



PRESS RELEASE

from

THE FRICK COLLECTION

1 EAST 70TH STREET • NEW YORK • NEW YORK 10021 • TELEPHONE (212) 288-0700 • FAX (212) 628-4417

Portraits, Pastels, Prints: Whistler in The Frick Collection

**First Viewing Together in Twenty Years of the Frick's
Whistlers in Three Media, Accompanied by East Gallery Refurbishment**

June 2 through August 23, 2009

This summer The Frick Collection presents a focus exhibition dedicated to the colorful and once controversial artist **James Abbott McNeill Whistler** (1834–1903). The Frick's four full-length portraits by Whistler will be displayed in the museum's Oval Room alongside his evocative seascape *Symphony in Grey and Green: The Ocean* (1866). The presentation also includes a Cabinet installation of fifteen works on paper—pastels and etchings—from his Venetian sojourn of 1879–80. Together, this remarkable ensemble represents the breadth of his activity, showing the artist's command of three distinct media and demonstrating his concern for the harmony of form, color, and composition. The gathering also testifies to Henry Clay Frick's appreciation for Whistler oeuvre; indeed, he acquired more work by this artist than by any other. This presentation, drawn from the institution's celebrated collection and accompanied by several gallery talks and other programs, marks the first time in more than twenty years that these holdings will be exhibited together.



Whistler, *Harmony in Pink and Grey: Portrait of Lady Meux*, 1881–82, oil on canvas, The Frick Collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb

Senior Curator Susan Grace Galassi notes, “Perhaps because we have not shown these paintings, etchings, and pastels together for more than two decades, it may come as a surprise that Whistler—an American and a near contemporary of Frick’s—is actually one of the best represented artists in our collection. We look forward to welcoming the public this summer to enjoy these works together, adjacent to the Old Master paintings for which the institution is best known.” The exhibition is organized by Curatorial Assistants Joanna Sheers and Caitlin Henningsen, in conjunction with Galassi.

EAST GALLERY REFURBISHMENT TO BE UNDERTAKEN THIS SUMMER

The movement of the full-length Whistler portraits into the Oval Room this summer has been arranged in connection with a project to refurbish the East Gallery, where they customarily hang. In August and September, the floors there will be refinished and the paneling will be treated and waxed. A new rose-colored velvet mohair wall covering will be installed, through the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Jeremiah M. Bogert. The East Gallery, which has not been renovated in more than twenty years, will reopen on September 8, 2009.

A DANDY TO RIVAL WILDE, A PAINTER OF ARISTOCRATS AND BOHEMIANS

Having left the United States as a young man in order to pursue his artistic ambitions in Europe, Whistler spent most of his life in London, where his reputation for dandyism rivaled that of his friend Oscar Wilde. Passionate, opinionated, and devastatingly witty, Whistler positioned himself at the center of contemporary debates about the purpose of art. He emerged as an advocate of Aestheticism, a movement that promoted the unity of art and design and embraced the concept of “art for art’s sake.” As Whistler put it, “Art should be independent of all claptrap—should stand alone... and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it.” He challenged himself to show beauty through the arrangement of shape, color, light, and line. Whistler simplified his forms to create a visual harmony among these elements, enveloping the features of his landscapes and seascapes in atmosphere and wrapping the subjects of his portraits in veils of color. Inspired by Baudelaire’s notion of correspondence between the arts of painting and music, Whistler often likened his portraits and landscapes to musical compositions, entitling them “Symphony,” “Harmony,” or “Nocturne.” Promoting his aesthetic principles with characteristic outspokenness, Whistler became a familiar presence at galleries and salons and in the pages of newspapers. With his avant-garde approach to painting and carefully cultivated public persona, he deliberately provoked the leaders of London’s art establishment. In 1877, the critic John Ruskin ridiculed the abstraction of Whistler’s *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, accusing him of “flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.” The artist countered by successfully suing Ruskin for libel. Though his legal expenses ultimately forced him into bankruptcy, Whistler’s famous victory was deemed a triumph for modern art.



Whistler, *Symphony in Grey and Green: The Ocean*, 1866, oil on canvas, The Frick Collection, New York; photo: Michael Bodycomb

The Frick’s *Symphony in Grey and Green: The Ocean* (1866) foreshadows the *Nocturnes* that would cause such controversy in the following decade. The picture, on view at the center of the Oval Room, presents a view out to sea from the harbor of Valparaiso, Chile. Whistler traveled to the port city, then under Spanish blockade, with the vague intention of participating in the military conflict. Though shells hurtled through the air during his stay, the painting suggests none of this drama. Employing a serene palette and spare composition, Whistler presents a handful of ships as shadowy forms suspended between sky and sea. The ships may allude to the

blockade, but any specificity of time and place has been effaced in favor of a nuanced spectrum of grey and green

tones. In preparation for an exhibition in 1872, Whistler added the spray of bamboo and the rectangular cartouche with his butterfly signature to the lower-right corner. The artist included such decorative elements—inspired by Japanese woodblock prints—in many portraits and landscapes of the early 1870s.

Whistler's refined Aestheticism made him an appealing choice for wealthy patrons eager to present themselves in an elegant, forward-looking style, and he became one of the greatest society portraitists of his age. The Frick's *Symphony in Flesh Color and Pink: Portrait of Mrs. Frances Leyland* was commissioned in 1871 by the Liverpool shipping magnate Frederick Leyland, one of the painter's most important early supporters. Whistler and Frances Leyland had a close friendship, one which he sought to honor in this portrait by achieving a total harmony of art and design. Mrs. Leyland wears a loose diaphanous gown of the painter's design, showing off its appliquéd train with her back to the viewer, and turning left to reveal her elegant profile. Borrowing spatial conventions from the Japanese prints he admired, he shows the checkered rug and floor flattened against the picture plane rather than receding into space. The palette of pink and mulberry tones was inspired by Mrs. Leyland's auburn hair and pale complexion. Whistler often employed one or two dominant colors to unify his paintings. In the Frick's *Arrangement in Brown and Black: Portrait of Miss Rosa Corder* (1876–78) and *Arrangement in Black and Gold: Comte Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac* (1891–92), the painter mined the expressive possibilities of a somber palette, inspired in part by Dutch and Spanish painting of the seventeenth century.



Whistler, *Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink: Portrait of Mrs Frances Leyland*, 1871–74, oil on canvas, The Frick Collection, New York; photo: Michael Bodycomb

Whistler's gifts as a portraitist were accompanied by willfulness that infuriated even his most ardent supporters. A quarrel with Leyland over payment laid the foundation for his financial troubles, and after his bankruptcy in 1879 he found himself less in demand among the upper classes. His fortunes were at a low point in 1881 when he met Valerie Meux, a former actress whose scandalous marriage to a wealthy baronet had made her notorious. Intent on fashioning a new image for herself at a time when it was, according to one critic, “an act of courage to have oneself painted by Whistler,” she commissioned three full-length portraits in 1881. The Frick Collection's *Harmony in Pink and Grey: Portrait of Lady Meux*, seen on the front page of this release, is as much an exploration of color and texture as it is a perceptive likeness—brilliant passages of pink satin and semitransparent chiffon cascade to the floor, while Lady Meux's defiant pose and bold gaze make clear that she is a woman unafraid of attention. Artist and subject had much in common. She reflected on their relationship in a letter to Whistler of 1892: “you & I always get on well together[.] I suppose we are both a little eccentric and not loved by all the world, personally I am glad of it as I should prefer a little hate.” Praise for Whistler's portraits of Lady Meux prompted more commissions, and these, together with the eventual success of his Venice etchings and pastels, succeeded in reviving the artist's fortunes.

VIBRANCY AND ATMOSPHERIC EFFECT

Whistler's Venice works were the result of a much-needed commission from the Fine Arts Society, which charged him to complete twelve etchings of the city within three months, so that the prints could be issued as a set in time for Christmas. He traveled to Venice in September 1879, just after declaring bankruptcy. With no impetus to return to London, where his belongings were soon to be auctioned off to settle his accounts, he remained in Italy for fourteen months, creating approximately fifty etchings and one hundred pastels. To reassure his patrons at the Fine Arts Society, he wrote extolling the virtues of his new prints in comparison to his etchings of the 1860s: "The 'Venice'... will be superb—and you may double your bets all round...I have learned to know a Venice in Venice that others never seem to have perceived... The etchings themselves are far more delicate in execution, more beautiful in subject, and more important in interest than any of the old set." The twelve etchings of the Fine Arts Society commission, which came to be known as the First Venice Set, are among the most beautiful in his oeuvre. The Frick's First Venice Set will be displayed in the Cabinet alongside three vibrant pastels from this period.



Whistler, First Venice Set: *The Doorway*, 1879, etching and drypoint, The Frick Collection, New York; photo: Michael Bodycomb

Whistler's notion of representing "a Venice in Venice" is revealed in his preference for depicting the city and its inhabitants in quiet moments, glimpsed from narrow canals and second-story windows. As one scholar observed, Whistler aimed to capture "the essence of the crumbling city: its texture, light, distinctive enclosed *calli* [streets] and *piazze* [squares], and its unique 'floating' quality." His approach marked a deliberate departure from the tradition of *vedute*, topographical views of the city's principal sites, such as San Marco and the Grand Canal. Determined to present Venice's ethereal beauty in a new way, Whistler set out on foot or by gondola, carrying thin copper etching plates wrapped in paper and etching tools stuck in a cork in his pocket. He expressed amazement at the wealth of subjects Venice presented, writing to a friend in April 1880 that "marvels...

wait for me at every turn – Indeed that is the danger of the place—You are perfectly bewildered with the entanglement of beautiful things!"

The First Venice Set displays the full range of Whistler's subjects and techniques from his Venice period, ranging from densely hatched studies of narrow passageways and shadowy doorways, to open vistas of the city and lagoon. He explored similar subjects in pastel, and his engagement with these new themes inspired a fresh approach to both media. The artist's interest in capturing effects of light and atmosphere is evident in *The Cemetery*, which dates from the first few months of his stay. The church's white marble façade shines in the bright midday sun, and Whistler captures its reflection on the rippling water with quick horizontal strokes.



Whistler, *The Cemetery*, 1879, pastel on brown paper, The Frick Collection, New York; photo: Michael Bodycomb



Whistler, First Venice Set: *Little Lagoon*, 1879-80, etching and drypoint, The Frick Collection, New York; photo: Michael Bodycomb

Whistler's etchings of the lagoon at different times of day are the images most closely associated with his Venetian period. In *Little Lagoon*, gondoliers ply their small crafts around a moored ship. To depict the play of light on the water in a monochromatic medium, Whistler experimented with the use of plate tone—ink left on the copperplate before printing to create tonal effects of different intensities. For this impression, Whistler wiped the bottom of the plate lightly to suggest the growing darkness. He varied his graphic style to suggest the textures of the sea: feathery lines toward the bottom of the page indicate low, curling waves, while the glassy water around the ship is represented by a few crisply etched lines. Despite the expressive variety of Whistler's techniques, the etching's overall effect is spare—it conveys a fleeting view of life on the lagoon with the utmost economy of means.

Whistler intended to reestablish his place in the art world with a series of one-man exhibitions of his Venice etchings and pastels. On his return to London in November 1880, he began printing one hundred editions of the First Venice Set for the Fine Arts Society—a project he hoped would prove financially rewarding. Whistler worked for over a decade to fulfill the commission, thus extending his creative involvement with the Venice etchings well beyond his stay in Italy. The artist considered each impression as a unique work of art, and often made changes to the plates while printing, adding or adjusting figures and experimenting with plate tone to evoke different conditions of light and atmosphere. Inking plates to achieve dramatic tonal effects was a controversial practice to some critics, and Whistler came under scrutiny for the “artistic printing” of many of his plates. Yet this aspect of his process was essential to the eventual success of the etchings: over time, the different versions became objects of competition for print enthusiasts seeking to chart each composition's evolution from impression to impression. Celebrated American collectors such as Charles Lang Freer and Samuel P. Avery amassed extensive holdings of Whistler's etchings, often with the help of the artist himself.

WHISTLER'S PLACE IN FRICK'S COLLECTION

Henry Clay Frick's respect for Whistler as a printmaker is demonstrated by the fact that the First Venice Set was the first acquisition of prints he made after deciding to leave his collection to the public. This purchase, made in March 1915 from the gallery Knoedler & Co., was followed one month later by the acquisition of an engraving by Dürer and two magnificent etchings by Rembrandt. Frick would go on to purchase nine more etchings by the Dutch master, and his collecting of Whistler and Rembrandt in tandem testifies to the esteem in which Whistler's etched oeuvre was held at the time. In a history of the etching medium published in 1914, Whistler was named “the consummate master of modern times... on the same altitude as the art's supreme protagonist (Rembrandt).” The association was one that Whistler would have valued, for he was influenced by Rembrandt not only as an etcher, but also as a painter of landscapes and portraits. He also acknowledged debts to Frans Hals, Velázquez, Van Dyck, and Gainsborough. In collecting Whistler's paintings alongside great works by these Old Master artists, Frick appears to have made the same connection.

EDUCATION PROGRAMS TO COMPLEMENT THE EXHIBITION

The Education department is pleased to offer the following programs to support, enrich, and enliven this special exhibition. Reservations are required for all events and may be made directly through the website's calendar through the link <http://www.frick.org/education/calendar.htm>

Gallery Conversations

Wednesday, July 29 at 3:00 p.m.

Saturdays, June 13 and August 22 at 11:00 a.m.

Participants study and discuss selected masterpieces from *Portraits, Pastels, Prints: Whistler in The Frick Collection* with Rika Burnham, Head of Education. Free with museum admission (reservations required).

Gallery Talks

Tuesday, July 21 at 11:00 a.m.

Wednesday, August 12 at 1:00 p.m.

Thursday: June 25 at 2:00 p.m.

Saturdays, June 20, July 18, and August 8 at 11:00 a.m.

Exhibition curators Susan Grace Galassi, Joanna Sheers, and Caitlin Henningsen offer introductory gallery talks to *Portraits, Pastels, Prints: Whistler in The Frick Collection*. Free with museum admission (reservations required).

Seminar: James Abbott McNeill Whistler in The Frick Collection

Monday, July 13 from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Fee: general public, \$100; special member price, \$90

Senior Curator Susan Grace Galassi conducts a seminar on the paintings and works on paper in the special exhibition *Portraits, Pastels, Prints: Whistler in The Frick Collection* (reservations/ticketing required).

Live at the Frick for High School Students and College Students: Intense Looks

July 21 through July 31, 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

High school and college students are invited to appreciate and understand masterpieces by James Abbott McNeill Whistler in the special exhibition *Portraits, Pastels, Prints: Whistler in The Frick Collection*. Head of Education Rika Burnham is the instructor. Free. Students apply by emailing students@frick.org.

BASIC INFORMATION

General Information Phone: (212) 288-0700

Web site: www.frick.org

Where: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue.

Hours: open six days a week: 10am to 6pm, Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11am to 5pm, Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11am to 5pm) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, & Veterans Day.

Admission: \$18; senior citizens \$12; students \$5; "pay as you wish" on Sundays from 11am to 1pm

PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection.

Subway: #6 local (on Lexington Avenue) to 68th Street station; **Bus:** M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street; crosstown M72 stopping eastbound on Madison at 70th Street or westbound on Fifth Avenue at 72nd Street or 69th Street

Tour Information: included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide Audio Tour of the permanent collection, provided by Acoustiguide. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

Museum Shop: the shop is open the same days as the Museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

Group Visits: Please call (212) 288-0700 for details and to make reservations.

Public Programs: A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

#145, April 30, 2009

For further press information, please contact Heidi Rosenau, Manager of Media Relations & Marketing, or Alexis Light, Media Relations & Marketing Coordinator

Media Relations Phone:

(212) 547-6844

General Phone:

(212) 288-0700

E-mail address:

mediarelations@frick.org