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TurnerWhistlerMonet: More than a Show of Hands, Exhibition conceived by the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, and organized jointly by the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Réunion des musées nationaux and Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and Tate Britain, London

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TurnerWhistlerMonet: More than a Show of Hands
Exhibition conceived by the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, and organized jointly by the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Réunion des musées nationaux and Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and Tate Britain, London.

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Itinerary: Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 12 June–12 September, 2004; Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, 12 October 2004–17 January 2005; Tate Britain, London, 10 February–15 May 2005.

Catalogue: *TurnerWhistlerMonet: Impressionist Visions*, by Katharine Lochnan with contributions by Luce Abélès, John House, Sylvie Patin, Jonathan Ribner, John Siewert, Sarah Taft, and Ian Warrell (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario in association with Tate Publishing, 2004).

It would be difficult to name three painters more attuned to urban resonances than W. J. M. Turner, James McNeill Whistler, and Claude Monet. Entranced by London and Venice, which they all visited or inhabited, each reimagined those fulgent, flawed, and fabulous nineteenth-century cities the way lovers reimagine the objects of their passion, by casting veils of new beauty over both the best and the worst of their features. This show is no place to find meticulous truths and cartographic clarities; rather, it offers a profound realism of the eye, filtered through the commitment of the heart. It glories in pivotal works such as Turner's "The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, 16th October" of 1834 where the classic urban news story of a spectacular fire is rendered through the hot breath of art; Whistler's notoriously impudent "Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket" of 1875, which gilds the hooker's walk of Cremorne Gardens; and Monet's "Impression, Sunrise" of 1872–1873 (shown in Paris only), the quavering view of Le Havre that gave the infant Impressionist movement its improvised name.

That it very evidently must have taken years to select the comparative works and assemble this show, and its excellence, makes any hesitation over its virtues seem ungrateful. Nonetheless, after the last breathtaking view is absorbed, and the catalogue, with all its fine scholarly contributions (accompanied by reproductions that must inevitably pale in comparison to the originals) is read, the realization of a disappointment grows. After such massive efforts to gather these works, and to bring together these scholars, the sweep of what these three artists seen together can tell us about the 19th century—its art, its cities, its communications, its values, its markets—is barely touched upon. In fact, except for a bow to the history of smog in London (which is the fascinating contextualizing chapter, not expanded for the admittedly just as polluted Seine or Venice), almost all the rest of the text (and historical context) is devoted to supporting a classic one-directional history of art as style altered by influence: Turner influenced Whistler and Monet's style, Whistler influenced Monet's style . . . and here is the proof in all these details of where they each were when, and when they each saw what of each other's work.

These scholars spend their time pinning down admirably exact locations when these artists wanted to obscure just that in suggestiveness and atmosphere and frequently generalized titles. The recording of ever more elaborate detail is among the least involving contextualizations of art historians, of use largely to each other and connoisseurs, not general viewers or readers. These paintings are poems meant to take away your breath, to give you vertigo, to tip your balance, to make you cry, and art historians mention this only in language that situates any emotion in the past and so resolutely avoids such reactions today. James Elkins has said this is because art historians desire a scholarly objectivity, "a bloodless pursuit . . . to see how it is put together,"[1] to give themselves credibility. But how far does such objectivity actually lead us away from the truth? For example, the role of cities as pathetic fallacy for the artist is easy to discern. Turner often enough accompanied his romantic views with melancholic lines of poetry, including from his own poem "The Fallacies of Hope." Whistler's last prints of the Thames were created from the room at the top of the Savoy Hotel where he stayed by the side of his beloved wife as she slowly died of cancer; this exhibition has some of these views, including the most brilliant and final one, as he never returned to that theme after her death. Can they really to be seen without the tears through which he made them?

Ironically, given the fine comb of detail offered for the paintings, there is no sense of what the agenda might have been of the contemporary photographs reproduced in the catalogue for comparison, such as those by Henry W. Taunt and J. Hedderly. It is as though these often industrial photos and city views, intended for "context," had no context themselves, were value-free and could be understood without explanation. There is no indication of whether such photographs of the time might have influenced Whistler or Monet either in method (photos were frequently marketed in series, for example) or in subject, or stylistically in reaction against such views. These three art-

John Turner, The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons, 16 October 1834 (or 1835). Oil on canvas, 92.1 x 123.2 cm. The John Howard McFadden Colection, 1928.

ists redefined the "real," moving it from sharp clarity and focus towards atmosphere and perception, including interpretive feeling and a connection with "greater spiritual truths." They shifted *the ground on which the real stood*; *was this at all a riposte to* photography or a recognition of it? What did these three artists think of photography? We know Turner wanted no part of it for reproducing his works; Whistler became an idol of art photographers; and Monet? The Impressionists are often said to be heavily indebted to photographic seeing.

There is little help in answering such questions in the catalogue of this show: very little about the public and professional reception of Turner's, Whistler's, and Monet's works (except a little whiff of polite sneering that their late styles were so unappreciated in their day); very little about how they marketed themselves (except for some blithely underdeveloped comments about Turner's reliance and indelible impact on topographical book illustration later in life); and very little about where they *differed. What might it mean, for example, that both Turner and* Whistler virtually recast the way reproductive media defined their own standards because of their obsessive relationships to engraving, etching, and lithography, while Monet had little interest in anything but oil painting (yet he equally intensively elaborated a method of working on multiple canvases that needed, in turn, to be jointly seen to make his point about the changes wrought by light and weather)? There is next to nothing at all about what such working methods, or any other aspect of their work, might have meant, or might still mean, for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

On that last point, here's another question: all three artists developed late styles that were close to abstraction and were misunderstood. But perhaps it is not just that they anticipated abstraction that makes them important for the twentieth century. Is it not also because they lived through being highly criticized, if not reviled, yet persisted in positioning themselves as artists? By their actions (and Whistler by his copious words and his precedent-setting lawsuit to retrieve his reputation and the "Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket" from Ruskin's bilious attack), they won the point that art is what the artist says it is, not the client or the critic. By the end of the nineteenth century, they had helped define the avant garde artist—in Donald Kuspit's view, a person of unique insight, producing work ultimately of therapeutic value for what ails the spirit in the rest of us[2]—and most importantly, they had helped to clear a space where it was possible, even desirable, to combat previous canonical art. By becoming well-known and revered as great and misunderstood confrontational artists, they helped create the idea with the public, for good or ill, that art evolves, and previous art was not necessarily to be copied but surpassed. Their precedent, repeated with others, provided a *sine qua non* for later avant garde artists, even Dada artists; they could seek to question or destroy "art" and still consider themselves artists and believe they could be vindicated. After all, before Turner, those not accredited by the Academy—which was effectively the heir of the guilds where aspiring artists needed to be apprenticed and accepted in order to be able to practise—could hardly even call themselves artists. After Monet, artists as often wanted to be reviled, to shock; it meant they could align with such heroes of art.

And later avant garde artists recognized that, like Turner, Whistler, and Monet, they could effect a social or spiritual change, a change in the standards and perception of the intrinsically valuable or beautiful, one viewer at a time, by choosing unconventional means and unapproved, modern subjects (not just styles) which carried a freight of meaning and immediacy. Art became more relevant, even as it became more strange. Surely this effect, winding its way through these three artists, is so profound and so important still today, that not to mention it, or even perhaps to see it, in the pursuit of dates and style variants, is a real disappointment. Yet the exhibition itself stands as a swelling testament to the audacious way these three helped to make the earth move not just beneath art, but beneath us all.

Notes

1. James Elkins, *Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 208.
2. Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

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