white material with big arabesques and flowers of all
colours! Hush! Not a word to Courbet! Now through
the window you can see the whole Thames! The
background is like an etching - and was unbelievably
difficult! The sky for example is very truly and splendidly
painted - there is a corner which can be seen through
the window panes which is excellent! - Nearer that is a
row of large boats one of which is unloading coal and
right by the window the mast and yellow sail of a lighter
and just by the head of the girl (who I forgot to tell you
looks supremely whore-like) there is the bowsprit of
another large boat, the ropes and pulleys of which go
across the whole picture - ... There are also many small
boats and buildings which I cannot put into the sketch.
But my dear Fantin I assure you that I have
never attempted such a difficult subject - it will certainly
be said that it is not finished - because as the boats
leave I have only just time to put in their shades of
colour - you understand me - and for those who are in
the habit of making their seascapes at home and to

paint models and toys for warships my real boats will not be finished

Chelsea

In March 1863 Whistler settled at 7 Lindsey Row, on the Thames in Chelsea. Neighbours included Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the poet Algernon Swinburne. The Greaves brothers – Walter and Henry – lived a few doors up at 9 and 10 Lindsey Row. They rowed Whistler about the river, helped in the studio, and themselves worked on paintings of the Thames. Literary editor Mme Emilie Venturi lived a few doors along; a friend and patron, she acquired from the artist the impressionistic oil painting *Chelsea In Ice* (Colby College Museum of Art)

In 1867 Whistler moved to 2 Lindsey Row (now 96 Cheyne Walk). In June 1878 he moved briefly to the White House in Tite Street, designed by E.W. Godwin, but this was lost, along with everything he owned, when he went bankrupt the following year. However, except for a painting trip abroad and several years in Paris in

the 1890s, he lived in Chelsea for the rest of his life. He died at 72 Cheyne Walk in 1903.

2 Lindsey Row was a three-storey townhouse, with the kitchen and dining room on the ground floor, sitting room and studio on the first floor. It faced the Thames, with Battersea Bridge to the left, the factories of Battersea across the river, and the pleasure gardens of Cremorne, to the right up the river. Over forty years, Whistler drew and painted the Thames, in all seasons and weather from the riverbank, the bridge and nearby piers, and from his house.

The proximity of Lindsey Row to the Thames meant that the river was a daily feature of Whistler's existence.

There were panoramic views from the upper floors of both his houses from which he could observe passing barges, and on journeys on the river he became closely acquainted with its wharves and the topography of Chelsea – from the gardens at the Royal Hospital, along Cheyne Walk, past Cadogan Pier, Battersea Pier and

under the narrow arches of Old Battersea Bridge to Cremorne Road and beyond.

Lithographs and Lithotints

In Lithography, the image is pulled from the surface of a stone or plate. Whistler drew with lithographic crayon either directly on limestone or (in his later lithographs) on specially prepared paper that was used to transfer the images to stone. The surface of the stone was prepared so that, when inked, the drawing in lithographic crayon could produce effects comparable to chalk or pastel drawings. Lithotints, where a diluted lithographic mixture was applied with a brush, produced effects akin to watercolour.

Whistler was encouraged to start making lithographs by the professional printer Thomas Way in 1878, and most were printed by Way and his son T.R. Way in London. Whistler explored some subjects – including the Thames and Old Battersea Bridge - in both lithography and etching.

He agreed to provide illustrations for the journal, *Piccadilly*, launched in May 1878. *Early Morning* and *The Toilet* were followed by two based on chalk drawings of Battersea Bridge, drawn on site and transferred onto fresh stones in the Ways' printing office. *The Broad Bridge* was published in *Piccadilly* but most prints of *The Tall Bridge* were destroyed when the journal failed.

Whistler returned to lithography around 1887. In 1888 he married the artist Beatrice Godwin, widow of E.W. Godwin, who encouraged his work in lithography. Whistler experimented with drawing in lithographic crayon and stumps of paper on different transfer papers. Beatrice was diagnosed with cancer and died in May 1896. Shortly before her death they stayed at the Savoy Hotel where Whistler made two devastatingly sad portraits of his dying wife and several views from the windows over the Thames. Finally, he made one lithotint – his last Nocturne, *The Thames* – a beautiful, complex study, harking back to his earlier work. It was so bound

up with the dark days of his wife's fatal illness that after her death Whistler refused to let it be printed. These late lithographs, drawn between February and March 1896, marked the end of Whistler's work in lithography.

Nocturnes

'I can't thank you too much for the name "Nocturne" as a title for my moonlights! ... it is really so charming and does so poetically say all I want to say and no more than I wish!' (Whistler to F.R. Leyland)

Night as a subject inspired many artists known to Whistler from Aivazovsky to Rembrandt and Turner (Whistler described *The Night Watch* at the Rijksmuseum as a 'merveille'). Whistler himself painted evening scenes in Valparaiso in 1866, developing some into 'Nocturnes' years later. In August 1871 he painted his first 'Moonlights', exhibited as *Nocturnes* at the Dudley Gallery in November. Whistler's Liverpool patron, Frederick R. Leyland, suggested using the title 'Nocturne'. The French term 'Nocturne' denoted a composition played of an evening or evocative of night.

It was usually applied to a three-movement piano composition, as perfected by Chopin.

During the Whistler v. Ruskin trial in 1878, Whistler was called on to explain 'the meaning of the word "nocturne" as applied to your pictures'. He replied:

By using the word "nocturne" I wished to indicate an artistic interest alone, divesting the picture of any outside anecdotal interest which might have been otherwise attached to it. A nocturne is an arrangement of line, form and colour first. The picture is throughout a problem that I attempt to solve. I make use of any means, any incident or object in nature, that will bring about this symmetrical result.

He added 'Among my works are some night pieces, and I have chosen the word "nocturne" because it generalizes and simplifies the whole set of them.'

Japonisme

'the story of the beautiful is already complete – hewn in the marbles of the Parthenon, and broidered, with the birds, upon the fan of Hokusai – at the foot of Fusihama – (Whistler, 'Ten o'clock' Lecture, 1885)

Japan was closed to outside trade until Commodore Perry's arrival with an American naval force in 1855, when a trade agreement was negotiated. Soon after that, Japanese art reached the west. Whistler could have seen Japanese woodcuts and other Asian art as early as 1858 but the main impact of Japanese art came in 1862, with a substantial Japanese collection exhibited at the *International Exhibition* in South Kensington. By 1863 Whistler was collecting Asian art in Paris, Rotterdam and London. He competed with other artists - Dante Gabriel Rossetti and J.J. Tissot in particular - who avidly collected Chinese porcelain and pictures, Japanese prints and kimonos, to incorporate in their work. In 1864, Whistler's mother described the sitting room in Whistler's house in Chelsea as:

'ornamented by a very rare collection of Japanese & Chinese [china], he considers the paintings upon them

the finest specimens of Art & his companions (Artists) ... get enthusiastic as the[y] handle & examine the curious subjects pourtrayed [sic], some of the pieces more than two centuries old, he has also a Japanese book of painting, unique in their estimation.'

Whistler's paintings include specific images of Asian art and artefacts, as well as compositions derived from Japanese woodcuts. In *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl* Joanna Hiffernan holds an Asian fan, decorated with a Hiroshige woodcut, *The Banks of the Sumida River* from the set of *Famous Places in the Eastern Capital*, dating from 1857. The views depicted by both Hiroshige and Hokusai, with their many variations on river and bridge themes, had a notable influence on Whistler's paintings of Old Battersea Bridge. In subject, composition and detail such prints had a strong influence on Whistler's work in the 1860s and 1870s.

Old Battersea Bridge

Old Battersea Bridge crosses the river Thames between Chelsea and Battersea. The old timber bridge, built by John Philips under the direction of Henry Holland from 1771–72, was closed to traffic in 1883, demolished by 1890, and replaced by Sir Joseph Bazalgette's bridge between 1886 and 1890.

Between 1859 and 1879 Whistler frequently portrayed the old bridge. His first oil painting of the whole bridge was *Brown and Silver: Old Battersea Bridge*. Later studies were drawn either from a boat or the shore near Whistler's house on Lindsey Row in Chelsea. In 1878 he made two powerful chalk studies, *The Broad Bridge* and *The Tall Bridge*, for lithographs intended for publication. In the dramatic etching *Under Old Battersea Bridge* he simplified the structure of the bridge: it appears to show the two piers to the left of the central passage under the bridge (when heading upstream), which appear in reverse as printed at the far right of his later etching *Old Battersea Bridge*.

Single piles supporting a section of bridge (making a T-shaped composition) appear in several drawings including *Nocturne: Battersea Bridge*, and these relate to the screen that stood in Whistler's studio until his death: *Blue and Silver: Screen, with Old Battersea Bridge* (Hunterian). A nocturnal view of the Thames from upstream, it shows the clock tower of Chelsea Old Church on the left panel and a pier of Old Battersea Bridge in the centre. In the distance is the Albert Suspension Bridge under construction (it opened to the public in August 1873). The screen was probably planned in the summer of 1871, and worked on through December 1872.

A further refinement of the composition is seen in the oil painting *Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge*, the most famous of these T-shaped compositions, which reflects the influence of Japanese prints. In it, Whistler synthesized the on-site realism of his earlier work with ideas of composition acquired from Japanese woodcuts. When exhibited at the Grosvenor

Gallery in 1877, *Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge* became the target of the art critic John Ruskin's attack on Whistler, published in *Fors Clavigera*, and was shown at the trial of *Whistler v Ruskin* in November 1878.

Nocturne: Blue and Gold - Old Battersea Bridge

It was not my intent simply to make a copy of Battersea Bridge. I did not intend to paint a portrait of the bridge, but only a painting of a moonlight scene. As to what the picture represents, that depends on who looks at it.
(Whistler, 1878)

During the *Whistler vs. Ruskin* trial, Whistler, under interrogation, stated that *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* represented a 'moonlight effect.' Asked 'Which part of the picture is the bridge?' he replied:

Your Lordship is too close at present to the picture to perceive the effect I intended to produce at a distance. The spectator is supposed to be looking down the river toward London. The picture gives a view of the bridge

and, looking through the arch, Chelsea Church in the further distance.

Questioned again, 'Do you say that this is a correct representation of Battersea Bridge?' Whistler explained: It was not my intent simply to make a copy of Battersea Bridge. I did not intend to paint a portrait of the bridge, but only a painting of a moonlight scene. As to what the picture represents, that depends on who looks at it. To some persons it may represent all that I intended; to others it may represent nothing.

He added:

'The blue colouring on the gilt frame is part of the scheme of the picture. The blue spot on the right side of the frame is my monogram, which I place on the frame as well as the canvas; it balances the picture. The frame and the picture together are a work of art.'

Finally he was questioned about details: 'the cascade of gold colour is a firework', the 'prevailing colour' was blue, the figures on the bridge were 'just what you like', and there was a barge underneath the bridge. And he repeated, 'The thing is intended simply as a representation of moonlight. My whole scheme was only to bring about a certain harmony of colour.'