

Paintings at The Studio

Spring 2009

Set in the grounds of our family home at Lords Wood, Marlow, Buckinghamshire, The Studio was described in Michael Holroyd's biography, *Lytton Strachey* as follows: "*In the middle of the building were two great wooden tables piled high with boxes and files, and on the floor were littered innumerable trunks and suitcases—all full of letters, diaries and miscellaneous papers. Cobwebs and a pall of dust blanketed everything...*". Built at the turn of the century by the artist Mary Sargant Florence, Lords Wood became a summer retreat for members of the Bloomsbury Group of artists and writers, including Mark Gertler and Dora Carrington. The Studio itself was initially used by Florence to plan the frescoes she painted for Oakham and Bourneville Schools. Later, her daughter Alix married James Strachey, brother of the writer and critic Lytton Strachey. On Lytton's death in 1932 The Studio came to house his library and the first translations of Freud into English took place within its walls.

This was very much the state in which Millie and I found the house when we moved here in 1974, but in the intervening years The Studio has undergone a transformation. Cleaned, extended and restored, it now houses another library and collection of pictures. With our gallery in Cork Street, London's foremost contemporary art street, and The Studio, we offer a comprehensive inventory of British traditional, impressionist and contemporary art and sculpture.

Lords Wood has a long history as the home of artists and writers and it is only fitting that The Studio should continue to form the focus of artistic enterprise. It is at The Studio that the publishing arm of our business is based and, with its specialist libraries, it is also there that much of the necessary research is undertaken. I am grateful to Dr Jane Hamilton for continuing the company's tradition of ground-breaking research in areas pertinent to our collections.

With much of our inventory arising from private sources or being drawn from the studio estates that we represent, Messum's brings art to you directly, as affordably as possible—from our home to yours.

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Theodore Roussel RBA ARE 1847-1926

1. *Blue Thames, End of a Summer Afternoon, Chelsea* c. 1888

oil on canvas
84 x 121 cms 33 x 48 ins
signed lower right

PROVENANCE:
Guy Roussel

EXHIBITED:
London: Goupil Gallery, 1889, *London Impressionists*, no. 53
London: The Barbican Art Gallery, 1995, *Impressionism in Britain*, no. 185

LITERATURE:
Laura Wortley, *British Impressionism: A Garden of Bright Images*, Marlow: Studio Fine Art Productions, 1988, illus. p. 133
Kenneth McConkey, *British Impressionism*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1989 p. 62, plate 56
Anna Gruetzner Robins in Norma Broude (ed.), *World Impressionism*, New York: Harry N Abrams Inc., 1990, p. 76
Kenneth McConkey, *Impressionism in Britain*, London: Barbican Art Gallery and Yale University Press, 1995, cat. 185
James Beechey and Roger Plant introds., *Theodore Roussel, 1847-1926, Paintings, Drawings and Prints*, London: Michael Parkin Gallery, 1997, n.p.

Born in Lorient in Brittany, Theodore Roussel came to England in 1874 after serving in the Franco-Prussian War. Intending a brief stay in order to study British portraiture and Romantic landscape painting, this insular young French artist, found the English way of life more congenial than that in Paris. He settled permanently in London and in February 1880 married an English woman, Frances Amelia Smithson Bull. In 1885 he became part of Whistler's entourage.¹ As an etcher, Roussel readily acknowledged his debt to the American expatriate, and described himself "élève de Whistler" in exhibition catalogues.² With Mortimer Menpes and Walter Sickert, he entered the Society of British Artists, only to leave it when Whistler's presidency was abruptly terminated. By 1887, when *The Reading Girl*, (Tate Britain) was shown at the New English Art Club, - "the finest nude that was ever painted", according to Sir William Orpen - Roussel had begun to acquire a strong and independent reputation.³

While Roussel's modern nude, ostensibly containing references to Manet's *Olympia*, (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), caused something of a stir, it was strictly an academic exercise and not the prelude to a career painting classical subjects. He was more interested in the seemingly less shocking subject matter of the Chelsea Embankment, an area of London romantically associated with J.M.W. Turner through its connection with the Greaves family boatyard (see no. 2 and 3). Whistler had taken up residence there in 1863 and during the 1870s used the industrial landscape facing his house in Lindsey Row for many of his 'nocturnes' - infamous poetic evocations of the river, recreated in the studio from memory, using thin, almost uncontrollable washes of colour. During the 1880s the artist quarter expanded and new studios were being built. The borough attracted young painters such as Fred Brown, Alfred East, and many others.⁴ Of Roussel's more immediate New English comrades, Sydney Starr and Paul Fordyce Maitland were both painting Whistlerian views of the London river.⁵

Roussel's views across the Thames to the Battersea shore provided an ideal opportunity for analysis of the marquetry of repeated shapes provided by the flat gables of factory buildings. Their minute alterations of hue were recorded in oil sketches, while line and tone were caught in small jewel-like etchings.⁶ These supplied information for the larger studio production - *Blue Thames - End of a Summer Afternoon, Chelsea*. And if the location was important, so too were the time of day and the season - the end of an afternoon in summer. Menpes recalled,

We were continually asking one another to guess what hour such-and-such a picture was painted. A follower would suggest eleven-thirty. "Right you are - almost," the proud possessor would answer: Not eleven-thirty, but eleven-fifteen - ... The school was becoming scientific. To be able to tell the time of day by a picture was astounding!

It is easy to see a connection between these preoccupations and Monet's 'series' paintings, being developed simultaneously on the banks of the Seine. It is equally clear that Roussel followed the accepted practice of bringing his 'plein air' discoveries into the studio, to be worked upon with greater deliberation. Only in this context could a daily scene take on the visionary intensity of *Blue Thames*.

With this wider recognition, Roussel emerged from Whistler's shadow, arriving at a technique that was distinctly individual and characteristic. His quasi-scientific observation of the world that surrounded him was matched by his sensitive handling of paint. As Sir Frederick Wedmore pointed out,

*It is the beauty and the poetry of the world and life - the quiet waters, the massed town, this strong man's character, the flowers, that woman's hand, and this child's face - it is all that, our world today, and not the technical achievements of the masters who have gone before him, that is the source and the origin of Roussel's so refined, so very modern, since always so sincere and personal work.*⁸

By the time Wedmore penned this eulogy, Roussel had staged exhibitions at Dowdeswell's, Colnaghi's and Goupil's galleries in London.⁹ In the early nineties he moved from King's Road to Parson's Green and after his wife's death he married the widow of the Glasgow School painter, Arthur Melville. His influence upon British art after the Great War has never been fully addressed.

Kenneth McConkey

¹ Whistler apparently spotted one of Roussel's watercolours at Dowdeswell's gallery in 1885 and asked to meet him. For details of Roussel's early career in London see Margaret Dunwoody Hausberg, *The Prints of Theodore Roussel, A Catalogue Raisonné*, New York: MH, Broxville, 1991, pp. 4-5.

² Whistler apparently declared Roussel 'a follower worthy of the master', see Mortimer Menpes, *Whistler as I knew him*, n.d., [1904], (A&C Black), p. 19. Menpes notes that unlike Walter Sickert and himself, Roussel was not regarded as a 'pupil'.

³ Sir William Orpen, letter to *The Times*, 21 October 1927.

⁴ Fred Brown's *An Impromptu Dance*, a picture of children dancing in the wide space of the newly created embankment was shown at the Royal Academy in 1883, while East's *Old Battersea Bridge* was shown at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1886.

⁵ Starr exhibited *Old and New Battersea Bridge* at the NEAC in the spring of 1891.

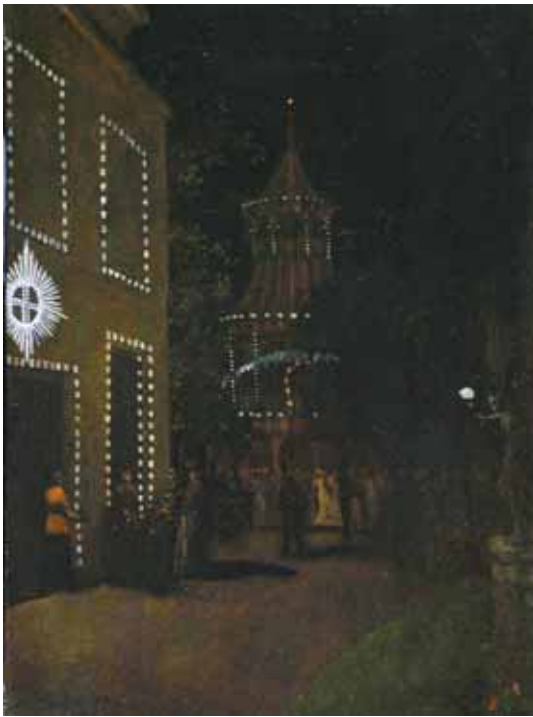
⁶ A study for *Blue Thames*, entitled *Battersea from Cheyne Walk*, was exhibited in James Beechey and Roger Plant introds., *Theodore Roussel, 1847-1926, Paintings, Drawings and Prints*, London: Michael Parkin Gallery, 1997, no. 15. This shows the same range of factories, in front of which a small paddle steamer appears on the left. The iron bridge partially indicated in the study but omitted from *Blue Thames* is seen in *Battersea from Chelsea, 1888-9* (Margaret Dunwoody Hausberg, no. 21), an etching which is thought to have been drawn from Greaves' boatyard or Lindsey Wharf.

⁷ Menpes, n.d., p. 21.

⁸ Frederick Wedmore, *Some of the Moderns*, London: Virtue and Co., 1909, p. 21.

⁹ These were held in 1894, 1906 and 1909 respectively.





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Walter Greaves 1846-1930

2. *Cremorne Gardens at Night* c. 1870

oil on canvas
58.4 x 43.2 cms 23 x 17 ins
signed lower left

PROVENANCE:

W. S. Hudson, 24 Lullington Garth, N12 (according to inscription on stretcher)

3. *Battersea Reach, Moonlight*

oil on canvas
45.7 x 71.1 cms 18 x 28 ins

The son of a Chelsea boat-builder who had been J. M. W. Turner's boatman, Walter Greaves was from c. 1863 Whistler's studio assistant, pupil and close friend for more than 20 years. Whistler's first house in London was 7 Lindsey Row, Chelsea, now 101 Cheyne Walk. The Greaves family lived at the end of the same row of houses. In a letter to William Marchant, proprietor of the Goupil galleries, Greaves recounts how he was "constantly rowing Whistler about, sometimes spending the whole night on the water".¹ Together, the two men would go and observe some particular effect of the light on this stretch of the Thames, the inspiration for many of Whistler's notorious 'Nocturne' paintings.

Cremorne Gardens was first opened as the Cremorne Stadium in 1832 by Charles Random de Berenger. His house had previously belonged to Viscount Cremorne. The site was reopened as pleasure gardens in 1840 and could accommodate 1500 people at a variety of attractions including a banqueting hall, theatre, bowling saloon, grottoes and a bandstand, visible in the present picture. Dancing, fireworks and balloon ascents were frequent occurrences. It

was never as popular as the Vauxhall pleasure gardens, however, and when in the 1870s it acquired a bad reputation its license was withdrawn when it came up for renewal in 1877. A vestige of the gardens remains just east of the Lots Road power station in Chelsea.

Visitors usually arrived by boat onto landing jetties and it is most probably from this vantage point, with Greaves manoeuvring the boat, that Whistler made his famous series of paintings of the gardens between 1872-7.²

There are a number of known works by Greaves representing views within the Cremorne Gardens, some of them incorporating portraits of Whistler.³

¹ Cited by R. R. Tatlock, 'Walter Greaves', *Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 58, no. 339, 1931, p. 261

² Whistler's paintings of Cremorne Gardens are now held at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Freer Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

³ A drawing close to the present composition dated 1869 was offered at Christie's London on 23 June 1994, lot 47. Other views of Cremorne by Greaves have been at Sotheby's London, 13 May 1987, lot 86; Christie's, London, 24 May

Theodore Roussel RBA ARE 1847-1926

4. *The Sands at Noon*, 1918

watercolour
24 x 35 cms 10 x 14 ins
signed with initials and dated lower right

PROVENANCE:

Miss Mackay, London

EXHIBITED:

London: Goupil Galleries, *Salon*, 1921, no. 403

London: Goupil Galleries, *Memorial Exhibition of Works by Theodore Roussel*, 1927, no. 44

London: Fine Art Society, *Channel Packet: Paris-London, 1880-1920*, 1969, no. 125

LITERATURE:

Margaret Dunwoody Hausberg, *The Prints of Theodore Roussel: a catalogue raisonné*,

New York: Bronxville, 1991. The related drypoint, executed 1920, is illustrated p. 145.

The present watercolour was executed in a late period of Roussel's life. Following the death of his first wife, Roussel was married for a second time in 1914. His bride was Ethel Melville, the widow of the painter Arthur Melville, and the couple set up home together at Adelaide House, Grand Parade, St. Leonards-on-sea. This grand house, overlooking the English Channel, had once been the home of Queen Adelaide, the wife of William IV. Their time together was brief. In 1917 Ethel succumbed to TB and her niece Agnes came to St. Leonards to take charge of the household.

During this period the seaside and those in Roussel's immediate family

circle were central to his repertoire of subjects. The present watercolour represents holiday-makers on the beach at St. Leonards-on-sea in 1918 and he returned to the composition in 1920, when he worked it up into a drypoint engraving.¹ Of the 10 impressions that were made, two are held at the British Museum, London.

¹ See Margaret Dunwoody Hausberg, *The Prints of Theodore Roussel: a catalogue raisonné*, Bronxville: New York, 1991, cat. nos. 122, 123; illustrated p. 145