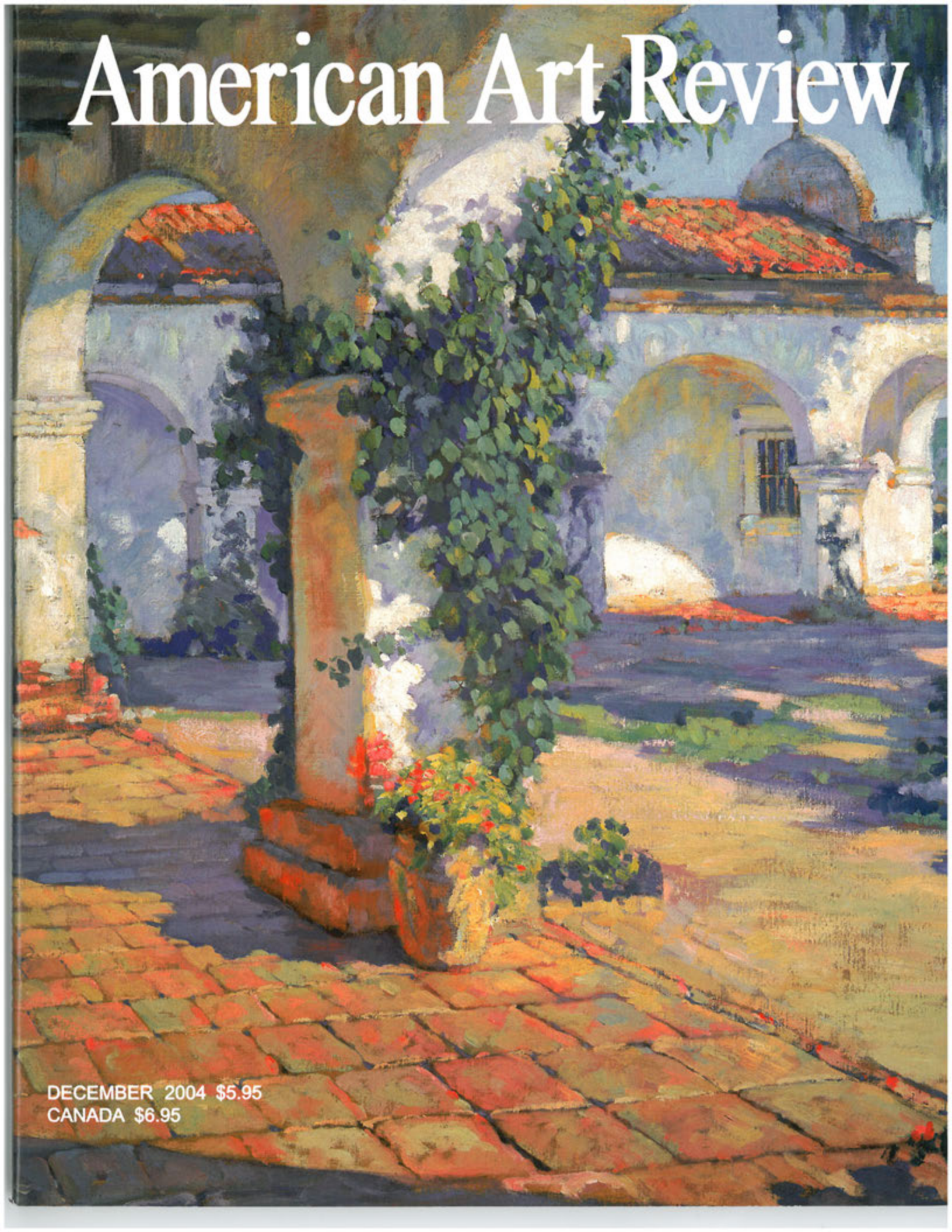
American Art Review



DECEMBER 2004 $5.95
CANADA $6.95

J. M. Whistler: Works from the Hunterian Art Gallery

by **Peter Black**

Like many of the greatest public art museums, the Hunterian Art Gallery owes the greatest glories of its collections to a very small number of generous individuals. A distinguishing feature of the Hunterian is that the generosity of these donors to one of the greatest university art collections in Britain dates back over 200 years. William Hunter, on whose bequest the Hunterian was founded, died in 1783. The museum 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 about significant transformation in the art collections. This spectacular period of growth culminated in 1980 with the opening of the Hunterian Art Gallery as a freestanding building separate from the parent Hunterian Museum. The first of the twentieth-century donations that so transformed the fortunes of the Hunterian was the 1935 gift, by James McNeill Whistler's sister-in-law and executrix Rosalind Birnie Philip, of over forty oils by the artist, together with a significant group of works on paper.

One hundred years after his death, James McNeill Whistler remains a fascinating, complicated, and controversial figure. He was an American who studied and worked in Paris, which was the cultural capital of nineteenth-century Europe, and for long periods in London, a wealthier city where artists could make substantial

James McNeill Whistler: Selected Works from The Hunterian Art Gallery is on view through January 2, 2005, at the The Dixon Gallery and Gardens, 4339 Park Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee, 38117, 901-761-5250, www.dixon.org. Toured by International Arts & Artists, (www.artsandartists.org) and organized by the Hunterian Museums and Arts Gallery, Glasgow, Scotland, the exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue. The next location is the Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati, Ohio, from March 4 through May 22, 2005, with five other venues planned through April 2007.

All illustrations are by James McNeill Whistler and from the Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, unless otherwise noted.

All measurements are in centimeters.

LEFT: *Eagle Wharf*, 1859, etching, 13.8 x 21.3.

BELOW LEFT: *The Priest's Lodging, Dieppe*, 1897, o/panel, 16.5 x 24.3.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Self-Portrait*, 1896, o/c, 51.5 x 31.3.

RIGHT: *Nocturne*, c. 1875-7, o/c, 55.5 x 39.4.

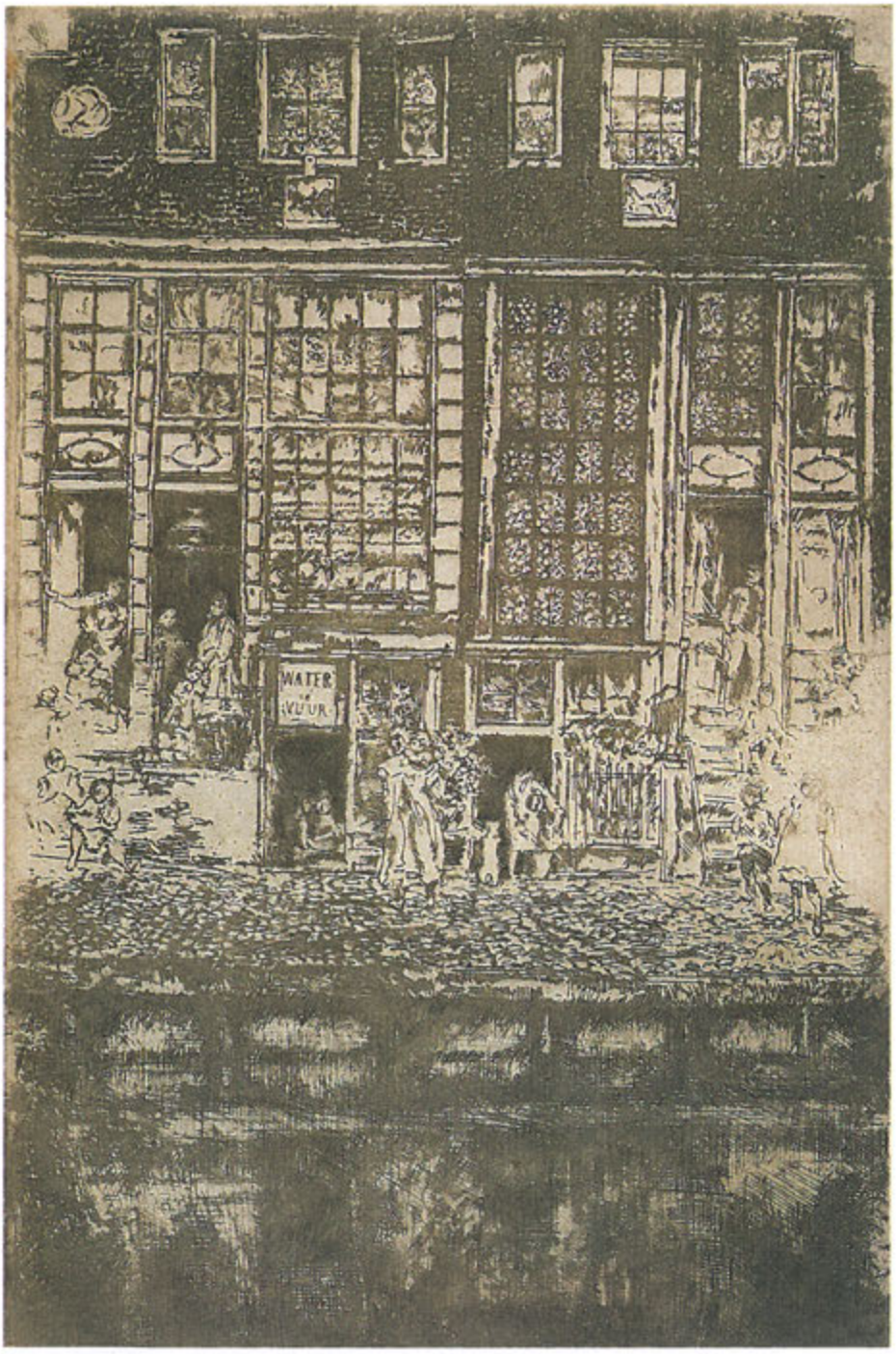
fortunes. He first arrived in Paris in 1855 at the moment when the conventional tradition of literary/historical figure painting represented by Delacroix and Ingres was in its last stages and would shortly, partly through Whistler's influence, be replaced by a range of subjects more concerned with intrinsic visual effect.

A reactive personality, Whistler, set out to confound those who would categorize him. It is as an important outsider alongside the French Impressionist group that he should be known; as an innovative painter of portraits and landscapes who confounded academic principles in ways analogous to the work of the Impressionists. Whistler refused to produce classically-inspired figure subjects; he borrowed techniques of composition from exotic 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 principles deriving from 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*, the earliest of which date from 1871, employed a simplified compositional structure inspired by newly-discovered Japanese prints. In handling paint surfaces he applied conventions of brush painting on paper to his works on canvas. This, even more conspicuously than the avoidance of story-telling, was the means he used to achieve the aesthetic focus of his paintings, at the same time distancing himself from the oil painters of the Royal Academy in London and the annual Salon in Paris, who worked in a technical tradition scarcely changed since Raphael. It was arguably in his etchings that Whistler most successfully achieved this synthesis of ideas.

In art history, the role played by printmaking within the oeuvre of certain 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. But Whistler is a key figure in nineteenth-century art, much of whose influence was achieved through prints. He took the neglected copper-plate etching and rescued it from its bookish, rather snobbish promoters mid-century, and turned it into the hand-printed, signed and limited, and, most significantly, framed work of art that actually competes with drawings and paintings for critical attention.

Whistler was ahead of his time, and in some ways his work and his principles come closer to developments beyond Im-



pressionism. Links can even be made with some of the overtly abstract artists working in the Paris of the early 1900s. Some of Whistler's very abstract etchings of Amsterdam canal subjects have even been regarded as inspiration for the monochrome early Cubist paintings of Braque and Picasso, which echo the tonality of Whistler's celebrated etchings.[1]

The notion that a painting should be appreciated for its quality as a work of art rather than as a pointer to a story from history or literature which might move the viewer was not invented by Whistler. But his colorful life, especially the events of the infamous Ruskin libel trial, have made him a central part of the story of this Aesthetic Movement. Whistler's influence is hard to distinguish from the influences on him; they extended beyond painting into poetry and music. This trend ultimately pointed in the direction of abstraction, but on the way it led to a fruitful interrelationship between the arts.

Whistler increasingly avoided the realism of the Victorian 'subject' or the conventional landscape, or other anecdotal associations in his painting. 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 to be appreciated in a way analogous to the art of music which was becoming accepted as something absolute—even abstract.[2] Whistler's work and also his very public battles with critics like Ruskin gave the world a sense that something new and interesting was going on.

Whistler's legal battle with the art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) financially ruined Whistler but ensured his fame. The battle was sparked by one of his most abstract pictures, the *Nocturne in Black and Gold: the Falling Rocket* (Detroit Institute of Arts) which was shown at the inaugural exhibition of the Grosvenor Gallery in London in 1877. Ruskin, whose mental health was fragile, allowed his irritation with Whistler to get the better of him, and he wrote a piece referring to the artist's "cockney impudence," and comparing the price of the painting to "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." Whistler was understandably wounded by this. Although the court found in his favour, he received derisory damages of one farthing (one quarter of one penny), and the costs of the case, on top of years of overspending, tipped him into bankruptcy.

RIGHT: *Off the Dutch Coast*, 1883-84, watercolor on paper, 14.6 x 25.
BELOW RIGHT: *Annabel Lee*, c. 1869-97, o/c, 74 x 50.7.
LEFT: *Note in Green and Brown: Orlando at Coombe*, 1884, o/panel, 14.8 x 9.
FAR LEFT: *The Embroidered Curtain*, 1889, etching, 23.8 x 15.8.

James McNeill Whistler: Selected Works from The Hunterian Art Gallery presents a full picture of his creative output, from earliest to latest, with works representing the whole range of his styles, interests and activities. The extensive selection of prints and drawings provides a complete, chronological sense of Whistler's life.

Annabel Lee is a fascinating, unfinished painting begun in the late 1860s. The subject is an example of Whistler flirting with anecdotal painting: the subject illustrates a poem by Edgar Allan Poe. The sitter for this painting, which was begun in about 1869, was a fifteen-year-old girl known only as Maggie, and the work was a commission for the Glasgow MP and collector William Graham. Maggie failed to turn up for her sitting one day, and this prompted Whistler to embark 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.

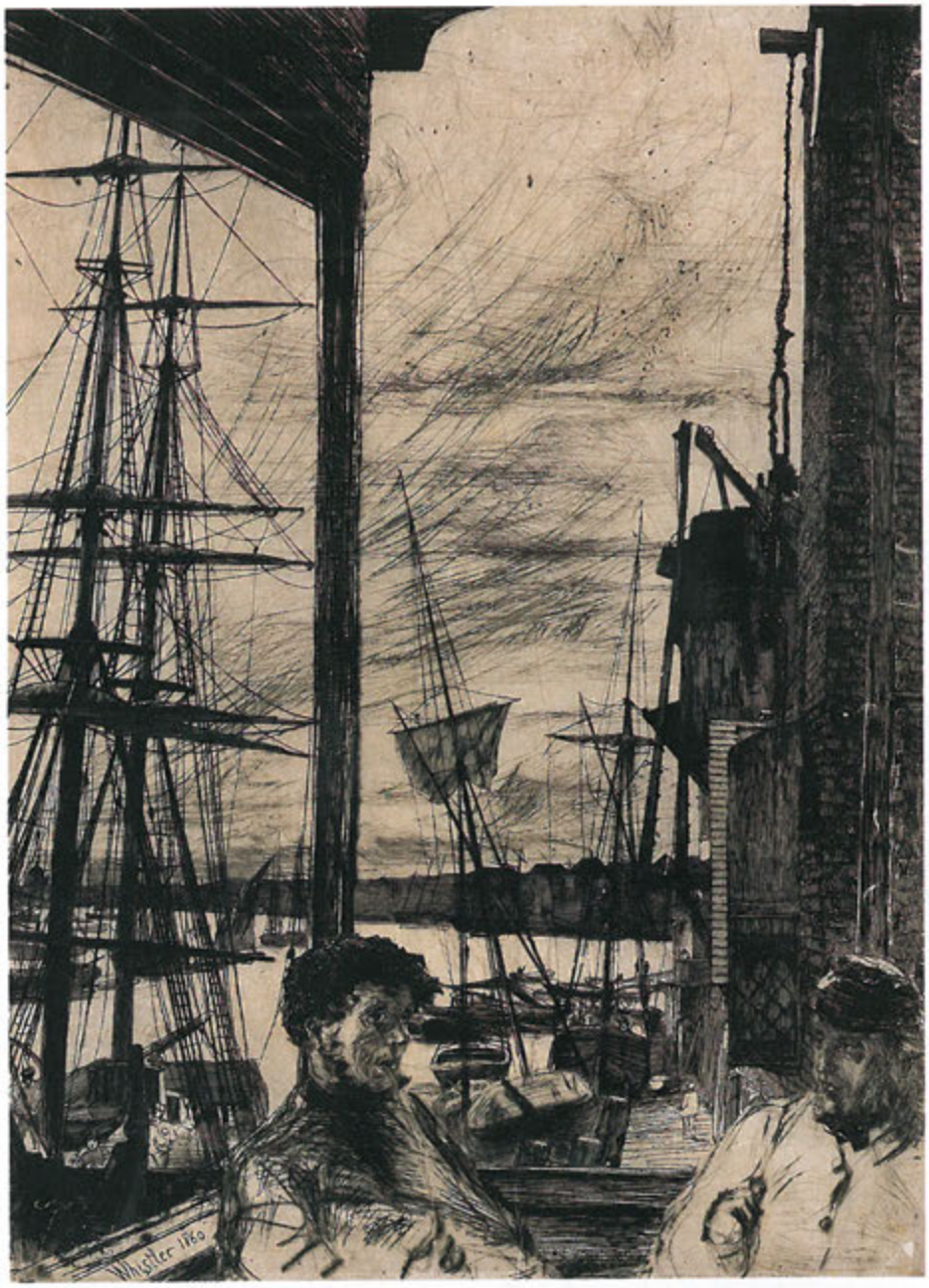
In the period in which he was painting *Annabel Lee*, Whistler was working on an innovative type of landscape painting, the earliest examples of which he called his "Moonlights." These were scenes of the River Thames at or after dusk, capturing the special qualities of the arterial river when the constant traffic of boats retreated at night leaving nature in command. 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 formed an exciting and original contribution to nineteenth century landscape painting. *Nocturne* takes the representation of darkness to its extreme. The view is towards Westminster from Chelsea and the boats and other features are difficult to make out in a composition that is intended to be virtually abstract, because it concerns the moment at which the light goes.

Prominent among the paintings that remained in the artist's studio and which were ultimately bequeathed to the Hunter-

ian Museum in Glasgow, were the oil sketches which Whistler painted out of doors in all periods, using specially-made sketching boxes that he carried about with him. The small size of these sketches is surprising in relation to their strong visual impact. He presented these colorful jewels in imposing frames to emphasize their artistic value as pictures painted from life. *A Distant Dome* is a very late work, painted on holiday in Corsica in 1901 where he had been persuaded to go for the sake of his failing health. *The Priest's Lodging, Dieppe* on the other hand is a fine example of one of the many shop-front paintings that he made, whether in Chelsea, Paris or Amsterdam, 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.

Figure painting was the basis of Whistler's first attempts to achieve fame at the Academy in London and the Salon in Paris. *The Symphonies in White*, of which the first is in Washington D.C. (National Gallery of Art) sparked controversy, since conventional critics did not know how to read a painting except in terms of its dramatic content. Figure painting and portraiture was a mainstay of his production, both by inclination and because of the rewards available to the painter who could portray

RIGHT: *Rotherhithe*, 1860, etching, 27.5 x 19.8.
LEFT: *Little Lizzie Willis*, 1896-99, o/c, 51.4 x 31.4.
FAR LEFT: *The Blacksmith's Howth*, 1900, watercolor on card, 14.7 x 25.
MIDDLE FAR LEFT: *A Distant Dome*, 1901, o/panel, 12.7 x 21.7.
BELOW FAR LEFT: *The Little Red Cap*, 1892-99, o/c, 73 x 49.8.
BELOW LEFT: *Nude Girl with a Bowl*, c. 1892-95, o/panel, 51.4 x 32.2.



the very rich.

Note in Green and Brown: Orlando at Coombe is a sketch and shows the sitter who featured in one of the artist's most controversial portraits: the *Arrangement in Black: la dame au brodequin jaune—Portrait of Lady Archibald Campbell* (Philadelphia Museum of Art).[3] The figure playing the character of Orlando in Shakespeare's "As You Like It," is Lady Campbell, who with her husband was a pioneer in the outdoor production of Shakespeare's plays. The two figure paintings, *Nude Girl with a Bowl* and *The Little Red Cap* are fine and characteristic examples of the more personal kind of painting that Whistler made when he had no exhibition in view, and could explore feminine beauty for its own sake as he might the beauty of a landscape.[4]

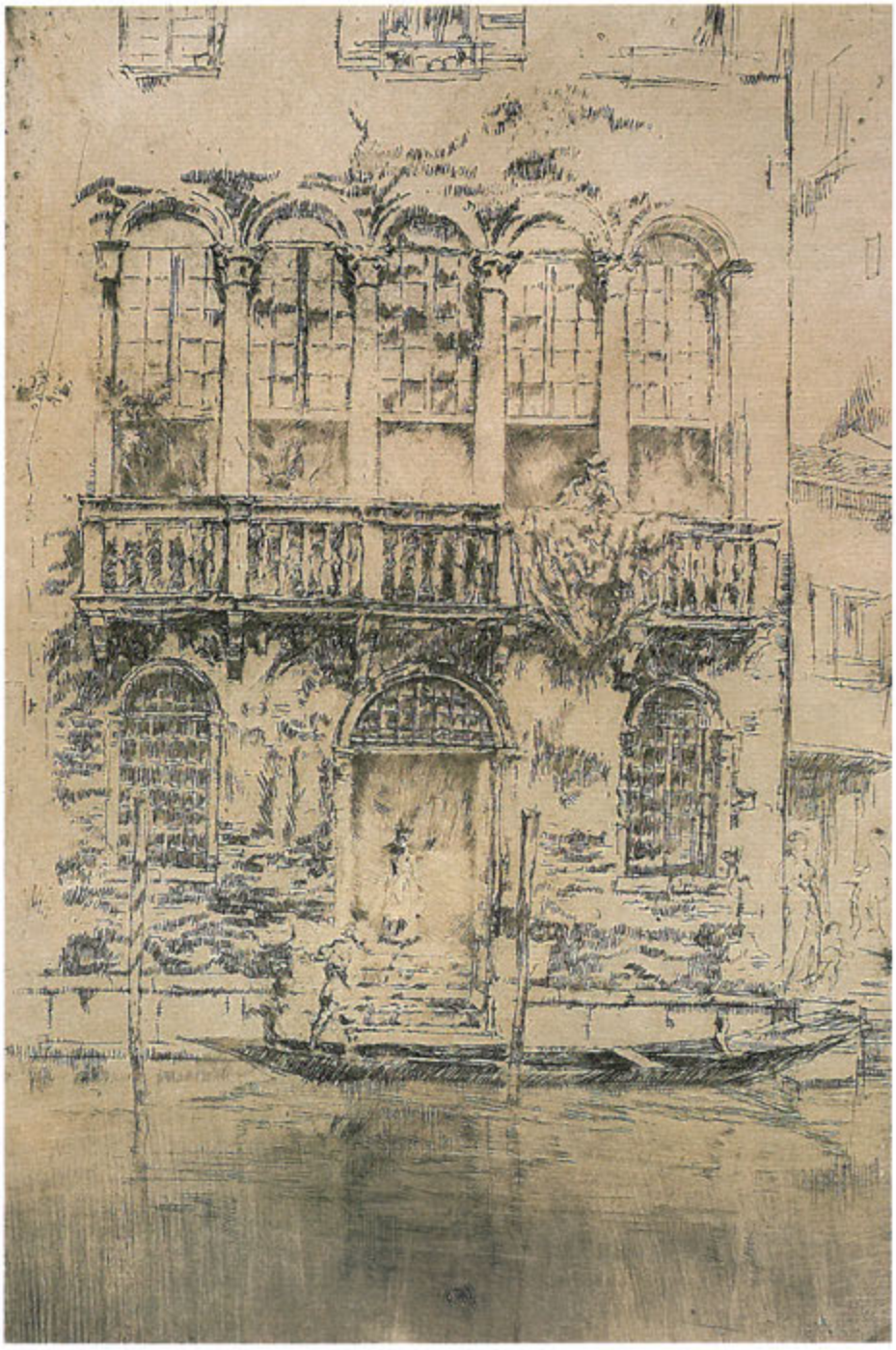
Despite his love of public controversy and battling with critics, Whistler had an introspective side, and painted a number of very fine self-portraits which show an awareness of the European tradition, going back to Sir Joshua Reynolds, Velázquez, and Rembrandt. The *Self-Portrait* sketch is a study undertaken for the finished painting *Gold and Brown, Self-Portrait*, 1898 (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.).

Etchings were the basis of Whistler's early success. They were his route to financial recovery after the Ruskin libel trial of 1878, 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 his aesthetic development Whistler was a dedicated lover of art on paper, one of the most potent influences on the young artist being the watercolors and prints of J.M.W.Turner. The interest in representing atmosphere as a subject in itself, and which pervades Whistler's art, goes back to Turner, both to the prints of his Liber Studiorum and to the daring later watercolor paintings. This is not to say that Whistler did not produce important paintings on canvas; rather his compositional devices, and the entirely original way in which he handles paint on canvas are indebted to the conventions of art on paper.

Whistler had the good fortune to discover early in life an aptitude for graphic art, and when as a very young man he took a job with the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in Washington in 1854-55, producing the "useful works" of art recommended to him by his late father, he learned the technique of etching.[5] But this was to be a brief interlude, before setting off definitively to become an artist in Paris.

In Whistler's early days there was little or no serious interest in making etchings, and artists tended for the sake of economy to publish them in sets, or clubbed together with others to publish their prints in portfolios and illustrated books. Since Whistler had little critical or commercial success with his paintings at the Royal Academy in London, or at the Salon in Paris, printmaking represented—in the artistic vacuum which then existed in that medium—a commercial opportunity which he seized in a dramatic way.

Whistler's 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, in terms of both the works of art created, and of their sheer popular impact, was the publication of the "First Venice Set" (the "Twelve Etchings of Venice") at the Fine Art Society in 1880, and the "Second Venice Set" (the "Twenty-Six Etchings of Venice") published by Dowdeswell & Dowdeswell in 1886. These are the works which were, and are most prized by collectors of nineteenth century prints, and which the painter and critic Walter Sickert, writing at the time, saw as the greatest Impressionist prints.[6]

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*). By the 1890s, with a major body of etchings behind him, and encouraged by his new wife Beatrix, Whistler was concentrating on lithography.

During the years of 1855-59, Whistler alternated between Paris and London. When he first settled in Paris to train as an artist, he already had the notion of becoming an etcher. But there was no school where printmaking could be studied in Paris or anywhere else. Neither his experience of learning to draw at the Ecole Impériale et Spéciale de Dessin, nor of painting in the studio of the painter Charles Gleyre (1808-1874) count for much beside his personal motivation, contacts with other artists, his investigation of printmaking techniques, and decision to publish a set of plates "drawn from nature."

Whistler's search for subjects among the working population of London, especially in the docks, and among the men and women who worked on the river, links him with Courbet, Manet and the Realist movement in France. Some of the prints—especially those early works with figures engaged in a drama, such as *Rotherhithe*—

ABOVE: *Needlework*, 1896, lithograph, 25.5 x 18.2.
ABOVE RIGHT: Katsushika Hokusai, *Aoyama enza-no-matsu—The Cushion-Pine of Aoyama*, c. 1830, woodcut printed in colors on Japanese paper, 25.7 x 38.
RIGHT: *The Pool*, 1859, etching, 13.9 x 21.5.
LEFT: *Red and Black: The Fan*, 1891-94, o/c, 187.4 x 89.8
FAR LEFT: *The Balcony*, 1879-80, etching, 29.5 x 19.8.

explore ideas for paintings with which Whistler hoped to compete with Courbet for public attention. In others, such as *Eagle Wharf* and *The Pool*, 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 Thames prints that Whistler had produced were not published as a set until 1871. Meanwhile in the 1860s, other projects occupied him, notably portraits and figure paintings and drawings. The 1870s was the period in which Whistler's thoughts about landscape painting and etching crystallized. These oil paintings, inspired to some extent by the Japanese art that had also informed his figure paintings of the 1860s, concentrated on the moody, fog-bound Thames riverscape, and were painted with remarkable economy of means, in striking contrast to the earlier more conventional, because essentially topographical, Thames etchings and paintings.

Whistler had badly overspent immediately before the Ruskin trial, and the necessity of paying his legal bills precipitated his bankruptcy in 1879. Having lost virtually everything, Whistler set out for Venice in 1879 with a commission from the Fine Art Society to produce twelve etchings. The Venice etchings established the artist's right to be as selective, as summary, and abstract in fact, as he wished.

Venice in the cold winter of 1879-80 was undoubtedly a welcome retreat from the humiliation of the bankruptcy sale in London. It also provided the artist with the opportunity to focus with mature vision (he was forty-five 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 imagination, too, would have lain knowledge of the Japanese artists Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) and Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858), who forty years previously, on the other side of the globe, had produced highly commercial sets of forty to fifty prints on landscape themes which were partly the inspiration for Whistler's imagery.

Whistler understood perfectly that all publicity is good publicity. He hoarded

(continued page 159)