

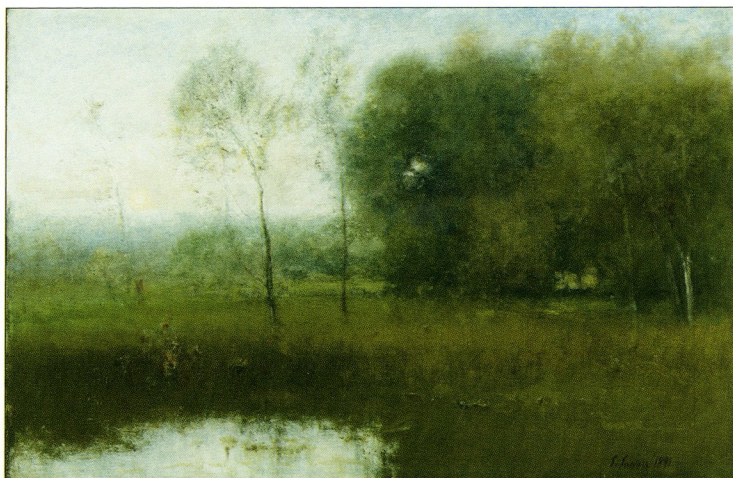
Painted Veils

by Gail Leggio

There is an intriguing premise behind “Like Breath on Glass: Whistler, Inness and the Art of Painting Softly” at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. The title of the exhibition paraphrases a remark made by Whistler in Venice in 1880: “Paint should not be applied thick. It should be like breath on the surface of a pane of glass.” James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) suggests a good deal in this aperçu, both about technique and his aesthetic milieu, recurrent preoccupations in this attractive but scattershot exhibition and its accompanying catalogue.¹ Second billing goes to George Inness (1825–94). Temperamentally, the two men were very different. Whistler was a cultural magpie, painting alongside Gustave Courbet and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, collecting Asian art, forging a stimulating friendship with the Symbolist writer Stéphane Mallarmé. Yet he developed his own idiosyncratic style, specializing in portraits and a genre he largely invented, the Nocturne. Whistler painted London and Venice; Inness, the marshes around Montclair, New Jersey, and Tarpon Springs, Florida. Inness began as a Hudson River School painter, softened his style under Barbizon influence and ended as a visionary landscapist, not by seeking the sublime but by transfiguring the ordinary. Juxtaposing Whistler and Inness reveals some interesting crosscurrents in post-Civil War American art.

Inness’s most distinctive paintings reflect his conversion to the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who taught a theory of correspondences, confections between the natural and spiritual realms that could be perceived subjectively. Whistler, who did not share Inness’s religious ardor, would have

George Inness
*Summer, Montclair (New
Jersey Landscape)*, 1891
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James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne in Blue and Silver: The Lagoon, Venice*, 1880
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

recognized the idea of correspondences from the work of Charles Baudelaire. Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James were pursuing similar lines of inquiry. For both Inness and Whistler, smudged contours and low-key palettes were the preferred vehicle for depicting the psychic dimension of the physical world. The two artists shared a dislike for the extroverted brushwork and garish color of Impressionism. Both rejected the notion of finish, either in the tight realism advocated by John Ruskin or in the “licked” surfaces of academic paintings. Whistler’s notorious lawsuit against Ruskin at least had the merit of defending the real, if not always apparent, craftsmanship behind his style. For Inness, a very physical painter, the finished work of art was suspect. “No great artist ever finished a picture or a statue,” he believed.² Nature itself was in “a continual changing state, but a state which forms the basis of all our knowledge.”³ How these two artists implemented their ideas through technical means is a subject raised in several of the catalogue essays.⁴

This is a rich pairing, not adequately addressed by the half-dozen paintings by each artist in the forty-one-work exhibition. “Like Breath on Glass” extends its span to 1920, including groups of paintings by Thomas Dewing (1851–1938) and John Henry Twachtman (1853–1902), and more-or-less appropriate exam-

ples by other artists. One can imagine a tighter, more focused show or a larger, more wide-ranging effort. Michael J. Lewis's essay "The 'Inaction Painters' and Their Moment" provides a graceful and incisive coda to the catalogue, drawing parallels between the American art scenes of the 1950s and the post-Civil War era. His principal twentieth-century work is Helen Frankenthaler's *Mountain and Sea* (1953), a luminous abstract landscape created by spilling paint on unprimed canvas. Lewis writes that the image "seemed to appear there as if from its own volition, as if a form of condensation (or, as Whistler proposed, 'like breath on glass')." ⁵ Morris Louis (1912–62) is perhaps the best-known practitioner of this short-lived movement, partly undone, the author suggests, by the difficulty of reproducing the delicate effects, "predicated on subtle gradations of tone and hue, often at the threshold of perception." ⁶ The catalogue adds another layer of art historical perspective by reprinting Wanda M. Corn's essay for the groundbreaking 1972 exhibition "The Color of Mood: American Tonalism, 1880–1910." Corn astutely included photography as well as painting in her survey, an opportunity overlooked by the current exhibition, although "Like Breath on Glass" features some oils by the pioneer photographer Eduard Steichen. Corn points out some parallels between Whistler and Inness, notably a deliberate use of the word *tone* in cognizance of both its painterly and musical meanings. Inness discussed "the harmony of tone" in a picture, "the gradation of light and shade which corresponds to music." ⁷ On a cultural level, Tonalism represented a countercurrent to the hurly-burly optimism of the Gilded Age.

"Like Breath on Glass" does not radically shift the art historical landscape but offers insights that may stimulate discussion on this fascinating phenomenon. Curator Marc Simpson points out the implicit hint of magic in Whistler's breath-on-glass analogy. The works in the show "are the result of highly skilled painters manipulating their medium with every tool at their command," yet "each has been fashioned so as to *seem* less a handmade thing than a thought or vision breathed upon the canvas." ⁸ Spiritualism was rife at the fin-de-siècle, and occultism was pervasive. Whistler was not elf-shot in the way of such diverse contemporaries as Odilon Redon, Elihu Vedder and Arthur Rackham. ⁹ Whistler studiously avoided the iconographic trappings of ghosts, angels and fairies, but commentators frequently employed an otherworldly vocabulary to describe his work. When his *Arrangement in Black: Portrait of Señor Pablo de Sarasate* (1884) was shown at the Paris Salon, a critic characterized it as "a sort of apparition of the celebrated violinist called up by some medium in a séance of spiritualism." ¹⁰ It is interesting to note the use of the word *medium*, here in the sense of a channeler who gives voice—or sometimes visual form—to absent personalities. The word belongs to the vocabulary of art, too. Whistler uses the fluid medium of paint to conjure up an image of his subject. His admiration of Velázquez is evident in the brown-black palette and restrained dignity. But the painting also demands and rewards the viewer's patience in a modernist way. The dusky-pale face and hands, crisp white shirtfront and cuffs, and russet vio-

lin emerge from the Stygian darkness fairly easily. But the rest of the figure becomes visible only after the eyes adjust to the subtleties, as an Ad Reinhardt “black” painting gradually reveals its nuances of eggplant and teal.

The paintings that best illustrate the principle of “breath on glass,” however, are Whistler’s Nocturnes, in which the blurred contours of a great city loom like an apparition. Whistler described them, in his 1885 “Ten o’ Clock” lecture, in a Pateresque prose poem:

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 campanile, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and fairy-land is before us.... Nature, who for once has sung in tune, sings her exquisite song to the artist alone.¹¹

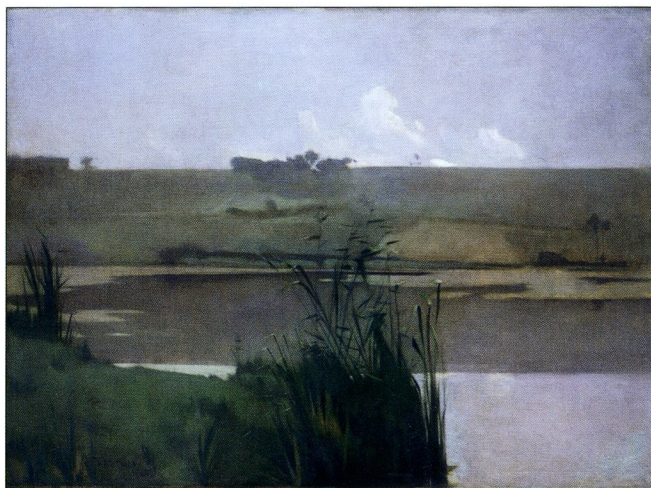
Whistler aimed for a painting technique that would be as diaphanous as those evening mists. The artist’s marks, his hand-work, were meant to be invisible. Using diluted paint, what he called his “sauce,” he worked wet-into-wet, layering tints over each other, rubbing them down until he achieved the effect he wanted. He worked on coarse fabric and let the weave show through the skin of paint. There is something magical about the process. For all his modernist sophistication, Whistler seems to have tapped into an ancient idea, the miraculously generated images the Greeks call *acheiropoietas* (literally, not made by hand). In her wonderful cultural study *Veronica and Her Cloth*, Ewa Kuryluk discusses legends of spontaneous icons, “images...impregnating the fabric with mercurial speed,” and remarks “a cloth with images...can be used to visualize the inner dimension of remembrance and fantasy.”¹²

Other artists have painted night scenes, such as John Atkinson Grimshaw (1836–93), whose darkness is punctuated by pockets of artificially lit activity—harbors, manufacturing plants, storefronts. He celebrates Victorian industriousness even as he notes with skill the play of different sorts of light and shadow. Whistler’s night scenes are different. *Nocturne: Black and Gold—The Fire Wheel* (1875) is swallowed up, except for the scintillating pyrotechnics, in smoke and night. Looking at the canvas, the novelist George Moore saw “not black paint but darkness.”¹³ Whistler’s coarse weave soaked up the dark stains the way Georges Seurat’s special, toothy paper absorbed conté crayon, creating his signature unfathomably rich blacks.

But Whistler is most at home not in full darkness, but in twilight. His views along the Thames turn the polluted, coal-fueled fogs of London into painted veils of refined beauty. In *Nocturne: Blue and Silver—Battersea Reach* (1872–78), a barge plies the expanse of water, shadowy buildings give soft definition to the horizon and pinpoint of colored light glow like tiny jewels. In *Nocturne in Blue and Silver: The Lagoon, Venice* (1880), we can make out the dome and campanile of San Giorgio Maggiore. But, as Denys Sutton writes, “the scene is almost

John Henry Twachtman
Arques-la-Bataille, 1885

THE METROPOLITAN
MUSEUM OF ART
NEW YORK CITY



ghostlike, the gondolas sneak through the night, with their particular, almost insidious gliding movement.”¹⁴ Both paintings are described as blue and silver Nocturnes, but Whistler’s range of nuance is remarkable. The paler *Battersea* shimmers in soft gradations of blue, green and grey. *The Lagoon, Venice* is darker but somehow more defined, with peacock tints in the water and undertones of rose in the sky. This is a scene that J.M.W. Turner and John Singer Sargent painted in hot, sparkling sunshine. Whistler gives a new interpretation of the city, tender and melancholy, a “floating world”—to use a phrase associated with the Japanese prints he collected—of the imagination.

If Whistler is the painter of twilight, Inness is the painter of afterglow—the subdued, still smoldering orange of a fading sunset—and soft greens, as in the 1891 *Summer, Montclair (New Jersey Landscape)*. Inness did not set out in search of ideal landscape. Topographically modest settings revealed their spiritual vibrations if the beholder adjusted his eye. He wrote: “elabourateness [sic] in detail did not gain me meaning.... I could not sustain it everywhere and produce the sense of spaces and distances and with them that subjective mystery of nature with which wherever I went I was filled.”¹⁵ In *Hazy Morning, Montclair* (1893), the left side of the picture is closed in by trees and a rudimentary house shape. Shadow spreads across the foreground. On the right, fields extend back to a blurred horizon and a tender mauve sky. The illusion of recession is convincing, but the unremarkable landscape is filtered through a spiritual sfumato. Adrienne Baxter Bell discusses the paintings in terms of William James’s idea that mystical knowledge is separated from everyday consciousness by only “the filmiest of screens,” which “soften nature’s outlines and open out the strongest possibilities and perspectives.”¹⁶ Inness did not limit himself to a single formula. *Home at Montclair* (1892) is a winter scene, with the foreground an expanse of scruffy but bright white snow. The cluster of buildings and trees on the horizon looks inviting under a matte orange sky. The wisp of smoke coming from a

chimney echoes the spindly form of a leafless, middle-distance tree, an elegant compositional stroke. More, it suggests what a grounded mystic Inness was, reconciling rapture with everyday existence. In one of his more radical paintings, *The Home of the Heron* (1893), a smoking chimney again appears in the distance, a tiny grace note of hominess and a counterpoint to the bird, silhouetted against a molten streak of light and water. Marshland features are implied through a web of smudges and stains that look organic. Against the luminous sky, a row of trees mark off space like the dividing measures of a musical score.

Inness is too messy and intense an artist to be part of the Aesthetic movement, but a number of Americans fall into the category of decorative artists. Thomas Wilmer Dewing, who was influenced by Whistler and Asian art, called his larger paintings decorations. While Dewing fits the criteria for the exhibition, with his blurry fantasias of pretty young women in open fields and elegant interiors, the works seem slight. Many of the paintings are enhanced by the suave architectural frames provided by Stanford White. A more interesting artist, John White Alexander (1856–1915) makes a strong impression with two works, the graceful figure study *In the Orchard* (c. 1894) and *A Ray of Sunlight* (*The Cellist*) from 1898. Alexander, who studied in Munich and formed friendships with Whistler and Henry James, was both a highly successful portrait painter and a Symbolist, associating in Paris with Mallarmé, Mirbeau and Gide. *A Ray of Sunlight* is a striking composition, with light falling across the arm of the musician and the curve of her instrument, while her face—in profile—remains a yearning, ghostly shape in deep shadow. Other artists push the paradigm into the twentieth century. The pioneer photographer Eduard Steichen (1879–1973) spent his early career shuttling between Romantically blurry photographs in the Pictorialist style and smudgy paintings such as *Across the Salt Marshes, Huntington* (1905). John Henry Twachtman, a far more accomplished

painter, proved too progressive for many of his contemporaries. The influence of Whistler and Japanese prints is evident in the lovely grey-green layers of *Arques-la-Bataille* (1885). The feathery details of the plants in the foreground anchor the scene in a real-world riverbank.



William Merritt Chase
The Young Orphan (At Her Ease), 1884
 NATIONAL ACADEMY MUSEUM
 NEW YORK CITY

The snowy landscapes based on his Connecticut farm tip over into something like abstraction. *Round Hill Road* (c. 1890) is a nearly square study in white, with only a curved line and a couple of tree-shapes in grey to suggest a landscape.

“Like Breath on Glass” is filled out with paintings that sometimes feel roped in and are of varying interest. John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), the worldliest of painters and a champion of bravura brushwork, is an unlikely candidate, but his *In the Luxembourg Gardens* (1879) softens contours in a moonlit twilight. The eclectic stylist William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) was equally adept at Velázquez-inspired still lifes and high-color Impressionist landscapes. His 1884 riff on Whistler, *The Young Orphan (At Her Ease)*, an arrangement in red and black, is enormously appealing. Arthur Wesley Dow (1857–1922) painted alongside Gauguin in Pont-Aven and taught Georgia O’Keeffe. Dow’s *The Mirror* (1916) nicely represents the allegorical-abstraction strain in American art. “Like Breath on Glass: Whistler, Inness and the Art of Painting Softly” is on view through October 19, 2008, at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267. Telephone (413) 458-2303. On the web at www.clarkart.edu

NOTES

1. Marc Simpson, et al., *Like Breath on Glass: Whistler, Inness and the Art of Painting Softly* (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, distributed by Yale University Press, 2008).
2. Cited, Adrienne Baxter Bell, *George Inness and the Visionary Landscape* (New York: National Academy of Design and George Braziller, Publishers, 2003), p. 47.
3. 1877 letter from Inness to his daughter, cited, Bell, p. 120.
4. See Cody Hartley, “True Illusions in Soft Paintings,” and Joyce Hill Stoner, “Materials for Immateriality” in *Like Breath on Glass*.
5. Michael J. Lewis, “The ‘Inaction Painters’ and Their Moment” in *Like Breath on Glass*, p. 198.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
7. “The Color of Mood: American Tonalism, 1880–1910” in *Like Breath on Glass*, p. 237.
8. Introduction, *Like Breath on Glass*.
9. See Charles C. Elderidge, *American Imagination and Symbolist Painting* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 1979).
10. Cited, Marc Simpson, “Whistler, Modernism and the Creative Afflatus” in *Like Breath on Glass*, p. 42.
11. Cited, *Like Breath on Glass*, p. 34.
12. Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 18, 180.
13. Cited, *Like Breath on Glass*, p. 37.
14. Denys Sutton, *Nocturne: The Art of James McNeill Whistler* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1963), p. 94.
15. Cited, Bell, p. 19.