

Within the grasp of the master

Selection of oddities from Hunterian gallery showcases **Whistler** the man more than the talent

By Fredric Koepfel / koepfel@commercialappeal.com

THE EXHIBITION OF WORKS by American expatriate artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler at Dixon Gallery and Gardens evinces a familiar Wonders-esque sensibility. The first object we see upon entering the Dixon's main gallery isn't a work of art but the artist's Sheffield plate cheese toaster, its wooden handle slightly worn, so we know that *somebody*, Whistler or not, held it over a fire and, you know, toasted some cheese.

The object is supposed to personalize the artist in the same way that Napoleon's toothbrush and Catherine the Great's coffee spoon were supposed to bring those world-shakers and history-makers closer to our sensibilities in their blockbuster exhibitions in Memphis's Wonders series.

And speaking of spoons, several place settings from Whistler's domestic array of silver are displayed at Dixon, along with pieces of blue-and-white Chinese table porcelain that the artist and his wife collected.

There's even a hand-written

menu card from a dinner dated "June 5." On this evening Whistler and his guests dined on *rissoles du boeuf* ("beef turnovers"), *cotelettes de mouton* ("mutton chops"), asparagus and crepes. Wine is not mentioned.

art review

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

At Dixon Gallery and Gardens through Jan. 2.

Rosalind Birnie Philip, Whistler's youngest sister-in-law, ward, caretaker and heir, and other family members, beginning

See WHISTLER, PAGE 31

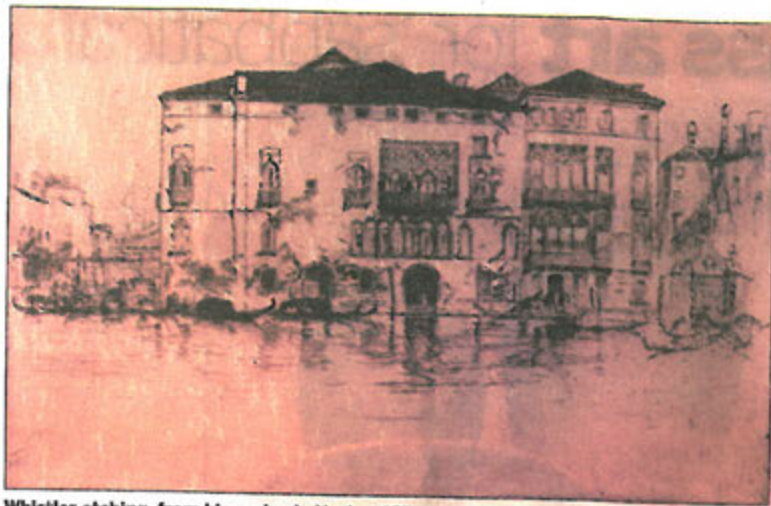


Whistler's "Red and Black: The Fan" (circa 1891)

movies: Ray Charles on the big screen **dining:** A haven in Casino Row

music: LL Cool J looks for votes **art:** Whistler at the Dixon

The Commercial Appeal | Friday, October 29, 2004



Whistler etching, from his series in Venice, 1879-80.

WHISTLER, from page 30

in 1935. Whistler died in 1903.

This emphasis on Whistler's daily life would be acceptable if the items hovered at the periphery of an absorbing display of his art, but such is not the case.

Of the 12 paintings on display, the one that stands out hangs on the wall facing the gallery entry. This is "Red and Black: The Fan," a stunning full-length portrait of another of Whistler's sisters-in-law. Executed with supreme self-confidence and a dry brush, this piece blazes with its subject's orangy-red dress and intensely black feather boa. It's a measure of Whistler's skill that rather than painting the dress first and the boa second, he reversed the process, and rapidly filled the dress in over the black background, leaving the ruffles and fringes of the boa outlined by red.

The other paintings in the exhibition are mainly preliminary sketches or unfinished pictures of women, clothed or nude, in generic "classical" poses. And in a first in any exhibition I have seen, the Hunterian includes in this show a scraped canvas, that is, a painting that the artist decided he didn't like and scraped smooth so it could be used again. Except that Whistler never got around to recycling this scraped canvas, so it stayed in his studio, a ghostly manifestation of another nymph. One wonders about the motivation for displaying this curiosity.

Most of the exhibition consists of etchings, a medium of which Whistler was the finest practitioner between Rembrandt and the end of time, and lithographs, of which his mastery was also incomparable. This selection of 57 graphic works, from the hundreds Whistler produced, extends from his first efforts and the pieces that brought him fame, the "French Set" of 1858 and the "Thames Set" of 1859, through the revolutionary etchings he produced in Venice in 1879 and 1880.

A few of these pieces are essential, and it's an important aspect of the exhibition that labels for many of them explain both the processes by which different kinds of

etchings and lithographs are made and the manner in which Whistler pushed beyond the boundaries of conventional practice, particularly in allowing gradations of ink to indicate light and shadow rather than scratching those features in with the etcher's needle. The evocative etching "Nocturne," from the mid-1870s, and the lithograph "The Thames," from 1896, illustrate Whistler's superb tonal control and sense of spacial organization.

Whistler, as were many European artists were in the late 19th Century, was influenced by the spareness, the flat, abstracting qualities and the unusual composition of Japanese watercolors and prints, of which he was an early collector. These qualities show up in and are transcended in "Little Lagoon," from the first Venice Set, in which the artist allows the resonance of the blank page to stand in for the water, while he defines a gondola and a few buildings with a minimum of nonchalant yet incredibly significant lines.

The Hunterian Art Gallery holds the world's largest group of paintings, drawings, graphic works and related matter by Whistler, serving as a major study and research center. One wishes that the institution, in a touring exhibition commemorating the centenary of the American-born artist's death, had sent material that we could take more seriously and that would showcase his talents more generously than some of these oddities do.

It's time to say, by the way, that the walls at the Dixon are in terrible shape.

I noticed their dire condition at the museum's exhibition this summer of its permanent collection, and they haven't improved for this show. Great stretches of the walls in the main gallery are pockmarked by holes of diverse sizes, by remnants of metal picture holders stuck in the wall and by touchup paint of a different color from the walls.

Surely this is not the impression that Hugo and Margaret Dixon wanted to impart when they bequeathed their home and collection of Impressionist paintings to found the museum 30 years ago.

— Fredric Koepfel, 529-2376