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THE FRICK COLLECTION

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WHISTLER AS PRINTMAKER: HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE GERTRUDE KOVOSKY COLLECTION

EXHIBITION TO CELEBRATE A PROMISED GIFT TO THE FRICK

April 30 to September 1, 2019



James McNeill Whistler, *Fumette*, 1858, etching and drypoint, black ink on cream French laid paper, Gertrude Kosovsky Collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb

The Frick Collection is pleased to announce a promised gift of forty-two works on paper by James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), from the collection of Gertrude Kosovsky. An exhibition highlighting fifteen prints and one pastel from the gift is now on view in the Cabinet Gallery. The collection was formed over five decades by Mrs. Kosovsky, with the support of her husband, Dr. Harry Kosovsky, and includes twenty-seven etchings, fourteen lithographs, and one pastel, which range from Whistler's early etchings dating from the late 1850s to lithographs of the late 1890s. Most are impressions made during his lifetime, a number of them from his major published sets, while others were produced for periodicals, thus encompassing different aspects of the American expatriate's prolific activity as a printmaker. Works printed posthumously are also included. The Kosovsky promised gift comes a little over a century after Henry Clay Frick gave Whistler pride of place in his collection, having purchased

more works (including paintings, etchings, and pastels) by the artist than by any other. Since Mr. Frick's death in 1919, only one work by Whistler has been added to the collection, a lithograph after his portrait of Robert, the Count of Montesquiou. The gift significantly expands the institution's Whistler holdings. In particular, it nearly triples the Frick's works on paper by the artist—almost all from his



James McNeill Whistler, *Billingsgate*, 1859, etching and drypoint, black ink on cream Japanese paper, Gertrude Kosovsky Collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb

Venice period—and places them in the context of his career as a whole, allowing many more aspects of the master’s virtuoso printmaking to be appreciated. *Whistler as Printmaker: Highlights from the Gertrude Kosovsky Collection* will remain on view through September 1. It is organized by Susan Grace Galassi, Senior Curator, and Margaret Iacono, Associate Research Curator, and is accompanied by public programs.

Gertrude Kosovsky began to collect prints in the 1960s, encouraged by her friend and mentor, the expressionist painter Joseph Solman. Although her interests were wide-ranging, she focused mainly on Whistler. Over time, she and her husband gave thirty-seven prints and one pastel by the artist to their son, who continues to add to the collection and has made this generous promised gift in her honor. Comments Ian Wardropper, “We are immensely grateful to Gertrude Kosovsky and her son for this outstanding collection, which will fit in seamlessly with the Frick’s holdings. Henry Clay Frick particularly admired Whistler, his near contemporary, and acquired twenty works by the artist in different media. Along with five paintings, he purchased a set of twelve etchings and three pastels of Venetian subjects. The Kosovsky promised gift enriches the Frick’s works on paper from Whistler’s Venice period with additional examples and introduces new areas of the artist’s graphic oeuvre, as well as new subject matter.”

ABOUT WHISTLER’S PRINTS AND THE GERTRUDE KOVOSKY COLLECTION

Born in Lowell, Massachusetts, Whistler spent part of his youth in Europe. He attended the United States Military Academy at West Point, leaving after three years. During a brief period working at the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, he learned the rudiments of etching for the purposes of mapmaking. Intent on becoming an artist, he left for Europe at age twenty-one and never returned to his native land. A flamboyant, contentious, and charismatic character, he spent his career in Paris and London and rose to the heights of his profession. Arriving in Paris in 1855, Whistler met leading artists of the realist circle and was himself a leading figure in the Etching Revival. The flexible medium of etching, which reached a peak in the hands of Rembrandt, had fallen into decline until the mid-nineteenth century, when it was rediscovered as a means of personal expression.



James McNeill Whistler, *The Wine Glass*, 1859, etching, black ink on thin, cream Japanese paper, Gertrude Kosovsky Collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb

In the late 1850s, Whistler worked extensively in printmaking in both London and Paris. The Kosovsky gift is particularly rich in examples of Whistler’s early etchings, bringing to the Frick eighteen works made between 1858–59. During this period, the artist experimented with etching techniques while staying in London, visiting his half-sister Deborah and her husband, the surgeon and etcher Sir Francis Seymour Haden, whose Old Master print collection fascinated Whistler. The Kosovsky’s beguiling *Wine Glass*, a diminutive, meticulous work, was likely influenced by Rembrandt’s small-scale works on paper in Haden’s possession. Printed on fine quality Japanese paper, it demonstrates Whistler’s technical skill and ambition in the print medium at an early age.

In France, the artist's reputation as a printmaker rose rapidly. In 1858, he produced his first published series of etchings, popularly known as the French Set—made up of streetscapes, genre scenes, and portraits—printed by the celebrated Auguste Delâtre. Several works in the Kosovsky Collection are part of this foundational set. Among the most arresting depicts *Fumette* (page one), a Parisian seamstress and Whistler's mistress, who was known for her fiery temper. In this evocative portrait, Whistler displays his incisive eye for the characterization of his subjects. The same model posed in another Kosovsky print, *Venus* (1859); in this work, her unidealized voluptuous body reveals the strong influence of Courbet and realism.

In 1859, Whistler moved to London, his home for the next forty years, with periods in Paris. At that time, he began a new series of etchings of the decrepit docks and wharfs on the Thames in East London. They would be published with other works in 1871 as the Thames Set. The Kosovsky Collection includes three prints from this series, as well as one that may have been created for it but not included: *Billingsgate* (page one), a scene of the fish market of the same name, published in the periodical *The Portfolio* in 1878. With its multi-layered space, teeming activity, and rhythmic succession of masts, it was praised as exceedingly vivid and original. The unpublished print *Soupe à Trois Sous* (1859), while set in a Parisian café, is in the same realist spirit as the scenes of the working longshoremen in the Thames Set.



James McNeill Whistler, *Soupe à Trois Sous*, 1859, etching, black ink on cream Japanese gampi paper, laid down on white Japanese paper, Gertrude Kosovsky Collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb

By the mid-1860s, Whistler had become a leader of the aesthetic movement, which emphasized the abstract formal elements of art over subject matter. Moving away from his earlier realism, he turned to new sources, among them classical antiquity and Japanese art. While focusing primarily on painting during the 1870s, he returned to printmaking with renewed interest at the end of the decade, making some of his most innovative etchings that reflected his aesthetic principles. Following his bankruptcy (which stemmed, at least in part, from his famous libel suit against the critic John Ruskin), Whistler accepted a commission in 1879 from the Fine Art Society of London. He was to spend three months in Venice and execute a set of twelve etchings. Whistler, however, remained in Venice for fourteen months and came back with fifty etched plates and one hundred pastels. He justified his delay by claiming that he had discovered a “Venice in Venice” —the back canals, crumbling buildings, and hidden piazzas—that other artists had overlooked. Exploring the city on foot and by gondola, he sketched the sights before him with his etching needle on prepared copper plates. He also carried pastels and paper with him, switching between media.



James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne*, 1879–80, etching and drypoint, brownish-black ink on cream laid paper, Gertrude Kosovsky Collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb

On his return to London, Whistler selected twelve plates to be published in an edition, which would be known as the First Venice Set, printing the sheets himself with the help of his assistants. He individualized each impression through his choice of paper support and by varying the amount of ink left on the plate, which added tone to the fine mesh of etched lines. Through his method of artistic printing, he evoked different weather effects and moods. The Kosovsky *Nocturne*, the most dramatic work of the First Venice Set, exemplifies Whistler's new tonal, suggestive manner of etching, with a minimal use of line. With his Venice prints, Whistler began to trim

his paper to the plate mark, leaving a small tab below on which he drew in pencil his butterfly monogram, with the letters "imp" indicating that the work had been printed by him. The Kosovsky gift brings another four Venice prints to the Frick, all from Whistler's Second Venice Set, a group of twenty-six etchings pulled from the original fifty plates and published in 1886. They range from the fine linear quality of *La Salute: Dawn*, to the rich chiaroscuro effects of *San Biagio*, to the strong geometric quality of the *Ponte del Piovan*.

In 1974, Gertrude Kosovsky purchased a single pastel by Whistler, *Sunset: Venice* (1880), one of the most understated and evocative of the pastels the artist executed in that city and the highlight of the promised gift. With a delicate, scribbled black chalk line, Whistler suggests the blurred forms of the Santa Maria della Salute and the Giudecca sinking into evening mist. Touches of color in the sky capture the reflected light of sunset on drifting clouds, while strokes of white in the water convey its shimmering surface. The Kosovsky pastel will join three other Venetian pastels acquired by Henry Clay Frick.



James McNeill Whistler, *Sunset: Venice*, 1880, chalk and pastel on beige paper, Gertrude Kosovsky Collection

In 1878, Whistler experimented with lithography under the tutelage of the printer Thomas Way and returned to it a decade later. Invented in the last years of the eighteenth century, lithography quickly became a favored means for commercial printing. Like etching, lithography was rediscovered by artists in the mid-nineteenth century as a medium for original work. In etching, lines are carved into a surface, while in lithography, the image is drawn with a greasy crayon either directly on a block of stone from which the impression is printed, or on paper then transferred to the stone in a process known as transfer lithography. From the late 1880s through the 1890s, Whistler made extensive use of lithography, working primarily in the transfer method. The lithographic process enables the artist to achieve soft, blended, painterly effects that have a sketch-like quality. Whistler embraced the kinship of this method of printmaking with drawing, referring to his lithographs as "songs on stone."



James McNeill Whistler, *La Belle Dame Endormie*, 1894, transfer lithograph, black ink on ivory laid paper, Gertrude Kosovsky Collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb

This promised gift adds outstanding lithographic impressions to the Frick's holdings of Whistler prints. Among the most renowned is the poignant *La Belle Dame Endormie*, a portrait of his wife, Beatrice, reclining in an armchair, already ill with the disease that would claim her life. Printed on old laid paper removed from a ledger book, the impression appears as if it were a drawing pulled from a sketchbook. Whistler's thoughtful selection of his paper support in this work is characteristic of his printmaking throughout his career. In contrast to the subtlety of *La Belle Dame Endormie*, *The Russian Schube*, a portrait of his friend and future biographer, Joseph Pennell, is infused with energy. Through the figure's standing frontal position and robust form, emphasized by his oversized cloak, and the spontaneity of Whistler's crayon strokes, the artist evokes a vivid presence.



James McNeill Whistler, *The Russian Schube*, 1896, transfer lithograph, black ink on ivory Japanese paper, Gertrude Kosovsky Collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb

Principal support for the exhibition is provided by Margot and Jerry Bogert.

RELATED PROGRAMS

Alex Gordon Lecture in the History of Art

Whistler's Art: "An Arrangement in Line, Form & Colour"

Wednesday, May 15, 6:00 p.m.

Margaret F. MacDonald, Professor of History of Art, University of Glasgow

This lecture is free, no reservations are necessary. Seating is on a first-come, first-served basis. This lecture will be webcast live and archived for future viewing on our Web site. Please visit frick.org/live for details.

A skillful draftsman, a master printmaker, and a controversial painter, James McNeill Whistler created strikingly perceptive and atmospheric masterpieces. His art and writings reveal his strong response to color and how this conflicted with his belief in the central importance of drawing. This lecture focuses on works on paper that illustrate the development of his art from 1855 to 1903.

Seminar: Whistler's Paintings, Pastels, and Prints at The Frick Collection




Monday, June 10, 2–3:30 p.m.

Susan Grace Galassi, Senior Curator, The Frick Collection

Registration is required, \$100 (\$90 for members); register online at frick.org/seminars.

Henry Clay Frick acquired five oil paintings, three pastels, and twelve etchings by James McNeill Whistler. Focusing on the artist's innovations across media, this seminar provides the unique opportunity to view the works together and to explore his extraordinary etching technique through close examination of his First Venice Set, prints which are usually kept in storage.

INTERACT

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BASIC INFORMATION

General Information Phone: (212) 288-0700

Web site: www.frick.org

Building project: www.frickfuture.org

E-mail: info@frick.org

App: frick.org/app

Museum address: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue

Hours: Open six days a week: 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day

Admission: \$22; senior citizens \$17; students \$12; Pay-what-you-wish hours on Wednesdays from 2:00 to 6:00 p.m.

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

First Fridays: Museum admission and gallery programs are free from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. on the first Friday evening of the month (except January and September)

Subway: #6 local to 68th Street station; #Q to 72nd Street station; Bus: M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

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

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

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

Public Programs: A calendar of events is available online

Library address: 10 East 71st Street, near Fifth Avenue

Hours: www.frick.org/visit/library/hours

Admission: Open to the public free of charge

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For further press information, please contact Alison Peknay, Media Relations & Marketing Coordinator; Phone: (212) 547-0710; E-mail: pek nay@frick.org