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Thames River Works

**Edited by Shalini Le Gall and Justin
McCann**

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Cover image: Hew Locke, Huan Tian Xi Di, 2016, acrylic paint on C-TYPE photograph, 124.5 × 174 cm.. Digital image courtesy of DACS/Artimage 2022 (all rights reserved).

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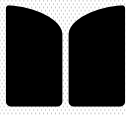
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Introduction: “Watery Relations”

Shalini Le Gall and Justin McCann

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In early January 1864, a “sharp frost” hit London. According to his mother, it was during this period of frigid weather that James McNeill Whistler opened the windows of his house that overlooked the Thames and painted *Chelsea in Ice* (fig. 1). In the painting, barren trees line the riverbank where pedestrians have stopped to watch a steamboat navigate the icy water. In the distance, factories on the Battersea shore loom as a solid gray mass, underscoring the wintry conditions. Along with *Battersea Reach from Lindsey House* (1864-1870) (fig. 2) and *Grey and Silver: Chelsea Wharf* (1864-1868) (fig. 3), *Chelsea in Ice* foregrounds Whistler’s interest in the industrial and commercial Thames riverscape and anticipates the more well-known nocturnes of the 1870s.



Figure 1.

James McNeill Whistler, *Chelsea in Ice*, 1864, oil on canvas, 45.09 × 60.96 cm. The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (2013.293). Digital image courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art (all rights reserved).



Figure 2.

James McNeill Whistler, *Battersea Reach from Lindsey House*, circa 1864–1871, oil on canvas, 51.3 × 76.5 cm. Collection of The Hunterian, University of Glasgow (GLAHA_46358). Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).



Figure 3.

James McNeill Whistler, *Grey and Silver: Chelsea Wharf*, 1864-1868, oil on canvas, 61 × 46 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington (1942.9.99). Digital image courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington (public domain).

The word “atmospheric” is often used to describe these works. This poetic quality, however, provides the paintings with more than mood and feeling. As an aesthetic term, atmospheric can be taken to include both the way in which Whistler depicts Battersea Reach, for example, and the riverscape itself. It forms one line of inquiry inspired by the method set forth in Jesse Oak Taylor’s book *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (2016). In Taylor’s analysis, focusing on the atmosphere in urban environments inverts the presumed central subject. As he puts it, “foreground becomes background and background becomes foreground”.¹ Although he famously championed the autonomy of art and its

independence from everyday life, Whistler's pictures of the Thames remain rooted in the industrial activities happening on and by the river. As environmental historian Vanessa Taylor writes,

Rivers have always been enmeshed in dominant economic and political discourses ... As unruly environments, they also overflow the banks of any single ideology or management structure. Because of the ways in which they connect involuntary neighbors, rivers are always social and political ... ²

Whistler and the Thames were neighbors for much of the second half of the nineteenth century. From Lindsey House in Chelsea, Whistler had a clear view of the river, and he spent considerable time walking alongside and rowing on it. His paintings and prints are part of the material world and web of relationships that characterize the Thames during this period.

Drawing on Vanessa Taylor's analysis of rivers as critical components of a region's cultural and environmental history, this special issue of *British Art Studies* centers the Thames—and its ships, docks, gardens, plants, and factories—in discussions of art, work, and life in nineteenth-century London. The title, "Thames River Works", signals the industrial and economic importance of the river, as well as the many ways in which the river worked (and has continued to work) as a dynamic force in the lives of those who encounter it. Throughout history, the Thames at London has been a symbol of change and the passage of time, with its shifting shorelines and extreme tides that have altered the flow of the river on a daily basis and the deterioration of bridges over the course of years. The management of the river was the major environmental issue of nineteenth-century London. As engineers sought to contain and improve the river, artists like Whistler found inspiration in it. The works of art and images produced by those working on the river speak to the myriad ways that the Thames connects seemingly disparate perspectives and time periods.

Many of the articles in this special issue reference Whistler, both because of the artist's singular importance in developing images of the river that would become fixtures in the art-historical canon, and because of the project's origins in a Whistler exhibition. In 2019, we organized the exhibition *River Works: Whistler and the Industrial Thames* at the Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine. The show drew heavily from the extraordinary prints and paintings in the Lunder Collection and was developed in partnership with students and faculty. Embedded at an academic art museum, in an institution with strong environmental studies and environmental humanities initiatives, the exhibition created a forum for class sessions and public lectures that explored the connections between art, energy, empire, and the

environment. Concurrently, the Colby Museum also presented *Hew Locke: Here's the Thing*, organized by Jonathan Watkins at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, and curated by Diana Tuite at the Colby Museum (fig. 4). Locke's work in that exhibition critically re-examined the symbols and imagery of the maritime traditions and cultures of the British Empire. In sculptural interventions that include modified busts of Queen Victoria and suspended ships laden with vegetation, Locke draws our attention to the ways that maritime activity is deeply connected to colonialism, migration, and the environment. Centering Guyana, formerly British Guiana, where Locke was raised, these works of art force consideration of the global pathways traced by British maritime activity in the nineteenth century. This activity often began, and ended, with the Thames. In the painting *Huan Tian Xi Di* (2016), Locke references a traditional Chinese vessel scheduled to participate in the Diamond Jubilee Thames procession of Elizabeth II in 2012 (fig. 5). As Tuite has written, the subject recalls "the triumphalism of invasion or military victory", while reinforcing the river's importance in securing the wealth generated by Britain's vast mercantile operations.³ We have paired two of Whistler's works depicting the Thames (figs. 6 and 7) with Locke's *Huan Tian Xi Di*, and a still from the "map of contents" at the top of this page, in a series of cover images for this issue. These covers delineate our approach to transhistorical dimensions of the Thames, with close study of specific works of art and consideration of the river's continuing legacy on the peoples and places formerly subject to British colonial power.



Figure 4.

Installation view, *Hew Locke: Here's the Thing*, 8 March–2 June 2019, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Ikon Gallery. Photo: Stuart Whipps (all rights reserved).



Figure 5.

Hew Locke, Huan Tian Xi Di, 2016, acrylic paint on C-TYPE photograph, 124.5 × 174 cm. Digital image courtesy of DACS/Artimage 2022 (all rights reserved).



Figure 6.

James McNeill Whistler, *Brown and Silver: Old Battersea Bridge*, 1862-1865, oil on canvas mounted on masonite, 63.8 × 76 cm. Collection of the Addison Gallery of American Art (1928.55). Digital image courtesy of the Addison Gallery of American Art / Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).



Figure 7.

James McNeill Whistler, *Troopships*, 1887, etching and drypoint, second (final) state, 13.1 × 17.6 cm. Collection of The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (2013.490). Digital image courtesy of The Lunder Collection, Colby College Museum of Art (all rights reserved).

This special issue, initially organized around Whistler's art, evolved to consider the Thames as a waterway that connected London to the world, and a marker of cultural and environmental history in the industrial period. For many of the authors, Whistler remains a point of departure, but the questions raised in these analyses extend beyond biographical modes of inquiry. The articles included here are methodologically grounded in the processes, vistas, and ecologies of the Thames and fundamentally ask what it might mean to think with water. From rural villages in the British countryside to the North Sea opening into wider waters, the Thames transported priceless cargo, nurtured botanical specimens, collected industrial waste, and was admired (and at times avoided) by pleasure seekers. As the articles in this issue reveal, thinking with water, and specifically Thames water, asks that we center the river as an object of study and as a cultural element in the lives of those who engaged with it.

In their articles for this issue, Patricia de Montfort looks closely at the lives of women depicted by Whistler in modern urban landscapes, Jon Newman contextualizes Whistler's Battersea scenes in an analysis of the aesthetics of erasure and redevelopment, and Shalini Le Gall situates Tilbury as a launching point for the study of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. Sarah Mead Leonard examines plant motifs and botany in the development of William Morris's pastoral subjects, and Nancy Rose Marshall explores the visual

imagery and violence of the Tooley Street fire, and the risks associated with merchandise held in dock warehouses. The immateriality of gas, and the emergence of a visual gas field critical to the development of the manufacturing and ballooning industries are the focus of Jennifer Tucker's article. Aleema Gray and Danielle Thom study the colonialist legacy of the West India Docks, and the challenges of decolonizing culturally contested public spaces. Gray and Thom pose the critical question: If the river works, for whom and what does it work?

The objects and materials at the center of these studies are varied. They include prints, maps, paintings, illustrations, periodicals, monuments, photographs, wallpaper, and decorative art objects. Aesthetic questions, when asked, are grounded in studies of the Thames. The articles share an understanding of nineteenth-century London as a "watery place" filled with "watery relations", as described by Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis in *Thinking with Water* (2013). Chen writes,

Unlike thinking with land, thinking with water asks that we deterritorialize how we understand where we live and that we consider ongoing relations with others—whether these relations join us to other locations, other beings, or other events and spacetimes.⁴

Chen's approach helps us understand the Thames as a living historical archive, prompting questions about art, environment, empire, and industry. Our access to this living archive, and many other more conventional research centers, was drastically impacted by the restrictions related to the global pandemic that began in 2020. Although many of the articles in this publication benefited from primary source research in a number of archives, including the Museum of London, Docklands, and the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, the pandemic required us all to pivot toward digital research methods. In the process, we discovered collaborators and information portals that profoundly shaped the nature of our papers. As our work moved into Zoom meetings over the period of 12–18 months, the phrase "I'll drop the link in the chat" became a common refrain. Our discussions centered on considerations of the materiality of the archives, while our ongoing research uncovered the ways in which digital archives and scholarship are especially well suited to the study of a living subject like the Thames.

As an object of study, the Thames is a transhistorical specimen. In his project *Tate Thames Dig* (1999), contemporary artist Mark Dion worked with a team to collect objects on the foreshore of the Thames, and later displayed them in a cabinet at the Tate Gallery (figs. 8 and 9). Roman coins, medieval

artifacts, and plastic refuse all combined to narrate the history of human interaction with the river. Although many of the articles in this issue focus on the long nineteenth century, several of the studies also adopt a transhistorical framework, examining, for example, real estate development in Battersea or decolonial approaches to the West India Docks. As our research shifted primarily to web-based formats during the pandemic, we also explored community-led archival efforts, such as the *Barter Archive* led by artist Pat Wingshan Wong. Wong trades her sketches of the Billingsgate fish market with fishmongers in exchange for physical memorabilia and recorded oral histories (figs. 10–13). With this archival project, Wong aims to provide “visibility, respect and compassion to the invisible or marginalised communities”, working in the market.



Figure 8.

Mark Dion, Tate Thames Dig: Mark Dion and Collaborators with Cleaned and Classified Artifacts, South Lawn of the Tate at Millbank, 1999, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Mark Dion (all rights reserved).



Figure 9.

Mark Dion, Tate Thames Dig, 1999, wooden cabinet, porcelain, earthenware, metal, animal bones, glass, 27 prints and 2 maps, 266 × 370 × 126 cm. Collection of Tate (T07669). Digital image courtesy of Mark Dion / Tate (all rights reserved).



Figure 10.

Pat Wingshan Wong, Fawsitt Fish: Tony, 6 October 2020, carbon transfer drawing on paper, 13.5 × 21 cm. Digital image courtesy of barter_archive, <https://www.barter-archive.com/>, drawn by Pat WingShan Wong (all rights reserved).



Figure 11.

Pat Wingshan Wong, C&A Seafood, 21 January 2021, carbon transfer drawing on paper, 13.5 x 21 cm. Digital image courtesy of barter_archive, <https://www.barter-archive.com/>, drawn by Pat WingShan Wong (all rights reserved).



Figure 12.

Pat Wingshan Wong, Billingsgate Fish Market (Outdoor), 10 October 2020, carbon transfer drawing on paper, 13.5 x 21 cm. Digital image courtesy of barter_archive, <https://www.barter-archive.com/>, drawn by Pat WingShan Wong (all rights reserved).



Figure 13.

Pat Wingshan Wong, Mick's Eel Supply, 21 May 2021, carbon transfer drawing on paper, 13.5 × 21 cm. Digital image courtesy of barter_archive, <https://www.barter-archive.com/>, drawn by Pat WingShan Wong (all rights reserved).

More than a century-and-a-half earlier, Whistler had etched laborers outside of the Billingsgate fish market waiting to be hired for the day (see [fig. 6](#)). Wong's work helps us connect the present with the past and reconsider the long tradition and culture of riverside employment. A desire to make and visualize connections between different historical periods and academic disciplines inspired us to approach this project from the very beginning as a web-based publication. The faces, places, and objects depicted in Whistler's, Wong's, and Locke's works each carry a history that is complex and multilayered, at once personal and collective. A river's nature to flow, connect, and network—to form “watery relations”—makes its histories non-linear and expansive. It requires us to excavate its past at specific points, as these articles and the works of art they examine do, and study its layers to see how they connect to one another and to a world we have inherited from the past.

The river's “watery relations” have fostered connections between people and places and necessitated the flow and exchange of materials and ideas. At the outset of this project, we considered how we might work with the team at *BAS* to map these relations. We were especially interested in how digital methodologies might show both the historical character and the connective and relational essence of the Thames. Inspired by folding river maps, whose format approximates the long scroll of a webpage, we ultimately landed on a

“map of contents” interface, designed by Lizzie Malcolm at Rectangle, which marks each article in this issue at a relevant point along the Thames. The river’s outline illustrates the tension between the natural contours of the river and the crisp angles of man-made structures. Our hope is that this engaging feature, and the art-historical research presented across the seven articles in this issue, allow readers to trace unexpected connections in their study of the Thames, and identify topics for further research and inquiry.

Footnotes

- 1 Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog and British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 14–15.
- 2 Vanessa Taylor, “London’s River? The Thames as Contested Environmental Space”, *The London Journal: A Review of Metropolitan Society Past and Present* 40, no. 3 (2015): 184, DOI:[10.1179/1749632215Y.0000000010](https://doi.org/10.1179/1749632215Y.0000000010).
- 3 Diana Tuite, “Pretenders to the Throne: Imperialism, Authenticity and Excess”, in *Hew Locke: Here’s the Thing* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery; Kansas City, MO: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art; Waterville, ME: Colby College Museum of Art, 2019), 58.
- 4 Cecilia Chen, “Mapping Waters: Thinking with Watery Places”, in *Thinking with Water: An Aqueous Imaginary and An Epistemology of Unknowability*, ed. Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013), 275.

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