

JOHN ATKINSON GRIMSHAW

(Leeds 1836 - Leeds 1893)

Greenock Harbour at Night

signed and dated 'Atkinson Grimshaw 93' (lower right) and
further signed and inscribed 'Greenock-/Atkinson Grimshaw 93' (on the reverse)
oil on canvas
30.5 x 45.7 cm (12 x 18 in)

Provenance: With Richard Green, London.

AHUB OF VICTORIAN INDUSTRIAL LIFE, THE DOCKS at Greenock on the River Clyde was the subject of several compositions that John Atkinson Grimshaw painted and was a favourite location for depicting his night scenes. The industrial cities of Britain and their commercial growth were the source of immense inspiration for Grimshaw, as he celebrated the age of industry, commerce and conspicuous wealth.

In the present picture, the cobweb of the ships' rigging is silhouetted against the darkened sky, a horse-drawn carriage makes its way along the wet cobbled road, the shoppers peer into the windows and a cart-horse waits on the street. The building at the far end of the street with its imposing classical architecture is Greenock Custom House designed by William Burn in 1818, it is considered by many to be the finest of its kind and is now a museum. The Custom House is shown here painted in an earlier Georgian style by Robert Salmon (fig. 1). The use of a carriage or omnibus, as in *Liverpool Quay by Moonlight*, 1887 (fig. 2) is another characteristic element in Grimshaw's works and acts as an aide to the viewer's perspective along his orderly straight streets. Again, other common elements present in both works, include the backlighting of masts of the ships stencilled across the skyline, which are contrasted against the warm light from the shops and its bathing effect on

the streets. Often there is also a suggestion of social division in his work; the over-packed omnibus alongside a private carriage as in *Liverpool Quay by Moonlight* (fig. 2), or a lonesome servant girl making her way home.

Greenock is a large town in the west of Scotland, and lies on the south bank of the River Clyde. It prospered as a port town in the eighteenth century as the main west coast port for trade with the Americas, in particular for valuable sugar imported from the Caribbean. By the end of the eighteenth century, around 400 ships a year were transporting sugar from Caribbean holdings and to Greenock for processing in the fourteen sugar refineries that were situated in the town (fig. 3). Greenock's increasing importance and wealth was manifested in the construction of the Italianate municipal buildings, in particular the Victoria Tower, completed in 1886, which stands 245 feet tall, and the town's railway station opened in 1841. The nineteenth-century wealth of the town was also evident in the large villas that were built in the West End for ship owners, industrialists and investors who thrived from the town's industry.

Grimshaw's dock scenes were almost always depicted at night or in a fading light. In the present work, and *Liverpool Quay by Moonlight*, the glow of the moon casts its hazy light from above the painting. By setting the scene under this faded light Grimshaw was able to show off his skill at depicting the effects of light; here we see the glow from the shop fronts as it literally bounces off



Robert Salmon (1755- c.1844), *The Custom House at Greenock*, 1828, Metropolitan Museum, New York (Figure 1)



John Atkinson Grimshaw, *Liverpool Quay by Moonlight*, 1887, Tate Collection (Figure 2)



the wet cobbles outside. Grimshaw's fascination with depicting night scenes follows an allure to painting moonlight scenes during the Romantic era.

Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), who painted *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1819), is perhaps one of the most well known painters of this theme. The moon presented a magical and fantastical subject matter and was a source of great inspiration across the arts. Frédéric Chopin composed his *Nocturnes for Piano* (1827-46) and Ludwig van Beethoven his *Moonlight Sonata* (1801). It featured in the poetry of Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), the autobiographical *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811-33) of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), and the *Hymns to the Night* (1800) of the poet Novalis (1772-1801). However, one of the most well known painters of moonlit scenes, or 'nocturnes', was Grimshaw's contemporary, James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903). Grimshaw befriended Whistler whilst in London and it is believed that they possibly shared a studio, Whistler apparently described Grimshaw as an inventor of 'nocturnes' saying: 'I considered myself the inventor of nocturnes until I saw Grimmy's moonlight picture.'

In his paintings of the docks, Grimshaw simultaneously created an image of a poetic and mysterious Victorian Britain, a testimonial snapshot of a great industrial age. Grimshaw's interest in photography also plays a part in this mystical vision, as does the Pre-Raphaelite precision that can be seen in his detailing. 'The work of Atkinson Grimshaw is valuable and unique in several respects. He made a great popular success out of that amalgam of Pre-Raphaelite sentiment, nature and industry that dominated the culture of northern England in the later nineteenth century. His work is our only visual equivalent to the great epics of industrial change, the novels of Gaskell and Dickens' (David Bromfield, *Atkinson Grimshaw 1836-1893*, exhibition catalogue, 1979-80, p. 5)

Born in Leeds in 1836, Grimshaw was the son of a policeman. His parents were strict Baptists and his mother strongly disapproved of his interest in painting and on one occasion she destroyed all his paints. He began working

as a clerk for the Great Northern Railway in 1848 in their Leeds office but began to concentrate on painting full time in 1861. Being a self-taught artist, his early influence is attributed to a contemporary Leeds artist of the Pre-Raphaelite style, John William Inchbold. The city also had several art galleries so Grimshaw was able to see the work of Holman Hunt, Henry Wallis, Rosa Bonheur and William Powell Frith (cat. no's. 29 and 30). The technique and realism of Pre-Raphaelite style, as well as the intensity and role of colour, would also play a part in his later landscapes. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, Grimshaw would also draw on contemporary poetry and literature to inspire his work.

Grimshaw soon became popular in Leeds, selling his work through a couple of small galleries and picture dealers. His growing popularity, particularly with art collectors in the northern urban centres, encouraged him to paint the industrial ports and harbours of Liverpool, Hull, Scarborough, Whitby and Glasgow. Indeed, Grimshaw's dock scenes were in such demand that one collector in Liverpool named Jackson told the artist that he would buy as many pictures as could be painted. By the 1870s he was at his most successful and had rented Knostrop Hall, a manor house in Leeds. Grimshaw used its interiors as a backdrop and painted a series of fashionably dressed women in the style of James Tissot and collaborated with the dealer William Agnew to buy and sell his works in London. Until the early 1870s Grimshaw's paintings were predominantly still lifes with a few landscapes of the Leeds area. However, it is his work from the 1880s, of the towns and docks of Glasgow, Liverpool, Leeds, London, Scarborough and Whitby, that are Grimshaw's best known subjects. He recreated atmospheric scenes capturing the Victorian age, bathing his street scenes, manor houses and city-scapes in the light of sunset or under the moonlight. In particular, his nostalgic night scenes such as *Nightfall Down the Thames* (1880), *The Thames by Moonlight* (1884) and *Liverpool Quay by Moonlight* (1887). Grimshaw exhibited just five works in total at the Royal Academy, between 1874 and 1886, including the present work *Grenock Harbour at Night*.



A late nineteenth century view of the sugar refineries of Greenock, the river Clyde and docks beyond (Figure 3)



John Atkinson Grimshaw, *Grenock Harbour at Night* (Detail)

