



Friendship, Feuds and FANTASY

Janet Gleeson enjoys the colourful story of Whistler's Peacock Room and Darren Waterston's haunting recreation, 'Filthy Lucre', on display at the Victoria & Albert Museum



The mural of two fighting peacocks symbolises the feud between artist and patron. Darren has altered Whistler's original, showing the peacocks with feathers flying and each other's entrails in their beaks.

V&A/Amber Gray/@mz_lamber_gray; Harry Bedford Lemere, 'The Peacock Room, 49 Princes Gate', 1892 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Vases sit drunkenly askew, glazes seep on collapsing shelves that drip with gilded stalactites, a decayed painting dissolves into the shelf beneath, broken shards of china are strewn across the floor, as melancholy music plays over gossiping voices. Welcome to 'Filthy Lucre: Whistler's Peacock Room Reimagined', an immersive installation by contemporary American artist Darren Waterston, who has cleverly recreated James Abbott McNeill Whistler's most famous, and scandalous, interior – in a state of disrepair, haunted by those who created, lived and squabbled in it. Whistler's original Peacock Room was the jaw-droppingly lavish dining room in the Kensington home of shipping

LEFT Darren Waterston's installation, 'Filthy Lucre', shows Whistler's interior collapsing and decayed to highlight the destructive egos involved in its creation. **BELOW** An 1892 photograph of the original room.



magnate Frederick R Leyland. Designed in 1876, in the cutting-edge Aesthetic style, it showcased Leyland's dazzling collection of oriental blue and white porcelain, with a masterpiece by Whistler, *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* as its focus. 'To my mind it is the most important Aesthetic interior in the world – the only complete one that still exists by Whistler. It marks a turning point in his career, the moment he sees a space for art as something immersive, that surrounded you entirely,' says Kerry Roeder, Curatorial Fellow at the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington DC, where the original room is now housed. Sensuous and sophisticated, the Aesthetic Movement flowered in the last decades ▶



ABOVE The original Peacock Room, now in Washington DC. **RIGHT** Darren Waterston's version of Whistler's central masterpiece, *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, shows the subject grotesquely disfigured. **FACING PAGE** The window shutters elaborately decorated with gilded peacocks. As Whistler lost track of his brief, he overpainted every surface to create his harmony in blue and gold.



of the 19th century. It claimed to celebrate art for art's sake and flourished in a world at odds with the glamour and gloss it revered. 'We are in the orbit of *bons mots*, of Wildean satire, of everyone trying to be clever and witty,' explains James Robinson, Keeper of Sculpture, Metalwork, Ceramics and Glass at the V&A.

Little surprise, then, that when you dig deeper, beneath the Peacock Room's refinement you find a story of a friendship that soured. 'What Darren is doing is excavating Aesthetic Movement values and looking at the toxicity that develops between Leyland and Whistler evidenced in the room. Darren's title, *Filthy Lucre*, highlights the bad blood. It comes from a hideous 1879 Whistler portrait called *The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre (The Creditor)* showing Leyland as a monstrous peacock.'

Whistler's part in the unsettling tale begins when the architect, Thomas ▶

V&A/Amber Gray/@mz.amber.gray; Colleen Dugan; James McNeill Whistler/Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.61



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INTERIORS



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ABOVE When Leyland refused to pay Whistler's exorbitant bill, the artist painted this fighting peacock mural and bitterly entitled it, 'Art and Money; or the Story of the Room'. **BELOW** Broken shelving and shattered pots in the V&A installation symbolise the tensions that resulted from Whistler's unsanctioned work.



Jeckyll, who Leyland had commissioned to design his dining room, was taken ill. 'Whistler was working in the house at the time, so Leyland asked him for suggestions for painting the door and shutters,' says Kerry. Leyland authorised a few minor embellishments but, while he was away, Whistler overstepped his brief, covering the ceiling with gold and a pattern of peacock feathers, gilding the shelving, overpainting the antique leather wallpaper in Prussian blue and painting peacocks on the shutters. 'I just painted on... I forgot everything in my joy in it,' he later wrote.

Tensions between artist and patron are nothing new, James says. 'But when you delve into the detail, Whistler is out of order. He more or less locks himself in the room, does what he wants and then charges Leyland 2,000 guineas.' Kerry agrees: 'Whistler's life is a series of close

relationships that end in a dramatic falling out. He wasn't keen on respecting the opinions of anyone else, including patrons.'

When an infuriated Leyland quibbled about the bill, Whistler responded, predictably in paint. A mural of two sparring peacocks, cruelly entitled: 'Art and Money; or the Story of the Room' appeared on one wall. 'One peacock symbolises Whistler and the other Leyland, with coins pouring from his breast,' says James. Yet, despite the acrimony, Leyland kept the room unchanged. 'There was a recognition that this was something new and different, worth preserving,' says Kerry.

In 1904, after Leyland's death, the porcelain collection was dispersed and the room sold to the American industrialist, Charles Lang Freer, who installed it in his Detroit home. 'He wanted to be the definitive Whistler

collector, and he'd already bought *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, so he had the entire room shipped across the Atlantic in 27 crates.' What did he think when he saw the room painstakingly rebuilt? 'He was initially underwhelmed - by then it was somewhat disfigured by grime and cigar smoke. But he came to love it,' says Kerry. 'And when he decided to create a museum for Whistler's work, The Peacock Room was the focal point.'

At the time of writing, Whistler's masterpiece, restored to its former glory, is inaccessible due to Covid restrictions. But, while the shutters are closed on the original, there's Darren Waterston's brilliant version, newly reopened, to relish at the V&A. Just beware of falling pots and fighting ghosts. 🍷

Filthy Lucre: Whistler's Peacock Room Reimagined is on display until 29th November at the V&A (vam.ac.uk)



ABOVE A portrait of Whistler with the *White Lock*, undated. Artist Thomas Robert Way.

1 THE DOUBLE CUBE ROOM WILTON HOUSE, WILTSHIRE

It's hard to think of a more extravagant room than this one at the ancestral home of the Earls of Pembroke. So-called because of its classical proportions: the Double Cube Room is 18m long, by 9m high and wide, and said to be the grandest 17th-century state room in England. Designed by Inigo Jones and John Webb c1653, it has white painted panelled walls, decorated with gilded swags of fruit and foliage. These provide a sumptuous framework for a collection of portraits by Van Dyck.



2 THE ROYAL PAVILION, BRIGHTON



Oriental ceramics displayed on gilded shelves: Japanese art was a key source of inspiration for the Aesthetic Movement.



V&A/Amber Gray/@mz.amber.gray; Colleen Dugan; James McNeill Whistler/Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.6; Heritage Art/Heritage Images via Getty Images

3 THE SALOON BUSCOT PARK, OXFORDSHIRE

Burne-Jones' obsession with Charles Perrault's *Sleeping Beauty* inspired the artist's *Legend of the Briar Rose* series, which now adorns the Saloon at Buscot Park. The series (completed in 1890) was applauded when it was exhibited at Agnews in London but, when Lord Faringdon bought the works for his Palladian mansion, and invited Burne-Jones to see them, the artist wasn't happy with the effect. So, he extended the frames to fill up the wall space and inserted 10 smaller canvases that continue the theme.



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