

Font Size: [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)

Whistler: The Enraged Genius

Christopher Benfey

JUNE 5, 2014 ISSUE

Whistler: A Life for Art's Sake

by Daniel E. Sutherland

Yale University Press, 440 pp., \$40.00

An American in London: Whistler and the Thames

an exhibition at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, October 16, 2013–January 12, 2014; the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts, February 1–April 13, 2014; and the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., May 2–August 17, 2014

Catalog of the exhibition by Margaret F. MacDonald and Patricia de Montfort

London: Philip Wilson, 191 pp., \$60.00 (Distributed in the US by Palgrave Macmillan)

Darren Waterston: Uncertain Beauty

an exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, Massachusetts, March 8, 2014–February 1, 2015; and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington, D.C., July 2015

Catalog of the exhibition, to be published by Rizzoli in association with MASSMoCA and the Smithsonian, is scheduled for publication in July 2014, with essays by Susan Cross, Lee Glazer, and John Ott

1.

In 1891, Stéphane Mallarmé, the most exacting French poet of his generation, helped bring about the purchase, by the French government, of his friend James McNeill Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1*. One can see why this arresting 1872 portrait of Whistler's mother, in mourning and seated in stark profile, might have appealed to Mallarmé and his circle of self-styled "Symbolists." Whistler had applied the paint with ghostly, veil-like thinness, like "breath on the surface of a pane of glass," as he put it. Anna Whistler's gaze, facing a rippling curtain of Japanese indigo, seemed to turn inward—"on the wing," as the Symbolist art critic and novelist J.K. Huysmans wrote approvingly, "towards a distant dreaminess." With its muted expanses of gray and black, this large painting—well over five feet across and nearly square—could be seen as pensive, otherworldly, "spiritual."

When Alfred Barr Jr., founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, borrowed *Whistler's Mother* (as the popular picture had come to be known) from the Louvre forty years later, he hoped to raise lagging attendance during the depths of the Depression while at the same time reminding museumgoers of how daringly modern an artist Whistler—some kind of an American after all, despite his long residency in Russia, Paris, and London—was. As the picture began a coast-to-coast tour of the United States, it became clear that the huge crowds lined up in cities from Baltimore to San Francisco saw other things in the painting than an audacious arrangement of abstract forms. In March 1934, the

postmaster general announced that a stamp bearing Whistler's mother would be issued for Mother's Day—President Roosevelt himself had reportedly selected the image. The stool at Anna Whistler's feet was replaced on the stamp with a pot of flowers.

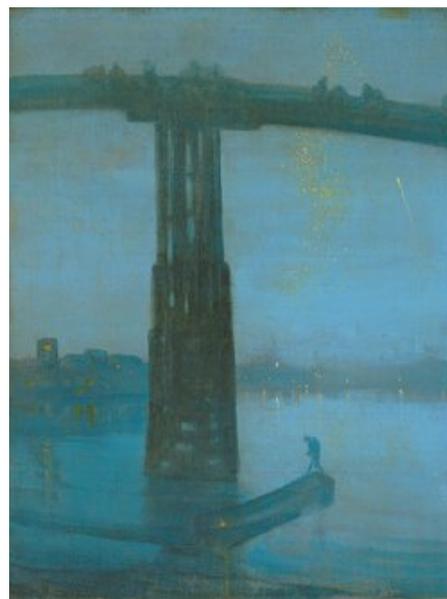
Muttering disdainfully about “mother cults of the past” and retrograde “American Protestantism,” Barr maintained that if the notoriously combative Whistler were still alive, “he would be enraged by the adulteration of his design.” One feels that Barr's unease—an unease that in various guises has dogged Whistler's reputation to this day—was less about what he confidently called “Whistler's intention” than about the outpouring of emotion directed at Whistler's painting, as though such sentiment were somehow an illegitimate response to the intellectual rigors of modern art.

And yet, what exactly was Whistler's intention in complex paintings like *Arrangement in Grey and Black*, which appeal to different viewers in such sharply diverging ways? To take another example, what are we to make of *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1861–1862), in which a serene young woman dressed in virginal white stands upon a bearskin (or, perhaps, a wolfskin—opinions differ), and the seemingly wide-awake animal stares at the viewer with teeth bared? Are we really any closer, today, to knowing the answers? An engaging new biography by the historian Daniel Sutherland and two tightly conceived exhibitions, recently mounted in Whistler's native New England and bound for Washington, bring renewed attention, and perhaps fresh perspective, to old battles surrounding Whistler's life and art.

2.

As a subject for biography, Whistler, who died in London in 1903 at the age of sixty-nine, is wonderfully alluring—in his vivid personal presence and in his commanding, ever-evolving art—and elusive. An inspiration in outrageous dress and deportment for acolytes like Oscar Wilde, Whistler contrived an elaborate costume of top hat, frock coat, monocle, square-toed pumps of patent leather, and a long cane that he liked to flourish menacingly. Meeting him by chance in a restaurant in Paris, Degas, who greatly admired Whistler's work, is reported to have said, “Whistler, you have forgotten your muff.” The young Proust, more reverential, purloined one of Whistler's gray gloves as a keepsake, and later modeled his painter Elstir after Whistler.

Whistler was one of the first artists to intuit a causal relation between personal celebrity and success in the art market (though Sutherland exaggerates in claiming that he “saw no difference between the creation and promotion of art”). He embroidered his exotic background and nomadic life. His father, an engineer born in Indiana and trained at West Point, was hired, when Whistler was nine, to oversee the construction of the railroad connecting St. Petersburg to Moscow. Whistler claimed that he himself had been born in Russia. When he was reminded that he had been born, after all, in Lowell, Massachusetts,



Tate, London

James McNeill Whistler: Nocturne: Blue and Gold—Old Battersea Bridge, 1872–1873

he replied acerbically, “I shall be born when and where I want.”

His talent for drawing was noticed early; he was enrolled at age ten in the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts. After her husband’s early death in 1849, Anna Whistler, originally from North Carolina, moved the family back to New England. With little money for a private college, Whistler entered West Point instead, where he received training in technical drafting before being expelled—like his idol Poe before him—two years later.

Whistler claimed that he had failed a chemistry test. “Had silicon been a gas,” he joked, he “would have been a major general.” In fact, his unruly behavior (judged on a point system for infractions like drinking and playing cards) made it impossible for Robert E. Lee, the sympathetic superintendent of the academy, to salvage Whistler’s military career. Whistler briefly worked in the drawing division of the US Coast and Geodetic Survey in Washington, where he learned the rudiments of etching, before leaving for Paris in 1855, having received his father’s legacy at twenty-one, to copy paintings at the Louvre and study in Charles Gleyre’s popular studio.

After moving to London in 1859, where a new industrial and banking class had expanded the market for artists, Whistler began the extraordinary series of etchings of the dilapidated neighborhoods of Wapping and Rotherhithe known as “The Thames Set,” which Baudelaire, another connoisseur of urban decay, found enthralling, “a chaos of fog, furnaces and gushing smoke.” Jo Hiffernan, a beautiful young Irishwoman with striking red hair, and the first of Whistler’s mistresses, posed for two marvelous paintings, *Wapping* (1860–1864; a lushly rendered view of lowlife locals at a riverside bar, prefiguring similar scenes by Renoir and Monet) and *The White Girl*. Paintings like these, exhibited in Paris, established Whistler as a leading painter in the loose-knit group of realists who were challenging the academic strictures of the government-sponsored Salon. In Henri Fantin-Latour’s *Homage to Delacroix*, Whistler, the central figure, is portrayed as a plausible successor to Delacroix himself, while Manet, Baudelaire, and others are on each side.

And then, shockingly, Whistler entirely remade his style. He had closely studied Japanese art and aesthetics, and had begun to collect, obsessively, blue and white porcelain from China. He had also, on a mysterious journey to Chile in 1866, begun to paint night scenes, or “moonlights,” that—like the Japanese prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige he admired—allowed for a radical simplification of subject and style. He had come to regret his allegiance to Courbet’s “damned Realism,” and his wasted years of “canvases produced by a nobody puffed up with pride” at his own skill. “Well,” he told Fantin, “it explains the enormous amount of work that I am now requiring myself to do.” It was during this intense period of reeducation that he painted the portrait of his mother, in the crepuscular mood of his nighttime views of the Thames.

It was these paintings, renamed “nocturnes” in Whistler’s ongoing attempt to make visual art as unencumbered as music with narrative or moralizing subject matter, that so shocked the aging and ailing John Ruskin, who considered them facile, unfinished, and overpriced. In *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin contrasted honest, medieval (and presumably poorly paid) craftsmen with modern artists demanding “irregular and monstrous prices,” and singled out Whistler’s night scene of fireworks on the Thames, *The Falling Rocket* (1875), as an egregious example of such skewed values. “I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now,” he wrote, “but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two

hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." Whistler won the lawsuit but was awarded a single farthing in damages by the jury and forced to pay court expenses, which, combined with other debts, bankrupted him. "The verdict, of course, satisfies neither party," Henry James reported dryly in *The Nation*. "Mr. Ruskin is formally condemned, but the plaintiff is not compensated."

3.

The Ruskin trial is often seen, like the legal battles over *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Ulysses*, as a landmark case in the inevitable progress of advanced art against the philistines. And yet, few had contributed more than Ruskin to establishing the taste for art like Whistler's. When Ruskin, in *Modern Painters*, evoked "that mysterious forest below London Bridge," with its "night scenery... against the moonlight," we are as likely to think of Whistler as of Turner. Ruskin's *Modern Painters* was itself provoked by a critic's disparaging remark, in 1842, about Turner—strikingly similar to Ruskin's own jibe about Whistler—whose pictures were said to be made "as if by throwing handfuls of white, blue, and red at the canvas, and letting what would stick, stick."

For those who still believe that the arrow of nineteenth-century art follows an arc of ever-increasing abstraction to land, eventually, on Jackson Pollock's studio floor, Whistler has come to occupy a privileged place. Sutherland refers to *The Falling Rocket* as "almost total abstraction," and ascribes its supposed "revolutionary" impact to its radical departure from recognizable subject matter. And yet, as a seductive array of paintings and prints—some of which figured prominently in the Ruskin trial—at the Addison Gallery in Andover, Massachusetts, makes clear, Whistler's career cannot be reliably mapped along a line of escalating abstraction, even if we ignore the exquisite full-length portraits in the style of Velázquez that he continued to paint into the 1890s.

The intensely observed early etchings known as "The Thames Set," executed between 1859 and 1871, are, in an obvious sense, more visually "accurate," more reliably informative about the appearance of particular buildings, shops, proprietary signs, and slagheaps than the later nocturnes, one of which has been identified recently as either a view of the Thames near Westminster or, alternatively, as a view of Venice. Even if it is suggested that the nocturnes document other things—mood, mist, industrial smoke, nightfall—anyone can see that these paintings have less direct reference in them than the earlier etchings.

But it can also be said, on closer inspection, that Whistler appears to be exploring two opposing poles of abstraction—like Pascal's two abysses of the very small and the very large—in these divergent bodies of work. In the relatively large nocturnes, he often deploys "horizontal ribbons of diluted, translucent paint" right across the picture, and "comes close," as Patricia de Montfort writes in *An American in London*, "to abandoning topographical detail entirely." In *Nocturne: Blue and Gold—Old Battersea Bridge* (1872–1873), a central piece of evidence in the Ruskin trial, the bridge itself is a great black "T," and sea and sky are rendered in the same shade of turquoise blue. Night, we feel, will soon obliterate even the faint lights in the distance. "What is that mark on the right of the picture, like a cascade—" asked Ruskin's counsel, "is it a firework?" "Yes," Whistler replied.



Victoria and Albert Museum, London

James McNeill Whistler: Vauxhall Bridge, 1861

In the Thames Set, the finished prints are barely the size of postcards (the viewer may need a magnifying glass to decipher them), but Whistler overloads the image with so much informative detail that he arrives at a different kind of unintelligibility. The array of decayed buildings and unsavory wharves in *Thames Police* (1859), with each dark passageway and chimney incisively shown, could guide officers sent to patrol the dangerous neighborhood of Wapping. The most extreme example of such informational overload is the tiny *Vauxhall Bridge* (1861), in which tautly diagonal rigging and mooring ropes intersect, in the middle of the composition, with the horizontal bridge, forming “a giant X,” as the art historian Michael Fried put it, “that effectively cancels the image whose principal motif they compose.”

4.

One must take into account the challenging and even confrontational characteristics of Whistler’s art when assessing the well-documented quarrels with Ruskin and others that punctuated his life, and that take up a good many pages in Sutherland’s biography. Over the years, first in London and then, after 1891, back in Paris, Whistler perfected what he called, in his 1890 scrapbook-like assemblage of negative reviews and his own venomous rejoinders, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. “I am not arguing with you—” he liked to say, “I am telling you.” When words didn’t suffice, he was quick, despite his diminutive five-foot-three frame, to use his fists instead. “The mistake I have sometimes made in my battles,” he once wrote, “is that I have left my man alive!”

Sutherland treats these recurring skirmishes, in which personal animosity sometimes reinforced

aesthetic disagreements, with sympathetic tact—at times, perhaps, with more patience accorded the hotheaded Whistler than he deserved. A particularly ugly incident occurred during his ill-fated trip to Chile in 1866. Always in need of money, the spendthrift Whistler was drawn into a scheme of ex-Confederate officers to sell arms to Chilean rebels in their fight for independence from Spain. Whistler's brother, Willie, had been a prominent surgeon in the Confederate Army and Whistler's own sympathies (as well as those of his mother, who had run the Union blockade to join him in London in 1863) remained with the Lost Cause. When the arms deal fell through—a shipment of torpedoes arrived too late for a naval battle in the harbor of Valparaíso—Whistler returned, discouraged, to London.

On the return voyage, Sutherland notes, “three times in as many days, Whistler engaged in fist fights.” First, he quarreled with an African-American fellow passenger, using racist epithets, and physically assaulted him. “He offended my prejudices as a Southerner,” Whistler said. The next day, confronted by the ship's mail agent, a “strong abolitionist,” over the incident, Whistler slapped him in the face. On reaching London, Whistler fought with the man who had arranged the arms deal, and who suspected Whistler of seducing his wife in Chile.

One may wonder why Whistler was so quick to take offense, so unruly and temperamental. Sutherland's suggestion that “perfection... more than anything else, defined the contours and ups and downs” of Whistler's life is hardly promising. When he remarks that Whistler's childhood wasn't altogether happy, he lapses into trite phrasing appropriate to a biography for young adults: “Even with doting parents—and he came up trumps on that score—the sweet-tempered lad would find his youth a bumpy ride.”* Whistler's bravado concealed deep insecurity. As Degas perceptively remarked, “Whistler, you behave as though you have no talent.”

Sutherland makes clear that Whistler found the customary relations between patron and artist especially humiliating. The most conspicuous example of friction of this kind involved the 1876 commission to decorate the dining room of his close friend Frederick Leyland's opulent house in London. Hired to gild the ceiling, doors, and shutters, Whistler persuaded Leyland that a few additional touches—painting the flowers on antique leather wall panels yellow and gold, and adding gold and blue peacocks to the window shutters—would show off to better advantage Leyland's collection of fine porcelain.

Leyland was not entirely pleased with Whistler's flamboyant scheme, titled *Harmony in Blue and Gold*, and offered half the price demanded. Knowing that the house would remain empty through the winter, Whistler proceeded to paint the entire room, leather and all, peacock blue, like a lacquered Japanese box. He added a twelve-foot-long mural of two huge peacocks, one a conspicuously “haughty” bird, meant to represent Leyland, confronting another one, “calm” with “suppressed strength” and a silver feather in his crest for Whistler's white forelock. Later, still incensed, Whistler painted three bitter caricatures of Leyland, the third showing the shipping magnate as a peacock with a recognizable human face, sitting at a piano whose sheet music read: “‘Gold Scab.’ Eruption in FRiLthy Lucre.”

5.

Kindred qualms about the relations between frilly, filthy plutocrats and the artists they employ would appear to have provoked Darren Waterston's alarming installation, inspired by the Peacock Room, at the

Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams. Waterston is known for his deftly executed dreamscapes, drawing on the French Symbolist painter Odilon Redon, in which swirling polychromatic washes suddenly come into focus as sharply delineated bats or other creatures of the night. MASSMoCA had initially invited Waterston to paint a mural for one of its smaller galleries. Instead, Waterston, with some of Whistler's own expansive energy, has constructed a strikingly faithful facsimile—in decor, color, and lighting—of Whistler's Peacock Room in one of the reclaimed mill buildings, themselves monuments of Gilded Age industrialism, that house the museum.

Something alarming has befallen Waterston's gaudy room, however. Shelves have buckled, and broken pottery—from some 250 crudely hand-painted ceramic vessels—lines the periphery. Gilding from the walls has melted and pooled across the floor. A copy of Whistler's *La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine* (1863–1864), a fantasy of a Western woman translated into a Japanese aesthetic milieu, is literally effaced, her head a mass of ugly brown bubbles. Music suggesting Arvo Pärt intermixed with somber percussion and ghostly conversations echoes from corner to corner. There's a whiff of Miss Haversham amid the wreckage, or the fallen House of Usher.

A wall text encourages viewers to interpret this damaged Peacock Room in specific ways. "For the artist," we are told, "this vision of decadence and decay warns of the parallels between the great wealth and materialism of the American Gilded Age and the economic disparities of our own time." With his title of the installation, *Filthy Lucre*, Waterston appears to endorse Whistler's anger at his wealthy patron. This of course is a different interpretation than Ruskin's, who felt that Whistler himself had been corrupted by high prices, and was no longer the honest worker of earlier periods of art and patronage. (In his "Ten O'Clock Lecture," translated into French by Mallarmé, Whistler had written, "There never was an artistic period.")

Waterston has introduced willful destruction into his allegory of Gilded Age art and patronage. And yet, destruction was already there in the original Peacock Room, now reassembled in the Freer Gallery in Washington, when Whistler consciously overruled his patron's intentions and converted his remarkable room into an allegory condemning his patron's greed.

6.

The exhibition at Andover's Addison Gallery is called "An American in London," and it is one premise of Darren Waterston's gothic installation that Whistler, in his strained relations with his patrons, can help us understand our own second Gilded Age. And yet, how much of an American was Whistler, who showed little interest in visiting this country after his departure for Paris in 1855, and whose famous mother hangs among works by Courbet and Manet in the Musée d'Orsay? Whistler's aping of the attitudes of a reactionary southerner, however genuine his abhorrent racism, seems of a piece with the rest of his artificial costume. Henry James called him that "queer little Londonized Southerner," but Whistler (unlike Degas, another artist with Confederate sympathies and family ties) never lived in the South.

Van Wyck Brooks suggested long ago that Whistler's technical virtuosity was itself emblematic of American artists abroad, as marked in the elaborate machinery of Henry James's novels and prefaces as

in the expertly engineered society portraits of John Singer Sargent. Without regional subject matter or a national style (of the kind that Winslow Homer or Mark Twain developed at home), these rootless cosmopolitans—“Europeans,” as Henry James called them—fell back on technique, Yankee ingenuity applied to art. “It was natural,” writes Brooks, perhaps exemplifying the ingenuity he seeks to explain, “that Whistler, Sargent and James should have excelled in technique all but the greatest of the Frenchmen,” who “kept their ‘native character’ as well.”

At this point it is easy to imagine Whistler impatiently flourishing his lethal cane and shouting, in his high-pitched voice, some version of his creed—or screed—against any such irrelevant associations. “Art should be independent of all clap-trap—should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like,” he wrote in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*.

Take the picture of my mother, exhibited at the Royal Academy as an “Arrangement in Grey and Black.” Now that is what it is. To me it is interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public to care about the identity of the portrait?

* Too often Sutherland relies on clichés, as in this passage about Whistler’s half-sister: “The only cloud hanging over all their lives was the plight of poor Debo. Sis had taken several hard knocks during the past year. First, sons Seymour and Harry left home to test life’s prospects....” Readers of French will be distracted by errors like “Champs des Mars,” “La Papillon,” “Mon viel Ami,” “Batignalles.” ↩