



THE FRICK COLLECTION

MEMBERS' MAGAZINE SPRING/SUMMER 2009

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Francesco Guardi (1712–1793), detail of *View of the Giudecca Canal and the Zattere*, c. 1765–70,
oil on canvas, private collection

LEFT:

The Garden Court of The Frick Collection

Portraits, Pastels, Prints

Whistler in The Frick Collection

June 2 through August 23, 2009

Between 1914 and 1919, Henry Clay Frick acquired twenty works by James McNeill Whistler: five paintings, three pastels, and twelve prints, a remarkable ensemble that represents the breadth of Whistler's artistic activity and testifies to Frick's taste as a collector. This summer, the museum's four full-length portraits and single evocative seascape by Whistler will be displayed in the Oval Room; in the Cabinet, twelve etchings and three pastels from his Venetian sojourn of 1879–80 will be brought together for the first time in more than twenty years. Dating from 1866 to 1892, these works demonstrate the continuity of Whistler's aesthetic concerns across three distinct media.

Whistler was born in Massachusetts in 1834. His father was a distinguished civil engineer whose career took the family to St. Petersburg, Russia, when Whistler was only nine years old. He showed an early aptitude for drawing and studied art in both St. Petersburg and London. After his father's death, he returned to New England and, in 1851, enrolled in West Point (his father's alma mater). An indifferent student—though he excelled at drawing and in French—he was expelled three years later. At twenty-one, Whistler sailed for Europe, where he remained for the rest of his life.

For most of his long career Whistler worked 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 art's purpose. 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 once remarked that a picture was "a problem that I attempt to solve." He challenged himself to create beauty through the arrangement of shape, color, light, and line. Whistler strove to form a visual harmony

among these elements, enveloping the features of his land- and seascapes in painterly atmosphere and wrapping the subjects of his portraits in veils of color. Inspired by Baudelaire's notion of the 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



RIGHT:

James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), *Symphony in Grey and Green: The Ocean*, 1866, oil on canvas, The Frick Collection

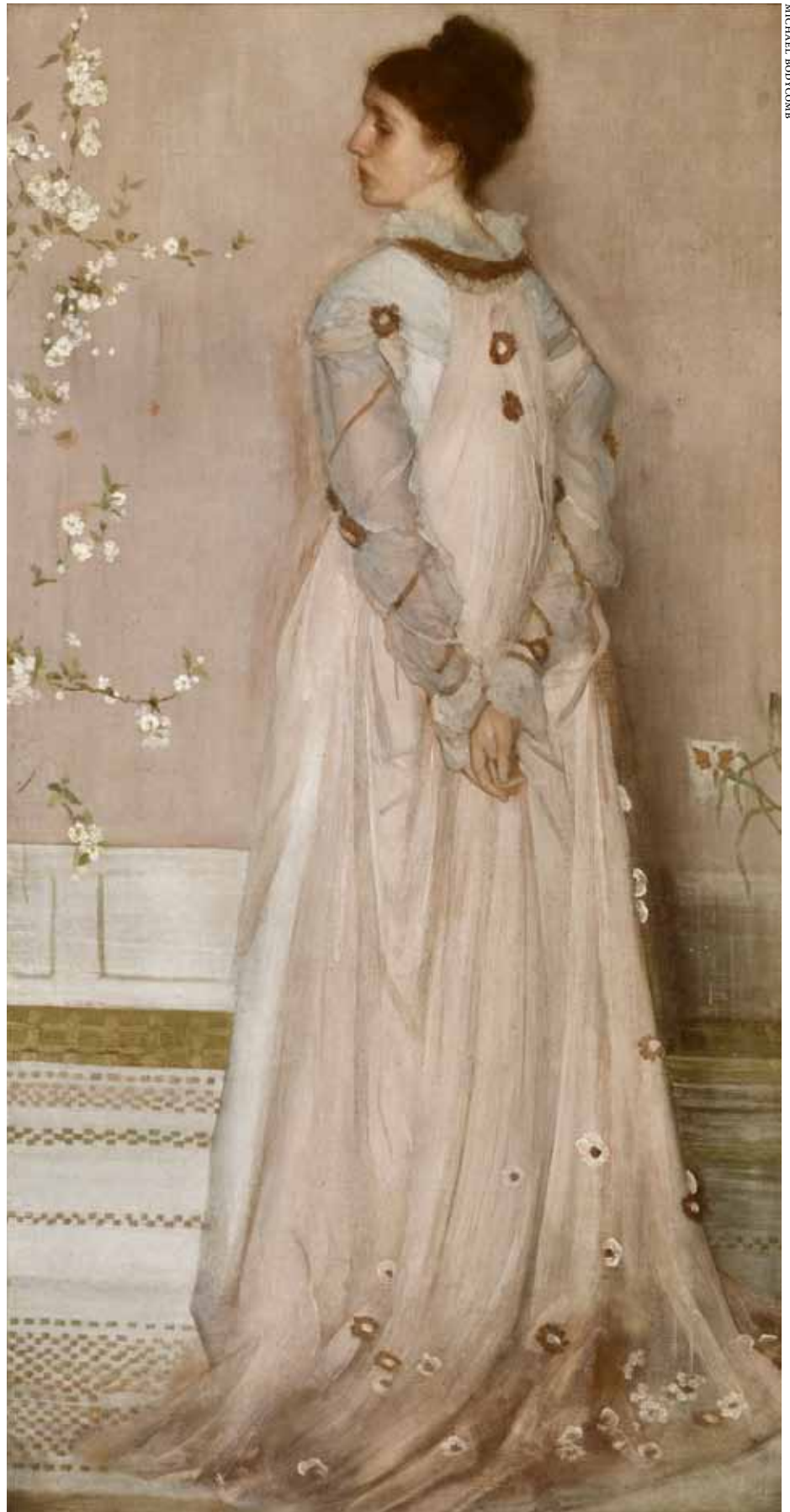
OPPOSITE PAGE:

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

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 later deemed a triumph for modern art.

The Frick's *Symphony in Grey and Green: The Ocean* (opposite page) foreshadows the Nocturnes that would cause such controversy during the following decade. Painted in 1866, the picture presents a view out to sea from the harbor of Valparaiso, Chile. Whistler traveled to the port city—which was 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 sea and sky. The ships may allude to the blockade, but any specificity of time and place has been effaced in favor of a nuanced spectrum of gray and green tones. In preparation for an exhibition in 1872, Whistler added a spray of bamboo and the rectangular cartouche containing his butterfly signature to the painting's lower-right corner. Inspired by Japanese woodblock prints, the artist regularly incorporated these decorative elements into his work from 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



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of the greatest society portraitists of his age. The Frick's *Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink: Portrait of Mrs Frances Leyland* (page 3) 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 that he sought to honor by achieving a total harmony of art and design in her portrait. She wears a loose diaphanous gown devised by the artist himself, showing off its appliquéd train with her back to the viewer and turning left to reveal her elegant profile. Whistler treats many elements of the painting—from her transparent, ribboned sleeves to the carpet and parquet floor—as fields for decorative display. 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 pale complexion and auburn hair. 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: Portrait of Comte Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac* (1891–92), he mined the expressive possibilities of a somber palette, inspired in part by Dutch and Spanish painting of the seventeenth century.

LEFT:

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

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Whistler, *The Cemetery*, 1879, pastel on brown paper, The Frick Collection

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Whistler's gifts as a portraitist were matched by a 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 had not improved by 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," Meux commissioned three full-scale portraits from him in 1881. The Frick Collection's *Harmony in Pink and Grey: Portrait of Lady Meux* (opposite page) 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. In this respect, artist and subject were very much alike. She reflected on their relationship in a letter of 1892 to Whistler: "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, helped to improve his finances.

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 in time for Christmas. Whistler traveled to Venice in September 1879, not long 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 more than a year, creating approximately fifty etchings and one hundred pastels. To reassure his patrons at the Fine Arts Society, he wrote to them 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 seem never 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'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, its light, its 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* (page 5), which dates from the first few months of his stay. Drawn while aboard a gondola, this work depicts the cemetery island of San Michele, with its church, clock tower, and walled gardens. The church's white marble facade shines in the bright midday sun, and Whistler captures its reflection on the rippling water with quick horizontal strokes. The application of pastel is particularly thick in the sky, where Whistler rubbed different colored chalks together to create a haze around the horizon.

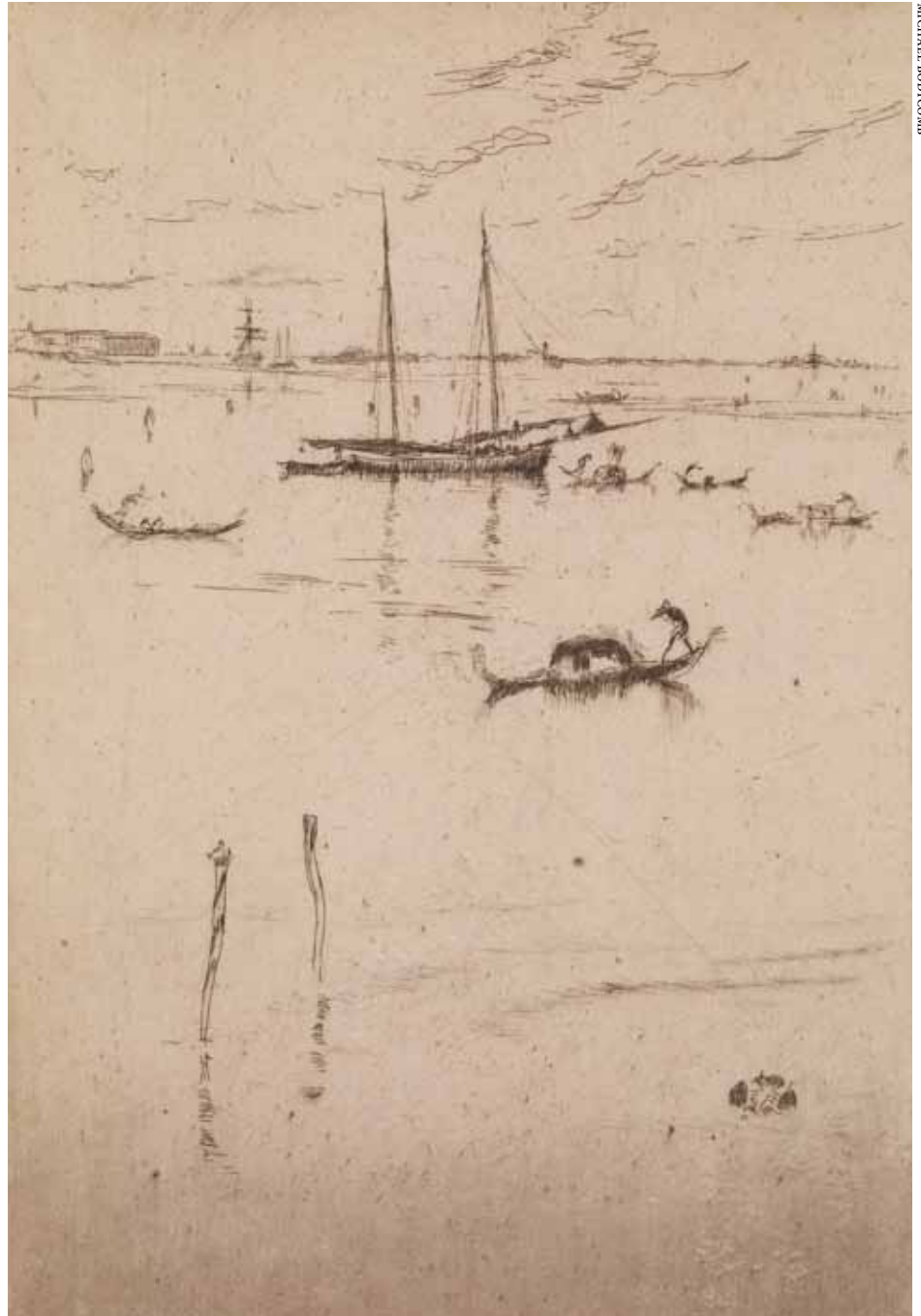
Whistler's etchings of the lagoon at various times of day are the images most closely associated with his Venetian period. In *Little Lagoon* (right), gondoliers ply their small crafts around a ship moored for evening. The structure of this steep composition reveals Whistler's study of Japanese wood-block prints. Two posts in the left foreground anchor the image. The ship's twin masts and long shadows echo these forms, drawing the eye back toward the high horizon line

RIGHT:

Whistler, *Little Lagoon*, 1879–80, etching and drypoint, The Frick Collection

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Whistler, *The Riva, No. 1*, 1879–80, etching and drypoint, The Frick Collection



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via a series of zigzagging vertical elements. 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 copper plate 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. *The Riva, No. 1* (above) presents the busy quay in front of Whistler's lodgings on the Riva degli Schiavoni. In this work, the artist combined two vantage points to encompass both the bustling activity below him and the long row of buildings that line the wharf. The domes and clock tower of San Marco appear just above the rooftops at the far right, underscoring the artist's characteristic unwillingness to highlight familiar tourist sites.

Whistler intended to re-establish his place in the art world with a series of one-man exhibitions of his Venice etchings and pastels. Upon his return to London, in November 1880, he began printing the First Venice Set in preparation for its publication by the Fine Arts Society, a project he hoped would prove lucrative. The Society had ordered one hundred impressions of

each of the twelve views in the set. Whistler worked for more than 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 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, and Whistler was criticized in the press for the "artistic printing" of many of his plates. Yet this aspect of his process was responsible for the etchings' eventual success: 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

Putnam Avery amassed extensive holdings of Whistler's etchings, often with the help of the artist himself.

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 Rembrandt and Whistler 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 Hals, Velázquez, Van Dyck, and Gainsborough. In collecting Whistler's paintings alongside great works by these Old Masters, Frick appears to have made the same connection.—*Caitlin Ford Henningsen, Curatorial Assistant*

Portraits, Pastels, Prints: Whistler in The Frick Collection is organized by Curatorial Assistants Joanna Sheers and Caitlin Ford Henningsen, in conjunction with Senior Curator Susan Grace Galassi.