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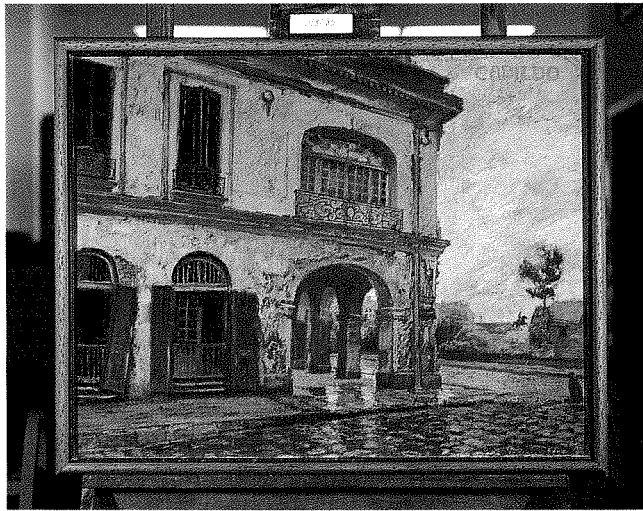
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William Faulkner's Jackson Square

Thomas Bonner, Jr.



Cabildo, William Woodward,
1905.
Courtesy The Historic New
Orleans Collection,
Museum/Research Center, acc.
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Jackson Square, until 1844 called the Place d'Armes, gives New Orleans an element of Old World charm. When William Faulkner came to the city in 1925, the square was in decline because the center of city life had moved up the Mississippi River to the American side of Canal Street. The decadent atmosphere and the near-Mediterranean light attracted and affected writers and artists, including Sherwood Anderson and William Spratling, both of whom provided Faulkner a place to stay near the square.

Clearly the light in New Orleans inspired William Faulkner, as his letters to his mother, his sketches in the *Times-Picayune* and his novel *Mosquitoes* suggest. He also must have felt the influence of other artists and writers in the city, such as William Woodward, whose paintings bathed the French Quarter in Mediterranean pastels and honored the tensions between light and dark in its shadows. Also working in the French Quarter at that time was Pope Whitesell, a photographer who manipulated photographs to achieve light and dark effects, especially soft light.

In *Mosquitoes*, a fictional treatment of the artistic and literary colony in New Orleans, Faulkner portrays Jackson Square at dusk, one of the more magical moments for the interplay of light and dark in this warm, humid atmosphere:

The violet dusk held in soft suspension lights slow as bellstrokes, Jackson Square was now a green and quiet lake in which abode lights round as jellyfish, feathering with silver mimosa and pomegranate and hibiscus beneath which lantanas bled and bled. Pontalba and cathedral were cut from black paper and pasted flat on a green sky; above them taller palms were fixed in black soundless explosions.¹

At another point in the book, Faulkner describes the square an hour later in the evening. While his emphasis continues on the effects of humidity, the light is now characterized in terms of the coolness of the moon, not the last glow of the warm sun:

Looking through the tall pickets into Jackson Square was like looking into an aquarium — a moist and motionless absinthe-cloudy green of all shades from ink black to a thin and rigid feathering of silver on pomegranate and mimosa-like coral in a tideless sea, amid which globular lights bung dull and unstraying as jellyfish, incandescent yet without seeming to emanate light; and in the center of it Andrew's baroque plunging stasis [Clark Mills' equestrian sculpture of Jackson] nimbed about with thin gleams as though he too were recently wetted.²

In the 1920s, the French Quarter was slowly recovering from abandonment by the old Creole families; today the neighborhood reflects its role as New Orleans' greatest tourist attraction. Jackson Square literally forms the

city's spiritual center. By day its "banquettes" course with visitors listening to street musicians, watching dancers and jugglers, and smelling the aromas of gumbo and etouffée mixed with the odors of the Mississippi River.

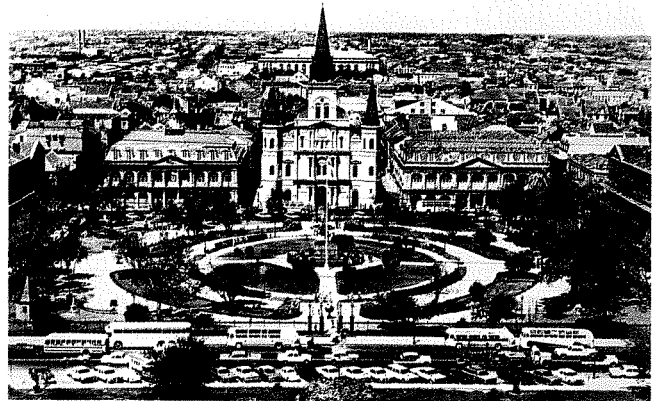
The crowds move less hurriedly at dusk, and the Pontalba apartment buildings, which flank the square, begin to reflect the rays of the setting sun. As knots of visitors pass through the square, the blue and red neon lights of restaurants and jazz clubs flash on like disorderly codes in the darkening narrow streets that adjoin the square. The birds disappear into trees and building cornices. As darkness advances the lights across the square come on suggestively, their rays blunted by the rising humidity.

Since Faulkner's time the riverfront warehouses, dark places from which Faulkner observed the lights of both the river and the city, have been removed. The passing lights of ships gliding along the river remind us that the square now is less a destination itself than a space across which people travel to dinner and music. As greater numbers of people stroll about this public park, the light in Jackson Square remains a catalyst affecting people and environment. ●

Jackson Square at dusk.
Photo © Alan Karchmer.

Notes

1. William Faulkner, *Mosquitoes* (New York: Liveright, 1927), 14 - 15.
2. *Ibid.*, 49.



Aerial view of Jackson Square from the Mississippi River, circa 1965.
Photo by Ralph Lincks, courtesy The Historic New Orleans Collection, Museum/Research Center, acc. no. 1974.25.14.176.

