Abstracting Realism: Dreams of a New City in Whistler’s *Nocturne in Blue and Silver*

*Nocturne in Blue and Silver* is an oil on panel landscape measuring 44.5 by 61 centimeters by James Abbott McNeill Whistler, executed circa 1871-1872 and currently on display at the Fogg Museum of Harvard University (Fig. 1). The work is one of thirty-two paintings in a Nocturnes series through which the artist explored the landscape of twilight, especially that of London along the River Thames where *Nocturne* is set. Whistler mystified the familiar terrain of the city in a foggy darkness, concealing the mundane pessimism of industrialization and instead, uncovering the magic hidden within urbanity. Although critics ridiculed the work for its spatial ambiguities and overall aimlessness, *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* retains a masterful balance between realist urban depiction and abstract tonal expression.

Compositionally, any specifics of constructed form evaporate into the overall imagery of the city. A broad stretch of the River Thames floods the foreground while smokestacks and metropolitan buildings loom behind. What could have been an easily-identifiable industrial section of the Thames is engulfed in a thick haze, clouding its architecture into only a dim, indistinct line that spans the horizon.¹ Whistler’s use of color and light additionally contributes to the shadowy temperament of the work. Fundamentally comprised of three bleak tones (blues, grays, and dabs of yellow that fleetingly illuminate the darkness), Whistler’s restricted hues all blend into a muted yet harmonious arrangement. It is also important to note Whistler’s

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inscription of a series of Japanese symbols and bamboo-like vegetation at the work’s bottom edge. Mimicking the translucency of East Asian ink wash painting, Whistler grants the river an autonomous energy free from the constraints of traditional illustration or the bluntness of artistic toil.²

The work’s strong sense of mood and dynamism is further created by Whistler’s stylistic choices. He described his minimalistic painterly style by declaring, “Paint should not be applied thick. It should be like a breath on the surface of a pane of glass.”³ This idea has since been coined “painting softly,” characterized pictorially by blurred delineations submerged in an atmospheric mist, and technically by reducing traces of brushwork to produce an enigmatic, ephemeral effect.⁴ In *Nocturne in Blue and Silver*, Whistler leverages subtle variations in oil tints to generate “vibrations that compellingly emulate the night’s shimmer.”⁵ This delicate and ostensibly laissez-faire treatment grants the work an organic sense of wonderment; as art historian Marc Simpson notes, “The metaphor gains its greatest use in that breath on glass is made without the use of the hand – a product of life itself rather than of deliberate or trained craft.”⁶ Therefore, Whistler’s “painting softly” technique amplifies the mystery of the work through a more pure expression of ambiance.

Critics, however, rejected *Nocturne in Blue and Silver’s* indeterminacy as a radical departure from honorable art.⁷ This comes as no surprise, for if viewers expected the standard representations of architecture typically found in landscape painting, then the spatial ambiguities

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³ Ibid., 3.
⁴ Ibid., 4.
⁵ Colbert, “Ghostly Gloamings,” 144.
⁶ Simpson, Corn, and Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, *Like Breath on Glass*, 4.
of *Nocturne* were destined to disappoint. Rather than struggling to peer through the darkness and impossibly discern a tangible scene, *Nocturne* obliges its viewer to question and ponder: Will structures continue to fade away altogether? Will new forms emerge from the London fog?

Whistler no longer concerns himself with physical accuracy, seeking only to capture the energy of the city at night and engage in the intrinsic value of art removed from any utilitarian purpose.\(^8\) Unfortunately, the resulting obscurities provoked a confused dismissal far more often than the prolonged contemplation that Whistler had intended – one critic concluded, “Pictures in the dark are contradictions in terms.”\(^9\) Indeed, Whistler had reconfigured what could have been a definitive, urban landscape into an expanse of hazy textures.

This is not to say, however, that all urban motifs are completely abandoned; rather, Whistler strikes a subtle equilibrium between the realities of the city combined with an evocative luminosity. Consider, for example, the smokestacks along the skyline. Their presence denotes a clear signal to the urban context of the work, yet they are nevertheless subdued by the surrounding smog. Herein lies the core of Whistler’s delicate balancing act between industrial authenticity and a nocturnal transcendence – these smokestacks and other forms of infrastructure are identifiably urban, yet they stand suspended amid a broader, haunting “labyrinth of darkness.”\(^10\) In essence, though the painting does depict a legitimate cityscape, it functions less as a documentation of place than as a creative study of the broader atmosphere.

Historically, painters had avoided portraying East London; the chaos and desolation produced by the scale of industrialization, compounded by its magnitude of poverty, deemed the truth of urbanity unworthy of any artistic attention.\(^11\) Even those who dared acknowledge the city

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\(^8\) Colbert, “Ghostly Gloamings,” 152.

\(^9\) Siewert, “Suspended Spectacle: Whistler’s ‘Falling Rocket’ and the Nocturnal Subject,” 42.


chose to limit themselves to its sordid conditions as an exemplar of urban tragedy – a brutal realism that dominated the writings of Dickens, for instance, during Whistler’s time. Yet for Whistler, the city functioned as his own inspired iconography. All elements of *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* are equally rendered as colored shadows like “notes blended amid a symphonic structure.” Only vague shapes are presented, reduced to mere silhouettes by the spewing smokestacks and thereby characterizing the urban environment as mystic and divine. In negating typical industrial blight with his expressive approach to depiction, Whistler sets out into the gloom to enchant a redefined city.

The title of *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* as an allusion to music further supports Whistler’s objective in merging a realistic portrayal of place with the freedom of musical experience. Whistler originally referred to his early nighttime landscapes as “moonlights,” though he changed their titles to “nocturnes” per a patron’s suggestion. In addition to the Nocturnes series, Whistler began to retitle many of his works using terms associated with music (including “symphonies,” “arrangements,” and “harmonies”) in an effort to emphasize the tonal qualities of his compositions, rather than the narrative content or any didactic purpose that might have been traditionally expected. Consequently, the usual role of drawing for the purpose of reproduction of form is deemed completely secondary to the creative process of the artist as well as the emotional impact on the viewer.

By supplementing realist imagery with abstract evocations, Whistler’s *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* transformed perceptions of urbanity. Whistler once said, “If the man who paints only

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12 Ibid., 73.
13 Ibid., 74.
14 Colbert, “Ghostly Gloamings,” 143.
16 Colbert, “Ghostly Gloamings,” 139.
the tree, or flower, or other surface he sees before him were an artist, the king of artists would be the photographer. It is for the true artist to do something beyond this.”17 Just like the inevitable ebb and flow of the River Thames or the undulating lyricism of a piano nocturne, *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* moves the art of landscape painting forward, guiding its viewer into dreams of a new city and the imagination of what could be.

Illustrations