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Right Image:
James McNeill Whistler, Little Lizzie Willis, 1896-1897

James McNeill Whistler: Selected Works from the Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow, Scotland

Article contributed by Peter Black, Curator of Prints, Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow, Scotland

Like many of the greatest art museums, the Hunterian Art Gallery owes the glories of its collections to a few generous individuals. A distinguishing feature of the Gallery is that the generosity of these donors to one of the greatest university art collections in Britain dates back over 200 years; Dr. William Hunter, on whose bequest the Hunterian was founded, died in 1783. The museum which takes his name opened to the public, as part of the University of Glasgow, in 1807. For over 150 years, from Hunter's death until the mid-1930s, few works of art except portraits were acquired. The next quarter-century brought a transformation in the art collections. This spectacular period of growth culminated, in 1980, with the opening of the Hunterian Art Gallery, separate from the parent Hunterian Museum.



The first of the 20th-century donations which so transformed the Hunterian was the 1935 gift by Whistler's executrix, Rosalind Birnie Philip, of over 40 oils by

the artist, together with a significant group of prints and drawings.

100 years after his death, James McNeill Whistler remains a fascinating, complicated, and controversial figure. He was an American who studied and worked in Paris - where he arrived in 1855 - and for long periods in London, a wealthier city where artists could make substantial fortunes. It is as an important outsider - perhaps the most important - alongside the French Impressionists that Whistler should be known. He refused to produce the expected classically-inspired figure subjects; he borrowed techniques of composition from exotic eastern rather than earlier European sources; he played down topographical accuracy in his landscapes, or rather insisted on the dominant effects of atmosphere and design over such detail.

Whistler's attraction to oriental art, in which paper was the normal support - not canvas - is crucial to an understanding of his importance. His innovative Thames landscapes, the *Nocturnes*, dating from 1871, employed a simplified structure inspired by newly-discovered Japanese woodblock prints. It was arguably in his etchings - the works central to this exhibition - that Whistler most successfully

achieved this synthesis of ideas.

In art history, the role played by printmaking within the oeuvre of influential figures tends to be overlooked in favor of the more public medium of oil paint, and it is only a Dürer or a Rembrandt whose prints become part of the bigger story. Whistler plays a similar key role in 19th century art. He took the neglected copper-plate etching and turned it into the hand-printed, signed and limited, and - significantly - framed work of art that competes with drawings and paintings for critical attention.



Whistler carefully avoided the realism of the Victorian 'subject'. In the 1870s his appropriation of the musical title 'Nocturne' for his Thames landscapes made explicit that they were not portraits of places, but works of art analogous to music, which was becoming accepted as an absolute, abstract art form.¹ Whistler's work and also his very public battles with critics like Ruskin—who took against the *Nocturnes*—gave the world a sense that something new and interesting was going on. The legal battle with the art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) is a set piece of 19th century art history. It was sparked by one of

¹Nocturne was the title of short expressive piano pieces, first used by John Field in 1812, but made famous by Frédéric Chopin in the 1830s.

On exhibition at the Boca Raton Museum of Art

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Whistler's most abstract pictures, the *Nocturne in Black and Gold: the Falling Rocket* (Detroit Institute of Arts) which was shown in London in 1877. Ruskin wrote referring to the artist's 'cockney impudence', and comparing Whistler's price (200 guineas) to 'flinging a pot of paint in the public's face'. Whistler was wounded, and scented money in the form of legal damages. Although the court found in his favor, Whistler received derisory damages of one farthing (one quarter of one penny), and the costs of the case tipped him into bankruptcy.

'James McNeill Whistler: Selected Works from the Hunterian Art Gallery'

presents a full picture of Whistler's creative output, from earliest to latest, representing the full range of his styles, interests and activities, with substantial personal material in the form of correspondence and examples of his own collections of porcelain and table silver. An extensive selection of prints and drawings provides a complete chronological sense of Whistler's life. Indeed the publication of his sets of prints marked milestones noted throughout the art world, in



the United States as much as in London and Paris.

Annabel Lee (1) is a fascinating, unfinished painting from 1869. The subject illustrates a poem by Edgar Allan Poe. The sitter for this painting was a fifteen-year-old girl known only as Maggie, and the work was a commission for the Glasgow MP and collector William Graham. When Maggie failed to turn up for a sitting, Whistler embarked on the famous portrait of his mother. The thin, dream-like quality of the painting is the result of Whistler having scraped much of the paint away in preparation for another draft of the image.

In the period in which he was painting *Annabel Lee*, Whistler was working on an innovative type of landscape painting. These were scenes of the river Thames at or after dusk, capturing the special qualities of the river. They were christened Nocturnes at the suggestion of Whistler's patron Frederick R. Leyland (an amateur pianist), and with their apparent emptiness and thin paint they became the butt of criticism - culminating in Ruskin's famous attack. *Nocturne* (2), a view towards Westminster from Chelsea, takes the representation of darkness to its extreme. Whistler painted out of doors in all periods, using specially made sketching boxes. He presented

these colorful jewels in imposing frames to emphasize their artistic value as pictures painted from life. *A Distant Dome* (12) is a



very late work of this kind, painted on holiday in Corsica in 1901. *The Priest's Lodging, Dieppe* (10) on the other hand is a fine example of one of the many shop-front paintings that he made, delighting in the abstract, almost cubist compositions that result from these confrontations with architecture, with their patches of color supplied by the detailing of doorways and shutters.

Note in Green and Brown: Orlando at Coombe (3) is a sketch from the life, and it shows the sitter who featured in one of the artist's most controversial portraits, that of Lady Archibald Campbell: the *Arrangement in Black: La Dame au brodequin jaun* (Philadelphia Museum of Art).² The figure playing the character of Orlando in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, is Lady Campbell, who was a pioneer in the outdoor production of Shakespeare. The two figure paintings, *Nude Girl with a Bowl* (5) and *The Little Red Cap* (6) are fine examples of the more personal kind of painting that Whistler made, simply exploring feminine beauty for its own sake.³

²Lady Campbell's family rejected the painting as provocative, and making her look like a prostitute.

Whistler and Etching

Etchings were the basis of Whistler's early success, and they are, arguably, his greatest achievement. By the end of his life, praise for this compartment of his work had become extravagant, and he was regularly referred to as the greatest etcher since Rembrandt.

In Whistler's early days there was little or no serious interest in making etchings, and artists tended to publish them in sets, or clubbed together with others to publish their prints in portfolios and illustrated books. Since Whistler had little success with his paintings at the Royal Academy in London, or at the Salon in Paris, printmaking represented a commercial opportunity which he seized in a dramatic way. His career can be simplified by referring to the publication of his major sets of prints, starting with the 'French Set' of 1858, followed by the 'Thames Set' created in the years 1859-63 but not published until 1871. Most extraordinary of all were the two 'Venice Sets', of 1880, and 1886. These were and are among the most prized of all 19th century prints.

In the 1880s, Whistler could afford to make the sketching trips to Holland, home of Rembrandt the greatest etcher, which he had planned as a young man but never made. He proposed to make an even grander series of etchings based on Amsterdam, and some great works were produced although they were not

published as a set (*The Embroidered Curtain*, 62).

London and Paris—The French Set, and the Thames Set

Whistler spent the years 1855-9 alternating between Paris and London where he would stay with the Hadens. When he first settled in Paris to train as an artist, he already thought of becoming an



etcher. But there was no school where printmaking could be studied in Paris or anywhere else. It was principally his personal motivation, contacts with other artists, and his own investigation of printmaking techniques, that led him to publish a set of plates 'drawn from nature' (the French Set).

Some of the early prints - especially those with figures engaged in a drama, such as the *Music Room* (29), or *Rotherhithe* (38) - explore ideas for paintings with which Whistler hoped to compete with Gustave Courbet for public attention. In others, such as *Eagle Wharf* (31) and *The Pool* (32), the figures seem almost superfluous, and the focus hints at future, more abstract prints, with their emphasis on taut, minimal composition, the depiction of moods, and the most general qualities of the Thames landscape.

The Venice Etchings

Whistler had badly overspent immediately before the Ruskin trial, and the necessity of paying his legal bills precipitated his bankruptcy. Having lost virtually everything, Whistler set out for Venice in 1879 with a commission from the Fine Art Society to produce 12 etchings. Whistler was destined to make - in addition to money - the conceptual breakthrough which the Ruskin trial nearly thwarted.⁴ The Venice etchings, described by the painter Walter Sickert in 1889 as 'triumphs of selection and summary expression in pure line'⁵, established the artist's right to be as selective, as summary, and abstract in fact, as he wished.

Venice provided the artist with an opportunity to focus with mature vision (he was 45 years old) on an endlessly beautiful scene, which presented no less than an ideal version of the water-boats-bridges-people-buildings-sky formula of his earlier Thames set. In his mind, too, were the prints of the Japanese woodblock print-makers Hokusai (1760-1849) and Hiroshige (1797-1858).

Letters

Three of the many letters preserved in Glasgow contribute some exciting pieces to the jigsaw of biography, and illustrate Whistler's attitudes to art. Important in the context of printmaking, is a letter to the artist's half-brother George (1822-69), in which Whistler can scarcely

⁴This topic was the subject of an exhibition at the Hunterian Art Gallery in 2003. See Robertson, Pamela, *Beauty and the Butterfly*, Hunterian Art Gallery, 2003.

conceal his annoyance that George can no longer afford some etchings he promised to buy. A letter written from Venice to his sister-in-law Helen reveals mixed feelings about bad weather: 'I begin rather to wish myself back in my own lovely London fogs! They are lovely those fogs - and I am their painter!'⁶ This is a telling reminder of the originality of Whistler's vision. The third is a letter from Claude Monet in 1886, about the possibilities of exhibiting together in London (80). Monet had the utmost respect for Whistler's attitude to the act of creation, and his belief

in the artist's right to produce Art for Art's Sake.

Private paintings

The Hunterian collection is fortunate in housing some of Whistler's most personal works. Some are sketches, for example a *Self-portrait* (7) of 1896, and a late portrait of his house-keeper's daughter, *Little Lizzie Willis* (8). Others again are testimony to the artist's constant revision of his works, and in their unfinished state give valuable insights into his working methods. The dramatic life-size painting *Red and Black: the Fan*, (4) is a major

work, painted in 1891-4. The sitter was Ethel Philip, the artist's sister-in-law. Whistler chose in its title to stress the universal qualities of the painting rather than the sitter's identity. The painting is about the allure of a young woman dressed for an evening in Parisian society.

This painting might have come to reside in America but Whistler refused to sell it, once to Isabella Stewart Gardner in Boston, and later to Alfred Pope of Cleveland.⁷ In the last decade of his life, Whistler could afford to withhold paintings from sale.

⁴ Some of Whistler's pre-Venice prices are printed in a list published by the Fine Art Society (as an advertisement) in Haden's text *About Etching*, 1879. 2 guineas was the price of *Billingsgate* (K 47). Some rare or special prints, *The Guitar Player* (K 140) and *Battersea Morning* (K 155), were priced as high as 10 guineas.

⁵ Walter Sickert, *The Complete Writings on Art*, edited by Anna Gruetzner Robins, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.10-11.

⁶ Letter to Helen Euphrosyne Whistler, October-November 1879, GUL MS Whistler W 680, *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler* 06686. Helen, née Ionides 1849-1917, was married to Whistler's brother William McNeill Whistler (1836-1900).

⁷ Margaret MacDonald and Richard Dormant. Exhibition catalogue *James McNeill Whistler*, Tate Gallery, London, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1994-5, cat 197.

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