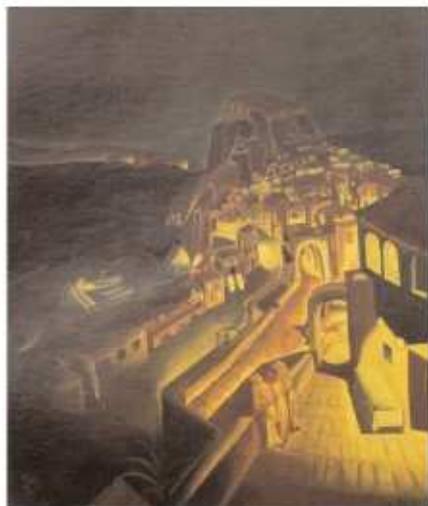# NIGHT SCENES

Marcel Ronay, Night Scene in Capri

Eric Doitch, The Old Underground Station, 1965-67

CONTENT AND IDEAS

What can you see in the painting *Night Scene in Capri*?
• A rocky hill
• Lots of buildings
• The sea
• Three people, two men and a woman, leaning on a wall
• A ship by a quay
• Narrow streets
• Several arches
• Several flights of steps
• A coastline in the background

What can you tell about Capri from this picture?
• It is a hot, dry place. The clues are the flat roofs, suggesting there is little rain, and the palm trees.
• It is rocky and steep. How many flights of steps can you see?
• It is built-up. Notice the huddled buildings, built well above sea level. The hill in the background is too steep and rocky to be built on
• It is by the sea.
• It has no cars or bikes.
• The roads are very narrow – some are only for pedestrians.
NOTE: Capri is an island in the Bay of Naples, off the southern coast of Italy, 17 miles from Naples. The only way to get there is by boat. The land in the background is the Italian coastline.

How are the people dressed? What does this tell you about the weather?
• The people are wearing light clothes.
• The men wear sunhats and short sleeves.
• The woman wears a short dress.
• It is probably summer.

What are the people looking at?
• They are looking towards the ship at the quayside.

The ship has just arrived. How can you tell?
• There is a thin plume of smoke coming from its funnel.
• Waves from the ship's wake ripple out behind it.

How would you describe the atmosphere of the picture?
• The bright glow of numerous lights conjures up a feeling of warmth and well-being.
However:
• The empty streets and strongly contrasting areas of shadow make the scene feel mysterious.

**How do you think the three people are feeling? If you could ask each one
a different question, what would you ask?**

Activity
Ask children, in groups of three, to make up (and perhaps act out) a conversation
between the three people.
– Why are they on the island? Do they live there? Are they on holiday? Have they come
  for some sinister purpose?
– Why are they the only people out at night?
– Who might they be expecting to arrive on the ship?
– What are they going to do next?
– Where might they go?
– How will the story end?

What can you see in The Old Underground Station at Night?
• An empty ticket booth on the right-hand side
• A slatted wooden barrier
• A poster in front of the barrier
• The top of a staircase and escalators
• A figure in a hat at the top of the escalator
  facing away from the viewer.
• Another figure with white hair at the top of
  the other escalator facing towards the viewer
• Several lights – some shining down from the ceiling,
  others on lamp stands shining upwards
• Two upright poles? with a barrier? across
• The arched ceiling of the stairwell leading down
  to the train platform.

How would you describe the atmosphere of this picture?
• The warm yellow lights and orange glow of the stairwell ceiling make the scene feel calm
  and welcoming, but it could also be seen as rather melancholy and haunted, because of
  the shadowy people.

FORM AND COMPOSITION

How have both artists shown that their scenes are set in the dark?
• In *Night scene in Capri*:
 – the sky is dark (and has no stars)
 – the sea is as dark as the sky
 – the yellow glow of the street lights and lighted houses contrast strongly
  with the colour of the sea and sky to suggest a night-time scene
 – the places where the lights do not reach are in deep shadow
• In *The Old Underground Station*:
 – the station entrance is dark, illuminated by four overhead lamps

**What similarities and differences can you see between the two pictures?**

Similarities
• Both pictures have several sources of artificial light, creating repeating spotlights that lead your eye
 from the foreground to the background.
• Although both pictures only show very few people, they also suggest the presence of other people.
• In Night Scene in Capri, many of the house windows are lit, suggesting life going on inside.
 In The Old Underground Station, shadowy silhouettes of heads and shoulders on the ceiling
 above the escalators suggest other people going down and coming up
• Both pictures have patches of strong light and strongly contrasting shadows
• In both pictures, the artists concentrate on the play of light and shadows on man-made shapes
• Both pictures have repeating shapes:
 – In Night Scene on Capri, the buildings have been simplified to different-sized building blocks,
  with squares, arches or rectangles for windows and doors painted in contrasting colours.
  The trees in the background have all been painted as round blobs.
 – In The Old Underground Station, there are repeating rectangular shapes: the ticket booth
  and its window, the poster, the gaps between the uprights of the ticket barrier.

Differences
• Night Scene in Capri is a long, bird's eye view of a place, whereas The Old Underground Station
 shows a more close-up view.
• Night Scene in Capri is an outside view. The Old Underground Station is an interior view.
• The lighting in the Old Underground Station is warmer and softer than in Night Scene on Capri.
• In Night Scene on Capri, your eye is led upwards into the distance, whereas in The Old Underground
 Station, your eye is led downwards towards the escalators leading to the train platforms.

**How has the artist composed *Night Scene on Capri*
to make it dramatic?**
The picture is composed in two halves divided diagonally from
bottom left to top right. Cover first the top triangle and then
the bottom one to discover the enormous contrast in colour
between the shadowy coast, sea, sky in one half of the picture
and enormous looming hill and the brightly-lit streets and buildings
in the other half.
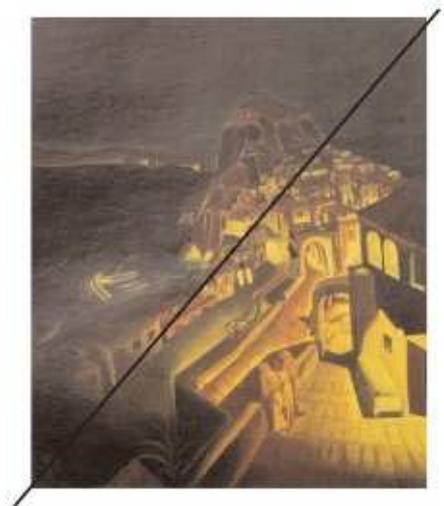
Compare Night Scene in Capri with these other night-time street scenes:

Vincent van Gogh's The Cafe Terrace at Arles at Night, 1888
Van Gogh painted a cheerful view of people sitting on a cafe terrace in a town on a starry night. A bold expanse of intense bright yellow and orange on the terrace sings against the varying blues of the buildings and the sky. If you divide his picture diagonally from top left to bottom right, you will see a similar composition to that of Night Scene on Capri. Dark sky and buildings contrast with the effect of bright artificial lights

Camille Pissarro, Boulevard Monmartre at Night, 1897 (National Gallery, London)
Pissarro painted this rainy Paris street looking down from his apartment. He used dashes of paint to create the effect of glistening reflections of the lights of street lamps, shops and horse-drawn carriages on the wet pavements and road.

Edward Hopper, Nighthawks, 1943 (Art Institute of Chicago)
Hopper captured the feeling of loneliness and possible menace of night-time in a big city. This picture shows a waiter with three hunched customers in a brightly-lit cafe on the corner of a deserted street with dark, shut-up shops.

Georgia O'Keeffe, New York, Night, 1929 (Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska) and Radiator Building, Night, New York 1927 (Carl van Vechten Gallery of Fine Art, Fisk University)
O'Keeffe painted several simplified, almost flat, views of soaring, newly-built New York skyscrapers at night. Brightly-lit windows, neon signs, street lamps, traffic lights and car headlights illuminate these scenes.

MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUE

How have the artists used colours to create their scenes?
• Ronay has used bright yellow to lead your eye around the entire painting – from the terrace in the foreground where the people are standing, through the arch at the end of the terrace, up the stairs to the right and through the arches beyond, down to the road below and across the houses huddled at the foot of the hill. Notice too the accent of yellow on the quay and the boat and the faint yellow patches on the far coast. Notice too how the folds and crags of the hill are outlined in yellow to help define their shapes.

• Doitch has used a narrow range of colours with warm tones – browns, oranges, yellows, which gives his picture an overall harmony. The picture glows even though it depicts a dark place. Notice how the colour of the lights changes from white, through a range of yellows, from their source outwards.

Activity
• Ask children to mix the brightest colours they can and make shapes on black paper and white paper to discover which glow better.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Eric Doitch

Doitch was born (illegitimately) in Vienna as Siegfried Steiner in 1923. At six months, he was adopted by his father and his wife, and took the family name Deutsch, which was anglicised into Doitch when he came to England. His father had turned from cabinet-making to tea-tasting, and was on a work trip in England when Austria was annexed by Germany in 1938. He managed to acquire a domestic servant's visa for his wife to join him and Eric was allowed to come too. His older sister, Didi, escaped to Egypt, but also later made her way to England with a domestic's visa. At first, Eric was sent to work on a farm. From 1940 to 1941 he was interned as an alien on the Isle of Man. On his release, he worked in a munitions factory as a lathe turner until 1945, when he went to Camberwell School of Art.

After Camberwell, he studied printmaking part-time at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, supporting himself with odd jobs. In 1951, he went to the Royal College of Art, where he met the artist Mary Fitzpayne, whom he married in 1954. He established a reputation as a teacher at Camberwell, the Guildhall, the City and Guilds School of Art and Chelsea School of Art. When he had time for his own work, Doitch painted small, intense scenes of post-war London – bomb sites around Camberwell, where he lived for 12 years from 1963, men on street corners, children playing in the street, burned-out cars and fairground scenes. He also painted specifically Jewish pictures, such as The Wedding Canopy and Women Scrubbing the Pavements, an anguished memory of pre-war occupied Austria.

In 1971, Eric and Mary bought a house in Lincolnshire, where they settled permanently in 1976. Here, Doitch painted intensely coloured landscapes, exploring the relationship between the vast Lincolnshire skies and the textures and forms of the land. One of his favourite subjects was Frieston Shore, an eerie stretch of coast where ragged salt marshes form a watery bridge between earth and air. He painted it in many moods: both in sunlight and shadow. Doitch also produced many figurative drawings, paintings and pastels, and was a fine etcher. Although his figures have wonderful flesh tones and surface character, they seem impersonal, secretive and ghostly, and his urban settings have a sense of absence and intrigue. Perhaps this owed something to his experiences as a Jewish boy in Nazi Austria.

Doitch and his wife worked every day at opposite ends of their house, a rectory set behind a graveyard. In their dark kitchen, surrounded by clocks, sat a Victorian artist's manikin called Belinda, who was generally posed reading a newspaper, and gave most visitors a nasty fright. Doitch was passionate about his work, but rarely considered it finished and was always making changes or threatening to touch up works he had already sold. Many private collectors bought his work, and examples can be seen in many galleries, including the South London Art Gallery, the Museum of Modern Art, Haifa, the Belzalel National Museum, Jerusalem and the Albertina in Vienna. Doitch died in Boston on 7 June 2000.

Marcel Ronay

Ronay was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1907, but his family moved first to Berlin and then Vienna when Ronay was a child. Ronay served an apprentice with a master carver and later studied at the Kunstgewerbeschule. He spent most of his life working in the family business, designing and decorating porcelain jewellery. Most of his artwork was completed before he came to in England in 1936. His work has been exhibited at the Vienna Secession and The Royal Academy of Arts, London. Ronay died in 1998.