Out of Hours Art

THE SPELL OF THE THAMES

An American in London:

Whistler and the Thames

Dulwich Picture Gallery, London

16 October 2013–12 January 2014

For people like me, who get a thrill from the vistas of the Thames when crossing one of its bridges, this small, concentrated exhibition about Whistler's obsession with the river was a very special treat indeed.

Whistler was born in Massachusetts in 1834. At the age of 9, his mother took him to St Petersburg where his father worked as a railway engineer. He was taught to draw at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, and this exhibition shows how important it is for painters to learn to draw properly. In 1849, after the death of his father, the family was back in Connecticut where, after being a failure at the military academy in West Point, New York, Whistler trained as a draughtsman

and worked briefly for the US Coast and Geodetic Society. At 21 years he was a student in Paris and in 1859 moved to London where his half-sister Deborah lived with her husband, the surgeon and printmaker Francis Seymour Haden.

The very fine etchings in the first room of this exhibition show the hustle and bustle of the Thames as a working river in all

its detail, and you can almost experience the sounds and smells of this rough, crowded working area. Whistler observed everything and recorded the smallest details. However, he soon moved from this realistic and detailed work to a much freer and impressionistic style of painting. From his house in Lindsey Row, Chelsea he had panoramic views of the river. His neighbours, the boat builders Walter and Henry Greaves, would row him on the river as well as helping in the studio. For 40 years

James McNeill Whistler (American, 1834–1903), *Pink and Silver - Chelsea, the Embankment*, c. 1885. Watercolor on paper, 5 x 8 1/2 in. (12.7 x 21.6 cm). Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA, 1955.1533

he observed and recorded life on the river in all its moods and details. His fine dreamlike 'nocturnes' are his best known river paintings:

'By using the word "nocturne", he said "I wished to indicate an artistic interest alone, divesting the picture of any outside anecdotal interest which might have been otherwise attached to it."

The famous *Nocturne: Blue and Gold — Old Battersea Bridge* (1872/1875) was loaned by the Tate for this exhibition.

His later paintings were much influenced by Japanese art, which became very popular in the West during the second half of the 19th century. *Symphony in White, No 2: the Little White Girl* and the *Old Battersea Bridge* paintings are examples of this influence. Of the lesser-known works I particularly liked two small watercolours *Blue and Silver: The Thames 1882* and *Pink and Silver — Chelsea, the Embankment 1885*. But there were so many delights on view here that each visitor will have discovered his or her own favourites.

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James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge*, c. 1872–75, oil on canvas, 68.26 x 51.2 cm, © Tate London, 2012, presented by the Art Fund, 1905