



It's Sunset Somewhere

BY Stephen Harby



Thames After Homer
(London)
graphite and watercolor on
paper, 6½x4¼

The representation of a nighttime scene, traditionally referred to as a *nocturne*, presents a fascinating and exciting challenge when the chosen medium is watercolor. This medium, which is all about light and transparency, would seem to be counter to the demands of representing a scene layered with dark tones and only glimmers of light, whether from the moon or the artificial illumination of lamps or candles.

The term, “nocturne” seems to have originated with the efforts of James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) in painting fireworks and scenes at dusk along the River Thames in the 1870s (see *Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge*, opposite). The results hardly met with universal acclaim, and the great art critic John Ruskin was so condemning that Whistler sued him in court—and won! Much earlier, the 17th-century Italian artist Caravaggio had pioneered the representation of dark scenes dramatically lit by a bright source of light, such as a candle. This came to be called *chiaroscuro*, literally, “clear/obscure” or “light/dark” (see *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, opposite).

I’ve painted many nocturnes featuring landmarks around the world, but my efforts began with the subject of the Thames; I set out to copy a watercolor by another great master, Winslow Homer (1836–1910). He painted *The Houses of Parliament* (bottom right) in 1881, just a few years after Whistler had painted his nocturnes, which, no doubt, influenced Homer’s work. Copying the work of an admired master is a great way to learn. In doing so, one dissects and reverse engineers the process the original artist used. In this case, I learned that in order to achieve the overall darkness of tone, it’s necessary to apply many successive layers of wash until the desired density and darkness is achieved. In *Thames After Homer* (opposite), the moonlight reflecting across the water and the sparkling lights from within the Houses of Parliament are a base color of cadmium yellow that had been reserved from an initial wash across the whole sheet to create a warm glow.

Reserving highlights is a key concept in watercolor since they are achieved only by preserving areas of the white paper, allowing its luminosity to shine through the obscurity.

Pantheon Door (Rome)
graphite and watercolor
on paper, 24x16



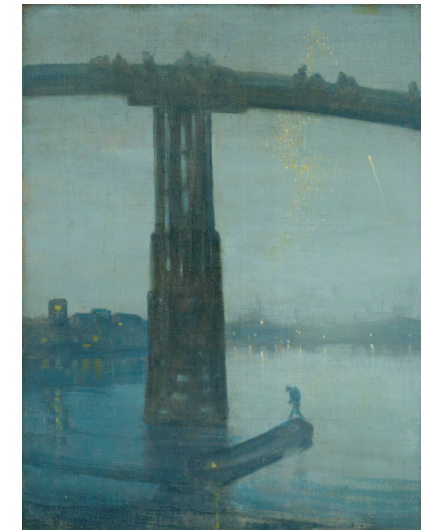
ALL ARTWORK IS BY STEPHEN HARBY UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED.

THEN THERE WAS DARK

The appeal of nocturnes is a fairly recent development for artists, who are so dependent on light. Caravaggio, Whistler and Homer helped to break through the resistance to painting the darker side of things.



Caravaggio, with his stark light-and-dark contrasts, as seen in **The Calling of Saint Matthew** (oil on canvas; 11x10½), opened the eyes of 17th-century artists to the appeal of dramatic darks.



James Abbott McNeill Whistler might be said to have “invented” the nocturne. Works such as **Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge** (ca 1872–75; oil on canvas; 26½x19¼) met with some stiff opposition from critics.



Despite early naysayers, the nocturne drew favorable attention from some artists. Winslow Homer painted **The Houses of Parliament** (watercolor on paper, 12¼x19¼) in 1881.



LEFT
Michigan Avenue at Dusk, sketch study
graphite and watercolor
on paper, 22x17

BELOW
Michigan Avenue at Dusk, Chicago
graphite and watercolor
on paper, 24x18

I loosely sketched Michigan Avenue in situ to capture the atmosphere. When I later created a studio piece of the scene, I started with a detailed underdrawing.



Santa Barbara Mission (California)
graphite and
watercolor on paper,
13½x10½

One way to accomplish this in watercolor is to apply resist—such as masking fluid, tape or candle wax—prior to bringing in the dark tones. Homer certainly used at least some of those methods in his painting, and I did as well. With oil, acrylic or other opaque media this is not an issue because these highlights can be added later, as Whistler, who was working in oil, was able to do.

Another challenge to painting the night is that when working outdoors after the sun has gone down, the considerable moisture in the air means the paper remains in a state of constant dampness. It is for this reason that most nocturnes are studio works based on quicker sketches done *in situ* (on site). 🍷

Stephen Harby is an architect, watercolorist, faculty member of the Yale School of Architecture and founder of the Stephen Harby Invitational, which organizes travel opportunities for small groups.