

Monet, Whistler, and the Painting of Modern Life

Honolulu Museum of Art

The Honolulu Museum of Art is planning *Monet, Whistler, and the Painting of Modern Life* for display at the museum in 2018. Organized by Theresa Papanikolas, the museum's curator of European and American art, this will be the first exhibition to consider how two of the nineteenth century's most significant and influential artists pioneered modernist strategies in their views of the River Thames.

When James McNeill Whistler and Claude Monet elected to paint the Thames and the bridges that spanned it, London itself had earned renown as the world's definitive modern metropolis, rivaled only by Paris in its vast cultural offerings, vigorous economy, and ultra-courante sophistication. London's notoriously smoggy atmosphere and sprawling industrial landscape proved inspirational to artists and writers seeking to capture the energy of the urban environment and chronicle its social realities, and Whistler and Monet in particular were captivated by the subtle variances and ever-changing effects of the city's atmosphere on its central waterway. *Monet, Whistler, and the Painting of Modern Life* will explore how first Whistler and later Monet created rich and complex series of Thames pictures that both operate within the long tradition of views of the British capital, and, more importantly, push the limits of the medium and practice of painting.

The exhibition will begin with a comprehensive selection of Whistler's Thames scenes to demonstrate how the artist's deep connection with the city of London and his simultaneous immersion in avant-garde developments abroad positioned him well to build upon existing theories of art for art's sake and, ultimately, undertake work liberated from manifest external associations. Etchings from his early and career-making Thames Set will show that his progress originated in his unconventional and largely impartial interest in the river's least picturesque industrial spaces and the working class that inhabited them, and it will introduce his radically non-hierarchical approach to style, format, subject matter, and modes of presentation. A select group of the artist's *Nocturnes* from the 1860s and 1870s will reveal how his fascination with the Thames evolved from an abiding interest in life alongside it to a fascination with the thick fog that engulfed it at dusk, resulting in a series of near-abstractions that suggest and evoke rather than record and describe, and thereby emerge as highly personal meditations rather than as echoes of established narratives and aesthetic formulae.

The exhibition will continue with Monet's views of Charing Cross Bridge, Waterloo Bridge, and the Houses of Parliament to show how the French Impressionist master built on Whistler's approach to the Thames to crystalize his own interest in capturing and interpreting the river's subtly shifting optical effects. Fascinated—perhaps even more so than Whistler—with how London's murky atmosphere constantly and often imperceptibly altered the appearance of the river and the urban landscape that surrounded it, he developed a method of working on several canvases at the site simultaneously, completing the works from memory in his Giverny studio. The result is a series of highly expressive tableaux whose identity of place is obscured and

reduced to formal continuities—the hazy outlines of buildings and bridges, the suggestion of bodies of water—and whose palette is liberated beyond natural appearances.

Monet, Whistler, and the Painting of Modern Life will build on the recent exhibitions, *Turner, Whistler, Monet* (2007, Art Gallery of Ontario) and *An American in London: Whistler and the Thames* (2013, Addison Gallery of American Art), to show how modern London became a site for the development of the two artists' modernist schema, from their mutual interests in seriality as a solution to the ephemerality of perception, in the limitations of empirical representation, and in the notion of finish, to their shared appreciation for the importance of memory and personal interpretation. The exhibition will also include a selection of works by Katsushika Hokusai, Utagawa Hiroshige, and other *ukiyo-e* masters, which will show how the two artists' understanding of Japanese woodblock prints was a stimulus for their spatial and compositional experimentation.

The exhibition is currently being planned for presentation at the Honolulu Museum of Art and an international tour. It will be accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue authored by Dr. Papanikolas, with essays by scholars and experts in the field.