Whistler and Battersea: The Aesthetics of Erasure and Redevelopment

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Article by **Jon Newman**
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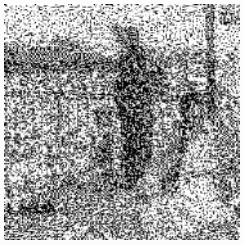

Abstract
This article looks at the significance of South London for Whistler, particularly the line of Battersea factories that he viewed and depicted repeatedly from his home on Cheyne Walk, where he lived from the 1860s. It uses *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green, The Balcony* (1864–1873) as a way of considering the context and precursors of these factories in Battersea, interrogating Whistler's use of Japonisme, and his emerging aesthetic that went on to manifest in the nocturnes and become fully articulated in his "Ten O'clock Lecture". A contrast is drawn between Whistler's depiction of factories in *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green* and the nocturnes, and use of these buildings as motifs in earlier British social realist art and writing of the 1840s and 1850s. Parallels are found between the transformation of industrial Battersea into a twilit fairyland of the imagination, as advocated in Whistler's lecture, and the subsequent developer-led transformation of Battersea's riverside, which started in the late twentieth century, turning it into a new zone of exclusive riverside apartment blocks where, quite literally, "the tall chimneys become campanile—and the warehouses are palaces in the night".

A Changing Prospect: Painting Battersea from Cheyne Walk

When James Abbott McNeill Whistler first came to live in London in 1859 and stayed with Seymour Haden, the bourgeois lifestyle at his brother-in-law's house on Sloane Street would have had a certain predictability, familiarity even. Less so his explorations of the river and wharves of East London that fed into the Thames Set, the sixteen etchings of riverside London he made between 1859 and 1871. Perhaps these forays in turn led him to the fashionable riverside raffishness of Cheyne Walk, just to the west of Battersea Bridge, to which he moved in 1863 into a house in Lindsey Row, part of the larger and now subdivided Lindsey House. He would not yet have met his Chelsea neighbour and future sitter, Thomas Carlyle, but perhaps already recognised Carlyle's ambivalent judgement that being situated here was like "living at the end of the world … safe at the bend of the river, away from all the great roads", yet at night unable to escape "the gleam of the great Babylon, affronting the skies".[1]
By the early 1860s Whistler was acquiring a sense of the distinctiveness of London's different locales—from the mercantilism of Wapping and Rotherhithe to the gentilities of Sloane Street—

but what did he make of the South London that confronted him across the river from Cheyne Walk? Despite the connectivity offered by road and rail bridges, the Thames was still a distinct divide between the city and its south bank. As viewed from the window of his house at Lindsey Row, it separated not only the riverside parishes of Battersea and Chelsea, and the counties of Surrey and Middlesex, but also a mainly industrial quarter from a residential one, and a predominantly working-class area from the self-consciously artistic and intellectual enclave of Cheyne Walk (fig. 1).

Figure 1

Edward Stanford, *Detail from Edward Stanford's Library Map of London and its Suburbs, showing Whistler's viewpoint south east from Lindsey Row across the Thames to Battersea*, 1862, 59.4 × 84.1 cm. Collection of Lambeth Archives. Digital image courtesy of Lambeth Archives (all rights reserved).

Cheyne Walk—the first high ground secured from flooding on the north bank to the west of Charing Cross—had long been an attractive point of settlement. Its relative isolation from main roads, even after the river crossing of Battersea Bridge, had preserved a *rus in urbe* quality, caught between the actual riverside villages of the upper Thames to the west and the creep of London to the east, exemplified by Thomas Cubitt's development of neighbouring Pimlico from the 1840s as a new middle-class quarter. Cheyne Walk was an area with a sense of both self-importance and continuity. When Carlyle moved there in 1834, he had observed that he "could shoot a gun into Smollett's old house (at this very time getting pulled down)".[2]
In 1863 Whistler was living on the street where the artist Joseph Mallord William Turner had died twelve years earlier. He might already have known of the area's cultural and artistic legacy, and he would soon encounter its contemporary representatives in the persons of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne, who both lived at 16 Cheyne Walk. Yet alongside this category of residents, in an early instance of aesthetic zoning, several successful industrialists with manufactories on the Battersea riverfront had also chosen to live on Cheyne Walk and commute over the bridge to their workplaces. From 1808 Marc Brunel lived on Lindsey Row opposite his Battersea sawmills, boot factory, and tin plate factory. A generation later, Thomas Morgan of the Morgan Crucible factory, built in part on the site of Brunel's works, lived in Beaufort Lodge on Cheyne Walk. These smoky, steam-powered enterprises lurking on the horizon of their owners' riverside views would be incorporated by Whistler into his future work.

In the Thames Set and in his earlier works, Whistler had been a free agent, coming upon and exploring multiple different views of London. By contrast, at Lindsey Row he was static, set at an upper window, repeatedly exploring the incongruities and the absences of traditional pictorial qualities in the view. There is a freshness and a sense of wonder to these paintings of the early 1860s. By the simple act of looking from north to south, he was bucking one established pictorial convention that treated the south bank of the river as a platform from which to view or depict the metropolis.[3] Instead, Whistler reversed that direction of view and looked south to produce a series of startlingly different versions of what was essentially the same riverscape that shifted between a busy realism and a fleeting "impressionism". *Brown and Silver: Old Battersea Bridge* (1862–1865) (fig. 2), *Battersea Reach* (1863), *Grey and Silver: Old Battersea Reach* (1863), *Grey and Silver: Chelsea Wharf* (1864), *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses* (1864–1871), and *Chelsea in Ice* (1864) (fig. 3) are each a different treatment of the same prospect seen from Lindsey Row. But it is *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green* that is the focus of this article: a view painted from the balcony at Lindsey Row (and originally titled *The Balcony*), which Whistler commenced in 1864, first showed in 1870, and continued to rework until 1873 (fig. 4).

Figure 2

James McNeill Whistler, *Brown and Silver: Old Battersea Bridge*, 1862–1865, oil on canvas mounted on masonite, 63.8 × 76 cm. Collection of the Addison Gallery of American Art (1928.55). Digital image courtesy of Addison Gallery of American Art / Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).

Figure 3

James McNeill Whistler, *Chelsea in Ice*, 1864, oil on canvas, 45.09 cm × 60.96 cm. Collection of The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (2013.293). Digital image courtesy of The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (all rights reserved).

Figure 4

James McNeill Whistler, *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green, The Balcony*, 1864–1873, oil on wood panel, 61.4 × 48.5 cm. Collection of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Charles Lang Freer (F1892.23a-b). Digital image courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution (public domain).

Variations is a painting that has still not shaken off the shock of the new, and its viewer is confronted by a disruptive juxtaposition. The gulf between the painting's costumed and balconied foreground and its wilfully anti-aesthetic industrial background seems to have been set up to be deliberately unbridgeable. The wider, more catholic, gaze found in many of Whistler's previous paintings of the same scene is here replaced by a narrow and occluded view, framed by the structure of the eponymous balcony, its green sun blinds, and wooden railings. Within this

enclosed space, a group of young women dressed as geishas pose with a Japanese tea service and musical instruments, and an ikebana spray of flowers.[4] Out beyond the balcony's edge, the flattened surfaces of river and sky—both in similarly reduced grey tones—are kept apart by a receding line of dark and smoking factory buildings, which stain and subdue the brighter palette used in the foreground.

Whistler's move to Cheyne Walk had coincided with his growing success as a society portraitist. *La Princesse du pays de la porcelain*, *The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks*, *The Little White Girl*, and *The Golden Screen* were all painted between 1864 and 1865. In each he had deliberately introduced Chinese and Japanese artefacts into portraits that were otherwise located within familiar English middle-class domestic interiors. Aileen Tsui sees these East Asian objects as symbolising an "unbridgeable cultural alterity and thus haunting enigma for Western viewers".[5] *Variations* is chronologically of a piece with these works, only here those same Japanese artefacts have been taken from their room settings, along with the kimonos, out onto a balcony—that interim, ambiguous space set between interior and exterior worlds. The effect seems to reinforce that other "alterity" (as presented here by Whistler) between Cheyne Walk and Battersea.

Part of this strangeness is the setting up of visual and social opposites in a way that had not been presented before. The figures in this elegantly leisured and enclosed foreground with its savours of orientalism and eroticism have set their backs to the other world across the water—that previously unpaintable zone of industrial toil—but it remains in sight to the viewer. In *Old Battersea Bridge* and *Battersea Reach* the Thames had teemed with traffic, whereas here the atomised foreground world floats above a waterway that has been eerily swept of craft and activity.[6] Known geographical points that might permit the viewer to locate themself have been excluded: Battersea Bridge is out of frame to the left; the familiar tower and spire of St. Mary's church is lost to sight behind the head and shoulders of the standing woman; and what in Whistler's previous paintings of the same view were identifiably the remaining lower brick courses of the circular Battersea horizontal mill have here been dissolved into an indeterminate spoil heap (fig. 5).

Figure 5

William Woolnoth after Jacob Schnebbelie, *Battersea Horizontal Mill*, 1806, engraving. Collection of Lambeth Archives. Digital image courtesy of Lambeth Archives (all rights reserved).

Both in its original title, *The Balcony*, and in its compositional structure, *Variations* appears to play with the idea of the painter's viewpoint. Whistler's other paintings of the same scene

exclude any sense of a viewing platform: one is merely aware of looking down from a vantage point. Writing to his picture restorer about *Battersea Reach*, he recalled that it "was very simply painted—long ago—one evening from my window".[7] But in *Variations* he has stepped back to bring its structure into the composition, prompting consideration of the nature and function of a balcony that predates Whistler's occupancy and hints at a previous, now destroyed, prospect that it had once commanded. In brief, the seventeenth-century Lindsey House had been remodelled in the 1750s, then subdivided into the four houses of Lindsey Row in the 1770s. The balcony was a yet later Regency addition made by Marc Brunel (fig. 6). As such, it was part of the emerging picturesque tradition in architecture, and one that presupposed a view worthy of contemplation. Whistler's use of it here invites consideration of the changing nature of the prospect and the way that it can be depicted. What had been the scene that Brunel had viewed from its platform in 1815, as compared with the "post-picturesque" vision that confronted Whistler just fifty years later?

Figure 6

Thomas Shepherd, *Lindsey House, Showing the Balcony of Marc Brunel's House on Lindsey Row*, 1850, watercolour. Collection of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Libraries (A146). Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Libraries (all rights reserved).

The scale and nature of these changes to Battersea's riverfront that presented themselves to Whistler were recent and not uncontested. The historian Edward Brayley, writing in 1848, had noted "various large manufacturing establishments, chemical works, smelting furnaces &c. are extended along its banks; greatly to the annoyance of the market gardeners and florists, who complain grievously of the injury they sustain by the smoke and noxious vapours of the numerous steam engines now employed in this hitherto rural district".[8] Here, it is the older agricultural economy that was seen as the injured party, but the destructive effect on the river view from Chelsea was equally marked.

Brayley's account of this "hitherto rural" state is contemporary with the artist Turner's residence at Davis Place. He moved to this cottage with Sophia Booth in 1846, on the smaller-scale western continuation of Cheyne Walk (now no. 119). It had equally commanding views over the Thames, which he had praised to the artist John Martin (also living at Lindsey Row in the 1840s): "Here you see my study: sky and water. Are they not glorious? Here I have my lesson,

night and day".[9] Turner had added a balustrade with railings to the roof, to allow him to view Battersea and the Thames while working in safety. He described the prospect east to Westminster and the City as his "English view", while that south and west over Battersea was his "Dutch view".[10] Although Turner's Dutch landscape was already starting to be compromised by the 1840s, its essential framework remained: a church spire set among windmills and water meadows amid the polder-like flatness of the Battersea common fields (fig. 7). From across the length of them the Thames was still clearly visible. "So clear was the air across Battersea Fields", wrote George Grove recalling his childhood in the 1820s, "that we could see the coloured sails of the barges going up and down the river".[11]

Figure 7

Robert Westall, *Battersea Fields*, 1848, watercolour, 21.5 × 75 cm. Collection of the Museum of London (64.110). Digital image courtesy of Museum of London (all rights reserved).

This landscape's transformation into Whistler's successor vision of dark and steepling industrial structures would be sudden. Robin Spencer has found in Whistler's views of "forgotten or overlooked" London ("once stripped of its nocturnal fog and impressionist hatching") a visual record of the unconsidered eighteenth-century city.[12] The statement works well for those earlier etchings of the riverside found in the Thames Set, but when one comes to his views of Battersea, this is a misreading of the landscape. Whistler was struck by the visual possibilities of its jarring incongruity without necessarily realising just how recently its change had come about.
What Whistler wilfully incorporated, others were actively avoiding. The guidebooks and river maps produced from the 1830s for Thames steamboat trippers detailed the route upstream from London to the picturesque destinations of Kew, Richmond, and Hampton Court. En route, the boats passed through the increasingly industrial *longueurs* of Battersea, where travellers were advised to avert their gaze. In 1849, the scene was one of "stores, warehouses, soap manufactories, timber yards, vinegar works or the filthy and squalid hovels of eel fishers and flounder catchers".[13] A decade later the fishermen had gone but the works and those other "objects that blot the landscape" had expanded into "a succession of factories … with yards and quays and waggon-sheds, auxiliaries to the manufactories of gin, soap, starch, silk, paper, candles, beer and vitriol".[14]

Industry in Battersea

Many of the titles Whistler gave to his etchings and lithographs of the 1870s can be described as impressionistic. *Battersea Dawn*, *Battersea Morn*, *Nocturne*, and *Battersea Early Morning* may not possess the absolute placelessness of the titles given to the nocturne paintings, but they still suggest a purposeful imprecision. This sense of unlocatedness is heightened by the disorientation implicit in the etching process, whereby the outline etched onto the copper plate becomes reversed when printed onto the sheet. In some works this is easily understood because of the familiarity of the view (the transposition of Santa Maria della Salute and San Giorgio Maggiore

in the *Salute* nocturnes of Whistler's Venice Set, for example), but amid the vagaries of a less familiar South London, the reversal seems to augment a sense of topographic uncertainty.[15] It is unusual, arresting even, to confront *Price's Candle Factory*, an etched view probably captured from a boat in mid-stream, whose loose lines and dry-point detail have the same fleetingness of the other etchings of the 1860s and 1870s, but which is firmly anchored to place both by the precision of its title and by the accuracy of its observation (in spite of the mirroring that puts the Cremorne railway bridge on the right of the picture) (fig. 8). This is confirmed by comparison with the earliest known photograph of Price's works taken just after its construction in the mid-1850s (fig. 9). The distinctive triple curved roofs of the candle rooms are recognisable in both images.

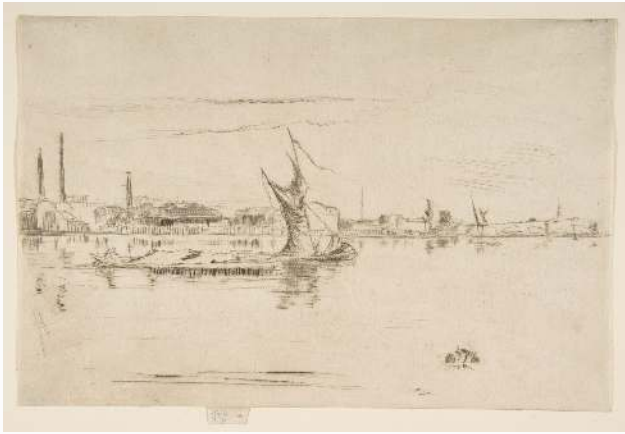

Figure 8

James McNeill Whistler, *Price's Candle Factory*, 1876–1877, drypoint etching, printed in black ink on dark ivory Japan, 14.8 × 22.4 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917 (17.3.71). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

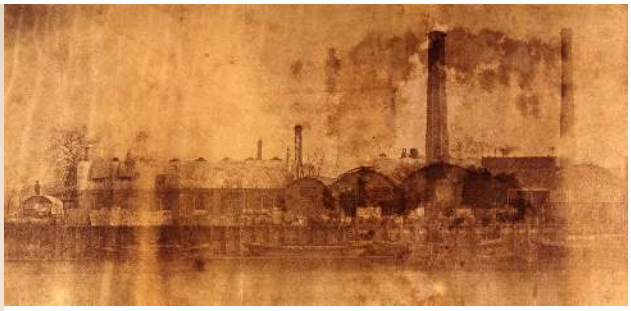

Figure 9

Unknown, *Price's Candle Works*, circa 1856, albumen print. Collection of Wandsworth Heritage Service. Digital image courtesy of Wandsworth Heritage Service (all rights reserved).

Certainly, such topographic accuracy cannot always be expected in Whistler's work, particularly with the nocturnes, and he provided his own playful caveat to that when reflecting on Burne-Jones's testimony at the Ruskin libel trial. Of the criticism that there was absolutely no detail or composition in his nocturnes, he observed,

> *There is a cunning condition of mind that requires to know. On the Stock Exchange this insures safe investment. In the painting trade this would induce certain picturemakers to cross the river at noon, in a boat, before negotiating a Nocturne, in order to make sure of detail on the bank, that honesty the purchaser might exact, and out of which he might have been tricked by the Night!*[16]

To the east of St. Mary's church and the Cremorne railway bridge stood the Morgan Crucible works. This was the industrial locus that came to dominate Whistler's depictions of Battersea (although the name never appears in any painting's title). Standing immediately across the Thames from Lindsey Row, it was the factory backdrop to *Variations*, the much reprised and highly aestheticised foreground to many of the nocturne paintings of the 1870s, and a regular feature in many of Whistler's etched and litho-printed works.

Price's and Morgan, the companies behind these factories, had both begun as small family-run concerns using chemical and technological innovation to repurpose colonial raw materials into novel products. Price's used saponification to turn Sri Lankan coconut oil and Nigerian palm oil into stearine candles that burnt longer and more brightly than tallow. Morgan mixed Sri Lankan and Madagascan graphite with clay to mould durable heat-refractive crucibles. Both firms nimbly absorbed and exploited fresh materials, newer technologies, and industrial by-products to dominate their respective markets and provide large-scale local employment. In switching to paraffin wax for candle manufacture in the 1890s, Price's expanded to create engine oil and petroleum as by-products; Morgan repurposed its graphite to the emerging electrical industry to make carbon brushes, resistors, and carbon rods for arc lighting. At the end of the twentieth century both firms relocated out of London and sold their Battersea sites for housing: Morgan in the 1980s and Price's in 2000, each departure leaving almost no trace.[17]
The Morgan Crucible works had come to Battersea in 1856. By 1862, a former porcelain works on the site had been rebuilt as a bespoke factory, which Whistler worked into the background of *Variations*. Morgan's works continued to expand further along the riverside, absorbing Brunel's sawmills, a vitriol works, a steamboat dockyard, May and Baker's chemical works, and a sugar factory. A prominent and ostentatious Italianate clock tower, known locally as "Ted Morgan's folly", was erected in 1872, and Whistler reprised its distinctive silhouette in many of his later paintings, where its lit tower often offers the single point of illumination within the penumbra of the nocturnes (fig. 10).

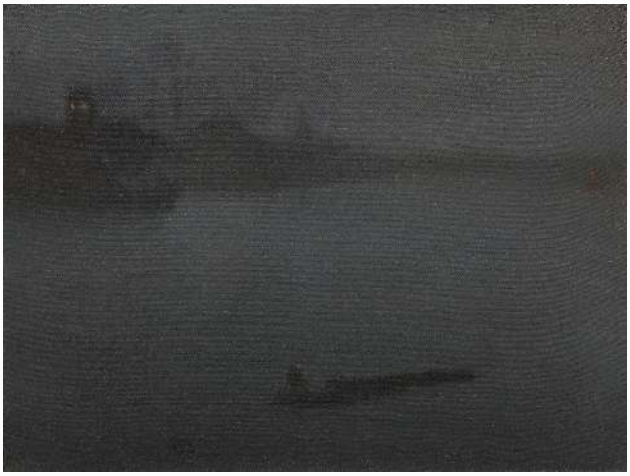

Figure 10

James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne in Blue and Silver*, 1872–1878, oil on canvas, 44.5 × 61 cm. Collection of the Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund (B1994.19). Digital image courtesy of Yale Centre for British Art (public domain).

By 1920, Morgan occupied eleven acres of river frontage, employed over four thousand workers, and was reputed to have the tallest factory chimney in southern England. During the war it set up "shadow" factories away from London, and after the 1956 Clean Air Act their polluting carbon brush manufacture was moved to Swansea. Morgan ceased manufacture at Battersea in 1971. It took fourteen years to redevelop the site; the initial proposal for office blocks was eventually replaced by the low-rise brick domesticity of the houses of Morgans Walk. It was the first of the big Battersea riverside factories to leave, and although the residential redevelopment was modest

in comparison with the height and density of subsequent schemes, it set the template for the industrial exodus from riverside Battersea as land values increased and the return on mere manufacture became financially unattractive.

Earlier Visions of South London

Just because Whistler's depiction of Battersea's factory-scape in *Variations* was startlingly novel, it did not mean that South London's riverside industry had never featured in British art. It appears as a motif in a number of socially realist paintings of the 1840s and 1850s, serving a quite different iconographic purpose. G.F. Watts's *Found Drowned* (circa 1850) is representative: it foregrounds the body of a drowned woman pulled from the Thames and framed by an arch of Waterloo Bridge, in which the silhouette of the Waterloo shot tower can be seen. The north bank of the Thames and the precarious public realm provided by its river bridges were well understood as spaces of last resort for the impoverished and for people contemplating suicide. The painting's title, *Found Drowned*, consciously echoes that of the regular column in *The Times*, which listed the names of Londoners who had died by suicide. In many instances, these were perceived as lone women seeking a way out of prostitution, poverty, or pregnancy. Their condition had been dramatised by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist* (1839) and *David Copperfield* (1849/50), and Thomas Hood achieved yet greater public awareness through his poem 'The Bridge of Sighs' (1844).

In *Oliver Twist*, Nancy, the partner of the criminal Bill Sikes, voices the desperate situation to Rose Maylie while standing at the foot of London Bridge: "Look before you lady. Look at the dark water. How many times do you read of such as I, who spring into the tide and leave no living thing to bewail them. It may be years hence, or it may be only months, but I shall come to that at last".[18] Similarly, David Copperfield overhears Martha Emmons contemplating suicide by the Thames at Millbank. Hablot Browne illustrated the scene: Martha looks from a low marshy bank next to Millbank prison across to the Lambeth waterfront, where "the clash and glare of sundry fiery Works upon the river-side, arose by night to disturb everything except the heavy and unbroken smoke that poured out of their chimneys" (fig. 11).[19] Dickens's description and Hablot Browne's etching both have an almost proto-nocturne-ish quality. Curiously, Whistler etched the same view, by day, as *Millbank* in the Thames Set, using the same angled mooring posts to frame the view across to Lambeth (fig. 12).

Figure 11

Hablot Knight Browne, *The River*, illustration in *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens, 1850, lithograph. Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).

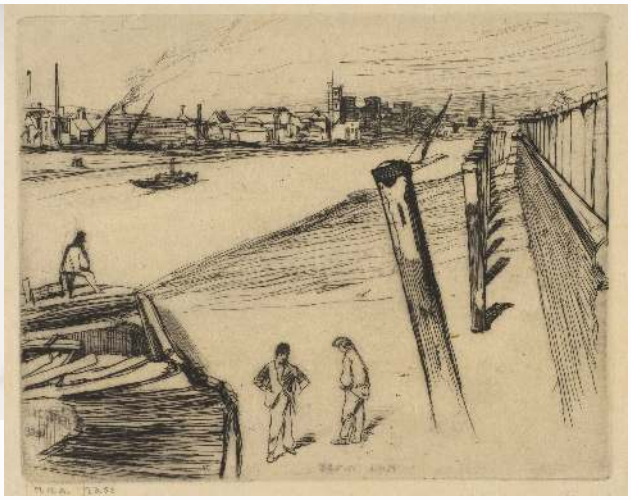

Figure 12

James McNeill Whistler, *Millbank*, 1861, etching and drypoint, printed in black ink on ivory laid Japan paper, 9.8 × 12.6 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917 (17.3.55). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

Augustus Egg's *Past and Present* triptych of 1856 sits firmly within this tradition. In the third frame, its precisely located "fallen" woman protagonist contemplates suicide by drowning from beneath the basement arches of the Adelphi (fig. 13). This was a fashionable terrace of houses built by the Adam brothers in 1770 on the north bank of the Thames below the Strand (and an early instance of the urban "riverside view").[20] These arches raised its structure above the peaks of the Thames tides and provided a well-known refuge for people experiencing homelessness. When Egg first exhibited the painting, the *Art Journal* described the Adelphi arches as "the lowest of all the profound deeps of human abandonment in this metropolis".[21] In the painting, the woman looks out through their frame across to a dark line of factory buildings and chimneys on the Lambeth riverfront between Westminster and Waterloo bridges. In Egg's depiction, these factories operate as a symbolic backdrop, suggestive of alienation and poverty, while also being precisely delineated structures—ones that could be found on a map or located in a business directory.

Figure 13

Augustus Egg, *Past and Present, No. 3*, 1858, oil on canvas, 63.5 × 76.2 cm. Collection of Tate (N03280). Digital image courtesy of Tate (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0).

In early 1896, Whistler nursed his dying wife, Trixie, at the Savoy Hotel—just one hundred metres east of the Adelphi. There, his sixth-floor hotel room gave an elevated view across the water to the same line of factories seen in Egg's painting. Whistler made multiple lithographs of the views, east and west to Waterloo and Westminster bridges, and a lithotint, *Thames*, that looked south to the same frontage that Egg had depicted through the Adelphi's arch (fig. 14). Katherine Lochnan, writing about these Savoy lithographs, observed that "like Mallarmé's poems, they are more suggestive than descriptive and have the quality of things remembered rather than things seen".[22] Perhaps we can be more specific about the nature of some of these memories, particularly in relation to another poignant lithograph from the series. *By the Balcony* shows Trixie lying on the couch in their hotel room (fig. 15). Behind her the balcony window gives an oblique glimpse over the same factories of South London. It provides a distant topographic echo of Egg's *Past and Present* while also seeming to suggest a ghostly, exhausted and un-costumed reprise of the figures first found posed on a riverside balcony in *Variations*.

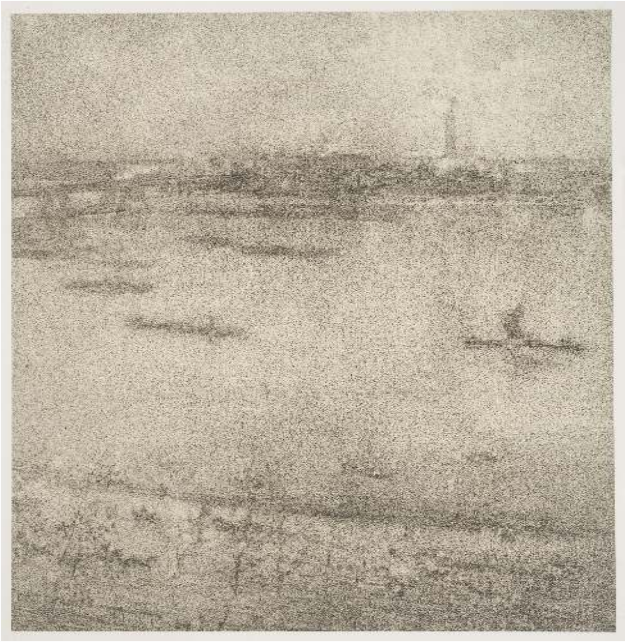

Figure 14

James McNeill Whistler, *The Thames*, 1896, lithotint, 39.1 × 27 cm. Collection of the Davis Museum at Wellesley College (1973.12). Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).

Figure 15

James McNeill Whistler, *By the Balcony*, 1896, lithograph, 21.7 × 14.2 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection (1946.21.363). Digital image courtesy of Smithsonian Institution (public domain).

"Faireyland": Transformations of Battersea

What had been common to those earlier artworks and pieces of social-realist writing was their Thames-side locations, where the riverbank marked the limits of existence, both as the place to which the desperate had been driven, and as the means of their self-destruction. But, over and above the individual psychodramas, London's river remained as a north–south divide, and in their final moments, all these women looked across the Thames to the alien indeterminacy of industrial South London.

Where Egg or Dickens had set women in front of factories to symbolise a failure of society or morality, in *Variations* Whistler set young women before a similarly industrial backdrop, though here grouped and costumed through the filter of Japonisme. In his "Ten O'clock Lecture" he sought to retrospectively conceptualise what he had been engaged in and to set out his position for a de-industrialised and amoral aesthetic definition of his art in the nocturnes, using the Battersea factory-scapes to make just this point. He spoke of the twilight hour,

> *When the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil—and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky—and the tall chimneys become campanile—and the warehouses are palaces in the night—and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and faireyland is before us.*[23]

In this statement, many rightly see Whistler stripping morality from his art and replacing it with the merely pictorial or compositional. Kathleen Pyne has described his "strategy of distancing and aestheticizing poverty" on behalf of potential middle-class patrons in order to arrive at "the completely veiled evasions of his semi-abstracted nocturnes of the early 1870s".[24] It is clear, too,

that Whistler, both by his own assessment and by that of his peers, was quite untroubled by the social and economic realities of his artistic subjects. Battersea's factories in his paintings had quite another function and, as Mortimer Menpes observed, he "had no socialist instincts … his only excuse for the masses was they were a blot of colour to be painted".[25]

Figure 16

Gordon Hales, *Whistlers Reach*, circa 1940–1950, oil on canvas, 50.8 × 59 cm. Collection of Watford Museum (2004.363). Digital image courtesy of Watord Museum (all rights reserved).

Whistler was the first artist to bring these brooding industrial landscapes into the Royal Academy and the salon as art objects. The profusion of his depictions of its industrial frontages created such a powerful sense of Battersea as a visual entity, at a specific moment in time, that by the twentieth century the river to the west of Battersea Bridge was known to writers, journalists, and other artists as "Whistler's Reach" (fig. 16). But while the name has endured, the buildings have not. The process of effacing the old industry at Battersea that commenced with the demolition and redevelopment of the Morgan site, and was especially active in the 1980s and 1990s, is now complete. A comprehensive slate-wiping of the old industrial monoculture has taken place, in which the factories have been replaced by an equally rarefied monoculture of exclusive residential riverside apartments. There is an intriguing parallel here between the erasure of the social and material realities of industrial Battersea that Whistler's "faireyland" nocturnes engaged in from the 1870s, and the erasures of the late twentieth century driven by redevelopment and gentrification. The remedial works carried out at Morgan in 1982 prior to rebuilding on its intensely polluted site required soil removal and replacement down to nearly eleven metres. Such total purgation is an effective metaphor for the scale and thoroughness of the regeneration that would follow. Consequently, a very different "faireyland is before us", one in which the draughty stretch between Battersea and Wandsworth bridges has been filled with gated and balconied apartment blocks. Only St. Mary's church and the Cremorne railway bridge remain as relics of an earlier sense of place—the fixed points which enable the viewer to align Whistler's views with those of the riverscape today (figs. 17–20).

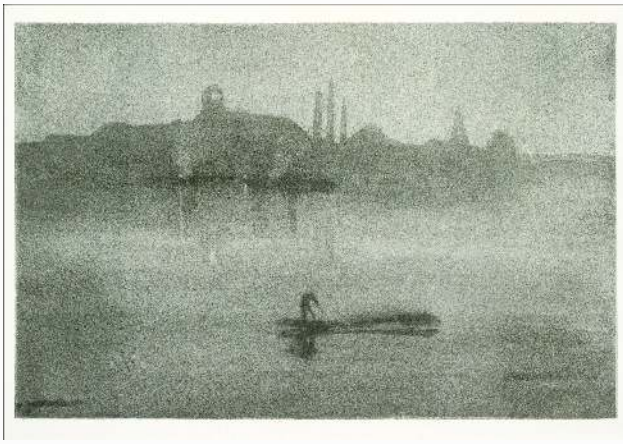

Figure 17

James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne: The Thames at Battersea (reversed)*, 1878, lithotint, 17.1 × 25.9 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917 (17.3.159). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

Figure 18

Jon Newman, *The Same View of the Riverscape*, 2021, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Jon Newman (all rights reserved).

Figure 19

James McNeill Whistler, *Price's Candle Factory (reversed)*, 1876–1877, drypoint etching, printed in black ink on dark ivory Japan paper, 14.8 × 22.4 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917 (17.3.71). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

Figure 20

Jon Newman, *The Same View of the Riverscape*, 2021, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Jon Newman (all rights reserved).

One public benefit from the redevelopment of Battersea's river frontage was the inception of the public right of way that would eventually become known as the Thames Path. One of its earliest sections was created with the development of the houses along Morgans Walk in 1984. The democratic access on both sides of the Thames and the unbroken views along "Whistler's Reach" that this now offers have also had the effect of concealing the limited nature of access to the Thames in the nineteenth century and the implicit privilege of Whistler's viewpoints. Unless

one lived on Cheyne Walk with windows or balconies giving onto the river, there were surprisingly few accessible viewpoints to it in the nineteenth century: Cremorne Gardens (the location of *The Falling Rocket* and *The Fire Wheel*), Battersea Bridge (the viewing platform for *Cremorne Lights*), and latterly the Chelsea Embankment. This helps explain why many of Whistler's works were sketched, etched, or first worked up from the stern of a hired boat. A further practical rather than visual explanation for the preponderance of views looking south to Battersea, rather than the reverse, would have been the difficulty of access to the private property of the fenced and walled wharves, mills, and manufactories on the Battersea shore.

If we find in the "Ten O'clock Lecture" a rhetoric for Whistler's aesthetic practices, then the *tabula rasa* language employed by developers to justify dismantling industrial Battersea—"an undistinguished and functionally obsolete industrial area"—and to obtain planning and zoning consent is the rhetoric of "tooth and claw laissez-faire urbanism".[26] The process of hyper-gentrification has now extended to the "Vauxhall, Nine Elms, Battersea opportunity area" east of Battersea Power Station.[27] Curiously, and surely unconsciously, the development brochures pepper their regeneration rhetoric with the language of the nocturnes. Embassy Gardens by Ballymore in Nine Elms is "a spectacular and radical transformation from inner city twilight zone to shining example of world class urban redevelopment. … Industrial activity has given way to a stunning array of districts, both new and reinvented. … What makes the Nine Elms opportunity so compelling is that it's virtually a blank canvas".[28] The emergence of campanili and palaces in Whistler's lecture, mutating Battersea into some twilit Italian Renaissance city state, conveyed how he believed his art was mediating the built reality, in a "spectacular and radical transformation" the equal of that promoted by developers today.

Bewilderingly, a secular and plutocratic version of Whistler's fantasy has come to pass. Adorning the apartment blocks that have replaced the tall chimneys, factory buildings, and warehouses of Morgan, Price's, and others, the serried balconies, once only found on a few of the grander houses on Cheyne Walk, are now commonplace. So, too, the privileged view that they offer, and that Whistler exercised from his balcony, is now a monetised attribute for every glassy riverside apartment building, wannabe-palazzo, new quarter, or landmark tower. The Battersea riverside at night, once pierced by the single beam of the lantern atop "Ted Morgan's Folly", is now lit up like a Christmas tree, illuminating its trajectory "from inner city twilight zone to shining example of world class urban redevelopment"."

About the author

Jon Newman is an archivist and writer who works in and writes about London. His recent publications include titles uncovering the courses and histories of some of South London's underground rivers and explorations of the local territories of writers and artists, including Whistler, William Blake, and John Ruskin. His most recent book, *Sunset Over Herne Hill: John Ruskin and South London* (Herne Hill Society and Backwater Books), was published in 2021.

Footnotes

1. Carlyle to his mother, 12 June 1834. *Letters of Thomas Carlyle, 1826–1836*, ed. C.E. Norton (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889), 412–413.
2. Letter to Sir William Hamilton, 8 July 1834. John Veitch, *Memoir of Sir William Hamilton* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1869), 127.

3. Wenceslaus Hollar's oblique aerial panoramas of London and Westminster, taken from church towers and windmills in Lambeth and Southwark and published between the 1640s and the 1670s, are arguably some of the earliest examples of what by the early nineteenth century had become an established direction of view. A later instance can be seen in Turner's *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* (1834).
4. These Japanese flower and leaf motifs, first encountered in *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green*, continue to intrude at the bottom of the frames of some of the nocturnes of the early 1870s, for example *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* (1871–1872) and *Nocturne in Blue and Silver: Cremorne Lights* (1872).
5. Aileen Tsui, "Whistler's *La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine*: Painting Re-Oriented", *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 2010): 41.
6. X-rays of *Variations* "show numerous alterations: for instance, a ship's masts may have been visible to the left of the standing woman". Margaret Macdonald and Patricia de Montfort, *An American in London: Whistler and the Thames* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2014), 89.
7. Whistler to Stephen Richards, 12 June 1892, cited in "Battersea Reach", *The Paintings of James McNeil Whistler. A Catalogue Raisonné* https://www.whistlerpaintings.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/display/?mid=y045&xml=tec.
8. Edward Brayley, *A Topographical History of Surrey*, Vol. 5 (London: G. Willis, 1850).
9. S.M. Ellis, *Mainly Victorian* (London: Hutchinson, 1924), 79.
10. Sophia Booth to J.R. Archer, cited in James Hamilton, *Turner, A Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997).
11. Charles L. Graves, *Life and Letters of Sir George Grove* (London: Macmillan, 1903), 5.
12. Robin Spencer, "The Aesthetics of Change: London as Seen by James McNeill Whistler", in *The Image of London* (London, Trefoil Publications, 1987), exhibition catalogue, 49.
13. John Fisher Murray, *A Picturesque Tour of the River Thames* (London: H.G. Bohn, 1849), 20.
14. Mr. and Mrs. S.C. Hall, *The Book of the Thames from its Rise to its Fall* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue, and Co., 1859), 395.
15. John Siewert cites a different instance of such topographical imprecision: when *Nocturne in Grey and Silver* (1873–1875), depicting the Morgan Crucible works seen from Chelsea, was hung at an exhibition in Pittsburgh in 1897, it was mis-titled *Westminster Palace in Fog*. John Siewert, "Art, Music, and an Aesthetics of Place in Whistler's Nocturne Paintings", in *Turner Whistler Monet: Impressionist Visions* (London: Tate, 2004), exhibition catalogue, 157.
16. Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London: William Heinemann, 1890), 15.
17. Jon Newman, *Battersea's Global Reach, the Story of Price's Candles* (London: History and Social Action Publications, 2009).
18. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Richard Bentley, 1838), 40.
19. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1850), 47.
20. John Summerson, *Georgian London* (London: Pleiades, 1947), 122.
21. Christopher Wood, *Victorian Painting* (Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1999), 53.
22. Katherine Lochnan, "Turner, Whistler and Monet: An Artistic Dialogue", in *Turner Whistler Monet: Impressionist Visions* (London: Tate, 2004), exhibition catalogue, 33.
23. *Mr. Whistler's "Ten O'clock"* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1888).
24. Kathleen Pyne, "Whistler and the Politics of the Urban Picturesque", *American Art* 8, no. 3/4 (Summer–Autumn 1994): 60–77.
25. Mortimer Menpes, *Whistler as I Knew Him* (London: A & C Black, 1904), 49.

26. Monte Vetro development proposal, 1998. *Monte Vetro Luxury Living in London*, https://montevetro.org.uk/history.php; Deyan Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 119.
27. The Vauxhall, Nine Elms, Battersea Opportunity Area was created to support the delivery of "a high density mixed use development" of 16,000 new homes, 20,000–25,000 jobs … and "significant public realm improvements and substantial social infrastructure". Vauxhall Nine Elms Battersea Opportunity Area Planning Framework, GLA, March 2012.
28. Embassy Gardens Host Brochure (Ecoworld and Ballymore, [2019]), https://ecoworld.my/ecoworldsg/assets/brochures/Embassy%20Gardens%20Host%20Brochure.pdf.

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