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James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Expatriate Artist and Controversialist

Whistler! Quite an artist and quite a personality, as you will see! [show biography sheet] I must pick and choose for a Torch paper, so here is what I have chosen: I'll talk briefly about Whistler as a **popular artist**, then as a **serious artist**, and finally as a **controversial celebrity**. I hope you finish with a better picture of the artist and the man than I had when I came to the Freer Gallery at The Smithsonian over six years ago.

The Popular Artist

Whistler did not **strive** to be a popular artist, but he nevertheless created an improbable artistic icon, his mother's portrait. Is there anyone who has not heard of 'Whistler's Mother'? Here she is in 1870 **[Slide 1]**, and as he painted her in 1871 **[Slide 2]**. That was 37 years after she gave birth to **James Abbott Whistler** in Lowell, Massachusetts. The portrait is actually named 'Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1: The Artist's Mother.' The musical term 'arrangement' was meant to direct attention away from the subject and to emphasize beauty as combinations of brushstrokes, analogous to the beauty of music achieved by combinations of notes, or poetry by combinations of words. In espousing this, he was among the leaders of the **aesthetic movement** of the late nineteenth century, also

described as **'art for art's sake.'** This was hardly a concept expected to rival the contemporary writer Charles Dickens in popularity, but the idea that beauty was paramount guided Whistler's life, even when it was at odds with efforts to earn a living by selling his art.

As an aside, does anyone know any **other** works by Whistler? You can always see several at the Freer, which houses one of the two finest Whistler collections in the world, thanks to the vision and wealth of Charles Lang Freer, a Detroit industrialist. Freer's main interest was Asian art, and he was drawn to Whistler through a shared interest in Japanese prints. Beginning in 1890 he became a patron, friend, and major collector of Whistler's work. The other major collection is in Glasgow, Scotland, but fortunately Whistler was sufficiently productive that his works are found in more than 70 museums, both large and small. His oil paintings are only a modest part of his work; he is a recognized master of etching and lithography, typically with multiple prints of each work.

Now back to his mother, Anna Matilda Whistler. James revered her, and eventually adopted her maiden name McNeill as his middle name, although he was known throughout his life by one or sometimes both middle names: Abbott and McNeill. 'Whistler's Mother,' despite the unusual pose and her severe demeanor, has truly become an American icon, which is ironic since Whistler never returned to America after he left in 1855. He painted her portrait in London several years after she came to spend the rest of her life there. Following two decades of mixed critical reviews of the painting, he proudly sold it to France in 1891, with the encouragement and help of influential French friends. It resides in Paris today, being moved in

1986 from the Louvre to the new Musee d'Orsay, which specializes in nineteenth century art.

The painting has visited America three times, the first and most celebrated in 1932-34, when it was brought to the U.S. by the fledgling Museum of Modern Art as the centerpiece of its first 'blockbuster' exhibit. The painting toured eleven cities, including the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, where it was greeted with great fanfare and elaborate security. In the final day of its month-long showing in San Francisco, more than 25,000 viewers came, roughly one per second.

Two recent books have explored and celebrated Whistler's Mother, in both illuminating and entertaining ways. Margaret MacDonald's book details the 'pop culture' side in Chapter 6, 'The face that launched a thousand images ... ' For Mother's Day in 1934, she appeared on a special United States postage stamp **[Slide 3]**, which was controversial in the art world because the image was severely cropped and a pot of flowers added. Here are two more examples **[Slides 4, 5]**. The Whistler pose was also used dramatically in Alfred Hitchcock's movie, 'Psycho,' and we discovered a wonderful Danny Kaye television skit in the video collection of our local library.

The Serious Artist

Naturally, we wonder how James Whistler rose to be an accomplished and influential artist. The most formative years of his childhood were in St. Petersburg, Russia, where his father, a West Point graduate and experienced railroad engineer, was engaged by the Russian government as

chief consultant on building the St. Petersburg to Moscow rail line. By that time, James had already showed talent for drawing, and he frequented the great art museums of St. Petersburg.

However, family tradition and connections led to an appointment to the United States Military Academy, which he entered at age 18. He was liked by his fellow cadets, and he remained proud of his West Point years, but he was most definitely not the '**military type**,' accumulating numerous demerits for dress and behavior. He excelled only in drawing class, and to this day some of his extracurricular art is displayed at the academy. He failed chemistry in his third year, probably intentionally, and was later quoted as saying, "If silicon were a gas, today I might be a major general." His family appealed for reinstatement to the superintendent of the academy, Col. Robert E. Lee, who graciously but firmly denied the request.

In 1854 Whistler's drawing skills, and again family connections, led to a position as cartographer at the Coast Survey in Washington, DC. There he learned about the skill of etching, and one work of that period exists at the Freer. **[Slide 6, Spaulding p.6]**. Note the several interesting but extraneous sketches of people above the rendering of the coastal terrain. His work schedule was exceedingly erratic, but rather than admitting to being late to work, he always insisted that the office opened too early!

In 1855 he finally wrote his disappointed mother that he was departing for Europe. At just age 21, he went first to London and then soon to Paris, where he enthusiastically adopted the Bohemian lifestyle and began serious study of art. Although he never disavowed his love for America, and

he later followed the Civil War closely, he never again returned to the United States.

Whistler initially embraced the 'realist' art of the time, particularly influenced by Gustave Courbet. Yet from the start he was uneasy, searching for his own style. With an artist friend, he set off for Amsterdam to study Rembrandt's work for himself. The two had little money, and they struggled to pay their way by charming and sketching villagers along the way, never reaching Amsterdam. Etchings from this trip were his first serious art, producing what became known as the French Set, 'Twelve Etchings from Nature.' A sophisticated example at the Freer is 'The Unsafe Tenement,' which exists in three different 'states,' -- that is, successive versions of the same copper plate, documented by prints in the collection. **[Slide 7, Naylor #8, 1857/58]**

Many critics regard Whistler as a master etcher, in the same league as Rembrandt and Goya. He returned to etching several times, including a commission with advance payment to make etchings in Venice. The eventual Venice Set generated much needed continuing sales. Still, financial concerns were always with him, made worse by his penchant to live, dress, and entertain in style. At West Point, he was delighted to look 'very dandy in grey,' and an early self portrait shows him as a sophisticated Bohemian. **[Slide 8, 1857/58 self portrait, Spalding #1]**

As early as 1860, he painted unconventional subjects with unconventional compositions, as in this family group, on permanent exhibit at the Freer. **[Slide 9, Spaulding #5]** It includes a favorite niece, Annie

Haden, the daughter of his sister Deborah and her husband Seymour Haden. At the time, Whistler lived comfortably and economically with the Hadens in London, and for several years he shared interests with Haden, who was an artist as well as physician. As with most relationships throughout his life, however, a falling out eventually ensued, in part because of jealousy when Haden had etchings accepted for a London exhibition, while Whistler's more adventuresome efforts were rejected.

The title, "Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room,' is significant, even though it was added some years later. The notion of musical themes actually began with an 1862 portrait **[Slide 10, Spaulding #7]**, which a critic referred to as a 'symphony in white.' Whistler subsequently adapted the phrase to make the formal title, 'Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl,' now at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. It was rejected for exhibition at the Royal Academy in London but then shown at a private gallery, where it caused some excitement. In what became a Whistlerian trait, he insisted that the exhibition catalog note "Rejected at the Academy." Another 'Symphony in White' portrait in 1864 was criticized because other colors besides white were used, which applies equally to No. 1. Whistler tartly replied, "Bon Dieu! Did the wise person expect white hair and chalked faces? And does he, then, in astounding consequence, believe that a symphony in F contains no other note, but shall be a continued repetition of FFF? Fool!"

In one of my principal sources for this paper, 'Whistler', by Frances Spaulding, 28 of the 48 color plates are titled with the musical themes: harmony, nocturne, symphony, variations, caprice, arrangement, and note.

In Whistler's own words, "Art should be independent of all clap-trap. Art should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like." This aesthetic view was **not** universally accepted, being considered elitist, shallow, and possibly **immoral** by critics who believed that art should be entwined with social conscience. Disputes were waged by pithy letters to periodicals and newspapers, and a critical review that Whistler judged libelous would eventually lead to a lawsuit and trial.

On the other hand … we might not expect a serious artist to sign his works with a butterfly, as Whistler frequently did, beginning in about 1869. **[Slide 11, 1885 butterfly]** It would be hard to describe Whistler as conventional, in his art or in his life.

Whistler and many of his contemporaries were strongly influenced by Japanese art, quickly introduced to Europe following Commodore Perry's opening of Japan in 1853. Here is an 1864 example from the Freer, **[Slide 12, Spaulding #10]** with a favorite model, Jo Hiffernan, in Japanese dress. She is looking at works recognizably those of the famous Japanese artist Hiroshige.

In 2003, on the hundredth anniversary of Whistler's death, the Freer recreated a notable achievement of Whistler, an 1883 exhibition of his work in London, which he conceived and planned in exhausting detail. **[Slide 13, Catalog cover for Arrangement in White & Yellow]** Fortunately he had a willing private gallery to help, and both the gallery and Whistler expected to benefit financially.

The entire operation was vintage Whistler. At that time, art was customarily exhibited by covering gallery walls with closely spaced paintings from floor to ceiling, as parodied by *Punch*. **[Slide 14, 1879]** Whistler instead placed the works with ample space between, in a setting he designed to the last detail -- the wall covering and color, lighting, and uniformed doormen in matching outfits. Art exhibitions were also considered important social as well as artistic events (as in the salons of France), and gracious music accompanied them.

The works in the exhibit were all Whistler's own, after some conflict with the gallery owner and other artists about making it an exclusive show. Finally, he wrote the exhibit catalog as J. McNeill Whistler, highlighting uncomplimentary comments of art critics, and his caustic responses to them.

The Controversialist

In 1866, we have this limerick from a well known artist, writer, and close friend, Dante Gabriel Rossetti:

> There is a young artist, called Whistler,
> Who in every respect is a bristler;
> A tube of white lead
> Or a punch to the head
> Come equally handy to Whistler.

A 1967 commentary aptly described Whistler as a 'controversialist.' Whistler would have been delighted, and he certainly lived up to the appellation.

A common interest in Japanese art brought Whistler and major patron, Frederick Leyland, together in 1866. Several excellent Leyland family portraits resulted. Whistler was then commissioned by Leyland to design what became known as the 'Peacock Room,' for the dining area of his London home. The focal point was the Japanese-inspired 'Princesse', **[Slide 15, 1864, Spaulding #12**] which Leyland already owned. The opposite wall displayed blue-and-white oriental pottery, and ornate painted peacocks. **[Slide 16, 1866-67, Spaulding #38]** Whistler planned all decorations and color schemes for the room, but he went far beyond the agreed tasks. He was so excited by the results that, without Leyland's knowledge, he invited the press and guests into the home. These excesses led to conflict over the cost, finally ending bitterly with payment in pounds rather than guineas, an insult to the artist. In spite, James changed one of two peacocks into a fighter, with loose coins strewn at his feet, **[Slide 17, detail]** and another version of the butterfly. **[Slide 18]** The final result is with us today, thanks to the eventual purchase of the entire room by Charles Lang Freer, and its installation at the Freer Gallery.

In 1875, Whistler painted unusual night scenes at Cremorne Gardens in London, impressionistic in character. **[Slide 19, 1875, nocturne, Detroit Inst.]** In 1877, a well known critic, John Ruskin, wrote, "I have seen, and heard, much of cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." Whistler then sued for libel, hoping for both money and fame. The

trial was eagerly covered by the press, and it included pungent and humorous exchanges between solicitors, Whistler, and other artists and critics as witnesses. One exchange, with Whistler on the witness stand: "The labor of two days, then, is that for which you ask two hundred guineas!" Whistler, "No; -- I ask it for the knowledge of a lifetime." (Applause) "You have been told that your pictures exhibit some eccentricities?" Whistler, "Yes; often." (Laughter)

Later in the trial, Whistler's 1872 painting of another 'nocturne' was introduced. **[Slide 20, 1872, Spaulding # 33]** Parenthetically, such nocturnes are thought by many critics to be Whistler's most innovative works. The following exchange ensued: Asked the subject of the painting, Whistler answered, "A moonlight effect on the river near old Battersea bridge." "Which part of the picture is the bridge?" (Laughter, followed by a rebuke from His Lordship, the judge.) "Is that a barge beneath?" Whistler, "Yes, I am very much encouraged at your perceiving that."

Following many such exchanges, the jury eventually found for Whistler. But damages were assessed at just **one farthing**, or a quarter of a penny, and he had to pay his own trial costs! He was bankrupted and had to live with the help of friends for several years.

Whistler and the younger writer Oscar Wilde became close friends and advocates of the Aesthetic Movement in the 1870s and '80s. An entertaining sidelight was Gilbert and Sullivan's 1881 comic opera 'Patience.' The stage directions call for the opera to open with a chorus of twenty 'rapturous maidens' wearing 'aesthetic draperies' and singing:

Twenty love-sick maidens we,
Love-sick all against our will.
Twenty years hence we shall be
Twenty love-sick maidens still!

The maidens, rather than swooning over the visiting dragoon guards, love the hero, who is a "fleshly poet" based on aesthete Algernon Swinburne, originally played with costume and manners of Whistler and Wilde. To the astonishment of both maidens and soldiers, the poet instead loves Patience, the village milkmaid. The opera relentlessly lampoons both the aesthetes and the English military. Whistler and Wilde attended performances as celebrities, and gloried in the limelight.

One final example: Whistler continued to promote aestheticism and the purity of art, culminating in his 1885 'Ten O'Clock' lecture, promoted with the help of Richard D'Oyly Carte, and particularly his wife Helen. The occasion was highly orchestrated, with selected intellectuals and aristocrats invited. The lecture was both praised and panned. In 1890, it became the centerpiece of a book, 'The Gentle Art of Making Enemies.' carefully signed James Abbott McNeill Whistler. **[Slide 21, book cover]** The book incorporated extensive magazine and newspaper articles and correspondence from critics, friends, and Whistler himself, and was illustrated with numerous Whistler butterflies, with stingers added to emphasize his barbed and satirical points.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with two Whistlers that particularly appeal to me. The first is a haunting etching from the 'Venice Set,' **[Slide 22]** which makes me marvel how anyone can scratch lines on a copper plate with such artistry. Finally, an 1872 self portrait, **[Slide 23]** done just a year after the 'Mother.' That white patch under his jaunty hat is no accident – it is a 'white lock' of hair in which he took great pride, part of his carefully cultivated persona. Note another version of his butterfly signature. In 1895, a new owner of the portrait requested Whistler to replace the butterfly with a conventional signature, but he refused to make the change. This portrait is now in Detroit, along with the infamous 'Falling Rocket.'

No short paper can do more than give glimpses of James Abbott McNeill Whistler. However, the 150 or so books about his art and his life, including scholarship of the last 25 years, attest to his significance. Whether we regard Whistler as a serious and successful artist, or as a lightweight, few would deny that his life was artistically and intellectually creative, colorful, and abundantly controversial.

Selected References

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