

Themes and Variations:

Recurring Imagery in the Prints of James McNeill Whistler

For some artists, the notion of recurring themes throughout their career—as a vehicle for discovery and even self-discovery—seems quite natural. For Rembrandt, the many self-portraits he executed in all media during his life have provided us with a rich and nuanced examination of personality and psychology—as well as of physiological changes over the years. Another example is Edgar Degas's fascination with both horse racing and ballet: each consists of highly formal and structured activities with set modes of dress and movements that recur. The graphic work of James McNeill Whistler also repeatedly plumbs intersecting themes—themes that appeared early in his career and to which he returned periodically throughout his lifetime. What is the attraction of certain aesthetic interests or preoccupations that drives an artist such as Whistler to revisit motifs that he had explored years earlier, and how do these themes shape a singular body of work distinct from the trends of both French and British painting of the nineteenth century? The recurring subjects present in Whistler's prints reveal how his interests took his art from a firm grounding in descriptive naturalism towards reductive distillation and even towards abstraction. They include the repetition of portals, thresholds, and doorways; images of forges and furnaces; the “nocturne”; and scenes of domestic contentment. This gallery guide explores two of these themes: doorways and nocturnes.

Portals/thresholds/doorways

Among Whistler's early prints are a number of etchings showing figures either in front of a doorway or within an interior seen from a threshold. Of all of the motifs that Whistler returns to, the framing opportunities of doorways are perhaps one of the most frequent in his etchings and lithographs. In his early etchings, doorways provide a glimpse into the lives of working people and take inspiration from nineteenth-century Realist concerns for depicting labor. As Whistler develops this motif over time, the doorway begins to take on significance beyond merely a formal framing device; the doorways become more prominent and enigmatic—we are not always permitted to see what is beyond.

A primarily dark interior with areas of great brightness draws upon Whistler's admiration for the chiaroscuro (dramatic light and dark) effects of seventeenth-century Dutch art, particularly prints by Rembrandt and paintings by Jan Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch. Images with this rich juxtaposition of light and dark include *The Kitchen*, from the *French Set* (1858), and *The Lime-burner* (1859), from the *Thames Set*. In *The Kitchen*, the dark foreground projects into a deep narrow space filled with light, against which a woman, facing away from us, is silhouetted. We are psychologically distanced from the woman, who, by her pose, seems unaware of the viewer. Although similar in construction, the effect of *The Lime-burner* is quite different. The figure of the lime-burner is not silhouetted against the distant light, but flooded from light overhead, as if a spotlight were shone on him. His look engages us, drawing us into the densely described wooden interior along the river's bank. In these early views of doorways, Whistler's admiration of Rembrandt is evident in his use of light and shadow to convey psychological complexity.

It is in the Venice etchings of 1879–80 that Whistler's doorways and portals representing a public *sottoportico*, or pedestrian passage, suggest mystery and secrecy—figures may inhabit the portal, but the looming darkness behind the figure often reveals little. Doorways that front onto a canal present a particular exploration of the motif; the doorway is not a structure in our space but an aperture that is at some distance from the viewer, as if we were passing in a gondola or on the opposite side of the canal. In *The Doorway*, the flanking arched windows fill much of the image and the beautiful filigree patterns of the metal grille cover the large window over the door. This impressive Renaissance palazzo portal frames the woman on the steps bending over the canal. In the earliest states, it was clearly Whistler's intent to show the woman dipping fabric into the water; this figure underwent constant adjustment through the seven

states of making the print. One of the first changes was to eliminate the cloth in her hands, thereby making her pose more ambiguous. By the last state, the cloth in the water had been redrawn, making the pose once more specific to its task; rarely has manual labor been so gracefully depicted. Whistler also plays on the patterns of the grillwork in the forms of chairs hanging from the ceiling inside the doorway. If it were not known that this establishment repaired chairs, it would be nearly impossible to decode what the ghostly shapes of the suspended chair legs represented. Whistler's Venice etchings frequently play on this kind of ambiguity—so different from the linear clarity of the earlier *Thames Set* and an aspect that must have been very attractive to him. As he wrote to his mother from Venice, one is “perfectly bewildered with the entanglement of beautiful things!”

Throughout the last twenty years of Whistler's life, the theme of doorways returned in both general street views and in depictions of specific shops or doorways. *Rue Vauvilliers* (1892–93), which uses untouched paper as a stand-in for the building's exterior wall, distills the building into a geometry of windows and doors that borders on abstraction.

Nocturnes

Whistler's nighttime canvases are sublime exercises in tonal painting, ambiguity, and understatement. One observer who watched Whistler paint his early nocturnes described how Whistler arranged paint on his palette and identified the single “tone” that was to harmonize and unify the painting. Whistler began painting these night views in the early 1870s and referred to them as “my moonlights” until Frederick Leyland, a major patron of his work, suggested the musical form of “nocturne.” Whistler thanked him for the idea, saying that the term could “so poetically say all I want to say and *no more* than I wish!” Whistler's nocturnes in etching and lithography share in this highly aestheticized exploration of light at its most evanescent.

Whistler did not, however, immediately arrive at this hallmark form. His first nocturnal view, *Street at Saverne*, from the 1858 *French Set*, translated a daytime sketch into a night scene. Although the etching doesn't have topographical specificity, the deep projection into space, the linear hatching throughout, and the lone lantern at the right side are all sharp—and even brusque—chiaroscuro effects compared to his later nocturnes. His early lithotints of Battersea and Chelsea, such as the *Nocturne* (1878), show Whistler dissolving his linear depictions into ones of gradations and subtle value shifts.

In Venice, Whistler applied this tonal approach to the medium of etching, hoping to approximate the effects of his lithotints of the 1870s. The line work is lighter and more atmospheric, and the use of plate tone (light films of ink left on the copper plate) approximates the *tusche* (diluted lithographic medium in liquid form) of the London lithotints of the late 1870s. The *Nocturne* from the *First Venice Set* (1879–80) is reliant on plate tone to render the damp and glowing nocturnal Venetian skyline. The sublime effects of the Venetian lagoon at night are brought into the back canals in *Nocturne: Palaces*, where the gloom of the city evokes mystery that is only hinted at in *Street at Saverne*.

The Venice etchings permitted Whistler to combine three of his repeating themes in one plate, *Nocturne: Furnace*: doorways, furnaces, and nocturnes are blended in spectacular nuance. Space and form are both treated with ambiguity. The viewer is confronted with two openings—the small window on the left with a figure looking towards the viewer and the glowing doorway on the right. The doorway frames a man at work before a furnace, but his specific task is not described. The network of hatching lines surrounding the water-door eddies and swirls around the portal, evoking but not directly describing the dim but flickering light on the canal whose source is unseen at left.

Whistler's late London nocturne, *The Thames* of 1896, brings together all of the effects that found first flowering in the early nocturnes of the 1870s. The half-tint applied to the stone provided Whistler with that unifying tone that he had achieved in the painted nocturnes. This middle value is richly evocative.

With delicate scraping or careful additions with crayon, this same middle tone could describe the roadway of the embankment at the bottom of the image, the fluid moving surface of the Thames itself with ethereal forms of boats and glimmering reflections, or the enshrouding mist that obscures the buildings and chimneys on the opposite bank. Understatement, nuance, and evocation are all so gently realized in this most melancholy of nocturnes.

Carole McNamara

Senior Curator of Western Art

Selected Bibliography

Bacher, Otto Henry. *With Whistler in Venice*. New York: The Century Co., 1908.

Kennedy, Edward G. *The Etched Work of Whistler*. San Francisco: Alan Wofsy Fine Arts, 1978.

Lochnan, Katharine A. *The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984.

McNamara, Carole, and John Siewert. *Whistler: Prosaic Views, Poetic Vision*. Exhibition catalogue. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art; New York: Thames & Hudson, 1994.

Menpes, Mortimer. *Whistler As I Knew Him*. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1905.

Pennell, Elizabeth Robins, and Joseph Pennell. *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*. London: William Heinemann, 1908.

Stratis, Harriet K., and Martha Tedeschi, eds. *The Lithographs of James McNeill Whistler*. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1998.

University of Glasgow. *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler*.
<http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/>.

Way, Thomas R. *The Lithographs by Whistler*. New York: Kennedy & Co., 1914.

On Beauty and the Everyday: The Prints of James McNeill Whistler

August 21–November 28, 2010

This exhibition is made possible in part by the University of Michigan Health System, the University of Michigan Office of the Provost, the Friends of the University of Michigan Museum of Art, and the Doris Sloan Memorial Fund.