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CULTURE & LIFESTYLE NEWS & REVIEWS

WORD TO YOUR

The Dixon's Whistler exhibit moves beyond the Oedipal.

MOTHER

by Chris Davis

If you could condense Americans into one art-appreciation class taking its final exam, there would only be a handful of paintings the entire group could connect with the artist. Most could nail a Pablo Picasso, hook Leonardo da Vinci up with the *Mona Lisa*, and Vincent Van Gogh to *Starry Night*. And certainly, they could tie old Whistler to his mama's apron strings. The somber, static image of "Whistler's Mother," officially titled *Arrangement in Grey and Black*, has been replicated so often that everyone knows it's famous, but nobody knows why it's famous.

James McNeill Whistler (1835-1903) represents a crossroads where Courbet realists, Impressionists, and abstract expressionists meet and have a little picnic. His cleverness — specific to the frilly mother-worship of the Victorian era — was perhaps more impressive than the dour, gloomy profile of his best-known model. Oh (knuckles to forehead) to reduce that poor self-sacrificing saint to an arrangement of colors and lines! Scandalous! The very road to anarchy!

It's probably best that Whistler's most famous and most confounding piece is not on display in "James McNeill Whistler: Selected Works from the Hunterian Art Gallery," at the Dixon Gallery and Gardens through January 30th. More informative are the Japanese watercolors from Whistler's personal art collection, which illuminate the American-born artist's Asian influences, buried effectively but not too deeply beneath an impossibly thin surface. Of course, there's only a small sampling of the artist's paintings on display here. This exhibit focuses on Whistler's revolutionary etchings, which, in terms of contemporary pop consciousness, never quite get out of Mama's shadow.

Curator Peter Black, from the Hunterian Gallery in Glasgow, Scotland, had much to say about Whistler, a peculiar man whose ultimate goal, it seems, was to redirect the world just to get a rise from the fogies.

Flyer: Everybody knows Whistler, but most probably don't know why. Can you give us a little Whistler 101?

Peter Black: Whistler courted controversy by giving abstract titles to figure paintings and to landscapes. He referred to his most famous painting of his mother as an *Arrangement in Grey and Black: A Portrait of the Artist's Mother*. He emphasized the abstract. The fact that the painting was of his mother was only of interest to him.

Whistler's language was as important to understanding the art as the actual artifact.

Yes. From very early on in his career, he was keen to avoid association with painters whose work was historical, mythological, or based on literature.

Making composition more important than narrative.

Very early on, Whistler painted a portrait of his mistress. She stands in a white dress. She has a ring on her finger, and she's standing on a bearskin rug. Whistler was irritated when critics suggested it was inspired by Wilkie Collins' novel *The Woman in White*. He wanted the painting interpreted by the use of color, not allegorically or anecdotally. In the 1880s, Whistler tried to market himself as a painter of abstract landscapes. He's painted the river Thames with no recognizable landmarks. He was making paintings about atmosphere. There are three bands: ground, river, and sky. He thought the appreciation of a painting shouldn't be based on any sort of literary standard.

And where do the etchings fit in?

He built his reputation largely on his work as an etcher. He brought himself back from bankruptcy largely due to these fabulous etchings. He sold them at much higher prices than other artists. And he brought to this artist's medium techniques for marketing, and selling, and pushing up prices that were common in the market of reproductive engravings.

The artist's approach to business is as innovative as his technique?

You could buy a print in different quantities. You could buy a print or a proof, and there were different prices. And he's really the first artist to limit an edition of prints, which seems natural and inevitable. But he's really the first artist to bring in this idea from the commercial world. The medium existed, and various great artists used it. But in the 1880s, nobody was using it in an intelligent way.

So it was a triumph of good marketing.

He decorated his own frames and got the galleries to decorate with loud, canary-yellow wall coverings. He brought lilies in and invited the Prince and Princess of Wales. The whole thing was a dramatic success.

He was both artist and art director.

He was, and somewhat irritating to the fine-art society. ■



Whistler's Red and Black — the Fan

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