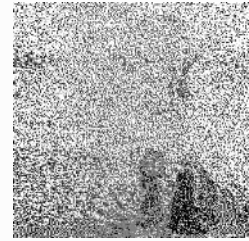


Women in Whistler's Images of Chelsea and the Thames

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Abstract

Women are an active, if often low-key, presence in Whistler's Thames images, from ghostly figures of models and fashionable strolling women to the small traders who populated the streets near his home in Chelsea. Women shopped for their families; they worked outside the home as servants, nursemaids, shop assistants, and in family trades. They travelled along the river daily and criss-crossed its banks in a changing cityscape in which new spaces for leisure were being opened up. They sought a living in a night-time world of entertainment venues like Vauxhall Gardens and Cremorne that could lead to exploitation, disease, and an early grave. This world beyond Whistler's Chelsea homes, overseen during the 1860s by his model and partner, Joanna Hiffernan (and by his mother, Anna Whistler for a time), is often overlooked. Moreover, Whistler's suggestion that the presence of tiny, anonymised female figures in works like *Variations in Pink and Grey: Chelsea and Cremorne Gardens, No. 2* was merely about colour and establishing a balance of decorative elements invites fresh analysis. This essay takes as its starting point women's presences in Whistler's riverside home and family circle before venturing outdoors to explore the world they inhabited along the Thames at Chelsea. It considers such questions as: how did women experience the contemporary redevelopment of the river? How did they occupy its adjacent streets and public spaces? Drawing upon examples of Whistler's Thames subjects from the 1870s and the work of chroniclers of social change like Chelsea photographer James Hedderly (1815–1885), it examines the world of women along the river in the context of visual, literary, and socio-economic discourses of the period. It seeks to give voice to their presence beneath the quiet surface of Whistler's images and how, as “involuntary neighbours”, they made sense of the watery, arterial world of London's celebrated river.

Introduction

Women are an active, if usually low-key, presence in Whistler's representations of Chelsea and the Thames, placed within the composition as colour notes and visual points of interest. They feature not only in the role of professional studio model (as in early studies such as *The Balcony* that use the Thames as a backdrop), but also in Whistler's nocturnal subjects painted in the 1870s. The women in Whistler's paintings offer us tantalising glimpses of riverside life and

women going about their business in the public spaces of the late nineteenth-century city: strolling with their children along the sweeping new Chelsea Embankment, criss-crossing its bridges, shopping in its adjacent suburban streets, and working in trade. Other women worked these riverside spaces to earn a living in the night-time world of entertainment venues such as Cremorne Gardens that could lead to exploitation, disease, and an early grave. The river itself became a familiar backdrop for images of so-called fallen women in Victorian visual and literary culture, from Dickensian characters such as Nancy in *Oliver Twist* (1838), and the drover's former lover driven to prostitution in D.G. Rossetti's *Found* (1854), to William Hayward's popular melodrama, *London by Night* (1865).

As Stuart Oliver has observed, between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, the middle and upper classes progressively "turn[ed] away from" the Thames. He points out that "as pollution increased only those who relied most immediately on the river for their income ... remained living in close proximity to it". London, by contrast with other cities, had "nothing like the riverside vistas or walks such as those by the Seine in Paris".¹ The construction of the Thames embankments from 1869–1874 on the north side of the river (and Albert Embankment on the south) suggest a change in attitude. Built as a response to human disease, principally a series of cholera outbreaks that culminated in the so-called "Great Stink" of 1858, Stephen Halliday summarises their role as "in effect, heavily used roads, superimposed on a honeycomb of tunnels carrying railways, water, gas and sewage, and bounded on one side by a powerful tidal river" (fig. 1).² In the drive to improve sanitation, a vast stretch of the riverside was transformed, opening up new opportunities for its use and for leisure, concentrated mainly north of the Thames. Whistler's nocturnes of the 1870s incorporate these changes, which are documented in detail in the work of local photographer James Hedderly, an acquaintance of the artist. They were not, of course, only structural, but also affected Chelsea's inhabitants, many of whom are captured momentarily in Whistler's paintings. I have long been intrigued by the presence of the female inhabitants in particular, since they appear not only at the margins of paintings such as *Chelsea in Ice* (1864–1867) and *Variations in Pink and Grey: Chelsea* (1871–1872) but—denied in economic and social power—also at the margins of their society of the period. Social and legislative reform, including the Public Health Acts of 1848 and 1875 and the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, promised change both for the river and for many of these women, historically excluded from economic and social positions of power. While in visual terms the role of these women in Whistler's paintings of the Thames in the late 1860s and early 1870s seems largely to be about colour and establishing a balance of decorative elements, the larger socio-economic context of their presence is less well understood and invites analysis. By exploring the relationship of these figures within the complex and changing urban riverscape, it is possible to enlarge our understanding of this period of Whistler's career and question scholarly assumptions that these women are merely decorative additions to his paintings. For a start, how did the women experience these transitional moments in the life of the river? How did they occupy its adjacent streets and public spaces? This article explores these questions, adopting as its starting point Whistler's early scenes of family domesticity before venturing out, as Vanessa Taylor puts it, into the "unruly environment" of the river beyond the second-floor window of his Chelsea home from which he painted several nocturnes.³ I suggest that if Whistler's images of women in his Thames paintings perform a role in his construction of modernity, it is bound up with the shifting environment of the river itself.

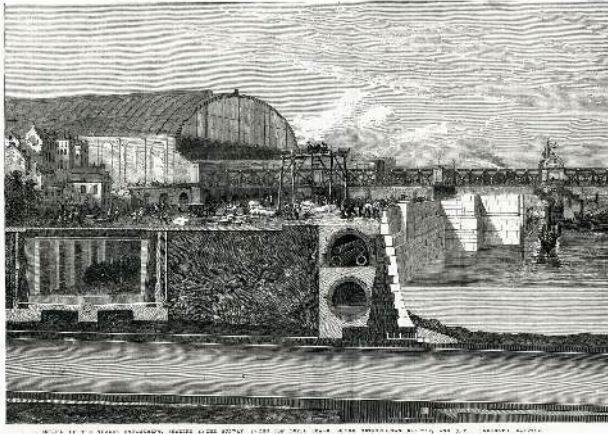


Figure 1

The Thames Embankment, in *The Illustrated London News* 50, no. 1432, 22 June 1867. Digital image courtesy of Mary Evans (all rights reserved).

Whistler's Images of Women

Although Whistler was born in Massachusetts in the United States, he visited London frequently as a boy and later as an art student, staying with his half-sister Deborah, before he finally settled in the city in 1859. Deborah had been living in London since her marriage to Francis Seymour Haden in 1847. By contrast with his student life in late 1850s Paris, Whistler's stays with the Hadens at 62 Sloane Street involved living the genteel existence of a late nineteenth-century middle-class household. Seymour Haden enjoyed a successful medical career; the family lived comfortably and feature often in Whistler's work of the period. After Whistler's move to Chelsea in 1863, to his first home at 7 Lindsey Row (now 101 Cheyne Walk), Joanna Hiffernan, his then model and girlfriend, presided for a time over the household. This arrangement was disrupted by the arrival of his mother from America in December 1863, in search of refuge from the war-torn Confederate South. This required Whistler to secure, as he put it, "a buen retiro" for Hiffernan elsewhere.⁴ From then on, the household acquired a more bourgeois air. Charmed by its garden and views of the Thames, Mrs. Whistler thrived at 7 Lindsey Row, where, as she told her friend James H. Gamble, a room on the second floor served a hybrid purpose as a studio and a cosy sitting-room: "In this room ... he has an Easel & paints generally—tho he dignifies it as our withdrawing room—for here is our bright fire & my post".⁵

Whistler's images of women from this period reflect these intimate settings in which women from his family, including Deborah, are seen engaged in domestic activities, for example reading and sewing—as in the etching *Reading by Lamplight* (1859)—and in genteel accomplishments, such as music-making. In *Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room* (1860–1861), however, painted in the music room at Sloane Street, Deborah is captured in three-quarter view, reflected by the mirror, in an implied conversation with a standing figure dressed in a riding habit, identified as Isabella Boott (fig. 2). A family connection of the Whistlers and the Hadens, Boott stands poised to depart while Annie sits nearby with her nose buried in a book. Such paintings represent an ordered Victorian society in which social structures were understood and rigorously maintained; an interior, feminised world that hints at women's so-called talent "for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision", as Ruskin claimed in "Sesame & Lilies".⁶ By contrast, the

shifting margins and muddy levels of the nearby River Thames, together with the choking pollution of the city (caused at least in part by domestic coal fires), made for a hazardous and uncertain environment. Richard Dormant conveys the starkness of these divergent worlds succinctly in his description of *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses* (1864/71) (fig. 3), one of Whistler's earliest atmospheric depictions of the river

*a view looking across the river to a coal slag on the Battersea side ... instead of the working class bargemen in the foreground Whistler places fashionably dressed Victorian ladies, two carrying open parasols that make them look like delicate figures on a Japanese screen.*⁷

Why does Whistler give these women, carrying parasols in the fashionable garb of the period, prominence in this grimy setting?



Figure 2

James McNeill Whistler, *Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room*, 1860–1861, oil on canvas, 96.3 × 71.7 cm. Collection of the Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Charles Lang Freer (F1917.234a-b). Digital image courtesy of Smithsonian Institution (CC0 1.0).



Figure 3

James McNeill Whistler, *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses*, 1864–1871, oil on canvas, 51.3 × 76.5 cm. Collection of The Hunterian, University of Glasgow (GLAHA_46358). Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).

It is worth considering the conditions in which such women moved about outside the home in the nineteenth-century city. These have been examined over several decades by scholars including Griselda Pollock, Janet Wolff, and Lynda Nead, as has the existence and nature of the *flâneuse*—the so-called female counterpart of the Baudelairean *flâneur* in Paris and London. Wolff argued against its existence, claiming “that such a character was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century”, for, after all, women could not stroll alone in the city.⁸ More recent studies, such as D’Souza and McDonough’s *The Invisible Flâneuse: Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (2006) have sought a nuanced reading of what has been interpreted as the opposing forces of masculine public space versus feminine private space.⁹ My concern here, however, is more with the fact that, while a doctrine of separate public

and private spheres prevailed among the Victorian middle classes from the 1830s, it was not always applied consistently. As Wolff has argued,

*The real situation of women in the second half of the nineteenth century was more complex than one of straightforward confinement to the home. It varied from one social class to another, and even from one geographical region to another, depending on the local industry, the degree of industrialisation, and numerous other factors.*¹⁰

In the same vein, Lynda Nead has warned against the assumption “that the only way to write middle-class women into histories of modernity is by looking at the private sphere, or the history of shopping”, especially since “shopping imposes a specific chronology on the emergence of women into the public sphere”, beginning in the 1870s.¹¹ As she has argued: “Rather than seeing public life as a monolithic entity, it is possible to conceive a variety of ways of accessing the public world and a number of different public arenas in which women could be involved”.¹² This could mean clubs aimed at middle-class working women, for example the Somerville Club (founded in 1878), but also public spaces, such as railway station buffets, department store refreshment rooms and, later in the century, tearoom chains, similar to Lyons or Fuller’s. She also joins Elizabeth Wilson in questioning the all-pervasive presence of the *flâneur*, “one of the central orthodoxies of recent accounts of modernity” therein opening up examination of women’s presence on the city streets.¹³ This line of argument has also been explored in more recent times by scholars of historical geography such as Richard Dennis. He cites a number of examples of female characters in George Gissing’s novels of the 1890s, who “lead independent lives, confident in their knowledge of the city’s geography and use of its public transport”.¹⁴ At the same time, as Wilson points out, class and ethnicity shaped women’s experiences. The question of whether London represented danger or opportunities for women in the nineteenth century “depends on what is being compared” for, should we “compare the life of urban working-class women with what they had left behind in the countryside, we may well conclude that the cities opened a vista of opportunities”.¹⁵ This same territory of inconsistency informs women’s presence in the late nineteenth-century environment of the Thames that included parks, gardens, promenades, and river crossings. This riverside space—a space in which the stark boundaries between danger and opportunity blurs—is the basis of my observations of the women in Whistler’s Thames paintings.

Distinction should be made, however, between green spaces inhabited by women represented by Whistler in these pictures, such as the embankment gardens, and those elsewhere. While Nancy Rose Marshall evokes the so-called feminine sphere in her discussion of the painting of London’s parks—“grass in a park represented nature in its domesticated and orderly form”,¹⁶—this seems to me closer to the essence of the large established parks such as Hyde Park and Regent’s Park, which were contained environments sited away from the river. Settings similar to Hyde Park, Marshall suggests, became places “in which the middle classes could assume at least the trappings of the coveted ‘blood and bearing’ of the aristocrats” through pursuits such as riding on Rotten Row.¹⁷ Women were prominent in visualisations of this setting “since, with the horses, they provided flesh of two sorts”.¹⁸ Moreover, most of the new urban parks that emerged in British cities during the late nineteenth century were planned and constructed with a clear sense of social purpose. As Hilary Taylor puts it, “[o]ne of the main aims of those setting up the parks was so to embody the teachings of science and art as to elevate the personal and public character of all urban dwellers, especially the working classes”.¹⁹

By contrast, any sense of social improvement attached to the embankment gardens was complicated by their fluid boundaries with the Thames, always at risk of the damage caused by

flooding.

Chelsea and the Embankment

Let us return to the embankment project itself and its impact on Whistler's neighbourhood.

Before the Embankment was commenced in 1868, the geography of Chelsea close to the river at Old Battersea Bridge and Cheyne Walk looked rather different. As the river, with its tidal creeks, its spaces were more haphazard and meandering, opening out into an estuary that was, as Théophile Gautier noted on a visit to London in 1842,

*so wide and the banks themselves so low that these cannot be seen from the centre of the stream. It is only after steaming many a mile that one at last makes them out, narrow, flat, black lines between the grey sky and the turbid water.*²⁰

Boats and barges lined the foreshore, including those belonging to the Greaves family of boatmen, Whistler's neighbours at Lindsey Row, whose sons Walter and Henry became his studio assistants for a time. Although only a limited area of land was reclaimed for the Chelsea Embankment at this spot, access to the river was streamlined and its views reconfigured. In 1878, Edward Walford noted the alterations that had taken place,

The old awkward way down to the steamboat pier under the archway of a private house has been cleared away, and the pontoon, moored close to the wall, is reached by a bridge resting in an opening in the granite. An old block of houses, too, which stood between this spot and Chelsea Church has been entirely removed. They formed a narrow quaint looking old thoroughfare, called Lombard Street ... The backs of one side of this thoroughfare overlooked, and here and there overhung, the river; but they have all been cleared away, and the narrow street converted into a broad one, so that one side of it faces the river. After passing the church the road widens out, and as the space between the houses and the embankment wall becomes greater, a piece of land has been laid out as a garden, so that there are two roads, one in front of the shops, the other between the garden and the granite wall.²¹

The partial demolition of Lombard Street (and nearby Duke Street) to make way for the embankment was approved enthusiastically by the London *Times*; it did away with a "row of ancient and dilapidated houses" in Lombard Street and an adjacent crumbling row of tenements of "disreputable appearance".²² The narrow semi-rural track that bordered the river in front of Cheyne Walk also disappeared, to be replaced by a broad new highway. Nearby, the old Ranelagh pleasure gardens, by then absorbed by the Royal Hospital grounds but which had enjoyed a licentious reputation in the eighteenth century, became separated from the Thames altogether (figs. 4 and 5).



Figure 4

James Hedderly, *The Building of the Chelsea Embankment*, 1873, photograph. Collection of Historic England Archive (OP04624). Digital image courtesy of Historic England Archive (all rights reserved).

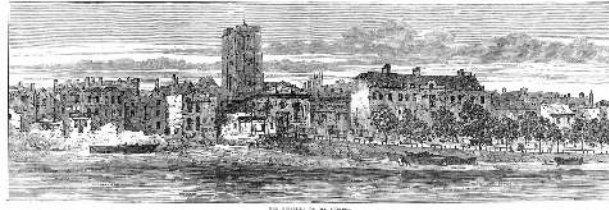


Figure 5

The Riverside of Chelsea, in *Illustrated London News* 61, no. 1726, 5 October 1872. Digital image courtesy of Mary Evans (all rights reserved).

These changes introduced a heightened sense of order to the riverside that was remarked upon in the press. “Chelsea”, the *Daily News* reflected in 1872, “waking up from its somnolence of many years, seems determined not to be behindhand with its neighbours in this rejuvenescent age”.²³ The Embankment also marked the incursion of the city upon the last remnants of Chelsea’s historical roots as a leafy retreat from central London, a neighbourhood of market gardens and covert spaces and the resort of many historical figures. This was romanticised by Victorians: the “traditions of Sir Thomas More, of Katherine Parr, of Anne of Cleves ... haunt its boundaries”, the same paper declared, “the times of Charles II, of William and Mary, and of Queen Anne—are visible in its streets”.²⁴ By contrast, the embankments introduced a sleek, modern world of sanitation, underground railways, and spaces for leisure in the name of progress. A photograph from the 1870s by James Hedderly, photographic chronicler of Chelsea’s transformation, hints at the new atmosphere of the neighbourhood (fig. 6). The view of historic Chelsea Old Church, then under renovation (and where Whistler escorted his mother to services every Sunday), looks westwards through one of the new public gardens built after the embankments were completed. A parade of shops, a remnant of old Lombard Street, can be glimpsed in the distance. In a related photograph, two respectably dressed women—perhaps a mother and daughter—wait idly by the church railings (fig. 7). This atmosphere is echoed in John O’Connor’s panoramic view of the Victoria Embankment looking eastwards, towards the City and St. Paul’s Cathedral; the view was painted in 1874 shortly after the embankment’s completion in 1872 (fig. 8). A bourgeois woman basks in the sunlight with her two children on the terrace of Somerset House, shaded by her parasol, while a regiment of Grenadier Guards march along the road below. The smoke-filled industrial world of chimneys, trains, and bridges is relegated to the distance. Despite the recent nature of their completion, the embankments, with their orderly public spaces and bourgeois strollers, seem an established presence, the disruption caused by their construction barely perceptible.



Figure 6

James Hedderly, *Chelsea Old Church*, 1870s, photograph. Collection of the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea Libraries. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea Libraries (all rights reserved).



Figure 7

James Hedderly, *Chelsea Old Church*, 1870s, photograph. Collection of the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea Libraries. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea Libraries (all rights reserved).



Figure 8

John O'Connor, *The Embankment*, 1874, oil on canvas, 90.5 × 143.5 cm. Collection of the Museum of London (85.552). Digital image courtesy of Museum of London (all rights reserved).

At the same time, as Vanessa Taylor has emphasised, “rivers have always been enmeshed in dominant economic and political discourses”.²⁵ In August 1871, the *Times* reported Joseph Bazalgette’s speech as the foundation stone was laid for the construction of the Embankment between Chelsea Hospital and Battersea Bridge. It emphasised the grand scale of his ambitions, and the belief that London’s improvements bore comparison with those that had taken place recently in other European cities.

*[He] admitted that the Board [of Works] ... had accomplished many proper and judicious improvements in the course of the last 15 years, having created new parks and streets, broken up overcrowded districts, formed embankments, and, in fact, placed the metropolis in a fair position to bear comparison with the European capitals.*²⁶

The scale of the work yet to be undertaken in this one section of the embankments was remarkable: ninety-one acres were to be reclaimed from the river and replaced by a seventy-foot wide roadway, three-quarters of a mile long and bordered by public gardens.²⁷ The gardens contributed to the promotion of physical and social hygiene as well as the embankment. There were precedents: in Paris, Baron Haussmann’s garden schemes, executed under the patronage of Napoleon III (an admirer of Hyde Park), were considered the above-ground counterpart to a network of sewers built in the 1850s.²⁸ His approach was widely admired; indeed, his gardens are considered a model for the Temple Garden at Victoria Embankment.²⁹

Whistler’s *Variations*

The innovative nature of Bazalgette’s project and its impact on the river boundaries can be glimpsed in two oils by Whistler of this period: *Variations in Violet and Green* (1871) and *Variations in Pink and Grey: Chelsea* (1871/2) (figs. 9 and 10). In *Variations in Violet and Green*, a woman sits partly turned away from the river to face the broad sweep of the new gardens, apparently conversing with her companion, who carries a Japanese-style parasol. To their right, a woman stands poised, perhaps preparing herself to approach them. All are portrayed in

fashionable aestheticised dress that appears in harmony with the ornamental setting of the gardens. At the same time, the figures are constrained by the setting, their containment intensified by their location at the lowest point of the composition, within the vertical lines of the railings and the cherry blossom placed by Whistler on either side. *Variations in Pink and Grey: Chelsea* is painted in a similar format/spatial arrangement. Three Thames barges are partially obscured by some temporary hoarding—only their furled sails can be seen—as a newly constructed boundary wall, formed of concrete faced with granite, reinforced concrete having recently come into vogue as an industrial material.



Figure 9
James McNeill Whistler, *Variations in Violet and Green*, 1871, oil on canvas, 61 × 35.5 cm. Collection of Musée d'Orsay (RF 1995 5). Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).



Figure 10
James McNeill Whistler, *Variations in Pink and Grey: Chelsea*, 1871–1872, oil on canvas, 82 × 62.7 cm. Collection of the Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institute, Gift of Charles Lang Freer (F1902.249a-b). Digital image courtesy of Smithsonian Institution (CC0 1.0).

Whistler himself maintained that *Variations in Pink and Grey* was “not a Nocturne!! but a little picture of Chelsea”, his attitude suggesting that he intended it as a nod to the material transformation of his neighbourhood taking place before him that was being documented by Hedderly.³⁰ According to Mrs. Whistler, he often worked outside during the summer of 1871 and was invigorated by the experience, which presumably would have been intensified by the clamour of construction activity. To “work in the open air”, Mrs. Whistler wrote, “was like the renewal of Etching & gave zest to Studio at intervals”.³¹ The hoarding clearly remained for some time, for it forms a backdrop to his depiction of the riverbank being recolonised by urban dwellers. This centres on several female strollers who appear to weave in and out of the newly planted trees.

This returns us to my original question: how did Whistler see these women? If, as he so readily claimed, they were no more than compositional devices or colour accents, why did he trouble himself with the indicative details of their dress and with referencing fashions of the day—albeit

in a sketchy and non-specific manner? It is worth considering one of Whistler's portrait commissions begun around this time, *Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink: Portrait of Mrs Frances Leyland* (1871/1874), wife of Frederick Leyland, Whistler's chief patron during this period (fig. 11). Its decorative, ethereal elements—and Mrs. Leyland's three-quarter pose—resonate with the figures in the two *Variations* pictures and in *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses*. Certainly, Whistler attended to every detail of the setting: his biographers, the Pennells, reported that “Mrs Leyland stood in the flesh-colour and yellow drawing room and he designed her gown to harmonise with it”.³² More recently, Susan Galassi has emphasised the uniqueness of the gown (which she classifies roughly as a tea gown), with its train decorated with rosettes in white and gold, and how it became a vehicle for Whistler's artistic aims.

*Like all of Whistler's work of the period, the costume draws from an eclectic mix of historic traditions and current trends, freely adapted to articulate his ideas of the beautiful, and to assert his modernity—for which fashion was an important signifier.*³³

Through the portrait, Whistler could present “an ideal modern world—a symphony of the arts”.³⁴



Figure 11

James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink: Portrait of Mrs Frances Leyland*, 1871–1874, oil on canvas, 95.9 × 102.2 cm. Collection of The Frick Collection, Henry Clay Frick Bequest (1917.1.133). Digital image courtesy of The Frick Collection (all rights reserved).

Whistler himself was dissatisfied with the result, however, as he told Frances Leyland,

*It should have been so beautiful! ... I sometimes dare to hope that still it may be saved—The strange little something, that stands between a master-piece in its perfection, and failure, might at any moment yield—and a mornings work bring with it the bright life that is now smouldering with in [sic].*³⁵

Nevertheless, the aestheticised nature of the portrait (Rossetti called it “a graceful design” but not “at all a likeness”) and Whistler's subsequent response point towards a transformative role for the semi-anonymised female figure in his Thames images during this period.³⁶ It served to

direct the viewer towards a new way of looking at the city—a poetic landscape of the mind that lay beyond the particularities of daily living for Victorians. Indeed, the dreamy air of Mrs. Leyland's portrait—the distance placed between sitter and viewer by her backward pose and flower-strewn robe—together with the geometric patterns of the matting and panelling, seem to connect directly with the flickering presence of the women and their Thames-side settings in Whistler's *Variations* and Cremorne images.

Marshall highlights the extent to which “woman” in nineteenth-century representation came to stand for modernity, a trope that was recognised and celebrated in countless texts and illustrations.³⁷ The fashionable female window-shopper was a particular manifestation of this trope that correlated with the rise of the fashion plate and the department store. The presence of female figures in fashionable garb in Whistler's pictures thus seems plausible—his placement of the women within the emerging new borderland of the river and the spaces between the figures serve to introduce light and air—forms of modernity—into the murky urban landscape and its masculinised world of global trade. The presence in the *Variations* and *Battersea Reach* paintings of linear elements such as railings, hoardings, and balconies is also worth noting—the latter are seen in earlier representations that include the Thames, as in *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green: The Balcony* (1864/73). This correlates with the prevalence of balconies in Haussmann's Paris where, as Gen Doy has examined, land values were high and the structures became “a means of providing additional space and light”.³⁸ Indeed for both locals and visitors, Haussmannisation offered, as Temma Balducci points out, “ever more visual distractions and alluring vistas through its expanded park system, new layout and burgeoning variety of commercial establishments”.³⁹ It offered new ways of viewing the city.

Balducci also gives attention to the presence of balconies (and windows) as vantage points in French painting of the period, most memorably in Manet's eponymous *Le Balcon* (1868), a painting likely known to Whistler, who maintained his contacts with French artists long after he settled in London.⁴⁰ Manet's focus is essentially inward—on the domestic interior and the eerily still spectacle of the figures on the balcony. By contrast, our experience of Whistler's depictions of women posed by balconies and railings—from the explicitly titled *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green: The Balcony* (1864–1873), to early crepuscular pictures such as *Variations in Violet and Green* and *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses*, is led by the largely outward gaze of the female figures over and beyond the human-made structures around them. Even in other comparable Whistlerian subjects, Gustave Caillebotte's *Le Pont de l'Europe* (1876) for instance, the male and female pedestrians are engulfed by the girders of the bridge. Indeed, Whistler's elevated representations of women in these settings seem on this basis to have more in common with the work of female Impressionists, for example Morisot's distant, indistinct representations of Paris in works like *Femme et Enfant au Balcon* (1872).

The aestheticised world of Whistler's female bystanders, and their outward gaze, surfaces in his “Ten O'Clock” lecture, first delivered on 20 February 1885.⁴¹ In Whistler's imaginary history of art, the artist—a “dreamer apart”—“stayed by the tents with the women” to perform a magician-like role as “deviser of the beautiful”. Nature is represented in feminised terms as the fount of the artist's imagination.

And 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 campanili, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairy-land is before us then the wayfarer hastens home ... Nature ... sings her exquisite song to

*the artist alone, her son and her master—her son in that he loves her, her master in that he knows her.*⁴²

Elsewhere in the lecture, the artist's self-directed journey into the imagination is described with the same deft brush strokes that Whistler applied to his visualisation of the women bystanders in his Thames images.

*In the citron wing of the pale butterfly, with its dainty spots of orange, he sees before him the stately halls of fair gold, with their slender saffron pillars, and is taught how the delicate drawing high upon the walls shall be traced in tender tones of orpiment, and repeated by the base in notes of graver hue.*⁴³

This dreamy universe should perhaps be seen in the context of the compromised and unstable position occupied by women by comparison with their male counterparts, since they lived in a society in which women's capacities were believed to centre upon reproduction and replication. As Judith Walkowitz points out: "In the mental map of urban spectators, they lacked autonomy: they were bearers of meaning rather than makers of meaning".⁴⁴

At the same time, the spectral women in Whistler's paintings confirmed the domestication of the river in line with technological progress. This is betrayed by the explicit presence of civic structures (and public safety devices like hoardings) in Thames views as in *Variations in Pink and Grey: Chelsea*. The women themselves had come to belong to what Oliver describes as a "regulated landscape of water, controlled and channelled into [an] ordered form".⁴⁵ This correlates with the rationalist tenor of nineteenth-century urban planning more generally that was based, as Elizabeth Wilson puts it, on "utilitarian principles of surveillance, hygiene and labour discipline" (although this was challenged on occasion by socialist demands that principles of redistribution be applied).⁴⁶ Guardians of moral and physical hygiene, bearers of the next generation to labour for trade and empire, middle-class women were required to fit into this schematic landscape. As Wilson highlights, for many Victorians: "the condition of women was the touchstone of the state of civilisation and progress".⁴⁷

Although a new world was emerging along these lines, the "old" world of Battersea Bridge, the eighteenth-century wooden structure depicted repeatedly by Whistler over forty years, still exercised its own constraints, in particular over the working-class men and women, who can be glimpsed making the crossing in etchings such as *Old Battersea Bridge* (1879) (fig. 12). While the bridge, as one commentator explained in 1872, had "always been, more or less, a resort for strollers", it was as much about economics as leisure.

*You have to pay at one end of the bridge, so that Chelsea folks can walk towards Surrey as far as the toll-bar, and turn back while the Battersea people cannot go on the bridge without paying ... at certain times in the day, the Surrey end forms a point of meeting, where working men and women come to receive meals or bundles from relatives to whom the payment of even a halfpenny toll is something desirable to be saved.*⁴⁸

The passage of the women who crossed the creaking bridge (soon to be replaced by a gleaming new structure) was constrained by the old-style economics of Victorian laissez-faire capitalism.⁴⁹



Figure 12

James McNeill Whistler, *Old Battersea Bridge*, 1879, etching, 20.2 × 29.3 cm. Collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Thomas E. Donnelley (1953.215). Digital image courtesy of Art Institute of Chicago (public domain).

The embankments, by contrast, were a concentrated expression of Victorian liberalism overseen by the Metropolitan Board of Works, charged since 1855 with steering the expansion of London's infrastructure. Promenades and green spaces, such as the Victoria and Chelsea Embankments Gardens, offered new opportunities to middle-class women for movement at a time when they were leading more visible lives on the street.⁵⁰ Gas lamps were installed to improve lighting and, for a time, the stretch from Westminster to Blackfriars was lit by electricity, attracting crowds of curious onlookers.⁵¹ By the time Whistler made a watercolour in the same vicinity a few years later, *Pink and Silver—Chelsea, the Embankment* (circa 1885), the ornamental trees were maturing and the Albert Bridge, then undergoing substantial modifications, is clearly visible on the horizon (fig. 13).⁵² The revitalised bridge, the *Times* declared, would be “an ornament to the river and neighbourhood, and ... command an extensive and picturesque prospect”.⁵³ The embankments came to form part of a complex web of modern structures in the service of urban life, delivering an aesthetic experience within a productive landscape.



Figure 13

James McNeill Whistler, *Pink and silver—Chelsea, the Embankment*, circa 1885, watercolour, 12.7 × 21.6 cm. Collection of The Clark, Williamstown, MA (1955.1533). Digital image courtesy of The Clark, Williamstown, MA (public domain).

Cremorne

But for women of all classes, the problem remained—as Nord has shown, there was little escape from their status as urban spectacle.⁵⁴ The idea that an unaccompanied respectable woman could experience enjoyment from walking alone through the city still threatened conventional models of femininity. Writing in 1862, conservative journalist and novelist, Eliza Lynn Linton, advised that a woman’s behaviour should be, ideally, “unobtrusive, gentle, womanly, she is just the person to slip through a crowd unobserved, like one of those soft grey moths in the evening, which come and go upon their way, unseen by men and undevoured by birds”. Linton’s opinions were nothing if not practical. They sought to place women, as Nead puts it, “in the city, but not of the city”, against a backdrop of “conditions created by London in the period [that] tested and expanded contemporary definitions of femininity and respectability”.⁵⁵

At Cremorne, a tree-covered pleasure gardens laid out with flower beds, statues, and fountains a short walk westwards from Whistler’s home, such contingent boundaries of women’s behaviour were subject to continual scrutiny. Until early evening, it was the haunt of the lower middle classes—shopkeepers, tradesmen, and their families, drawn to the entertainment on offer, which included dancing, fireworks, and a captive balloon. By night, however, Cremorne acquired a shadier atmosphere that fascinated Whistler, who made six nocturnal paintings of the subject in the 1870s. There is a foggy air of mystery to *Cremorne Gardens, No. 2*, the largest of these, in which brightly dressed women, some of whom may have been sex workers, meander and chat in a naturalistic setting, the trees lit with fairy lights (fig. 14).⁵⁶



Figure 14

James McNeill Whistler, *Cremorne Gardens, No. 2*, 1870–1880, oil on canvas, 68.6 × 134.9 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1912 (12.32). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

Cremorne had long been subject to moral scrutiny, not helped by its proximity to respectable parts of suburban Chelsea. Visiting London in the late 1860s, Daniel Joseph Kirwan declared it: *the maddest place in London, after ten o'clock in the evening ...from thence until one and two o'clock in the morning Cremorne is in the possession of Lost Women and their male friends and abettors ... Between the dances the girls promenade, or take supper with their male friends in the numerous restaurants, which are always crowded to excess by noisy people of both sexes, drinking Champagne and Moselle, or eating lobster or devilled kidneys.*⁵⁷

Kirwan's forensic description of his visit includes statistical information from the police returns as to the numbers of women engaged in sex work in the neighbourhood in the tradition of urban investigation practised by Henry Mayhew in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851–1862).⁵⁸ Mayhew's study suggests, however, that their status as so-called “lost women” was often subject to revision in a manner that tended to be overlooked by Victorian popular imagination: The women's own voices are largely inaudible, but Bracebridge Hemyng, who contributed to Mayhew's work, claimed that many women “eventually become respectable, and merge into the ocean of propriety”, quoting the words of one: “We often do marry, and well too; why shouldn't we, we are pretty, we dress well, we can talk and insinuate ourselves into the hearts of men by appealing to their passions and their senses”.⁵⁹

Cremorne also drew women from a category that Hemyng termed “convives”, women who lived together by necessity with their co-workers, albeit this was often a fitful arrangement.

*They never stay long in one house, although some will remain for ten or twelve months in a particular lodging. It is their principle to get as deeply into debt as they are able, and then to pack up their things, have them conveyed elsewhere by stealth.*⁶⁰

Such transgressions of the social order had long been part of the scene at Cremorne. In the end, local disapproval of the night-time crowd (which led to a procession of drunk and disorderly cases before the magistrate), defeated the efforts of its last proprietor, John Baum, to run the gardens as a middle-class leisure facility. He closed the enterprise in 1877 and the women moved on. Soon, developers moved in to exploit the site for building, encouraged by the gentrification of the surrounding area brought about by Chelsea Embankment. With his final Cremorne painting completed the same year, Whistler moved into a crisis period of his own—his libel case

against Ruskin and subsequent bankruptcy—a crisis period which nevertheless led to a transformation of his art over the next few years.

What can we conclude from such shifting settings about women's relations with the environment of the Thames in this period? How can their presence be contextualised in Whistler's paintings of this subject? I have argued previously that the positioning of the female figures in paintings such as the two *Variations* help Whistler convey his vision of the urban landscape that is about wide open spaces, light, and air. So too does the format of subsequent subjects like *Chelsea Shops: Yellow and Grey* (1884) with its strong verticals and horizontals, the vastness of the foreground punctuated by scurrying movement of the figures, including several women. This contrasts with *Cremorne Gardens, No. 2*, in which there is a perceptible psychological focus on the women that conforms to the notion of the sex worker as “a central spectacle in a set of urban encounters and fantasies”, as Walkowitz puts it.⁶¹ At the same time, there is an echo of his Chelsea streetscapes and river views in Whistler's treatment of the setting and the sketchy indistinctiveness of the figures which counteracts, as Marshall puts it, “the Victorian fondness for the use of binary oppositions of the ‘city of gold and mud’ sort” to produce pictorial meaning which, she points out was an approach commonly employed by modern life painters, including William Powell Frith.⁶² The ghostly appearance of the women precludes their categorisation as Frith-like physiognomic street types.

Richard Dennis cautions, however, against likening “public spaces” such as Cremorne and the Embankment with “public sphere” for, he points out, while in the late nineteenth century, “women were increasingly visible in the city's streets and other public spaces ... it does not follow that they were also more engaged in political and social debate”.⁶³ This is reflected in women's relations with the Thames environment. The Embankment and its gardens formed part of a movement not only to improve hygiene but also to bring the country to the city.⁶⁴ It represented space and order in contrast to London's crowded shopping streets with their attendant hazards for women and worries about the mixing of classes and the sexes. Its presence increased their visibility across the social and economic classes. But despite the opportunities for health and leisure it offered, in the end, the Embankment represented another extension of the private sphere (as with shops); it was a controlled rather than an emancipatory environment. As for Whistler's paintings of the Thames in the 1870s, they seem to me too non-specific in their portrayal of women to advocate a particular role for them in the modern city, and too grounded in theories of colour. Indeed, at least some of these portrayals may have been conjurings of Whistler's imagination, based on models in the studio rather than literal representations of Chelsea life.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, by the same token, his consistent inclusion of women in futuristic public settings, his avoidance of physiognomic types, and resolute disinterest in narrative (as he says in “The Red Rag”, “I care nothing for the past, present, or future of the black figure, placed there because the black was wanted at that spot”), affirms powerfully their place within it.

About the author

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Recent publications include *Louise Jopling: A Biographical and Cultural Study of the Modern Woman Artist in Victorian Britain* (2016) and *Whistler and Nature* (2018, exhibition catalogue).

Footnotes

1. Stuart Oliver, “Fantasies in Granite: The Thames Embankments as a Boundary to the River”, *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in The Representation of London* 5, no. 1 (March 2007), <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2007/oliver.html>.
2. Stephen Halliday, *The Great Stink of London* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 149–150.
3. Vanessa Taylor, “London’s River? The Thames as Contested Environmental Space”, *The London Journal* 40, no. 3 (2015): 183–195, DOI:10.1179/1749632215Y.0000000010.
4. Whistler to Henri Fantin-Latour, 4 January–3 February 1864, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Pennell–Whistler Collection, PWC 1/33/15. See *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, 1855–1903*, ed. Margaret F. MacDonald, Patricia de Montfort and Nigel Thorp, online edition (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2003). <http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence>, GUW #08036. Thereafter cited “GUW”, followed by record number.
5. Anna Matilda Whistler to James H. Gamble, 10–11 February 1864. Glasgow University Library, MS Whistler W516, GUW #06522.
6. John Ruskin, “Sesame and Lilies. Lecture II—Lilies: Of Queens’ Gardens”, *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols, ed. Edward Tias Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (1903–1912), Vol. 18, 122, <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/the-ruskin/the-complete-works-of-ruskin>
7. Richard Dormont, “Whistler and the Thames, Dulwich Picture Gallery, Review”, *Daily Telegraph*, 21 October 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/10393447/Whistler-and-the-Thames-Dulwich-Picture-Gallery-review.html>.
8. Janet Wolff, “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity”, *Theory, Culture and Society* 2, no. 3 (November 1985): 45.
9. Wolff, “The Invisible Flâneuse”.
10. Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 69.
11. Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, 70.
12. Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, 70–71.
13. Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840–1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 156. Dennis also cites an earlier example of the young independent woman, Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), who travels and walks alone in London, although she is more naïve abroad than a streetwise flâneuse. See Dennis, *Cities in Modernity*, 152.
14. Elizabeth Wilson. *The Contradictions of Culture: Cities, Culture, Women* (London: SAGE, 2000), 83.
15. Nancy Rose Marshall, *City of Gold and Mud: Painting Victorian London* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 217.
16. Marshall, *City of Gold and Mud*, 221.
17. Marshall, *City of Gold and Mud*, 221.
18. Hilary A. Taylor, “Urban Public Parks, 1840–1900: Design and Meaning”, *Garden History*, 23, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 213.

19. Théophile Gautier, “Une Journée à Londres”, in *The Works of Théophile Gautier*, 24 vols. (New York: G.D. Sproul, 1900), Vol. 14, 301–302.
20. Edward Walford, *Old and New London*, 6 vols. (London: Cassell, Petter and Galpin, 1878), Vol. 5, 50–70, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/old-new-london/vol5/pp50-70>.
21. “The Chelsea Embankment”, *The Times*, 25 December 1872.
22. “Old Chelsea”, *Daily News*, 2 November 1872.
23. “Old Chelsea”, *Daily News*.
24. Taylor, “London’s River?”
25. “New Embankment on The Thames”, *The Times*, 7 August 1871.
26. “New Embankment on The Thames”, *The Times*. The river embankment was estimated to be forty-one miles in length from Blackfriars to Battersea Bridge.
27. In his *Mémoires*, Haussmann emphasised the importance of public parks within the framework of the modern city; Georges Eugène Haussmann, *Mémoires du Baron Haussmann*, 3 vols. (Paris: Victor-Havard, 1890–1893), Vol. 3: *Grands travaux de Paris*.
28. Haussmann’s influence remains visible today in the meandering paths and “corbeille”-shaped flowerbeds in the adjacent smaller gardens. I am grateful to my colleague Prof. Clare A.P. Willsdon for this observation.
29. Whistler to D.C. Thomson, 28 February 1892, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Pennell–Whistler Collection, PWC 3, GUW #08213.
30. Anna Matilda Whistler to James H. Gamble, 29 November 1871, Glasgow University Library, MS Whistler W541. GUW #06547.
31. Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell, *The Whistler Journal* (London: J.B. Lippincott, 1921), 301.
32. Susan Galassi, “Whistler and Aesthetic Dress: Mrs Frances Leyland”, in *Whistler, Women and Fashion*, ed. Margaret F. MacDonald, Susan Galassi, Aileen Ribeiro, and Patricia de Montfort (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 95–96.
33. Galassi, “Whistler and Aesthetic Dress: Mrs Frances Leyland”, 96.
34. Whistler to Frances Leyland, [1/6 January 1874], Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Pennell–Whistler Collection, PWC 13/1171-72, GUW #10867, <http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/recno/display/?cid=10867>.
35. Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, [August 1874], William Fredeman, ed., *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 9 vols. (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2002–15), Vol. 6, 523.
36. Marshall, *City of Gold and Mud*, 222–223.
37. Doy suggests that the presence of balconies had particular implications for bourgeois women since they “turned domestic life outward to the street, rather than towards an inner courtyard”. Gen Doy, *Seeing and Consciousness: Women, Class and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2020), 62–63.
38. Temma Balducci, *Gender, Space, and the Gaze in Post-Haussmann Visual Culture: Beyond the Flâneur* (London: Routledge, 2017), 2 and 113.
39. Whistler first met Manet through their mutual friend Henri Fantin-Latour in 1861. In 1864, Fantin-Latour depicted the two men in *Hommage à Eugène Delacroix* (Musée d’Orsay) in which artists (who also included the painters Alphonse Legros and Félix Bracquemond) and critics (Charles Baudelaire, Edmond Duranty, and Jules Champfleury) gather in tribute to Eugène Delacroix, who had recently died.
40. James McNeill Whistler, *Mr Whistler’s Ten O’Clock* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1888).

41. James McNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, 2nd rev. ed. (London, 1892), 144.
 42. Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, 144.
 43. Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 21.
 44. Oliver, "Fantasies in Granite", 3.
 45. Wilson, *The Contradictions of Culture*, 69.
 46. Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 29.
 47. Anon., "London Bridges and their Memories", *Kind Words for Boys and Girls*, 1 December 1872.
 48. Most London bridges were private enterprises that charged tolls before these were abolished with the passing of the Metropolitan Toll Bridges Act, 1877.
 49. See Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, 62ff.
 50. This stretch was lit by electricity between 1878 and 1884 but, after the failure of the Jablochkoff electricity supply company in 1884, gas lighting was reinstated. Halliday, *Great Stink of London*, 163.
 51. Built in 1873, the Albert Bridge proved to be unsound. The modifications under Bazalgette's direction included incorporating the design elements of a suspension bridge.
 52. "The Albert-Bridge at Chelsea", *The Times*, 26 December 1871.
 53. Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 4.
 54. Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, 67.
 55. The scene may incorporate an encounter between several prostitutes and a potential customer. See Margaret F. MacDonald and Grischka Petri, *James McNeill Whistler: The Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2020), <http://whistlerpaintings.gla.ac.uk>.
 56. Daniel Joseph Kirwan, *Palace and Hovel: or, Phases of London Life* (Hartford, CT: Columbian Book Company, 1878), 594–595.
 57. Kirwan, *Palace and Hovel*, 590.
 58. Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols. (London: Charles Griffin & Company, 1862), Vol. 4, 220.
 59. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Vol. 4, 218–219.
 60. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 21.
 61. Marshall, *City of Gold and Mud*, 43.
 62. Dennis, *Cities in Modernity*, 154–155.
 63. Albeit the reality may have been much grittier, prompting leading commentators such as George Sala to declare his wish that the Embankment "be something more than a camping-ground for hulking roughs and blackguard little boys". George Augustus Sala, "Imaginary London", *Belgravia: A London Magazine* 1 (July 1873): 29–30.
 64. Certainly, their aestheticised attire (which includes what looks like Japanese kimonos and parasols) points towards this. See, for example, *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses* (1864/71) or *Variations in Violet and Green* (1871).
- ⁹Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough, eds., *The Invisible Flâneuse: Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

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