

Whistler v. Ruskin: Aesthetics on Trial

Whistler had always lived by the river, but it was not until the seventies “that he began to see the riverside with eyes trained by Japanese prints and attuned to the poetry of the night,” says art historian Linda Merrill. “The atrocities of the industrial world faded in the limited light of evening, and Whistler portrayed the effect that a moonlit view cast upon his mind.” He would stroll along the riverbank or row on the water, committing a vision to memory, painting that memory in the studio in the light of day.

He began a series of “nocturnes,” presentations of the Thames and other London ‘scapes that were, says Merrill, “artistic impressions rather than literal transcriptions of nature, closer in spirit to music than to literature.” With the nocturnes, says Whistler authority Robin Spencer, Whistler’s ambition was “to achieve what he believed to be a more artistically truthful – and poetic – account of nature, thereby surpassing the conventions of photographic or topographic description.”

Critics applied the terms “sketchy,” “unfinished,” “a practical joke” to Whistler’s Nocturnes. “There are certain accepted canons about what constitutes good drawing, good colour and good painting”, writes the art critic of the *Times*, “and when an artist deliberately sets himself to ignore or violate all of these, it is desirable that his work should not be classed with that of ordinary artists.”

Art critic John Ruskin saw Whistler’s *Nocturne in Black and Gold, the Falling Rocket* at an exhibition in London in the summer of 1878. In a subsequent review, Ruskin made his now infamous charge:

I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb [a conceited fop] ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s eye.

Whistler sued for libel, not only to “defend his own character,” says critic Richard Dorment, “but to correct via the press what he believed to be a popular misconception of the very nature of art.” In court, the lawyer for the defense, John Ruskin’s lawyer pressed Whistler:

SIR JOHN HOLKER: How long do you take to knock off one of your pictures?

JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER: Oh, I “knock one off” possibly in a couple of days – one day to do the work and another to finish it.

SIR JOHN HOLKER: The labor of two days is that for which you ask two hundred guineas?

JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER: No, I ask it for the knowledge I have gained in the work of a lifetime.

The trial was the talk of London, and widely covered in the press. The jury found for Whistler, but awarded him just a farthing. “Looking back on the Whistler Ruskin trial,” says art historian Tim Barringer, “we can see it as one of those great lines in the sand, one of those moments when *suddenly* it becomes clear that things have changed, that the world of art has moved on, that a certain kind of modern painting was emerging from this world of mid-Victorian London.” As curator David Park Curry notes, “The Whistler-Ruskin trial was important in so many ways. Essentially it was *aesthetics* that was on trial. It was the artist’s ability to *choose* that was on trial.”



Nocturne in Black and Gold, the Falling Rocket, 1875, Oil on canvas, Detroit Institute of the Arts, Detroit, MI