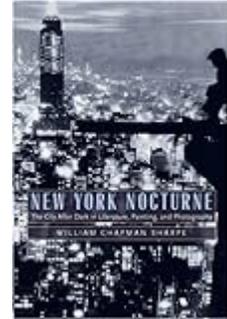




William Chapman Sharpe. *New York Nocturne: The City after Dark in Literature, Painting, and Photography, 1850-1950.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. Plates. xix + 402 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-13324-9.



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Night Light

Treat yourself to an elegantly written, beautifully illustrated, copiously researched sojourn into New York City's night. With William Chapman Sharpe as your guide, you will get a tantalizing new perspective on the city as reflected in art, literature, and history. Many other scholars have explored urban creativity, usually concentrating on one person, movement, or era. Books on the artistic and literary contributions of New York City abound. Some link art with literature, but none focuses so intensely on creative reactions to and interpretations of the urban night. Set within historical contexts without being mired in historiography, this book balances in-depth analyses of specific works with a broad discussion of patterns over time. It will enlighten any urbanist.

New York Nocturne revolves around the ways in which light revolutionized the real and perceived urban night, replacing the rhythms of nature with human inventions full of peril and possibility. But the changes did not happen overnight. Instead, Sharpe illuminates the gradual process of redefining night as the city moved from candles to gas lamps to electricity. At each step in

the process, artists and writers responded to and tried to understand the impact of technology on the human dimensions of urban life. They wrestled with night light.

Although Sharpe gives due deference to London and Paris, he loves New York City. As he explains, "nowhere else did nocturnal exploration take a more exciting form." Traversing the century from 1850 to 1950, Sharpe demonstrates how "the city that never sleeps" embraced the night with "a lust for light" that made it "the modern city, the ultimate city of light." Yet, night light could reveal the bad as well as the good—the slums next to the skyscrapers, the misery alongside the magic. It was precisely these "stunning extremes" that New York's artists and writers found so stimulating (pp. 5-7).

With a nod to historians, the book moves in chronological order. It starts in the mid-nineteenth century when night was usually seen in negative terms. Building on traditional associations of night with hell, devils, sex, crime, and violence, writers like George C. Foster capitalized on the fear and fascination that New

York's nightlife evoked. However, as gaslight became more prevalent, attitudes became more positive. People increasingly socialized at night and enjoyed walking past Broadway's brightly lit stores. The great urban poet, Walt Whitman, appreciated the positive potential of night. Best known for celebrating the bustling, democratic daytime city, Whitman also extolled the urban night as a lovely and loving democracy of the dark. Consequently, Sharpe considers Whitman a transformative figure through whom the urban night became more associated with dreams than with dangers.

In painting, Sharpe's nineteenth-century transformative figure is James McNeill Whistler. Sharpe claims that, despite being an ex-patriot who never saw New York, Whistler profoundly influenced all subsequent writers and artists who confronted Gotham. Using darkness to create a romantic atmosphere uncomplicated by moral messages or historical contexts, Whistler celebrated urban night light as art in itself. His fogs and mists offset the harsh version of night and, like Whitman's poems, spawned "a magical nocturnal transformation of the mundane metropolis" (p. 108). For Sharpe, Whistler's ethereal nocturnes provide the central artistic interpretation of the urban night and define the rest of the book. Everyone else is a footnote to Whistler.

In photography, the Whistlerian legacy was evident in the work of Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz, and others who manipulated the photographic process to obtain the desired effect of fog or mist akin to Whistler's nocturnes. The resulting dark aesthetic hallowed the delicate mystery of the urban night while also marking photography's maturation as an art. At the same time, however, Jacob Riis used the newly invented flash photography to reveal the less romantic realities of slum life. So too, the Ashcan artists along with writers Stephen Crane, William Dean Howells, and Theodore Dreiser, promoted realism over romanticism. This soft-harsh dichotomy permeates the book.

The spread of electric light in the new century caused another aesthetic revolution that replaced Whistler's calm nocturnes with exuberant nightlife. Now the focus was on the excitement of Greenwich Village, Harlem, Times Square, and Coney Island. As they studded the sky, skyscrapers obliterated the stars in a bold defiance of nature characteristic of an arrogant city enamored of technological progress. Consider also the new electric signs, which, says Sharpe, were "substituting blinding light for Whistler's impenetrable darkness." Commercialism, exoticism, and amusement came to define a city

of "visual overload" (pp. 193-194).

It remained for Joseph Stella to reinterpret and modernize both Whistler and Whitman, whose poems he found inspiring. According to Sharpe, Stella's five-panel masterpiece entitled *The Voice of the City* "suggests a Whistlerian vocabulary and harmony" (p. 202). Blending abstract technological geometries with recognizable forms, such as the skyscraper and the Brooklyn Bridge, Stella captured the visual power, the dark vibrancy, and the human challenge of the modern urban night. Similarly, the poet Hart Crane, who was influenced by Stella and Steichen, appreciated the potential of art and technology to enrich the urban experience, as symbolized by the dramatic nighttime illumination of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Analyzing urban creativity from the 1930s to the 1960s, Sharpe emphasizes the theatrical quality of the city, always under the spotlight, always on display, always comprised of both audience and actor. However, with glamour came superficiality and, compounded by the Great Depression, a need to rethink urban life. Thus, Sharpe juxtaposes writer Ralph Ellison's protest against invisibility with painter Edward Hopper's lonely individuals in sterile settings. Both artists remind Sharpe of Whistler's discrete use of light and shadow as well as of Whitman's streetwise urban sensibility.

By contrast, Weegee refocused the theme of urban alienation so prevalent in Ellison and Hopper. Totally unlike Whistler and Whitman, Weegee's photographs of dead crime victims were neither soft nor celebratory. Although he was a professional descendent of Jacob Riis, Weegee's photographic journalism targeted sales, not social reform. Blatantly voyeuristic and coldly documentary, his images exposed the harsh realities of *The Naked City*, Weegee's 1945 book.

Sharpe concludes his book with a brief look at post-1960 attempts to "take back the night," including graffiti artists who used the cover of dark to brazenly affirm the presence of the powerless in places left vulnerable by the powerful. Their aggressive, bright colors and flat lines were, like Weegee's photos, antithetical to Whistler's subtlety, illusion, and implicit elitism. Some, like artist Keith Haring, even acquired legitimacy, thereby expanding once again the meaning of art emerging from the night.

Sharpe insists that "the nocturne lives" through contemporary artists and writers who continue to examine the complex meaning of night light (p. 330). As he in-

tegrates the work of Faith Ringgold, George Segal, Adrienne Rich, and Edward Sorel, he asks readers to reconsider the significance of the night as subject matter in urban art and literature. Sharpe's study provides a provoca-

tive historical perspective on creativity in and about the city. A book of breadth, depth, and grace, it must be savored slowly to fully appreciate "the relation between the human, the urban, and the dark" (p. 9).

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