

James McNeill Whistler Retrospective

Born outside the American city of Boston, James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) was a prominent artist of the latter half of the 19th century who was primarily active in London and Paris.

In Victorian Britain, an era and place that represented the zenith of moralistic pictures, Whistler believed that pictures did not exist to convey a moral lesson. He was a major proponent of Aesthetic Movement that heralded 'Art for Art's Sake'. Whistler wrote, 'As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight'. Through his use of musical terminology such as Symphony and Nocturne in his painting titles, he pursued the harmony of colour and form while eschewing the need for subject or narrative in his works.

Whistler is also widely renowned as a Japonisme artist who was greatly inspired by his encounters with ukiyo-e and other Japanese art forms. Through his creation of compositions that did not rely on traditional Western perspectival methods and included the use of subdued gradations of colour tones, Whistler proved that Japanese art was more than simply the object of an interest in exotic lands, but rather an essential element in his formation of his own unique arts.

In Section 1 on Portraits and Section 2 on Landscapes, this exhibition explores how Whistler developed his own unique style as the leader of the Aesthetic Movement. Section 3 on Japonisme traces the meaning and function of Whistler's Japonisme through a display of the related ukiyo-e prints and reference materials as well as his own works. This exhibition, consisting of approximately 130 objects including oil paintings, watercolours and prints by Whistler, gives us an unprecedented opportunity to appreciate his comprehensive art world, which so broadly influenced other artists from his contemporaries to succeeding generations.

Section 1: Portraits

James McNeill Whistler travelled to Paris in 1855 to pursue his dream of becoming a painter. The new trend in the art world at that time was Realism, led by Gustave Courbet, and Whistler himself soon became a proponent of this style. Its influence is quite striking in early works, such as *Head of a Peasant Woman* and others, where the artist chose familiar townscapes and individuals as his subjects and captured them in thickly applied pigments with arresting naturalness.

Once he moved to London in 1859, however, Whistler developed a close relationship with the Pre-Raphaelite painters and began to paint sensual images of women, as seen in *Weary*. From the middle of the 1860s through the beginning of the 1870s, influenced by the increasing interest in classicism and Japanese art in British painting circles, Whistler experimented with combining elements of ancient Greek and Japanese art and developed a refined form of figural expression that he dubbed 'Greco-Japanese.' Another factor that cannot be overlooked in any discussion of Whistler's portraits is the influence of 17th- and 18th-century Spanish and Dutch Old Master painters, such as Velázquez and Van Dyck. The painting techniques and palette that Whistler learned from these great masters were clearly manifested in his portraits formed around key tones of black and grey. However, the inclusion of phrases such as 'Arrangement in Grey and Black' and 'Arrangement in Black' in his titles of portraits of such renowned figures of the day as Thomas Carlyle and Sir Henry Irving clearly indicates that his primary objective lay not in physical descriptions or the expression of inner emotions, but rather was rooted in the arrangement and harmony of colour and form. This was further demonstration of the artist's position that:

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. All these have no kind of concern with it.

Section 2: Landscapes

A key feature of Whistler's landscape painting is that while his selection of subject matter remained consistent throughout his career, his expression of his subject changed dramatically between his early period and his final years. In keeping with Courbet's assertion that one should paint real things that one actually saw, Whistler consistently took familiar scenes close at hand as his subjects, whether while at home in Paris or London, or when visiting Venice. In London in particular, Whistler repeatedly painted scenes of the Thames River basin, which served as a symbol of Britain's modernisation and industrial development. From these, a series of prints known as the 'Thames Set' was born. Perceiving a visual interest in the scenes of bridges, barges and boats, and the bustle of people coming and going from their punts, he utilised bold compositions while at the same time rendering them with complete realism. However, *Crepuscle in Flesh Colour and Green: Valparaiso*, which he painted in Chile in 1867, signifies the arrival of a turning point in Whistler's style. In this work, the thickly painted style of his earlier paintings was transformed through thinly applied pigments that emphasised colour and brushstroke. At this point, it is clear that Whistler's interest turned still further away from precise depictions of the landscape to expressions of scenes in which colour and form worked together equally. Taking this a step further, one could say that the artist was turning ever closer to achieving a harmonious union of the pictorial elements found in nature. In his works in the print format, Whistler's etchings demonstrate a certain fastidiousness with regard to the printing process itself, while at the same time taking into careful consideration the tones of ink and tints and textures of the papers. In his lithographs, he moved away from realistic expression through the skillful use of light colour tones, pursuing an expressive style that was richly lyrical and gently nuanced. This transition became still more evident in the group of paintings entitled 'Nocturnes,' which constitute 'artistic impressions' of scenes of evening and darkness that seem almost to be veiled in a shroud of mystery.

Section 3: Japonisme

Throughout his lifetime, Whistler was active as a 'cross-channel' artist, coming and going across the English Channel. He mingled with the leading painters of his time in both England and France, and established his own unique style by incorporating elements of various different artistic movements, such as Realism and Symbolism, into his work. He was particularly inspired by Japanese art, which was taking the European art world by storm in the latter half of the 19th century, as Western artists groped for a new mode of expression. Works such as *The Punt* testify that, like Manet and other Impressionist painters, Whistler too referenced *ukiyo-e*, captivated by its two-dimensionality and simplification of subject matter that were non-existent in traditional Western painting. In addition, in works such as *Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks*, he incorporated iconography of novel Asian wares not only for decorative effect, but also in an attempt to liberate his works from conventional symbolism and narrative. In terms of Whistler's oeuvre, *Japonisme* meant much more than imitating simplified formal expression or a taste for the exotic; it was a major driving force behind his creation of Art for Art's sake. This fact is also brilliantly embodied in Whistler's only surviving interior architectural design, the *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room* (video exhibit). This space filled with peacocks and blue waves achieves a truly magnificent harmony of universal elements of beauty from East and West. In addition, Whistler's *Japonisme* realises a certain perfection in his series of landscapes bearing the musical term 'Nocturne' in their titles. In them, he uses a limited palette of colours, but the delicate tonal variations bring about a stillness and harmony that are reminiscent of Asian ink painting. Whistler described the unique world of artistic harmony that he had achieved as an Aestheticist thus: 'By using the word "nocturne" I wish to indicate an artistic interest alone, [...] A nocturne is an arrangement of line, form and colour first.'

[Yokohama Venue]

Yokohama Museum of Art

December 6 (Sat.), 2014-March 1 (Sun.), 2015

Closed on Thursdays, December 29 (Mon.), 2014-January 2(Fri.), 2015

Exception: Open on December 25 (Thu.), 2014

Regular hours 10:00AM-6:00PM (admission until 5:30PM)

Evening hours December 22 (Mon.)-24 (Wed.), 2014 10:00AM-8:00PM (admission until 7:30PM)

Access Minatomirai 3-4-1 Nishi-ku, Yokohama, Kanagawa, 220-0012 Japan

tel:+81(0)3-5777-8600 (Hello Dial)

By train Get off at "Minatomirai" Station of The Minatomirai Line and 3 minutes walk from No.3 exit or Get off at "Sakuragicho"

Station of JR and Yokohama Municipal subway and 10 minutes walk via moving sidewalk.

Admission

	Day of admission	Advance	Group (20 or more)
Adult	1500	1300	1400
University students High school students	1100	900	1000
Junior high school students	600	400	500
Elementary school students and younger	Free		

* Advance tickets are on sale until December 5 (Fri.), 2014.

* Collection gallery is available with this ticket.

* Group of over 20 people (pre-booking required)

* Visitors with disability and one person accompanying them are admitted free of charge.

(Please present certificate at the admission.)

*Admission for high school and younger student is free every Saturday. (Valid student ID and student handbook required.)

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