

Lesson 4: Evolution of Nocturnes, Towards Abstraction

*"Look how the Japanese understand this! the same colour reappearing continually here and there like the same thread in an embroidery ... the whole forming in this way an harmonious pattern"*

- James McNeill Whistler to Henri Fantin-Latour

*"As the light fades and the shadows deepen, all petty and exacting details vanish, everything trivial disappears, and I see things as they are in great strong masses ... And that, night cannot efface from the painter's imagination."*

- James McNeill Whistler

Introduction

Guiding Questions

Learning Objectives

Background for Teachers

Preparing to Teach This Lesson

Suggested Activities

Activity 1. Compare and Contrast the Hiroshige print *Nihonbashi*, "Portrait of Artist's Mother", and "Nocturne Southampton Water"

Lesson 4.1 Small Images and Quotes Sheet

Lesson 4.2 Compare Hiroshige, Mother, Nocturne Worksheet

Art Image: Hiroshige, *Nihonbashi*, 1855

Art Image: Whistler, *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1, Portrait of the Artist's Mother*, 1871

Art Image: Whistler, *Nocturne: Blue and Gold--Southampton Water*, 1872

Activity 2. View "Falling Rocket"

Art Image: Whistler, *Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket*

Activity 3. Read Whistler v. Ruskin: Aesthetics on Trial

Lesson 4.3 Whistler v. Ruskin: Aesthetics on Trial

Activity 4 Assessment. Write an Analytical Criticism of *Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket*

Lesson 4.4 Assessment of Critical Analysis of *Falling Rocket* assignment

Activity 5 Studio. Paint a Nonliteral Scene from Memory

Activity 6 Lesson Extension. Hiroshige and Whistler Comparison

Activity 7 Lesson Extension. Compare Bridges by Hiroshige, Whistler and Monet

Activity 8 Lesson Extension. Read an Art Review

Extending the Lesson

Activity 6 Lesson Extension. Hiroshige and Whistler Comparison

Activity 7 Lesson Extension. Compare Bridges by Hiroshige, Whistler and Monet

Activity 8 Lesson Extension. Read an Art Review

The Basics

Standards Alignment

## **Introduction**

Today we take abstract art for granted. In the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century it was the norm. However, in the 1850's "fine art" conveyed a story or a moral and always had recognizable subjects. But Whistler questioned this. Wasn't a piece of art an object? Couldn't it be just a beautiful arrangement of line, form, and color? As he studied Japanese composition and color harmonies, his art gradually transitioned from Realism to simplified, almost abstract subjects. This led to his confrontation with traditional art critic, John Ruskin, in a memorable trial of aesthetics – tradition vs. avant-garde.

In this lesson students view and discuss a Japanese woodblock print to discover Eastern art's influence on Whistler. After studying Andō Hiroshige's print *Nihonbashi*, Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1, Portrait of the Artist's Mother*, and *Nocturne: Blue and Gold-- Southampton Water*, students compare and contrast the three artworks

on a Venn diagram. They read Whistler’s defense of his art in an excerpt from the Whistler v. Ruskin trial and roleplay this trial. Then they write a critical analysis of Whistler’s *Nocturne in Black and Gold, the Falling Rocket*. Students paint a scene from memory using color to indicate mood and write an artist statement about their painting.

### Guiding Questions

Why did Whistler create art that was almost abstract ?

Why didn’t Whistler and art critics agree about what is and is not fine art?

### Learning Objectives

At the end of this lesson students will be able to:

- Compare and contrast Hiroshige’s Japanese woodblock print *Nihonbashi* with Whistler’s paintings *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1*, *Portrait of the Artist’s Mother* and *Nocturne: Blue and Gold--Southampton Water*.
- Explain Japanese influences of color and composition in Whistler’s paintings.
- Discuss the transition in Whistler’s painting style from his early realism to the near abstraction of his mature paintings.
- Write a critical analysis of Whistler’s *Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket*.
- Dramatize the debate on aesthetics in the Whistler v. Ruskin trial to show their understanding of the clash between traditional 19<sup>th</sup>-Century art conventions and those of avant-garde artists creating “art for art’s sake.”
- Paint a landscape from memory using colors to suggest mood.
- Write artist statements explaining their paintings.

### Background for Teachers

#### Hiroshige

Japanese artist Andō Hiroshige was born in Edo (modern Tokyo) in 1797. His original name was Ichiyusai Tokutaro, but his professional name was Utagawa Hiroshige. Although he inherited a fire warden position from his father, by 1811 he was studying art. Edo was a prosperous commercial center where Hiroshige designed ukiyo-e prints. These genre pictures of Edo’s stylish, fleeting, “floating world” featured familiar scenes, everyday life and Edo’s entertainers.

Hiroshige’s print *Nihonbashi* was from his series *Famous Views of 53 Stations of the Tokaido Road, 1855*. This vertical composition shows a bird’s eye view of the bridge at the Nihonbashi station on the Tokaido Road. Mt. Fuji rises in the distant background. To learn more about Hiroshige and ukiyo-e see:

The Floating World of Ukiyo-E (includes Hiroshige's sketchbooks)  
Library of Congress Exhibit  
<<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/ukiyo-e/index.html>>

*Japan Memories of a Secret Empire*  
PBS video and website  
<<http://www.pbs.org/empires/japan/entered.html>>

Learn more about Japanese woodblock printing in Lesson 2.

### **Whistler's Mother**

James McNeill Whistler's mother, Anna McNeill Whistler, joined him in London in 1863 when she fled North Carolina during the American Civil War. In 1871 she was living with him when he explored color and composition in his famous portrait of her. After a serious illness in 1875, Mrs. Whistler moved south to seaside Hastings, England, where she died in 1881.

Learn more about Anna McNeill Whistler and her family at:

NCpedia  
<http://ncpedia.org/biography/whistler-anna-mathilda>

### **Preparing to Teach this Lesson**

Review the lesson plan and the websites used throughout. Locate and bookmark suggested materials and websites. Download and print out documents you will use. Duplicate copies as necessary for student viewing.

Students can access materials at <<http://www.whistlerthemovie.com>>.

Reproducible Handouts and Worksheets for this Whistler Lesson 4:

[Link to each of the following within this lesson]

- Lesson 4.1 Small Images And Quotes Sheet
- Lesson 4.2 Compare Hiroshige, Mother, Nocturne Worksheet
- Lesson 4.3 Whistler v. Ruskin: Aesthetics on Trial
- Lesson 4.4 Assessment of Critical Analysis of Falling Rocket Assignment

### **Suggested Activities**

[each of the following should be links to the activity within this lesson]

**Activity 1. Compare and Contrast the Hiroshige print "Nihonbashi", "Portrait of Artist's Mother", and "Nocturne Southampton Water"**

**Activity 2. View "Falling Rocket"**

**Activity 3. Read Whistler v. Ruskin: Aesthetics on Trial**

**Activity 4 Assessment. Write an Analytical Criticism of *Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket***

**Activity 5 Studio. Paint a Nonliteral Scene from Memory**

**Activity 6 Lesson Extension. Hiroshige and Whistler Comparison**

**Activity 7 Lesson Extension. Compare Bridges by Hiroshige, Whistler and Monet**

**Activity 8 Lesson Extension. Read an Art Review**

**Activity 1. Compare and Contrast the Hiroshige print "Nohonbashi", "Portrait of Artist's Mother", and "Nocturne Southampton Water"**

In this activity students will view a Japanese woodblock print by Hiroshige, (*Nihonbashi*) and two of Whistler's paintings (*Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1, Portrait of the Artist's Mother*, and *Nocturne: Blue and Gold--Southampton Water*). As a class they will look closely at each of these, noting Whistler's and Hiroshige's similar use of color and composition. By reading Whistler's quotes about this art, students will understand his logic in moving from the realism of the portrait to almost abstract nocturnes. In review, students will compare and contrast the three artworks on a Venn diagram.

Provide students with the [Lesson 4.1 Small Images and Quotes Sheet \[Link\]](#) to refer to during the class discussion. To review what they saw and discussed, they may compare and contrast the three artworks on the Venn diagram in the [Lesson 4.2 Compare Hiroshige, Mother, Nocturne Worksheet. \[Link\]](#)

## Class discussion:

• Andō Hiroshige, *Nihonbashi*, 1855, Woodblock print, 36.5x34.5 cm, Library of Congress

[[Link to LOC Nihonbashi - Hiroshige Edo Print.tif](#)]



As students view a large image of Andō Hiroshige's *Nihonbashi*, Ask: What do you see in this print? Mountain (Mt. Fuji), clouds, sky, distant trees, temple towers and low roofs, field, two bridges, large white buildings across river, pedestrians on closer bridge, boats holding people rowing and cargo, market or shops in lower right, lower left red signature block and a chop mark, upper right blocks (print title and series title, *Nihonbashi, Famous views of 53 stations of the Tokaido Road*)

Ask: What colors are in this print?

Depending on differences in projectors and monitors, students may see blue, blue gray, white, black, pale yellow, and red.

Have students locate repeated colors. Remind students that each color was printed with a separate block.

(See Lesson 2 for more information about Japanese block printing.)

Ask: Overall, how would you describe the colors of this print?

With its blue grays it is cool with very limited range of colors (hues).

Read Whistler's comment on Japanese use of color:

*Look how the Japanese understand this! the same colour reappearing continually here and there like the same thread in an embroidery ... the whole forming in this way an harmonious pattern.*

- James McNeill Whistler

Ask: Where are large areas of space in this print?

The sky and river on the left are large spaces.

Where are large blocks or bands of dark objects or areas?

The land in the background, the bridge, and the foreground land are large dark bands.

- Whistler, James McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1, Portrait of the Artist's Mother*, 1871, Oil on canvas, 144.3x162.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris  
[Link to 3\_Bridgeman\_XIR 30805.jpg]

As students view a large image of Whistler's portrait of his mother tell them that even though Whistler's subject is very different from Hiroshige's print, there are many similarities between these two works of art.



Ask: What is the subject of this painting?

It is a portrait of a seated woman, Anna McNeill Whistler - Whistler's mother.



Show students a **photograph of Whistler's mother Anna McNeill Whistler**, 1870s, Photograph, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives

[link 7\_Anna Whistler - Freer 16x9 No Paper.jpg] so they can see how realistically Whistler captured his mother's features.

Even though this is a realistic likeness of his mother, Whistler discounted the value of its exact realism.

Read Whistler's quote about this painting and what he hoped to achieve in it.

*"Art should be independent of all clap-trap—should...appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it...Take the picture of my mother...as an Arrangement in Grey and Black. Now that is what it is...what can or ought the public care about the identity of the portrait?"*

-James McNeill Whistler

Ask: Besides Whistler's mother, what else is in this painting?

Framed prints are on the wall. A curtain, footstool, chair, and baseboard are included.

Ask: What colors are in this painting?

Most of the composition is in gray, blue gray, and black, with small bits of white, pale muted yellow, and pinks in the face and hands. Colors may vary depending on the monitor or projector.

Ask: Compare Whistler's color scheme to Hiroshige's *Nihonbashi* print. They are very similar. Both are mostly cool grays and blue grays with a touch of red in Hiroshige's and lighter red or pink in Whistler's.

As Whistler tried to create harmony within his paintings, he experimented with Japanese color harmonies.

Ask: Where are large dark shapes?

Mother's dark dress and curtain form dark shapes. The dark baseboard line and the curtain tie the composition to the edges of the painting. Like Hiroshige, Whistler created horizontal bands across his composition.

Ask: Where are large blank spaces?

The gray wall functions as space that balances the heavy figure of the mother facing this blank space.

• James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne: Blue and Gold--Southampton Water*, 1872, Oil on canvas, 50.5x76 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, Stickney Fund  
[Link to 2\_AIC Southampton Water.tif]



As students view a large, bright image of Whistler's *Nocturne Southampton Water*

Ask: What do you see in this painting?

Moon, clouds, water, boats, lights, land mass in distant background, and harbor are barely visible.

Ask:

Describe the colors.

Most of the painting is blue gray with darker shades of gray and the contrasting yellow orange. Look carefully for tiny dots of yellow lights and reflections. Colors may vary due to differences in monitors and projectors.

Locate bands of color in the water and sky.



Ask: How are the colors in this painting like those of the “Portrait of the Artist’s Mother”?

Like the portrait, most of the painting is made up of muted grays with small spots of a warm color.

Ask: Which has the most abstract subject matter?

Objects in the Nocturne are most difficult to distinguish.

Read Whistler’s quote on [Lesson 4.1 Small Images and Quotes sheet](#) [\[link\]](#)

*“As the light fades and the shadows deepen, all petty and exacting details vanish, everything trivial disappears, and I see things as they are in great strong masses ... And that, night cannot efface from the painter's imagination.”*

Ask and discuss: How do Whistler’s *Arrangement in Grey and Black No 1, Portrait of the Artist’s Mother* and his *Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Southampton Water* demonstrate his philosophy of art as expressed in the quotes about these works on the Lesson 4.1 Small Images and Quotes sheet?

In both paintings he aims to eliminate anything extraneous to the sense of beauty of the art. This would include clap-trap, unnecessary details, and everything trivial.

Have students complete the Venn diagram on the [Lesson 4.2 Compare Hiroshige, Mother, Nocturne Worksheet](#) [\[Link to Worksheet\]](#) to compare the Hiroshige print *Nihonbashi*, and Whistler’s paintings *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1, Portrait of the Artist's Mother* and *Nocturne: Blue and Gold--Southampton Water*

Review and discuss students’ comparisons on the Venn diagram. Their comparisons may be similar to the following: (Shaded cells indicate similarities.)

	<b>Hiroshige, “Nihonbashi”</b>	<b>Whistler, “Portrait of The Artist’s Mother”</b>	<b>Whistler, “Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Southampton Water”</b>
<b>Medium</b>	Woodblock print	Oil painting	Oil painting

<b>Subject</b>	Landscape, river with boats, bridge, mountain	Portrait (Whistler might have considered the composition to be the subject.)	Landscape, water with boats, moon
<b>Color (Colors may vary due to differences in monitors and projectors.)</b>	Cool blue grays with bits of pale yellow, red signature and title blocks	Cool blue grays with bits of pale yellow, a little pink	Dark, cool blue grays with dots of yellow orange
<b>Composition</b>	Horizontal bands of space and dark land form the landscape.	Horizontal bands are in background. Space balances the figure shape. Curtain and baseboard anchor figure to edges.	Thin dark horizontal band of land divides sky. Clouds are in large sky and ripples are in water spaces. Yellow orange moon contrasts with dark blue grays to create a focal point.
<b>Style/realistic detail/abstraction</b>	Space is flattened, but there are many recognizable details.	Face is realistic; background is simplified. Arrangement (composition) is most important.	Barely recognizable objects are realistic for a night view, but this is the most abstract of the three artworks.



### Activity 2. View “Falling Rocket”

As students view a large, bright image of Whistler’s *Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket*, 1875, Oil on panel, 60.2x46.7 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Dexter M. Ferry, Jr. [ [Link 8\\_Bridgeman Falling Rocket.jpg](#) ]:

Ask: What do you see?

Students might not see any recognizable forms, just tones of blue black and spots of yellow orange.

Ask: How is this *Falling Rocket* like *Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Southampton Water*?

Both have indistinct objects. Both include water and lights.

Ask: What does the title, *Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket*, suggest about the art?

A nocturne is generally a dreamy musical composition relating to night. Black and gold are the main colors of the composition, and a falling rocket inspired the art.

The Cremorne Pleasure Gardens on the northern bank of the river Thames were near where Whistler lived in Chelsea. This rocket is like fireworks trailing downward, but there are rows of stationary lights too. Wispy indications of figures are in the foreground.

Ask: Would you recognize the subject without the title? How important is the subject?

### **Activity 3. Read Whistler v. Ruskin: Aesthetics on Trial**

[ Excerpt from Criticism of James McNeill Whistler, "Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket," 1875, Oil on panel, 60.2x46.7 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Dexter M. Ferry Jr. with image and link to 8\_Bridgeman Falling Rocket.jpg]

Before students read the essay, **Lesson 4.3 Whistler v. Ruskin: Aesthetics on Trial [Link to it]**, review unfamiliar terms or vocabulary.

- Aesthetics is an idea or notion about what constitutes beauty or art.
- Two hundred guineas is approximately \$20,000 in today's money.
- A farthing was worth ¼ penny in 1878.

After students have read Lesson 4.3 Whistler v. Ruskin: Aesthetics on Trial, discuss the effectiveness and impact of both Ruskin's and Whistler's language describing art. Invite students to roleplay John Ruskin voicing his criticism and the Whistler v. Ruskin trial in which Whistler defends his art. Student actors may play Ruskin, Whistler, Sir John Holker (defense lawyer), and imaginary London newspaper readers voicing their opinions about the trial.

Encourage students to express their own opinions

- about the trial,
- what makes something fine art,
- how much a piece of art is worth, and
- who determines what is fine art.

Ask:

Why would someone like *Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket*?

Who would not consider this fine art?

In 1987 one of Whistler’s paintings sold for \$2.58 million. In 2010, one of his etchings, *Nocturne*, sold for \$282,000.

#### **Activity 4. Assessment. Write an Analytical Criticism of *Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket***

Assign students to write an analytical criticism of James McNeill Whistler’s painting *Nocturne in Black and Gold, The Falling Rocket*. They should describe it and explain why they do or do not consider this fine art. In their response they should refer to or quote Whistler, Ruskin, or other art critics to support their opinion. See [Lesson 4.4 Assessment of Critical Analysis of Falling Rocket Assignment](#). [\[Link to rubric\]](#)

#### **Activity 5 Studio. Paint a Nonliteral Scene from Memory**

Lead students on a walking tour of an outdoor area. This could be on a field trip or around an area near their school. As they walk, encourage them to notice and point out what they see. Ask them to describe the light, shadows, and colors of the area. How do they feel about this area? Does it have a mood such as spooky, scary, trashy, beautiful, peaceful, or mystical? What colors might suggest this mood?

Have students use their memory to paint a nonliteral scene of the area they just viewed. They may wish to create this artwork with acrylic, oil, or tempera paint or with pastels. Remind students that Whistler painted his nocturnes from memory.

Instruct students to title their paintings and write artists’ statements explaining their art and what they were attempting to show. Display the students’ art with their artists’ statements.

#### **Activity 6 Lesson Extension. Hiroshige and Whistler Comparison**

- Direct students to compare Hiroshige's *Nihonbashi* [link to LOC Nihonbashi - Hiroshige Edo Print.tif] to Whistler's *Brown and Silver: Old Battersea Bridge* [link to 01 Whistler Brown and Silver Old Battersea Bridge Addison Gallery.jpg] and *Old Battersea Bridge* [08 Old Battersea Bridge 1879 NGA R-20101102-0074.jpg]. Students should consider if they are alike in subject, color, and composition.

### **Activity 7 Lesson Extension. Compare Bridges by Hiroshige, Whistler and Monet**

- Many French Impressionist paintings are similar to Whistler's nocturnes. Like Whistler, French Impressionists were intrigued by Japanese prints. Invite students to research Monet's paintings of bridges and compare one of Monet's bridge paintings to Hiroshige's and Whistler's.

### **Activity 8 Lesson Extension. Read an Art Review**

- As in Whistler's day, art critics still write reviews of art exhibits. They influence who attends these exhibits and purchases art. Have students read an art review in their local newspaper or in The New York Times.

## **Handouts for Lesson 4**

### **Other Resources**

EDSitement Lesson Plan

[Composition and Content in the Visual Arts](#)

### **The Basics**

Grade levels – 6-8 or 9-12

Subject areas

Art and Culture: Visual Arts, Art History

Literature and Language Arts: Common Core

Time required 4 or 5 periods

### **Standards Alignment**

National Core Arts Standards: National Visual Arts Standards

[<http://nationalartsstandards.org>](http://nationalartsstandards.org)

Grade 8

VA:Cr2.1.8

Demonstrate willingness to experiment, innovate, and take risks to pursue ideas, forms, and meanings that emerge in the process of art-making or designing.

Grade 7

VA:Cr3.1.7

Reflect on and explain important information about personal artwork in an artist statement or another format.

Grade Hs advanced

VA:Re7.2.HSIII

Determine the commonalities within a group of artists or visual images attributed to a particular type of art, timeframe, or culture.

Grade 6

VA:Re8.1.6

Interpret art by distinguishing between relevant and non-relevant contextual information and analyzing subject matter, characteristics of form and structure, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed.

Grade Hs advanced

VA:Re8.1.HSIII

Analyze differing interpretations of an artwork or collection of works in order to select and defend a plausible critical analysis.

Grade 8

VA:Re9.1.8

Create a convincing and logical argument to support an evaluation of art.

Grade Hs accomplished

VA:Re9.1.HSII

Determine the relevance of criteria used by others to evaluate a work of art or collection of works.

Common Core State Standards Initiative – English Language Arts Standards <<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/>>

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1.A

Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1.C

Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.2

Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.

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**Abstract:** In this lesson students learn how James McNeill Whistler's art transitioned from realism towards abstraction. By viewing a Japanese woodblock print they discover how the artwork, namely the prints, influenced Whistler's art. They compare and contrast a Hiroshige print with Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1, Portrait of the Artist's Mother* and *Nocturne: Blue and Gold--Southampton Water*. After reading Whistler's defense of his art in the trial Whistler v. Ruskin, they dramatize the trial. Students write a critical analysis of Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold, the Falling Rocket*. Students paint a landscape from memory using color to indicate mood and write an artist statement about their painting.