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## Not just a momma's boy

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Tulsa World (Final Home Edition), Page H3 of Arts

### **Philbrook exhibit shows many artistic sides of James McNeill Whistler**

All that most people know about James McNeill Whistler is that he was the son of one austere mother.

Whistler's painting of his mother - in a black dress, wearing a small white bonnet, sitting in profile before a gray wall - is one of the most famous ever created. The image has become such a pop culture icon that one only has to say the words "Whistler's Mother" to call the portrait to mind.

An artist who creates such an enduring image receives both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is that the artist's name and work remains in the public consciousness.

The curse is that people think that one painting is the only thing worthwhile the artist produced.

The exhibit that the Philbrook Museum of Art will open Sunday, "James McNeill Whistler: Selected Works From the Hunterian Art Gallery," was created to present a more complete portrait of one of the most influential artists of the 19th century.

And the exhibit accomplishes that by focusing not on Whistler's paintings, but on the works on paper - primarily etchings and lithographs - that he created throughout his life.

"Whistler was considered the greatest etcher of the 19th century, and probably the greatest etcher since Rembrandt," said James Peck, Ruth G. Hardman Curator of European and American Art at Philbrook. "And he was instrumental in getting people to look at etchings and works on paper as individual works of art, rather than mass-produced images."

Whistler also was at the forefront of a number of things that are considered common in the art world, from the way works of art are displayed to the concept of "art for art's sake" - that a painting or a sculpture should be judged only in terms of its beauty, not for the story it told or the scene it reproduced.

That included even that famous picture of his mother, as evidenced by its title "Arrangement in Gray and Black: Portrait of the Artist's Mother."

"People tend to misunderstand that painting," Peck said. "They think it's something unusual for him, but really it's very much a part of his work as a whole. It's an arrangement of line and color, using a very limited tonal range and flat composition. There's nothing austere or puritanical about it - it's supposed to be simply a work of art."

That is why Whistler would often title his works with musical terms - arrangement, nocturne, harmony. It was a way to get audiences to consider his work as something more than a

simple representation of the known world.

The exhibit was organized in 1903 by the Hunterian Art Gallery at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, in honor of the centennial of Whistler's death.

The Hunterian Art Gallery is home to one of the most complete collections of Whistler's work in the world, its holdings rivaled only by the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C.

Most of the works in the show have never been put on exhibit before, and the collection itself has never toured. One reason for that is the original donation to the Hunterian Art Gallery had the requirement that the works never leave the university.

"Most of the paintings donated to the gallery were in that original donation, which is why there aren't that many paintings in this show," Peck said. "However, there were two subsequent bequests to the university that did not have that stipulation, and this exhibit draws from those collections."

The paintings that are included in the exhibit are for the most part, Peck said, the sort of images one would find in an artist's studio -- early studies of works to be finished or abandoned, watercolor sketches.

The show includes two of Whistler's "Nocturnes," one of which ("Nocturne: The Solent") is on loan from Tulsa's Gilcrease Museum, and one of Whistler's full-length portraits, "Red and Black: The Fan."

"What makes this exhibit unique, I think, is that we're also able to include a number of Whistler's personal items in the show," Peck said. "It's a rare thing to be able have some of the items that an artist lived with and used everyday."

"And Whistler was someone who made art out of every aspect of his life, so that the act of selecting objects for his personal use was a kind of art," he said. "Then he would often mark these objects with the butterfly images that he used as his signature -- sort of putting his own stamp on these things."

The personal effects in the show include tableware, such as Chinese porcelain tea sets, silver place settings, letters written by and to Whistler (including one from Claude Monet), catalogs of exhibits, and a copy of Whistler's "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies," a collection of writings that served as the artist's manifesto.

Whistler was born in Massachusetts, but from an early age lived much of his life abroad. He grew into a flamboyant, opinionated, often pugnacious man, whose cutting wit and dandyish appearance were in sharp contrast to the subtle, almost subdued art he created.

He first was noticed for etchings that were grouped under the titles "the French Set" and "the Thames Set."

The early French etchings show Whistler's debt to Rembrandt, but the later English etchings reveal Whistler beginning to establish his own style, one in which the subject matter was increasingly unimportant.

"There are people in some of these scenes, especially in the Thames set," Peck said. "But they are really incidental to the image. There's no story being told."

Whistler was one of the first artists to oversee every aspect of an exhibition of his work. He did away with the 19th-century tradition of covering gallery walls floor to ceiling with paintings, but instead set images in a single line at eye level.

He would paint the walls, write the catalog and labels, even require the gallery guards to dress in uniforms he designed.

But Whistler's artistic temperament also got him into trouble. One of his most famous paintings, "Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket," drew the ire of critic John Ruskin, who described this abstract image as "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."

Whistler sued for libel and won, but ended up bankrupt.

His talent for etching saved him. Whistler received a commission to go to Venice and produce 12 etchings. He returned with 50, some of them among the most exquisite images ever created in this medium.

Some of the best, like "The Little Lagoon," are marvels of minimalism -- a few dark lines and a unique use of plate tone (a thin film of ink on the surface of the printing plate to create an atmospheric effect) are all Whistler needed to suggest boats and gondolas on the surface of the water.

"Because of the way he used plate tone, he was able to make each image drawn from this particular plate an individual work of art," Peck said. "There were something like 50 images printed of ('The Little Lagoon'), and no two are exactly alike."

The Venice etchings restored Whistler's fame and fortunes. He would marry (although his wife would soon succumb to cancer), and in the months prior to his own death was awarded an honorary doctorate degree from the University of Glasgow -- an accolade that led in part to a good portion of his life's work being housed at that institution.

"Because the images in this show are from the artist's personal collection," Peck said, "they represent the finest impressions of his prints, as well as the paintings that meant the most to him. During his life, he was offered huge sums of money for ('Red and Black: The Fan'), but he refused them all. It was something that meant a great deal to him.

"That's why we feel so lucky to have this show at Philbrook," he said. "It's not often that we're able to present an exhibit of this quality by one of the truly great artists of all time."

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## art exhibit

### "JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER: SELECTED WORKS FROM THE HUNTERIAN ART GALLERY"

#### When

Sunday through Oct. 30

#### Where

Philbrook Museum of Art, 2727 S. Rockford Road

#### Admission

\$7.50 adults, \$5.50 students and senior citizens, children 12 and under free

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## Whistler exhibit events

The Philbrook Museum of Art will offer a wide range of public programs in conjunction with its

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showing of "James McNeill Whistler: Selected Works from the Hunterian Art Gallery."

All programs are free with museum admission, and will be held in the Patti Johnson Wilson auditorium unless otherwise noted.

Two special performance programs will help put Whistler's life and work into broader context.

"Whistler Through the Eyes of His Women," is a "living history" presentation by Joyce Hill Stoner, a professor and paintings conservator at the Winterthur University of Delaware. Her presentation focuses on the many women in Whistler's life -- mother, wife, lovers. It will be presented at 2 p.m. Aug. 21.

Michael Lasser, host of the National Public Radio program "Fascinatin' Rhythm," will offer "Sounds of the Rude World: Popular Songs From Whistler's Time," at 2 p.m. Oct. 16. The program will feature discussion and performances of popular music of the 19th century.

Philbrook's curator of European and American Art James Peck will present "Whistler in Historical Context," a lecture on Whistler's importance in the history of American and European art, 2 p.m. Sept. 11.

Tulsa artist and printmaker Maxine Richard will answer the question, "How Did Whistler Make That?" in a lecture-demonstration of the art of printmaking, that will give participants the chance to create their own prints. This will be from 1 to 3 p.m. Sept. 24 in the Mabee Reception Gallery.

Whistler's manifesto, "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies," will be the subject of a reading and discussion led by Pamela Hodges, Bernsen Director of Education & Public Programs, 6 p.m. Sept. 29 in the Education Center Conference Room.

The Tulsa Contemporary Dance Company will present an original dance work choreographed by Katherine Feiok, inspired by Whistler's drawings of dancers and the butterfly image that the artist used as his signature. It will be performed at 6:30 p.m. Oct. 6.

For more information, call Philbrook at 748-5375.

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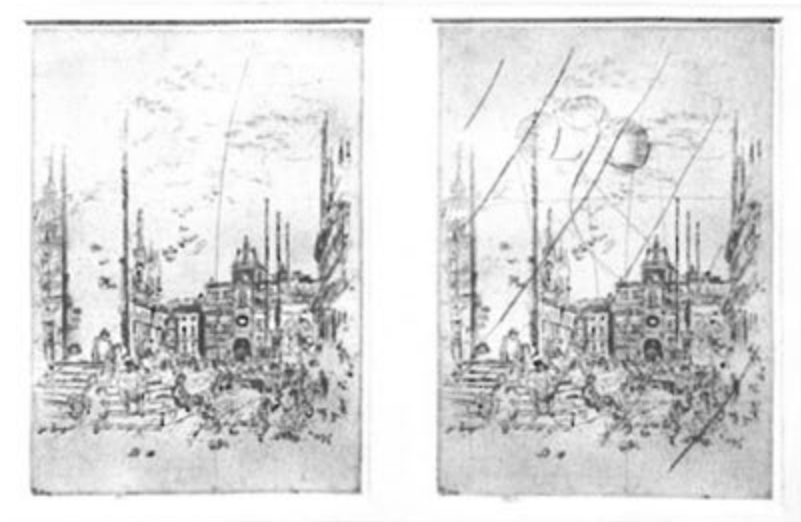
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The lesser known Whistler's sister-in-law  
Known to Whistler as "The Red Bunnie," this portrait of his sister-in-law is titled "Red and Black: The Fan, 1891-4"  
and is oil on canvas.

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'The Piazzetta (from First Venice Set), 1879-80" is part of the exhibit, "James McNeill Whistler: Selected works from  
he Hunterian Art Gallery," that opens Sunday at the Philbrook.

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