



Maxime Maufra,
Féerie nocturne -
Exposition universelle 1900, (Night-time
Enchantment - 1900 World's Fair), 1900
Oil on canvas, 65.9 x 80.8 cm, Henry Vasnier Bequest,
Museum of Fine Arts, Reims © C. Devleeschauwer

Electric Nights

MuMa
André Malraux Museum of Modern Art, Le Havre
3 June – 1st November 2020

This exhibition is part of the Normandie Impressionniste
and A Summer In Le Havre festival programmes.



Charles Lacoste

La Main d'ombre, (The Shadow Hand), 1896

Oil on canvas, 36 x 64.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

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During the 19th century - a great century of change - the night-time landscape was radically altered by the advent of artificial lighting. Long veiled in darkness, night gradually began to be lit up by a wide variety of forms of lighting, each creating a different ambience. The interplay of light and shadow, chiaroscuro, back-lighting and the first neon advertising signs offered an array of new visual experiences imbued with a magic and poetry unique to the world of night.

These transformations of night made a deep impression on artists, who reacted variously with curiosity, admiration, fascination and nostalgia. Throughout Europe, night-time scenes became a favourite subject with painters, printmakers and photographers - the most open to expressions of modernity. MuMa's exhibition «Electric Nights» is the first to explore artists' perceptions of artificial lighting in the urban setting between the 1850s and the eve of the First World War.

The rich and varied exhibition itinerary features 150 artworks by 70 artists including major French painters such as Monet, Pissarro, Vallotton, Toulouse-Lautrec, Steinlein, Bonnard, van Dongen and Sonia Delaunay and artists from other parts of Europe who may be less familiar to French visitors such as the Swede Eugène Jansson, the British painter Atkinson Grimshaw and the Spaniard Darío de Regoyos. Their depictions of these new light ambiances offer indirect insights into their preoccupations in the midst of a period of profound upheaval. Taken together, at the same time as providing a highly contemporary subject for reflection, in broader terms, these artworks invite us to meditate on our intimate relationship with night.

“A dreamscape in which the flickering yellow of gaslight is married with the lunar frigidity of the electrical spark.”

Walter Benjamin



Street lamps symbolize the «City of Light»

The arrival of street lighting greatly altered the appearance of town centres. The unfamiliar shapes of street lamps, gas jets and globe lights began to be seen in city streets. Artists were highly sensitive to the way the city was changing. They began by incorporating the new designs into their compositions and went on to give them pride of place. Charles Marville's first series of photographs of street lamps reveals a dazzling variety of shapes. Street lamps became a symbol of modernity and an emblem of the «City of Light».

Charles Marville

Lampadaire devant l'hôtel Rothschild, à l'angle de la rue de Rivoli et de la rue Saint Florentin, (Street lamp in front of the Rothschild house, on the corner of the Rue de Rivoli and the Rue Saint Florentin), circa 1865

Albumen print of positive photograph mounted on cardboard, 35.8 x 25.6 cm, Bibliothèque de l'Hôtel de Ville de Paris, Paris, France
© Charles Marville/BHdV/Roger-Viollet

A patchwork of light and dark

Despite the advent of artificial lighting, night-time atmospheres varied considerably. Some places remained in darkness. Paris' brilliantly-lit quarters had their shadowy counterpoint in the working-class neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city, where street lighting was scarcer, uneven and patchy. According to their differing sensibilities, some artists celebrated the brilliance of Paris' shops and night-time entertainments, while others endeavoured to convey the darkness of the slums.



Henri Le Sidaner,
Place de la Concorde, 1909

Oil on canvas, 101 x 151 cm, MUba Eugène Leroy,
Tourcoing © Bridgeman Images



New visual experiences

Artists for whom light was a central preoccupation were bound to be intrigued by the scope for visual experiments offered by the city at night. Street lighting, be it gas or electric, warm or cold, blinding or soft, still or moving, varied and altered the scene it lit up. The City of Light was far more complex than it appeared at first sight: dark and brightly-lit streets co-existed side by side. Presently, night took on new colours with the first neon advertising signs

Edouard Vuillard

La Place de Clichy, socle de la statue, (The Place de Clichy, Base of the Statue), undated

Oil on cardboard, 18,4 x 28 cm, Bemberg Foundation, Toulouse, France © RMN-Grand Palais/ Mathieu Rabeau

Maximilien Luce

Le Louvre et le Pont Neuf, la nuit, éventail (The Louvre and the Pont Neuf by Night, Fan), circa 1890-1892

Oil and gouache on paper, 20 x 57 cm, Donation by Ginette Signac in 1976, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France © RMN - Gérard Blot





Louis Hayet

***La Parade (The Parade)*, 1888**

Oil on cardboard, 19.2 x 27.2 cm, Association
des amis du Petit Palais, Geneva, Switzerland
© Studio Monique Bernaz, Geneva



Eugène Jansson

***Nocturne*, 1900**

Oil on canvas, 136 x 151 cm, Gothenburg Museum of Art, Sweden © Hossein Sehatlou - Göteborgs konstmuseum - 2015

Nocturnal reveries

Not all artists were fascinated and enthused by the way night was being transformed. Some found it disturbing that natural darkness was gradually being banished by increasing prevalent electric lights. The Symbolists responded by inventing an imaginary city of darkness and silence, in which night once again became a space for reverie.

Night-time photographs

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, photography and later cinema offered a new way of depicting night. Artificial light allowed photographers to capture nightlife by playing on contrasts in a way that was totally new, and electricity provided the first cinematographers with a unique tool for developing filming techniques. Even so, to film night-time scenes, they used the subterfuge of day for night.



Gabriel Loppé

Illuminations de la Tour Eiffel pendant l'Exposition universelle en 1900 (Eiffel Tower Lights during the World's Fair in 1900), 1900

Aristotype from a gelatin silver bromide glass plate negative,
12.9 x 17.8 cm, Donation by the Société des Amis du Musée d'Orsay
(1989), Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France
© RMN (Musée d'Orsay) - Patrice Schmidt



Light reigns supreme

By the eve of the First World War, electric street lighting was ubiquitous, although gas was still being used for street lighting as late as the period between the wars. The avant-garde artists' fascination with all expressions of modern life led them to stare head-on at light, dazzling themselves in the attempt to capture pure energy and producing artworks that deconstruct, fragmenting into an abstract, prism-like interplay of colours.

Sonia Delaunay
(Stern Terk Sarah Sophie, dite),
Prismes électriques, 1914

Oil on canvas, 250 x 250 cm, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Achat de l'État en 1958, attribution au MNAM-CCI en 1958 © Pracusa S.A.

Le Havre, an apt choice of venue

In several respects, the seaport city of Le Havre played a pioneering role in the history of street lighting. Electric arc lighting was installed in the lighthouses at La Hève in 1863, making them among the first in the world to be lit by electricity. Le Havre was one of the first cities to opt for electricity over gas, granting a concession to supply electricity to its network to the Société Havraise d'Énergie Électrique in 1889. It also provided the setting for one of the earliest of the very few Impressionist depictions of night - Claude Monet's 1872 painting *Le Port du Havre, effet de nuit* (The Port of Le Havre, Night Effect). The exhibition offers a rare opportunity to view this picture, which is now in a private collection

Over the last twenty years, MuMa has explored the ways in which artists incorporate transformations of their surroundings and scientific discoveries into their aesthetic innovations and experiments, taking major works from its collections as starting-points. «Electric Nights» follows on from exhibitions such as «Vagues. Autour des paysages de mer de Gustave Courbet» (Waves - Gustave Courbet's seascapes", 2004), "Sur les quais. Ports, docks et dockers" (On the docks - Ports, docks and dockers", 2008), "Nuages...là-bas les merveilleux nuages. Autour des études de ciel d'Eugène Boudin. Hommages et digressions" (Clouds... Over there, the wonderful clouds. Tributes to and digressions from Eugène Boudin's sky studies, 2009), and more recently "Né(e)s de l'écume et des rêves" (Ocean Imaginings", 2018).



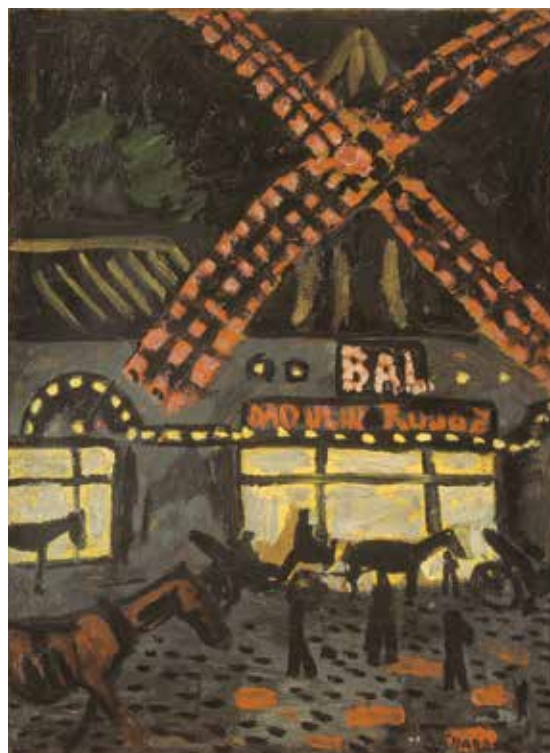
A private collector will exceptionally lend this work until the end of August 2020.

Claude Monet
Le Port du Havre, effet de nuit (The Port of Le Havre, Night Effect), 1873

Oil on canvas, 60 x 81 cm,
Private collection
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Curated by Annette Haudiquet, the director of MuMa, the exhibition brings together a group of oil and watercolour paintings, prints, photographs and films that have never previously been seen in conjunction with each other, loaned by major French and foreign collections both public and private including the Musée d'Orsay, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Centre Georges Pompidou, the Cinémathèque française, the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Reims, the Bemberg Foundation in Toulouse, Tate, the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum, the Petit Palais de Genève, and Göteborgs konstmuseum.

The exhibition has been mounted with special support from the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Cinémathèque Française and the Musée d'Orsay and is being presented as part of the Normandie Impressionniste and A Summer In Le Havre festivals.



Auguste Elysée Chabaud
Le Moulin rouge la nuit (The Moulin Rouge by Night), circa 1907

Oil on wood, 82 x 60 cm, Association des amis du Petit Palais, Geneva, Switzerland © Studio Monique Bernaz, Geneva © ADAGP, Paris, 2020



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Exhibition catalogue

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Charles Marville

Opéra, Candélabre

à 5 branches en bronze (Bronze candelabra with five branches, Opéra.)

Albumen print of positive photograph mounted on cardboard, State Library Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

The development of lighting techniques

By the middle of the 19th century, oil-lamps had largely been replaced by gaslight in London and big cities in America, France and Germany. However, gas soon faced competition from electricity, following Thomas Edison's invention of the incandescent electric light-bulb in 1879. There was huge excitement about the miracle of electricity in both Europe and America. Electricity stood for progress, energy and vitality. Its brilliant illumination lit up arcades, city boulevards, blocks of flats, department stores, theatres and café terraces.

Even so, electric street lighting did not really become the norm until just before the First World War. A variety of types of street lighting continued to exist side by side in town centres, creating a complex, variegated patchwork of ambiances. Meanwhile, some places were left in darkness.

The exhibition naturally devotes considerable space to Paris, the «City of Light» visited by so many artists, but it also focuses on European cities in general, given that this was a change that fascinated artists all over the world.

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