

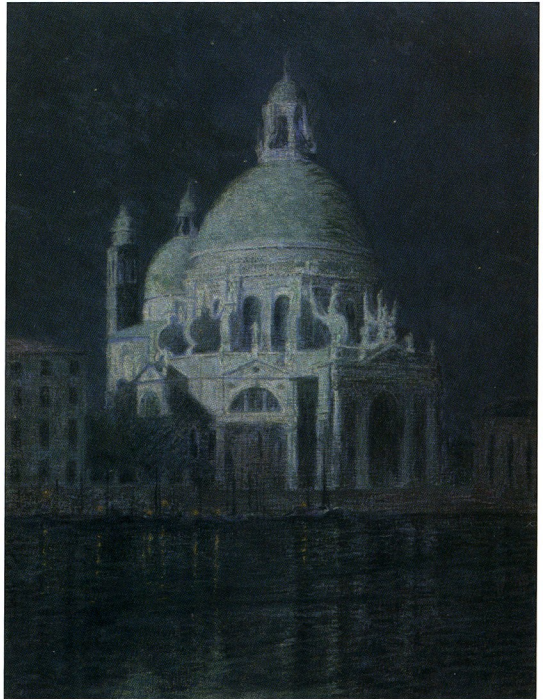
# Seeing in the Dark: Night Scenes in American Art

by Gail Leggio

In an 1838 journal entry, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote: “Moonlight is sculpture. Sunlight is painting.”<sup>1</sup> The ninety, mostly two-dimensional works in “Night Vision: Nocturnes in American Art, 1860–1960” argue against that simple dichotomy. To be sure, moonlight emphasizes sculptural qualities in Winslow Homer’s *The Fountains at Night, World’s Columbian Exposition* (1893) and John Leslie Breck’s *Santa Maria della Salute by Moonlight* (1897), yet its phantasmal glow also undermines any sense of solidity.

The title of this exhibition—presented only at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, June 27–October 18, 2015—and of its accompanying catalogue is “purposely ambiguous,” according to curator Joachim Homann. It “refers on a literal level to the conditions of visual perception specific to seeing in the dark, which requires special sensitivity and alertness. At the same time, it alludes to the imaginative, poetic, and potentially visionary experience that darkness can produce.”<sup>2</sup> The chosen timeframe underscores the importance of night themes on the cusp of the modern world.

Darkness, accepted for millennia as a diurnal fact of existence, seemed to be losing ground to human ingenuity. Many people, including and often especially artists, viewed artificial light with mixed feelings. We still do, complaining of light pollution and the inability to see the stars above our cities. Alex, protagonist of Anthony Burgess’s 1962 novel *A Clockwork Orange* and perhaps twentieth-century fiction’s most



John Leslie Breck, *Santa Maria della Salute by Moonlight*, 1897

COURTESY ADELSON GALLERIES,  
NEW YORK CITY

poetic thug, rhapsodizes about getting out of the city: “And soon it was trees and dark, with real country dark.” Artists became nocturnal, in part, because “darkness had become a distinctive and conscious experience when it ceased to be the only option at night.”<sup>3</sup>

The Nocturnes of James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) form a natural jumping-off point for this investigation into aestheticized obscurity, albeit with a stronger presence in the catalogue than the few minor works in the exhibition would suggest. The first painting reproduced in the catalogue is Whistler’s *Nocturne in Black and Gold—The Falling Rocket* (c. 1875), a swarthy near-abstraction with a drift of pyrotechnic fire that led to an infamous legal showdown between Whistler and the critic John Ruskin. Fireworks by night (and analogous subjects like Vesuvius in eruption) had long been favored by artists wanting to create bravura effects. A good example in this exhibition is Albert Bierstadt’s *The Burning Ship* (1869), which features lively incidents like rescue boats and a contrasting moonlight-touched section of the composition. Despite the darkness, Bierstadt’s picture is busy in a way the fastidious Whistler would have found crude.

Whistler actually preferred twilight—what the French call *l’heure bleu*—to full night. In a famous passage from his *Ten O’Clock* lecture, he delivers a prose poem on the subject:

And when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil, and the poorer buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanili, and the warehouses are palaces in the night...

Then, Whistler continues, the daylight people “cease to understand, as they have ceased to see, and Nature...sings her exquisite song to the artist alone.”<sup>4</sup> Whistler is a seeker after beauty, a role which falls within the job description of the traditional artist. But he is modern in insisting that beauty is revealed through acts of intelligent perception. The artist finds it in the ordinary London waterfront, shrouded in coal-fueled smog (a word that combines fog and smoke). Far from the glare of the obvious, such subtle effects challenge the painter—both his imagination and his technical skill. And they challenge the viewer, who must regard the painting with attentive patience.

D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930), best known as a novelist but also a prolific—and sometimes brilliant—poet, captures both the look and the idea of a nocturne in his “Grey Evening”:

Now underneath a blue-grey twilight, heaped  
Beyond the withering snow of the shorn fields  
Stands rubble of stunted houses; all is reaped  
And garnered that the golden daylight yields.

Dim lamps like yellow poppies glimmer among  
The shadowy stubble of the under-dusk,  
As farther off the scythe of night is swung  
And little stars coming rolling from their husk.

And so I sit and scan the book of grey,  
Feeling the shadows like a blind man reading  
All fearful lest I find the last words bleeding  
With wounds of sunset and the dying day.

Lawrence obliquely laments the loss of a loved one, as if through abandonment rather than death. But the poem also describes an act of looking that is simultaneously a search for understanding. For the nocturne artist, the dusk is a mirror, and peering into the darkness is a kind of divination.

George Inness (1825–94) was an adept of spiritual perception. While he began his career as a clear-eyed landscapist in the Hudson River School mode, he became a convert to the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who saw nature as an arcane text revealing the divine (and who influenced many artists, including William Blake). Inness depicted the modest marshlands around Montclair, New Jersey, and Harpon Springs, Florida, sometimes focusing on the benevolent afterglow of a smoldering sunset.<sup>5</sup> At other times, he found sanctity in near-total darkness. *Winter Evening* (c. 1864–65) contains two small figures, some distant trees and a cloud-streaked sky. The casual observer may dismiss these elements as smudges, but the enlightened eye will find beauty. The viewer must have an open, contemplative attitude.

Inness's visual philosophy can be followed in a legacy that extends beyond the limits of "Night Vision." The avant-garde composer John Cage, who practiced a Buddhism-inflected spirituality, wrote: "If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four....Eventually one discovers it is not boring at all." The 1960s black paintings of Ad Reinhardt are dull and virtually interchangeable in reproduction. But in a subtly lighted gallery, the originals reward a viewer's patient contemplation, revealing subtle shifts of color from black to slate blue or aubergine. Fortunately, the reproductions in *Night Vision* are large and sensitive, which is important for these artists, who mostly cling to the cause of representation, however they may seem to anticipate abstraction.

Many of the exhibition's artists could be considered traditionalists, to some extent, not only in their loyalty to representation but also in their choice of subject matter. The moon continued to be a popular subject in the nineteenth century, especially among Romantics such as Caspar David Friedrich (who stands outside the scope of this all-American exhibition) and John Keats, whose poem *Endymion* perpetuates the mythological dramatis personae of antiquity.

Still, the moon exerted its magnetic pull on American artists, as Linda J. Docherty explores in her catalogue essay, "Nocturnal Reflections: Images of





Ralph Albert Blakelock, *A Waterfall, Moonlight*, c. 1886

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART,  
NEW YORK CITY

the Moon in the Age of Electric Light.” The harshness of artificial light prompted a deeper appreciation for natural moonlight.<sup>6</sup> The exhibition features attractive examples, including Bierstadt’s relatively straightforward *Cloud Study, Moonlight* (c. 1860), along with the more exaggerated *Macbeth and the Witches* (after mid-1890s), by Albert Pinkham Ryder, and two works by Ralph Albert Blakelock, *Moonlight* (c. 1880s) and *A Waterfall, Moonlight* (c. 1886). (Blakelock, a fine pianist, called

another landscape *Moonlight Sonata* [c. 1892]; like Whistler, he felt that all art aspires to the condition of music.)

The scholar Abraham A. Davidson describes *A Waterfall* as a “forest moon-scape,” with the lacy foliage ensnaring the moon: “It is the affinity of one part of nature for another.”<sup>7</sup> Davidson considers Blakelock, Ryder and Inness visionary painters; he and Docherty both add Charles Burchfield to that list. Burchfield’s *The Night Wind* (1918), in this exhibition, makes a good case for that characterization. It is a spooky landscape, with ragged clouds like expressionist hieroglyphics.

Historically, darkness has played a significant role in religious art, notably in the chiaroscuro-rich scenes of Rembrandt and Caravaggio, and in works such as Georges de la Tour’s *Penitent Magdalene* (1625–50), which shows the saint’s cell illuminated by a single candle, reflected in a mirror, an emblem of contemplative self-reflection. In Christian thought, the *via negativa* tradition generated explorations of the paradox of light-in-darkness. Perhaps the finest poem on the trope is “The Night,” by Henry Vaughan (1621–95). Lamenting time wasted in “loud, evil days,” Vaughan finds salvation in the night:

There is in God—some say—  
A deep, but dazzling darkness, as men here  
Say it is late and dusky, because they see not clear.  
O for that Night! Where I in Him  
Might live invisible and dim!

Vaughan cites as a biblical model Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin:

Wise Nicodemus saw such light  
As made him know his God by night.

The story of Nicodemus seeking out Jesus under cover of darkness appears only in the Gospel of John, a principal source of the Gnostic strain in Christian theology.

The works in this exhibition tend toward modernism, which we think of as predominantly secular. Still, mysticism continued to grow in the fertile darkness, on the cusp of and well into the twentieth century—in the Tonalist works of the Swedenborgian George Inness, the watercolors of the pantheist Charles Burchfield and the biblical scenes of Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1931). An African American painter who studied in Paris and under Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Tanner traveled in the Middle East to research his biblical subjects, but he avoided the kind of archaeological detail seen in the art of William Holman Hunt and James Tissot, whose *Life of Christ* (1886–94) retells the gospel stories with proto-cinematic flair. Tanner's paintings are less directly illustrative. There are several in this exhibition.

*Nicodemus* (1899) draws on the same gospel incident as Vaughan's poem. Tanner depicts the elderly Pharisee on a terrace with Jesus. Both figures are shrouded in blue-grey dusk. In the dim light and deep shadows, Christ's features are virtually indecipherable, suggesting that faith is more important than the evidence of one's eyes. This obscurity may also be the artist's way of arguing that the salvation embodied in Christ transcends racial and ethnic distinctions. Tanner uses light and shadow differently in his other work in this exhibition. In the surprisingly sensuous *Salome* (c. 1900), the dancer's torso and legs—diaphanously veiled in a way that emphasizes rather than hides her body—emerge into bright artificial light, while her face and shoulders are enveloped in gloom. Tanner admired the contemporary performer Loïe Fuller, whose elaborately staged dances took advantage of advanced lighting techniques.<sup>8</sup>

Tanner, an interesting painter, simply does not have the daring compositional economy, rooted in technical bravura, that Whistler and Inness have. Childe Hassam (1859–1935) wields that kind of skill, without the atmosphere of aestheticism or spiritualism. Whistler finds poetry in the illusion of an



unpopulated city; Hassam relishes the human presence of a city that doesn't sleep. Hassam's *Nocturne, Railway Crossing, Chicago* (1893) is dark as night, but carriage lights and the just-discernable traffic invigorate the obscurity. His *Cab Stand at Night, Madison Square* (1891) is brightly lit by electricity, gas lamps and pure white snow, which set off the black-clad drivers, a convivial group. Snow and rain were effects cherished by secular nocturne-painters, and by Pictorialist photographers such as Edward Steichen, whose celebrated *Flatiron* (1906) is featured.

The exhibition makes a strong case for secular connoisseurs of night, such as John Sloan (1871–1951) and Edward Hopper (1882–1967). Sloan's lithographs and etchings—with provocative titles such as *Hell Hole* (1917), *Turning Out the Light* (1905) and *Roofs, Summer Night* (1906)—suggest scenes from a novel or film about urban life. Sloan's painting *The Cot* (1907), a dimly lit scene of a woman preparing for bed in a downscale room, could be an illustration for a Theodore Dreiser novel. *The Picture Shop Window* (1907) plays with the conventions of the nocturne, depicting passersby on the gloomy street drawn to the artificially lit display.

Hopper, too, incorporated abbreviated allusions to storytelling in his compositions. The black-and-white *Night Shadows* (1921) looks down, from a high vantage point, on a solitary man, a tiny black shape against the pale expanse



Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Nicodemus*, 1899

PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA



Andrew Wyeth, *Night Hauling*, 1944

© ANDREW WYETH, BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART, BRUNSWICK, MAINE

of the sidewalk. The stretched shadow of a street light falls menacingly across his path. This striking work could be a still from a film noir thriller. Other Hopper works are discussed in the catalogue, including *Night Windows* (1928), where we glimpse the cropped figure of a half-dressed woman, and *Room in New York* (1932), in which a man reading a newspaper and a woman idly fingering a piano keyboard are glimpsed through a window. They look like actors in a play, revealed in stage lighting as the curtain goes up. Hopper includes architectural details from apartment-building windows—essentially prosceniums framing the action. In her catalogue essay, Avis Berman addresses the charge of “voyeurism” often leveled at Sloan and Hopper, noting that New Yorkers often make little effort to screen their activities and suggesting “collusion—or an indifference to being seen.”<sup>9</sup>

Many of the subjects raised in this exhibition and catalogue could be explored further: Hopper’s vision of the city at night, for example, would make an intriguing show. But the wide net cast here brings in some fascinating specimens, such as Arthur Bowen Davies’s (1862–1928) *Sleep Lies Perfect in Them* (1906), in which six young women, with a Pre-Raphaelite look, recline in a meadow, very much in the style of Ferdinand Hodler. George Tooker’s *Dance* (1946) depicts an urban street scene as a modern *danse macabre*, in which a skeleton mingles with pedestrians. Andrew Wyeth’s *Night Hauling* (1944) ostensibly shows lobster traps but could pass for a scene from a science fiction movie.



Georgia O'Keeffe, most associated with the sunburnt southwest, explores the nocturne in two lovely works. In *New York Night* (1928–29), she looks down on the Upper East Side from the apartment she shared with Alfred Stieglitz, recording the spots of colored light—from shop windows, streetlights and traffic—that punctuate the darkness. *Black Abstraction* (1927), with a pinpoint of white amid gradually softening waves of black, “captured the fading of her consciousness during anesthesia,” she reported.<sup>10</sup>

Another O'Keeffe work, discussed in the catalogue, achieves poise between abstraction and representation. *Wave, Night* (1928) radically simplifies the shoreline components of water, sand and sky, but it retains the essence of the beach at night, while also describing the act of perception. It brings to mind a line from Raymond Chandler's novel *The Big Sleep* (1939): “Under the thinning fog the surf curled and creamed, almost without a sound, like a thought trying to form itself on the edge of consciousness.” Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 9400 College Station, Brunswick, Maine 04011. Telephone (207) 725-3275. [bowdoin.edu/art-museum](http://bowdoin.edu/art-museum)

#### Notes

1. *The American Notebooks of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).
2. Joachim Homann, with essays by Avis Berman, Daniel Bosch, Linda J. Docherty, Alexander Nemerov and Hélène Valance, *Night Vision: Nocturnes in American Art, 1860–1960* (Munich, London and New York: Delmonico Books, Prestel, in association with Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2015), 9.
3. Andreas Blühm and Louise Lippincott, *Light! The Industrial Age 1750–1900: Art and Science, Technology and Society* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 25.
4. *Night Vision*, 11.
5. 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).
6. *Night Vision*, 21–31.
7. Abraham A. Davidson, *The Eccentrics and Other American Visionary Painters* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), 132.
8. Anna O. Marley, ed., *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit* (Berkeley: University of California Press in association with the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2012).
9. *Night Vision*, 40.
10. *Night Vision*, 139.