

TREASURES OF ART
PAINTINGS BY
JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER



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BY

JAMES McNEILL

WHISTLER

Introduction by James Laver

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LONDON: THE STUDIO LIMITED, 44 LEICESTER SQUARE
NEW YORK: THE STUDIO PUBLICATIONS INC. 381 FOURTH AVENUE



Uniform with this volume

STAINED GLASS OF YORK MINSTER

By Canon F. Harrison

DUTCH FLOWER PIECES

By Percy Colson



Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

*Printed in Great Britain by Mackays Ltd., Chatham,
Kent. Plates engraved in Great Britain by Herbert
Reiach Ltd., 43 Belvedere Road, London, S.E.1*

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The Publishers wish to express their thanks to the authorities of the Tate Gallery, London, to the National Gallery, London, to the Glasgow Art Gallery and to the Luxembourg Museum, Paris, who have granted facilities for reproduction, and to Sir Edmund Davis and Miss Jean Alexander, who have kindly permitted the reproduction of paintings in their collections.

WHISTLER was born on July 10th, 1834, at the little town of Lowell, in Massachusetts. He always resented this fact in after-life, and pretended to have been born either at St. Petersburg or at Baltimore. He regarded himself as a Southerner, and it was, indeed, by the merest chance that he came to be born in the North, his father, Major Whistler, having accepted a post as engineer of locks and canals at Lowell. When James Abbott, as he had been christened (the McNeill was a later addition of his own), was little more than eight years old, his father was summoned to Russia to build a railway between Moscow and St. Petersburg for the Emperor Nicholas I. The whole family followed him, and the survivors—for Whistler's baby brother died on the way of sea-sickness and the fatigue of the journey—settled in the Russian capital for more than six years, including some of the most impressionable years of the future painter's life.

On the death of Major Whistler in 1849 of the effects of cholera, the family, somewhat reduced in circumstances, returned to America and lived at Pomfret in Connecticut. Whatever economies were necessary, however, Mrs. Whistler made none in the education of her sons, and at the conclusion of James's schooldays he was sent to the celebrated military academy at West Point. His father, his grandfather and two of his uncles had been soldiers. The military tradition was very strong in the Whistler family.

Whistler, however, was not a success at West Point, and his mother was forced to make other plans. She found him a place in the locomotive works at Baltimore, but her son had no liking for steam engines and no talent for engineering. He abandoned his second profession after less than six months' trial, and Jefferson Davis, the Secretary of War, to whom the young man appealed for assistance, gave him a post in the office of the Coastal Survey.

He soon tired of this also, although his time there was not entirely wasted, for he learned,

as part of the office routine of map-making, the technique of etching, which he was afterwards to practise with so much mastery. But it was quite plain that he was incapable of earning a living in any of the recognised ways. After a solemn conference the family reluctantly consented to his earnest plea to be allowed to study art in Paris, and from its meagre resources bought him a ticket to Europe and promised him a yearly pension of three hundred and fifty dollars for as long as he should need it. Whistler left the United States forever in the summer of 1855.

In Paris he fell in at first with the English students, and with Poynter and Du Maurier entered himself at the studio of Gleyre, a disciple of Ingres, who taught Whistler nothing but the debatable principle that black was the basis of tone. He continued his etching and produced some masterly early plates, but it was not until a chance meeting with Fantin-Latour brought him into touch with Courbet that he entered what may be considered the main stream of French painting.

After a period of neglect Gustave Courbet has regained in general estimation the position that is rightly his, as a powerful painter in his own right, and as one of the progenitors of the Impressionist Movement. His own practice he called Realism, and if it was a realism less of treatment than of subject-matter, his influence on Whistler was all the more beneficial, for it helped to rid him once for all of the superficial romanticism which led artists to concern themselves with scenes from far countries and distant epochs. Whistler learned to look to the life around him for his inspiration, and to depend for his effect upon pictorial qualities rather than upon literary or anecdotic interest. Although Whistler in after-life did not like to be reminded of it, he owed a real debt to Courbet, and in the late 'fifties was not ashamed to call him master.

One of his first ambitious canvases, *The White Girl*, was rejected by the Salon of 1863 along with the works of half-a-dozen young painters who were afterwards to become famous as Impressionists. A *Salon des Refusés* was organised for these works, and the most talked-of pictures in this much talked-of exhibition were Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and Whistler's *White Girl*. Whistler, in fact, was in the centre of "the Movement," and when

Fantin-Latour painted, in the same year, his *Hommage à Delacroix*, which included portraits of his friends, Whistler had an even better place in the picture than Manet.

He was, however, no longer living in Paris. From the end of his student days he had been coming more and more frequently to London, and in the early 'sixties he settled there. Now, if there was a "Movement" in Paris, there was also a "Movement" in London—that of the Pre-Raphaelites of which Rossetti was the acknowledged head.

Mutual friends brought Whistler and Rossetti together, and in his *Princesse du pays de la Porcelaine* it seemed for a moment as if Whistler had fallen under the influence of the older man. In reality, the influence was all the other way, for it was Whistler who had brought with him from Paris an appreciation of Japanese art, and it was he who infected Rossetti with the craze for collecting Oriental bric-à-brac. Whistler, when he settled in Chelsea, was universally known as "the Japanese artist."

Whistler learned much from the Japanese. For him it was not merely a question of accessories, although he used them freely in the *Princesse*, in the *Little White Girl*, and in other paintings, but of a deeper understanding, an assimilation of Oriental principles of design, a use of the silhouette and a deliberate simplification of the palette. The colour woodcut—and almost all that European artists of Whistler's generation knew of Japanese art was the colour woodcut—tends by its very nature to simplicity of colour, for every new colour means the cutting of another block. Just as the artist of the Ukiyoye arranged his colours before he started, so Whistler arranged his and saw that they formed a harmony. A harmony of colour applied to a decorative and rhythmical arabesque was henceforth to be his ideal in art. He had found his manner. By 1870 he had arrived, by the gradual elimination of superficially Japanese elements, at the perfect accord of his powers, at the period of his greatest portraits.

The *Mother*, the *Carlyle*, the *Miss Alexander*, followed in rapid succession. It was also the period of Whistler's greatest social success. He was a fashionable artist, and women especially were anxious to be painted by him. He found a generous patron in Frederick Leyland, a Liverpool shipowner, who commissioned him to paint portraits of the entire

family. Leyland also purchased Whistler's *Princesse du pays de la Porcelaine*, and set it up in the dining-room of his house at 49 Princes Gate, London. Whistler disliked the decorations surrounding the picture and altered them drastically to suit his own taste. Thus was produced the famous Peacock Room which involved the artist in a quarrel with Leyland, and was the beginning of many misfortunes. Whistler himself admitted in later life that he had "never had any luck" since the Peacock Room.

It was in 1877 that the Grosvenor Gallery held its first exhibition, and set the seal of fashion on the achievements of the "Aesthetic Movement." The hero of the exhibition was Burne-Jones, for whose pictures Ruskin expressed in *Fors Clavigera* the highest admiration. "I *know* that these will be immortal." For Whistler's exhibit, although it included the *Carlyle*, he had nothing but contempt, and his printed comments were so venomous that the artist thought himself justified in bringing a libel action.

The semi-comic, semi-tragic story of the Whistler-Ruskin trial has often been told. Whistler was awarded one farthing damages. He was left to pay his own costs, and the strain on his already shaken finances resulted in his bankruptcy. The White House, in Tite Street, which he had just had built for him, was sold; his pictures were scattered; and, what was even more serious, the flow of clients who wished to have portraits painted ceased abruptly. The prestige of Ruskin was so enormous that few were willing to risk the ridicule of being painted by an artist he had so uncompromisingly condemned.

He was rescued from his immediate difficulties by Ernest Brown, then in the employ of the Fine Art Society, who induced his firm to commission from Whistler a series of etchings of Venice and to pay his expenses in advance. Whistler went to Venice and brought back with him not only a series of etchings which is generally held to contain some of his finest plates, but a collection of pastels which, although received with derision by the more conservative critics, appealed to the larger public, and helped him to start a career in London once more. But it was some time before his oil-paintings once more commanded a sale.

The younger painters, however, gathered round him, notably Walter Richard Sickert, Mortimer Menpes, Anthony Ludovici and William Stott, and with these "followers," as

they were called, he marched about London showing himself in public places, laughing loudly in the exhibitions of more conservative artists, and generally proving to the world that the frowns of artistic officialdom had not broken his spirit. To the surprise of everybody he was suddenly elected a member of the Society of British Artists, and in a very short time, through the votes of an organised caucus of his "followers," he became President. But his methods were too drastic to please the majority of the members, and he soon found his position as President untenable.

In all these persecutions, as he chose to think them, he saw the hand, or at least the influence, of his old enemy, Ruskin, and he decided to carry the war into the critic's camp by himself delivering a lecture in which the true aesthetic doctrine should be proclaimed for all time. This was the origin of the famous "Ten o'clock," which was afterwards incorporated in the collection of his letters to the Press under the title of "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies."

Meanwhile, his ill-success in London—so far as the sale of pictures went—led him to turn once more to Paris. The *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, then very influential, had reported the Ruskin trial and had been his good friend ever since. Throughout the 'eighties he was a fairly constant exhibitor at the Paris Salon, and although his work differed widely from that of the now dominant Impressionists, it was received with respect. In 1891, the picture of his *Mother* was purchased for the French nation, and took its place in the Luxembourg. In the same year he was made an *Officier de la Légion d'Honneur*. Whistler prized both these compliments very highly, and began to think of settling once more in France.

Before he abandoned London he held, early in 1892, an exhibition of his work at the Goupil Gallery. He took infinite pains with the arrangement of the gallery, and in the choice of the pictures to be exhibited. He showed the best of his portraits, the Japanese pictures he had painted in the 'sixties, early canvases like *The Music Room*, and a group of the long-abused Nocturnes. The tide had now turned, and the Goupil exhibition was greeted with almost unanimous approval. Whistler was moved by the enthusiasm in the

gallery to a bitterness even beyond his wont, and he remarked : “ Well, you know, they were always pearls I cast before them, and the people were always—the same people.”

Maliciously, he had printed in the catalogue a selection of the unfavourable criticisms with which the same pictures had been greeted in the past : descriptions of his *Battersea Bridge* as “ a Farce in Moonshine with half-a-dozen dots,” or his exquisite *Miss Alexander* as “ a gruesomeness in grey ” or a “ Rhapsody in Raw Child and Cobwebs.” It was, perhaps, small wonder that he left London without regrets.

Some four years before, in August 1888, he had married the widow of Godwin, the architect who had built for him the White House, and with her he established himself in Paris, first in a studio in the Rue Notre Dame des Champs and later in the Rue du Bac. This latter address became a place of pilgrimage for the younger English and American artists. Unfortunately, the state of his wife's health compelled him to return to England in 1894, and two years later she died. It was a blow from which he never completely recovered. He was now sixty-two ; he had no really settled home again. He flitted from London to Paris, settled for a time in Cheyne Walk, travelled to Algiers and Corsica in search of sunshine, made a journey to Holland to gaze at the works of the Dutch masters. After the beginning of the new century his own health grew steadily worse, and on Friday, July 17th, 1903, he died. He was buried in Chiswick Cemetery beside his wife and near to Hogarth.

At his death his reputation stood extremely high. He was already an Old Master, and his pictures were competed for at prices which would have kept him in comfort for many years of his working life. Many of his canvases travelled to America. The Pennells, to whom he had entrusted the task of writing his life, brought out their able but provocative book in 1908, and in it claimed a position for Whistler in the history of modern painting which many, even of those who admired him most, felt to be unjustified. Whistler was not the greatest painter of the nineteenth century, and he was very far from being the most influential. The main stream of modern painting flows through the French Impressionists, and Whistler parted company from these in the early 'sixties. From Japanese art, from the statuettes of Tanagra, from his own experiments, he built up, by the flattening of planes

and the harmonising of colour, his own exquisitely personal art. It was too personal to be transmitted to disciples, and too exquisite to be used as the broad basis for future development. The subsequent history of easel painting in Europe shows hardly a trace of his influence.

Yet what he set out to do he did with singular perfection. He created a world, a world of half-lights and dim colours, a world of slender figures, and silhouettes elegant to the point of fragility, a world in which the Thames at evening is magically transformed into a harmony of grey and blue, and golden lights far off. And if there is no adjective for this world but Whistlerian, that is but a sign of how completely he had made it his own. As a wit, as a character, Whistler is still a legend ; as an artist he enriched the world with a new vision, a vision which is none the less enduring because it has had no progeny.

PLATES

PLATE I

AT THE PIANO

(By courtesy of Sir Edmund Davis)

In 1859 Whistler was dividing his time between Paris and London, and Fantin-Latour has recorded that on one of his returns to the French capital he brought with him what he described as the "Piano Picture." He offered it to the Salon, but it was rejected, along with works by Legros, Ribot and Fantin. The kindly French painter, Bonvin, exhibited the rejected works in his own studio, and it is recorded that Courbet came to see them, and was much impressed by Whistler's picture.

At the Piano seems to have been Whistler's first attempt at a deliberate composition. It was painted at Seymour Haden's house in Sloane Street, and the sitters were Mrs. Haden (Whistler's half-sister) and her daughter Annie, later to be the subject of the most famous of Whistler's etchings. It is interesting to see already present in this early canvas so many of the characteristics of Whistler's later paintings. The horizontal lines, the silhouetted figures, the preference for black and white and for a low-toned colour-scheme, the decorative use of the lower edges of picture frames—all these elements were to be exploited in later paintings, but are here fused for the first time into the unity of a work of art.



PLATE II

THE LITTLE WHITE GIRL

Symphony in White, No. II

(By courtesy of the National Gallery, London)

“ Jo ” Heffernan first begins to appear in Whistler’s pictures about the year 1859. She was the model for the famous *White Girl* of the *Salon des Refuses*, and she is depicted also in several of the etchings. She is also the subject of Courbet’s *La Belle Irlandaise*. *The Little White Girl* was painted in 1865, by which time Whistler had absorbed many of the lessons of Japanese art, the influence of which can be seen quite plainly in the pose of the figure, in the spray of blossom which strays into the picture from the bottom right-hand corner, in the fan in the girl’s hand and the porcelain on the mantelpiece. The “whiteness” theme is less plainly stressed than in the earlier canvas, but it is none the less a “symphony in white,” as Whistler called it, with the white, soft dress, innocent of crinoline, and the white mantelpiece. The reflection of the model’s rich, red hair in the old and somewhat tarnished mirror is exquisitely managed. The figure is easy and natural, even languid, in pose, yet firmly placed in the rectangle of the canvas with an almost architectural solidity. The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1865, and of all the critics, only W. M. Rossetti found in it anything to praise. It was this picture which moved Swinburne to write his exquisite poem :

Come snow, come wind or thunder

High up in air,

I watch my face, and wonder

At my bright hair. . . .



PLATE III

SYMPHONY IN WHITE, No. III

(By courtesy of Sir Edmund Davis)

This painting, which was exhibited in the Royal Academy of 1867, was Whistler's third variation on the theme of white upon white. It differs from the previous *White Girl* and *Little White Girl* in being painted in thin liquid paint, and by showing signs of the merging of the Japanese influence into something more classical or at least Tanagresque. The canvas has sometimes been compared with the work of Albert Moore, and as the two men were at this time friendly it is possible that Whistler was for the moment influenced by him.

The picture gave him infinite trouble, and was frequently scraped out and rubbed down before he had satisfied himself with the double harmony of line and colour for which he was striving. The difficulties he experienced with the left-hand figure caused him to lament the defects of his early training in draughtsmanship and to wish that he had studied under Ingres.

It was this canvas which was described by one of the critics as "not precisely a symphony in white. One lady has a yellowish dress and brown hair and a bit of blue ribbon ; the other has a red fan . . . and, of course, there is the flesh-colour of the complexions." Whistler retorted with one of his most celebrated letters : "*Bon dieu !* did this wise person expect white hair and chalked faces ? And does he then, in his astounding consequence, believe that a symphony in F contains no other note, but shall be a continued repetition of F F F ? . . . Fool ! "



Symphony in White, No. III. - Whistler. 1867.

PLATE IV

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST'S MOTHER

Arrangement in Grey and Black

(By courtesy of the Luxembourg Museum, Paris)

This, perhaps the most famous of all Whistler's paintings, was labelled by the artist himself: *Arrangement in Grey and Black*, as if to indicate that whatever sentimentality others might afterwards find in it, it was to him just one more expression of his determination in painting to be concerned with pictorial qualities alone. It is, in spite of, or perhaps because of, its reticence and straightforwardness, a singularly moving piece of work.

It was painted on the back of a canvas on which the artist had begun the portrait of a child. The paint used was extremely thin, and as the dado had been painted first right across the canvas it shows through the skirt. The pose of the silhouetted figure, the position of the frames on the wall, the extreme simplicity of the vertical and horizontal lines, all accentuate the effect of stillness.

The painting must have been begun in 1870 or 1871. It was sent to the Academy of 1872, which rejected it. Nineteen years later it was purchased for the *Musée du Luxembourg*.



PLATE V

PORTRAIT OF THOMAS CARLYLE

Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. II

(By courtesy of the Glasgow Art Gallery)

The success of Whistler's *Portrait of His Mother* induced some mutual friends to bring Carlyle and Whistler together in the hope that the Sage of Chelsea would be induced to sit. Carlyle liked the Mother portrait, and one morning arrived at the studio unexpectedly, sat down in a chair, and told the artist to "fire away." "When you are fighting a battle or painting a picture, the only thing is to fire away."

However true or untrue this doctrine may be of battles, it was certainly very far from Whistler's practice as a painter, and Carlyle grew very impatient with him before the work was done. He could not understand why the brushes used were so small, and Whistler had to pretend to paint with larger ones in order to convince Carlyle that he was not niggling. He brushed the face in quickly, but took so long over the coat that at last Carlyle refused to sit any more, and it had to be painted from a model.

The portrait is a pendant to the *Mother* and is only less successful in evoking the repose which Whistler was aiming at. For "psychological insight" into the character of Carlyle Whistler cared nothing, and has expressed nothing. The picture is essentially an "arrangement"—a cunningly-placed silhouette skilfully related to a series of outlined shapes, the whole bound together by a unity of tone which is almost magical.



PLATE VI

PORTRAIT OF MISS ALEXANDER

Harmony in Grey and Green

(By courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London)

This portrait is considered by some to be Whistler's most successful canvas. It is certainly one of his most characteristic. In the early 'seventies he became acquainted with Mr. W. C. Alexander, and the original intention was that he should paint the whole family, in particular the elder daughter, the real "Miss Alexander." However, the artist preferred to paint the younger daughter Cicely, whose fairness lent itself to the treble palette with which he was experimenting at that time. He took infinite pains in preparation. He chose the muslin for the little girl's dress and supervised the making of it. He decided where the bows should be placed and how long the frills should be. The dress was even laundered under his directions, and he had a carpet of black and white tape specially made for his young model to stand on. The actual painting of the picture required more than seventy sittings, and often, as Cicely Alexander thought he had finished, he would scrape it all out and begin again. It is recorded that tears of weariness used to roll down her face as she posed, for she was still too young to realise that in exchange for her lost play hours the painter was offering her immortality. The whole painting is a miracle of lightness, and the little girl herself is like some delicate white moth poised for an instant with faintly fluttering wings.



PLATE VII

NOCTURNE IN BLUE AND GREEN

(By courtesy of Miss Jean Alexander)

Whistler was the inventor of "Nocturnes"—of the name as applied to painting and even of the thing itself, an attempt to paint the night for its own sake. A hint, no doubt, was given by Japanese woodcuts, and he painted during his expedition to Valparaiso in 1866 a view of the harbour at night, which may be considered the first of the Nocturnes. It was not, however, until 1872 that he first exhibited a picture with that title.

His method of work is known from the accounts of his disciples, especially the Greaves brothers, who used to row him about the Thames at night. At first he tried to take colour-notes, but in the end he learned to rely on his memory. He would look at his subject and study it, and then, turning his back, would repeat to his companion the arrangement, the scheme of colour and as much of the detail as he wanted. He went to bed still turning it over in his mind, and in the morning, if he could see the finished picture on the bare canvas, he painted it. If not, he went out next night to observe again.

The Nocturnes were mostly painted on a very absorbent canvas or on panels. For the blue Nocturnes, either a mahogany panel was used or the canvas was covered with a red ground, the red in each case forcing up the blues. The whole colour scheme was arranged on the palette, and the picture brushed in with very liquid paint.



PLATE VIII

OLD BATTERSEA BRIDGE

Nocturne in Blue and Silver

(By courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London)

The picture which Whistler called both *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* and *Blue and Gold—Old Battersea Bridge*, was one of the canvases sent to the first Grosvenor Gallery exhibition in the summer of 1877. With it was the *Nocturne in Black and Gold—the Falling Rocket*, which Ruskin declared was equal to “flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.”

In the subsequent libel action, when the painting of Battersea Bridge was produced in court, the Judge enquired: “Is this part of the picture at the top Old Battersea Bridge? Are those figures on the top of the bridge intended for people?” and was surprised when Whistler answered coolly: “They are just what you like! The picture is simply a representation of moonlight. My whole scheme was only to bring about a certain harmony of colour.”

It seems incredible, in retrospect, that cultivated men should not have been able to see the beauty of this canvas, or to have thought that there was an element of fraud about it because every detail was not discernible (it was by definition a night-piece), or because it had been painted in two days. The picture might have been bought for the Chantrey Bequest for sixty pounds. It was later purchased for the nation by public subscription at a cost of two thousand.



V 759.1 Whi	10327
AUTHOR	Whistler, J. M.
TITLE	Treasures of art paintings.
DATE DUE	BORROWER'S NAME