

Painting the Night

By Kathleen McShane

Painting nighttime scenes can be complex. Typically, the artist must deal with limited sources of light, real (moon, stars) or artificial (street or interior lights, candles). Colors are perceived differently by the human eye at night. Different techniques are required to create depth when the scene occurs at night. Nevertheless, for hundreds of years, artists have created magnificent nighttime scenes in a myriad of styles. Here are some of the best.



Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, 1610

The Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610) was, according to the National Gallery in London, "Arrogant, rebellious and a murderer". His tempestuous temperament is evident in both his behavior and his art. Caravaggio was a master of dramatic lighting. His signature style, *chiaroscuro*, uses a stark contrast between light and dark to bring figures and actions forward from a shadowy background. The term *chiaroscuro* comes from the Italian words for "light" (*chiaro*) and "dark" (*scuro*). The *Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* is thought to be his last painting.



Georges de la Tour, *The Repentant Magdalene*, c. 1635-1640.

Georges de la Tour (1593-1652) was a French Baroque painter whose work largely reflects religious themes. His paintings are frequently candlelit scenes in the chiaroscuro style. The influence of Caravaggio is evident; De la Tour is considered a Caravaggisti, a 17th-century European painter who was a stylistic follower of the Italian artist.



Rembrandt, *The Night Watch*, 1642

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669), a Dutch Golden Age artist, is considered to be one of the greatest visual artists in the history of Western civilization. *The Militia Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq (The Night Watch)* is perhaps his most famous painting. A commissioned work for the new hall of the musketeer branch of the civic militia in Amsterdam, *The Night Watch* contrasts with the style that was common for this type of work. Instead of the typical formal, stiff portrayal of figures, Rembrandt's painting features dramatic action. Another of Rembrandt's nighttime paintings, *Christ in The Storm on the Sea of Galilee* (1633), was among the 13 artworks stolen (and yet to be recovered) from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston in 1990. The empty frame remains in the very place from which the painting was cut.



J.M.W. Turner, *Fishermen at Sea*, 1796

The British artist, J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), captured the hard life of fishermen in rough seas near the Isle of Wight in his moonlit *Fishermen at Sea*. A Romantic artist, Turner is well known for his marine paintings, which often feature turbulent seascapes. This painting is in the Tate Gallery's collection in London and is known as the first oil painting Turner exhibited at the Royal Academy.



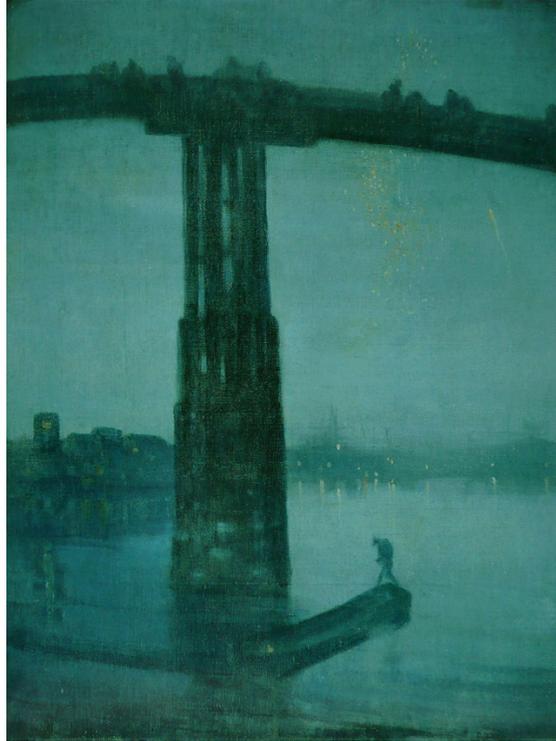
Francisco de Goya, *Witches' Sabbath*, 1798

Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) is considered to be the most important Spanish artist of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, often referred to as the last Old Master and the father of Modern Art. Among the Romantic School of artists, Goya frequently portrayed current events; he is considered an exemplary war artist. *Witches' Sabbath* was one of a series of six paintings on the subject of witchcraft, commissioned by the Dukes of Osana to decorate their estate, El Capricho, near Madrid. The painting has been interpreted as a protest against the values upheld during the Spanish Inquisition and as a mockery of the superstitious beliefs common in Spain at the time.



Claude Monet, *A Seascape, Shipping by Moonlight*, c.1864

Claude Monet (1840-1926) is considered to be the founder of Impressionism. One of his early influences was the Le Havre artist Eugène Boudin, who introduced Monet to the concept of *plein air* painting. Monet later said that he owed Boudin everything for his success. Monet was obsessed with light and its effects; he often painted the same scene over and over to capture the changes in light, as well as changes in weather and seasons. His series of haystacks, water lilies, and the cathedral at Rouen are good examples. *Seascape, Shipping by Moonlight*, one of the artist's early works, depicts the Honfleur harbor in Normandy. Monet said that he admired moonlit paintings, but noted the difficulty of painting nature at night.



James Whistler, *Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge*, c. 1872-75



James Whistler, *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, 1875

The American artist, James Whistler (1834-1903), was a leading proponent of the Aesthetic movement, whose philosophy was based on "Art for Art's Sake". He painted one of the most recognizable portraits in Western art, *Arrangement in Black and Grey No. 1*, known colloquially as Whistler's Mother or sometimes the Victorian Mona Lisa. He also painted a series of Nocturnes, representations of nighttime, adopting and adapting the term from Chopin's piano compositions. He would often be rowed out on the Thames River, memorizing the scene, which he then painted in his London studio.

Whistler sued the art critic John Ruskin for libel in 1877 after the art critic criticized the artist's *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, calling it "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." Whistler won the suit but was awarded only a single farthing in damages. Due to the impact of the criticism on the value of his work, Whistler was forced to declare bankruptcy.



Vincent Van Gogh, *Starry Night over the Rhône*, 1888



Vincent Van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889

Although Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) is clearly one of the best-known artists in the history of Western civilization art, his career as an artist lasted fewer than 10 years, from 1881, when he decided he could simultaneously be an artist and serve God, to his untimely death by suicide in 1890. Though his artistic career was short, he left behind a legacy of some 850 paintings and 1,300 works on paper.¹

¹ The film *Loving Vincent* is the world's first feature-length, oil painted animation. The biographical film tells the story of Vincent Van Gogh's life, focusing on the controversial events surrounding his

The location where Van Gogh painted *Starry Night Over the Rhône* was some 500 feet from the Yellow House, the artist's home when he lived in Arles. It was painted a couple of months before his mental breakdown, during which he cut off his ear and entered a mental asylum in St. Rémy. Van Gogh wrote his younger brother, Theo, about the painting, saying: "In short, the starry sky painted by night, actually under a gas jet. The sky is aquamarine, the water is royal blue, and the ground is mauve. The town is blue and purple. The gas is yellow, and the reflections are russet gold descending to green-bronze. On the aquamarine field of the sky, the Great Bear is a sparkling green and pink, whose discreet paleness contrasts with the brutal gold of the gas. Two colorful figurines of lovers in the foreground."

The Starry Night is not only an iconic nighttime painting but also one of the most recognizable paintings in Western art. It was painted while Van Gogh was in the St. Rémy asylum. The view has been identified as the one from his bedroom window in the asylum. A letter to Theo describes it as a failure.

unexpected and mysterious death. It features 120 of the artist's greatest paintings. Each of the film's 65,000 frames is an oil painting on canvas, using the same technique as Van Gogh, created by a team of 125 painters. The film won numerous awards and was nominated for an Oscar and a Golden Globe award for Best Animated Film in 2018.



Winslow Homer, *Summer Night*, 1890

Realist Winslow Homer (1836-1910) is regarded by many as the greatest 19th-century American painter. Of his artistic talent, Homer said, "There is no such thing as talent. What they call talent is nothing but the capacity for doing continuous work in the right way." In his later years, Homer lived in relative isolation at Prout's Neck, Maine, where *he painted Summer Night*. The painting is part of the Musée d'Orsay's collection in Paris.



Edvard Munch, *Kiss by the Window*, c. 1892-1897

Edvard Munch (1863-1944) was a Norwegian painter whose work is associated with the Expressionist and Symbolist movements. Munch, despite his mental health struggles, was highly productive as an artist. His body of work comprises some two thousand paintings, hundreds of graphic motifs, and thousands of drawings. Munch's work was banned in Nazi Germany as degenerative. Fortunately, most of his work survived World War II. His distinctive style has been dubbed "soul painting". *Kiss by the Window* is part of Munch's series *The Frieze of Life*, which explores the cycle of life, death, and love.



Henri Rousseau, *The Sleeping Gypsy*, 1897

Henri Rousseau (1844-1910) was a French artist who painted in the Naïve or Primitive style. With no formal art education, he was ridiculed by critics during his lifetime, but eventually became hailed as a self-taught genius. In his own opinion, he was a great realist artist. In fact, he considered Picasso and himself to be the only two great living artists. Encyclopedia Britannica says of *The Sleeping Gypsy*, "The image is intensely dreamlike yet also strangely real, evoking both peace and danger, mystery and whimsy."



Camille Pissarro, *The Boulevard Montmartre at Night*, 1897

Camille Pissarro (1830-1903) was a Danish-French artist, born in what is now the US Virgin Islands, who has been referred to as the first Impressionist and the "dean of Impressionist painters". He was forced to leave France during the Franco-Prussian War. Upon his return to France after the war, he found that of the 1,500 works of art he had left behind, only about 40 remained; soldiers had destroyed the others.

The Boulevard Montmartre at Night is one of 14 views of the Paris Boulevard Montmartre that Pissarro painted in 1897. Others show the boulevard in snow, rain, fog, mist, and sunlight, as well as in the morning, afternoon, and at sunset. *The Boulevard Montmartre at Night* is Pissarro's only nighttime painting.



Frederic Remington, *Apache Scouts, Listening*, 1908

Frederic Remington (1861-1909), according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, "earned esteem as a chronicler par excellence of the old American West." He captured what has been described as a vanishing way of life through paintings, illustrations, and sculptures. Upon his early death from complications from an appendectomy, the *Utica Herald-Dispatch* said, "In childhood, he had been at heart an artist, and his latent talent was awakened by the virile subjects which he encountered after going West. Returning to New York with depleted finances, he gained fame with his strong sketches of cowboy life, Indians, miners, Mexicans, and frontier soldiers. He created a new school and has perhaps done more than any other man to perpetuate the wild life incident to the conquering of the West."



Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Return at Night from the Market*, 1912

Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) has been called the most distinguished African American artist of the 19th century. A student of Thomas Eakins and the only African American at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Tanner went on to study and live in Paris, where he lived until his death. He is best known for his landscapes and depictions of biblical themes. Tanner was honored with a commemorative stamp in 1973.



Edward Hopper, *Rooms for Tourists*, 1945

Edward Hopper (1882-1967) has been called the most important American realist painter of the 20th century. His work largely reflects themes of loneliness and isolation within American urban and rural settings. His career as an artist languished until the woman who would become his wife, fellow artist Josephine Nivison, began to manage it, at the expense of her own. The two artists could not have been more different. She was gregarious and liberal; he was secretive and conservative. The actress, Helen Hayes, said of Edward Hopper, "I had never met a more misanthropic, grumpy, grouchy individual in my life...". Hopper's most famous work, *Nighthawks* (1942), is also a nighttime painting.



Peter Doig, *Milky Way*, 1989-90

Peter Doig (1959-present) is a Scottish-Canadian artist, called one of the most renowned figurative painters. Of Doig, the art critic Jonathan Jones said, "Amid all the nonsense, impostors, rhetorical bullshit and sheer trash that pass for art in the 21st century, Doig is a jewel of genuine imagination, sincere work and humble creativity." The style attributed to *Milky Way* is Magical Realism, which blends the ordinary with fantasy elements. The most famous literary equivalent is probably *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez.