

1 Linda Merrill, *A Pot of Paint: Aesthetics on Trial in Whistler v. Ruskin* (Washington 1992), p.173.

2 *The Times*, 1 May 1821.

3 John White, *Art's Treasury of Rarities and Curious Inventions* (London, 1710), p.34.

4 Leonardo da Vinci, 'How to paint a night-piece' in *Treatise on Painting* (new edition, London 1796), p.52.

Towards the end of his famous trial for being rude about Whistler's night paintings in 1878, John Ruskin called Sir Edward Burne-Jones as an expert witness. 'I have never seen any picture of night which has been successful', asserted the expert, 'and this (Whistler's *Nocturne in Blue and Gold*) is only one of a thousand failures which artists have made in their efforts at painting night'.¹ A reviewer in *The Times* a half century earlier had expressed similar doubts. 'We never yet saw the representation of a moonlight scene which pleased us', he noted. 'There is always something wanting to produce that sort of feeling which the scene itself inspires. It is not alone the light of the moon which creates this charm; it is the moon beam dancing upon the still bosom of the lake; it is the fanning of the evening breeze, the fall of a leaf, the rippling of a wave or the bay of a distant watch-dog that alone can give value to the solemn silence of the surrounding scene. If there is one effect of nature more than another which it is out of the power of the pencil adequately to express, it is the charm of moonlight'.²

Why have intimations of failure dogged the efforts of so many British night painters over the last two hundred years?

Given the restrictive advice doled out for much of the eighteenth century, the determination shown by some landscape artists to persevere with night scenes, 'in case such a piece be required' as one manual put it,³ comes as something of a surprise. If the lowly academic status conferred upon even day-lit landscapes was not off-putting enough, the 'rules' established for night painting by Leonardo da Vinci some 300 years earlier still hung around the subject like a deadweight. First, there was the matter of representing darkness through a medium that generally luxuriated in rich pigment. In Leonardo's view, there was little point in painting a night scene without the added contrivance of a large fire to provide light, and even then, objects placed at a distance from it would be indiscernible and 'only tinged with the obscurity of the night'.⁴ This advice alone was partly responsible for a Georgian welter of moonlight views featuring unexplained cottage blazes and hyperactive volcanoes. Those that chose to dispense with fires generally followed Rubens by bathing the landscape in buckets of moonshine, but this only invited criticism that their nights were not dark enough.

5 John White, *Art's Treasury of Rarities and Curious Inventions* (London, 1710), p.34.

6 James Roberts, *Introductory Lessons, with familiar examples in landscape* (London, 1800), pp.27-9.

7 *Manchester Times*, 19 September 1829.

8 *Manchester Times*, 19 September 1829.

9 Col Maurice H Grant, *A Chronology of Old English Landscape Painters* (London, 1926), pp.306-7, and quoted in Janette Kerr, *Representation and Indeterminacy: a Study of Night in Painting* (University of the West of England PhD, 2005). I am grateful to Janette for this reference.

Illumination was important because, for connoisseurs at least, the principle objective of viewing a night-piece was to enter a symbolic world in which complimentary states of reverie, solitude, retirement and reflection went head to head with intimations of mortality. It was not to be entertained by an accurately observed nocturnal illusion in other words, but to be intellectually provoked. This required an artist to occupy the canvas with 'appropriate' staffage and to ensure it was adequately lit. Approved accoutrements might include astronomers with telescopes, 'an owl flying in the air... or a wolf worrying of sheep and the like, these being natural to such pieces'.⁵ The moon, thought James Roberts, ideally crossed by diaphanous clouds to smudge its outline and prevent its looking like 'a shilling nailed to a counter', might be shown to best advantage if 'partly seen through the broken gothic window of a tower', with a lake below to provide further reflected light. Roberts understandably saw no need for studies from nature to furnish such effects and so advised artists to confine their efforts to the studio.⁶

This sort of advice was clearly taken to heart by several members of the moonlight-painting Pether family, whose tranquil, well-lit and blue-tinged night-pieces earned them recognition between 1790 and 1860 and helped to define an English sub-genre. Henry Pether's *Mill Weir by Moonlight*, included here, characteristically makes a metaphor of its own stillness; its rural church tower and water-wheel suggesting continuity and tradition as a counterpoint to change, movement or modernity. The fortunes of the Pethers declined as naturalism and plein aire sketching rose in popularity during the first half of the nineteenth century however. Their buildings and trees were recorded so meticulously, it was objected, that 'if nature furnished the originals, they must have been sketched in broad daylight and the moonlight tints supplied by the artist afterwards. We never happened to observe objects at night so exceedingly well detailed'.⁷

Lighting conventions tended towards the irrational and unscientific and none more so than the back-grounding of the sky with a bright full moon. If painters of over-lit scenes had only taken the trouble to make a few observational drawings, it was pointed out, they would have noticed that although a landscape lit by a full moon behind the viewer might conceivably appear bright, a moon in view to the front would not illuminate the scene but, on the contrary, throw most objects into mysterious silhouette.⁸ Charles Lees's *Bait Gatherers* (1858), applies this rule rigidly to its foreground figures if rather less so to distant shipping, while James Giles's *Weird Wife* (1830) counters the difficulty by lighting the scene brightly from an undisclosed source behind the viewer. In Maurice Grant's opinion, artists over-lit their landscapes because moonlight was simply easier to paint than shadow. The more skilled business of representing 'darks so deep with life, so tangled, shifting and whispering', was invariably unexplored but was probably, in any case, 'unpaintable'.⁹

¹⁰ *The Examiner*, 2 March 1828; *Caledonian Mercury*, 26 March 1855.

¹¹ *Liverpool Mercury* 16 October, 1846.

¹² *The Examiner*, 16 May 1819; *Caledonian Mercury*, 23 March 1827.

¹³ *Caledonian Mercury* 14 March 1840, and for Crome, 13 February 1841. For Millais, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 May 1871.

¹⁴ *The Times*, 2 May 1863.

¹⁵ *The Examiner*, 6 March, 22 May 1825.

Landscape artists were not the only painters criticised for their clarity. Public enthusiasm for James Drummond's dramatic history painting, *The Porteous Mob* (1855), was tempered by irritation at 'the chronological incongruity of painting a night scene with the clearness and minuteness of daylight'.¹⁰ Drummond would no doubt have objected that his *Porteous*, no less than two of the paintings included here – Paton's *Oberon and Titania* (1846) and Mackie's *La Danse du Village* (1914) – was a crowd scene whose meaning lay not in naturalism but in narrative. Paton and Mackie's paintings both rejoice in light and rather than darkness, but night remains essential to their conception because it permits light of a hue that cannot be found by day; the one ethereal, the other artificial. Mackie's rustics, cosseted from the darkness beyond, are made a tighter community by the warm lamplight, while Paton's pallid fairies glow with a radiance that seems to come from within. 'It is the imaginative tone of light thrown over the whole subject', enthused a reviewer; 'It is neither a natural nor an artificial light of this world – it is the light of a dream'.¹¹

Painters seeking more naturalistic effects had also to be on their guard against the wilful misuse of colour. 'In moonlight, all objects on land are completely neutralised – they have no colour but are merely chiaroscuro', advised the Examiner. In fact, the only objects in which any colour should be admitted at all were those to be placed directly beneath the moon. The consequent 'monotony of tone', whilst necessary, was the very reason so many moonlight paintings were 'comparatively ineffective'.¹² Blue was certainly the most commonly used colour, but critics (and purchasers) frequently found the results unapproachable. 'The difficulty lies in preserving the uniform tone apparently thrown over the earth and at the same time to retain a sufficient quantity of warm colour to prevent the picture from looking cold and slaty', wrote a reviewer in 1840. Some painters, most notably John Crome, experimented with darker brown and yellow tones to construct nights that were 'rich and warm in colour'. But although Crome's readiness to grapple with 'shadowy uncertainty' was welcomed, the palette remained a stumbling block and one critic was left to conclude that 'no-one but Millais has ever really succeeded in painting night the right colour'.¹³ This was probably a reference to the painter's *Eve of St Agnes* (1863), in which moonlight hues were generally considered to have been reproduced with 'wonderful truth and skill'.¹⁴

As if it wasn't enough to be exercised over problems of light and colour, moonlight painters had also to be careful about purpose. Naturalism may have freed them from the more obvious iconographic compromises enforced by the symbolism of owls, wolves and telescopes, but their work was nevertheless expected to conform to an essentially conservative aesthetic. In 1825 for example, the ever-watchful Examiner was demanding canvasses to evoke 'the spirit of philosophic reflection and of calm and delicious fancies', and art that was faithful to 'the placid feeling raised by the undisturbed tranquillity of moonlight... the meditative calm of evening and the due solemnity of night'.¹⁵

¹⁶ *The Times*, 23 April 1866.

¹⁷ *The Examiner* 11 May 1878.

¹⁸ Merrill, *A Pot of Paint*, p.157.

¹⁹ *Liverpool Mercury*,
1 December 1864.

Excessive mark-making was discouraged lest it interfere with the 'sublimity of solemn calm' essential to the subject.¹⁶ Despite Burne-Jones' cynicism, Whistler's quieter blue, silver and grey nocturnes followed such dictums closely enough and were well received by the Examiner some fifty years later; once its reviewer had come to terms with their apparent emptiness. This first required 'an admission that pictures may be painted in some other light than that of the broad and open day, and that the painter may legitimately seek to represent objects as they appear in dim twilight or in moonlight'. The resulting murky ill-definition of the surface prompted new ways of seeing. 'It is perhaps the dimness of Mr Whistler's pictures that tempts people to go so close to them as to destroy the illusion', pondered the paper. The trick was to stand well back; only then would the pictures 'give to weary eyes some of that relief and refreshment which they often experience from looking at the reality'.¹⁷

Whistler's fraught relationship with public opinion should be read within the context of a long legacy of criticism. After all, approval for moonlight painting, pursued against such an historical encumbrance of restrictive rules, had become almost as unattainable as the Grail. The Attorney General's assertion at Ruskin's trial that 200 guineas was a 'stiffish price... for a picture of this kind',¹⁸ only emphasised the low market value of a disaster-prone genre and its marginalisation as an exercise in sentiment, tone and shadow. The silver and blue nocturnes somewhat surprisingly enjoyed by the Examiner may have been easier on the eye than the explosions of black and gold that so irritated Ruskin, but the latter painting was probably the nearest any artist had yet come to painting the 'shadowy uncertainty' so sought after by advocates of naturalism. If a qualified (and by no means universal) acceptance of Whistler's quieter blue paintings was a breakthrough of sorts, it also strengthened traditional associations between moonlit landscapes and contemplative moods. His borrowing from the sympathetic musical language of the nocturne, while opening the door to abstraction, may be said simultaneously to have discouraged other qualities of expression and consigned a new generation of night painters to bridge-building between the beautiful and the sublime.

Yet if an uneasy relationship with critical judgement had become intrinsic to the genre by the close of the nineteenth century, artists who courted approval could at least bask in the mystery of their own genius if they stumbled upon success. 'It is a wonder to many how so wonderful a picture could ever have been made at night', marvelled an awestruck reviewer as he stood before a watercolour of the industrial Midlands in 1864. 'How has the painter... painted that picture at night?'¹⁹

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