

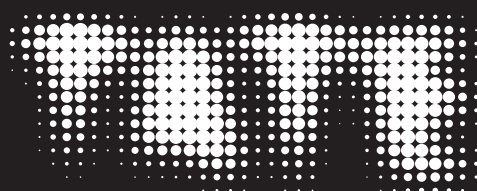
JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER

21 MAY – 27 SEP 2026

LARGE PRINT GUIDE ROOMS 1-3



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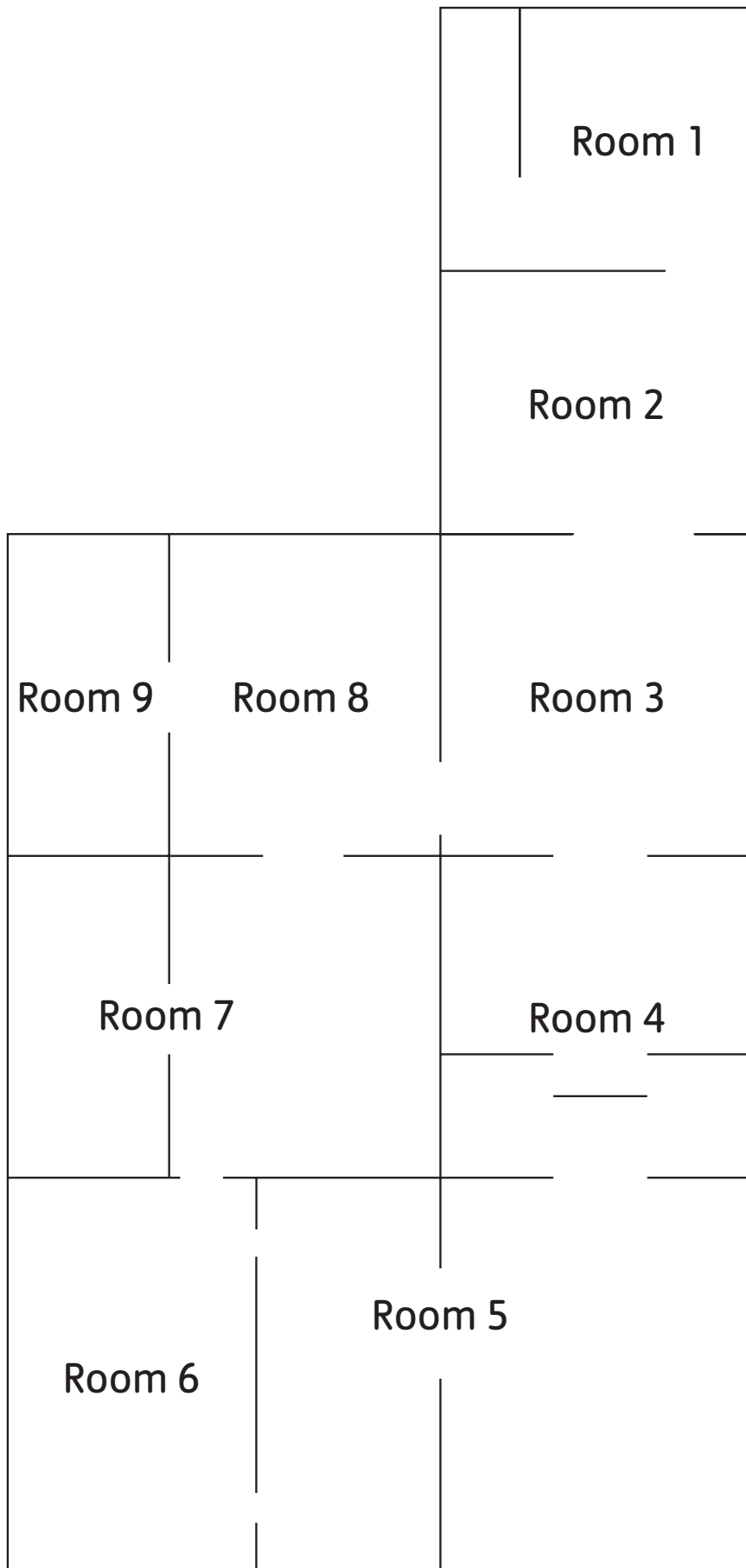
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EXHIBITION MAP



CONCOURSE

JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER

21 May – 27 September 2026

This exhibition presents James McNeill Whistler's fearless pursuit of beauty. Through 50 years of painting, drawing, printmaking and design, it reveals the secrets of his experimental methods.

Born in the United States and raised in Russia, Whistler (1834–1903) worked across four continents. His career in Paris and London, and his fiery relationship with the art world, brought him international fame. Yet he was most at home among friends and lovers in the ordinary settings that inspired his art.

Whistler depicted modern life alongside a generation of avant-garde artists. He explored colour and pattern for their own sake, influenced by East Asian art. His spare and spontaneous style redefined painting as a visual equivalent to music.

'Nature is very rarely right,' Whistler said. He believed that a true artist must transform what they see. His steps towards abstraction challenged his contemporaries and foretold the future of modern art.

Supported by the James McNeill Whistler Exhibition
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The Whistler's Finish Research and Conservation Project was
supported by The Lunder Foundation.

THE TIMES
THE SUNDAY TIMES

Associated research supported by the Manton Historic
British Art Scholarship Fund.

Media Partner

On behalf of Tate, the curatorial team of James McNeill
Whistler offer special thanks to The Anson Charitable Trust;
Dr Martin Kenig; and Stuart Southall.

Exhibition organised by Tate Britain with the Van Gogh
Museum and the Mesdag Collection.

The exhibition is curated by Carol Jacobi, Curator, British Art 1850-1915; Tate Britain, with Isobel Muir, Assistant Curator, 19th Century British Art; James Finch, former Assistant Curator, 19th Century British Art; Edwin Becker, Chief Curator of Exhibitions, the Van Gogh Museum; and Renske Suijver, Curator Van Gogh Museum and The Mesdag Collection.

With curatorial advisors Patricia de Montfort, Senior Lecturer in History of Art & Research Curator, The Hunterian at University of Glasgow; Elisa Germán, Lunder Curator of Works on Paper and Whistler Studies, Colby College of Art; and honorary advisor Margaret F. MacDonald, Professor Emerita & Honorary Professorial Research Fellow, School of Culture and Creative Arts, University of Glasgow.

This exhibition has been made possible by the provision of insurance through the Government Indemnity Scheme. Tate would like to thank HM Government for providing Government Indemnity and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and Arts Council England for arranging the indemnity.

VISITING INFORMATION

- There are 9 rooms and 190 artworks in this exhibition.
- Lighting levels in the gallery vary.
There is seating in some rooms and portable stools are available at the exhibition entrance.
- Ear defenders, earplugs, magnifying glasses, reading overlays, ramble tags and communication cards are on the shelf below, please return after using.
- Large print guides are available at the exhibition entrance and on the Tate website.
- Our Quiet Room can be found on the Main Floor, next to Play Studio.
- Toilets are located inside the exhibition.
- The Changing Places facility can be accessed through the Clore Gallery. Please ask a member of Tate staff for directions.

1. STUDIO LIFE

CLOCKWISE FROM THE WALL TEXT

[WALL TEXT]

1. IN THE STUDIO

The 1870s marked James McNeill Whistler's declaration of independence. In his waterside studio in Chelsea, he painted the famous portrait of his mother and night views of the River Thames that challenged the art world.

Whistler's home was devoted to work. He rejected fussy Victorian taste, designing rooms with plain walls, sparse furnishings and artefacts from East and South Asia. He also broke social conventions, sharing his life with professional women as partners and friends.

The studio was a public place of performance as well as a private working space. Whistler fascinated the press and fashionable society. They flocked to his dinner parties and studio breakfasts, where he served dishes such as American pancakes with maple syrup.

Yet the decade was turbulent, taking Whistler from triumph to financial ruin. No sooner had he moved to a new studio house than he lost it all, forced to leave London and start again.



Hear stories about the art on display from curators and other experts on our self-led audio guide, available on your smartphone.

Scan to buy and start listening



[WALL GRAPHIC]



The Artist in his Studio

1865–6

Oil paint on paper mounted on panel

Meet James Whistler. He looks out from his studio, palette and brushes in hand. Painting himself at work, he nods to artists of the past like Rembrandt and Velázquez. The artist Joanna Hiffernan and professional model Emelie Jones relax in loose Japanese robes. A display of blue and white ceramics behind them signals Whistler's interest in East Asian art.

The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art
Collection, 1912.141
X100389

[OBJECT ON THE WALL]

Beatrix Whistler 1857–1896

Wall Cabinet

1875–80

Wood, brass, painted panels

Whistler collaborated with the architect-designers Edward William and Beatrix Godwin (née Birnie Philip), who became close friends. Beatrix designed this panelled cabinet in an Anglo-Japanese style. Her furniture designs drew inspiration from the birds, flowers and trees she observed in nature. She exhibited her work under the name 'Rix Birnie' to avoid gendered prejudice. Whistler and Beatrix married after her husband's death, many years later.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100900

[VITRINE BY THE WALL]

Whistler's table palette

c.1886

A selection of

Whistler's paintbrushes

1860–1903

Tate Archive, TGA 8022/15, Presented

by Major General Fox-Pitt, 1980

Z92004

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Z91912-17, Z91920

Whistler favoured long-handled brushes that allowed him to step back and judge the overall effect. Wide brushes helped create dramatic sweeps, while stiff hog-hair brushes made unblended strokes or 'taches'. Like his impressionist colleagues, Whistler was inspired by the dynamic brushwork of 17th-century artists such as Rembrandt and Velázquez. He went on to explore other effects. The compartments of his table palette held paint thinned down into liquid mixtures he called his 'sauce'.

[OBJECT BY THE WALL]

Whistler's easel

1800s

Wood and metal

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Z92014

[INTERMEDIATE WALL TEXT]

WHICH BRUSH?

Whistler wanted to show an 'impression' rather than detail. He used long-handled brushes (on view nearby) to paint at a distance from his canvas and sitter.

He was absorbed in effects of paint. These portraits conjure Maud Franklin and the space around her in just a few brushstrokes. Whistler created the folds of her skirt with a stiff, flat-ended brush. He pressed harder against the canvas to deepen the shadow at the hem. He chose softer brushes for the face and a smaller round-headed brush when he came to paint the tendrils of her hair.

Whistler experimented with paint textures. Thin, dry strokes suggest highlights on the rough fabric of the skirt. The background shadows are washed in like watercolour,

with oil paint so liquid that it has dripped. The velvety, matte texture and soft, dark colour suit Franklin's mysterious pose.

Arrangement in Yellow and Gray: Effie Deans

c.1876–8

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler reinvented the traditional full-length portrait through a series of 'studio experiments'. Unlike the commissions made for patrons, these works gave him the freedom to explore new ideas. His partner Maud Franklin, an artist and model, posed for 12 paintings. Here she represents Effie Deans, the heroine of Walter Scott's novel **The Heart of Mid-Lothian**. Whistler and Franklin had recently seen the stage production. The story of an unmarried mother may have resonated with Franklin's own pregnancy.

Rijksmuseum. Gift of M.C. barones van Lynden-van Pallandt
X100392

Arrangement in Black and Brown: The Fur Jacket

1877

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler portrays Maud Franklin in fashionable outdoor dress. The painting is part of his lifelong series of 'arrangements in black' in conversation with the 17th-century portraits of Diego Velázquez. When this work was exhibited, even some friends and allies considered Whistler's spare brushwork slapdash. **The Fur Jacket** was presented as evidence in court in 1878 when he sued the critic John Ruskin for libel. It and **Effie Deans** (on view nearby) were separated when they were taken from Whistler's studio to repay debts from the court case.

Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, MA, Museum Purchase,
1910.5
X100393

Top to bottom:

James McNeill Whistler
1834–1903

Black Lion Wharf

1859

Etching and drypoint on paper

Richard Josey after James McNeill Whistler

1840–1906, 1834–1903

Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1

1879

Mezzotint on paper

Victoria and Albert Museum

X100868

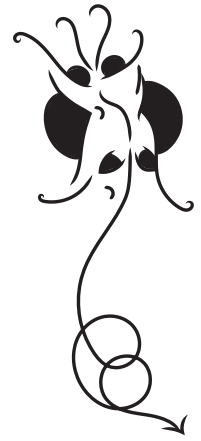
The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100899

Whistler found early success in printmaking. He focused on ordinary views of city life, publishing 16 etchings of London as 'The Thames Set' in 1871. This docklands scene appears on his studio wall in his famous portrait of his mother (on view in Room 4).

Reproducing his best-known paintings as prints helped raise funds to support Whistler's lavish lifestyle.

[INTERMEDIATE WALL TEXT]
WHERE ARE WHISTLER'S BUTTERFLIES?



Whistler created a 'mark' to sign his work, like a Chinese or Japanese designer of ceramics. He turned his initials J and W into a butterfly. The J is the head and 'tail' and the W is the wings.

As Whistler fought for his ideas of art, he turned the tail into a sting.

What's your mark? What picture could the letters of your name make?

One of Whistler's butterflies hovers somewhere in each room of this exhibition. Look out for them in his paintings, too.

How many can you find?



[OBJECT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM]

After Ōzawa Nampo, after James McNeill Whistler

b.1845, 1834–1903

Birds and Blossoms, Autumn;

Blue and Silver: Old Battersea Bridge

1867, 1871–3, reproduction made for display 2026

Reproduction of distemper and paint on paper laid
on canvas, stretched on back of silk screen

This is a recreation of a screen painted by Whistler and the Japanese artist Ōzawa Nampo. She depicted birds and flowers on silk, which Whistler later incorporated into a screen with a moonlit view of Old Battersea Bridge, the clock tower of Chelsea Church and the Albert Bridge, near his studio. The dialogue between two distant artists evokes Kachō Fūgetsu – a Japanese concept meaning ‘flower, bird, wind, moon’ that celebrates beauty in nature.

Frame Conservation and Workshop teams,

Tate. Images courtesy

of The Hunterian, University of Glasgow.

Z92376

Utagawa Hiroshige 1797–1858

Left to right:

**Kyobashi Takegashi (Takegashi wharf at Kyobashi bridge)
from Meisho Edo hyakkei (One Hundred Famous Views
of Edo)**

c.1857

Woodblock print on paper

Osumi Sakurajima (Sakurajima volcano, Osumi province)

c.1856

Woodblock print on paper

Utagawa Hiroshige rose to fame for his innovative and ambitious landscapes during a boom in Japanese printmaking. His works depict everyday life in Japan's Edo period, from the capital city to famous places in the regions. By the time of his death in 1858, his work had reached Britain and Europe.

Whistler helped promote Hiroshige among his London and Paris circles. He owned copies of these prints, admiring their composition and subtle gradations of colour in the sky and water. Hiroshige's moonlit bridge inspired the view of Old Battersea Bridge on the nearby screen.

The British Museum. 1906,1220,0.691

X100932

The British Museum. 1902,0212,0.397.35

X100901

[WALL-MOUNTED VITRINE]

Unknown makers

Chinese Kangxi style ceramics from Whistler's collection

Here is a selection of blue and white porcelain from Whistler's personal collection. He owned more than 300 pieces. The style he favoured originated in Jingdezhen in south-east China during the reign of Emperor Kangxi, for trade at home and abroad. Using blue cobalt imported from Iran, these designs often depict romantic and historical scenes. Whistler appreciated the artists' sparing use of colour and line.

From top, left to right:

Four plates

1662–1722

Brush pot

1662–1722

Plate

1600s–1700s

Brush pot

1662–1722

Tureen, cover and stand

1736–95

Trumpet cup

1750–1800

Saucer

1662–1722

Trumpet cup

1750–1800

Saucer

1662–1722

All porcelain with cobalt blue underglaze

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X102999, X102997, X102996, X102998, X103012, X103000,
X103013, X100978, X103001, X103003, X103002, X103004

[MIRROR ON THE WALL]

The Thames at Battersea

c.1876–8

Watercolour on paper

The British Museum. 1920,0728.2. Donated by Miss Hague
X100769

2. SCENES OF BOHEMIA ORIGIN STORY

ANTICLOCKWISE FROM THE ROOM ENTRANCE

[QUOTATION ON THE WALL]

'No day without a line.'

James McNeill Whistler

[WALL TEXT]

2. ORIGIN STORY

Whistler was born in Massachusetts to a family of soldiers, doctors and engineers. He grew up in St Petersburg, where his father oversaw Russia's first railway for Tsar Nicholas I. At 14, encouraged by trips to England and Europe, he asked permission to train as a professional artist.

Letters reveal a blended family that was brought closer by the deaths of four children in quick succession. They shared a fierce commitment to work and a love of making art and music together. After Whistler's father died suddenly, they returned to the United States. Whistler enrolled at West Point Military Academy. Drawing was the only subject in which he excelled. He was expelled for poor performance and persistent rule-breaking.

Drawing was both a discipline and a refuge from an early age. By 20, Whistler had produced nearly 200 studies, mostly on pocket-sized sheets. Books, music, art and everyday life were all sources of inspiration. Whistler lived by the motto 'no day without a line'.

[VITRINE BY THE WALL]

St Petersburg Sketchbook

1844–8

Graphite, watercolour, ink and chalk on paper
in boards

This sketchbook gives us a glimpse into Whistler's life in St Petersburg. Trained by tutors in the imperial court, he learned the conventions of grand paintings of history and myth. This was the visual language of state authority in the Russian Empire. But in sketchbooks like this one his formal artistic studies appear alongside casual drawings of everyday life. We find the young artist caught between public expectations and private curiosity.

Touch the screen to see more pages.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow
X101465

[SCREEN]

[TOUCH SCREEN]

Top to bottom:

Ma Nièce

1848

Graphite on paper

Deborah Haden with her baby Annie

1848

Ink, gouache and graphite on paper

From early on, Whistler found inspiration in family life. At the age of 14, he sketched his newly married half-sister, Deborah Haden, and her newborn daughter, Annie, during a visit to London. These intimate images in pencil and ink reveal Whistler's habit of exploring the same subjects through repeated drawing.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100687, X100688

Top, clockwise from top:

Lady Playing the Harp

c.1849–51

Watercolour on paper

Sailing Boat

c.1849–51

Ink and watercolour on paper

Mr Frampton uses his Umbrella

c.1850–1

Ink on paper

Whistler had a remarkable range as a young artist. He shifted easily between observation and imagination. These three drawings include a study of a modern sailboat, an invented Medieval scene and an image from a popular satire. We see him growing in confidence in his technique, composition and storytelling.

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Anonymous loan and promised gift in honor of Mason Hammond, X100841, X100844, X100763

Bottom:

Musicians

c.1849–51

Graphite on paper

This drawing points to the place of music in shaping Whistler's early life and development. The man playing the flute is thought to represent his father George. It was with his encouragement that Whistler decided to pursue art. George's early musical discipline later informed the rhythmic and tonal principles of Whistler's art.

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Anonymous loan
and promised gift in honor of Mason Hammond
X100842

Top to bottom:

Shoulder Arms

c.1849–51

Watercolour and graphite on paper

Counsel of War

c.1849–51

Ink on paper

Before enrolling at West Point in 1851, Whistler was torn between family expectations and his desire to pursue art. Anecdotes from family and friends and a visit to the academy encouraged a romantic view of military life. These experiments with figure drawing look forward to his mature work.

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Anonymous loan and promised gift in honor of Mason Hammond
X100843, X100845

Top to bottom:

**Design Cover, Sheet Music for 'West Point Song
of the Graduates'**

1852

Printed pamphlet

Church Scene

After Dinner

Dress Parade

Jem Bugs

c.1852

Graphite, ink and gouache on paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Margaret C. Buell,
Helen L. King, and Sybil A. Walk, 1970 (1970.121.18)

X100765

Tate

Z92353

Some of Whistler's youthful drawings were later collected in an album. He also designed this songbook cover. **Dress Parade** (bottom right) records a public ritual of discipline at West Point Military Academy. With spare lines, Whistler catches the cadets' posture, uniform and coordinated movement. The comic verse below refers to the women watching the parade. Whistler's enjoyment of the social opportunities of cadet life contributed to his expulsion from West Point in 1854.

Top to bottom:

Anacapa Island in Santa Barbara Channel

1854

Etching on paper

Sketches on the Coast Survey Plate

1854–5

Etching on paper

From 1854, Whistler worked briefly in the Drawing Division of the US Coast and Geodetic Survey. It mapped coastlines to support US commerce, industry and the seizure of Indigenous land. These two etchings are focused on trade and mobility routes, marking an early stage in Whistler's engagement with rivers and coasts. He pairs the discipline of coastal surveying with moments of personal invention.

The Joan M Winchell Collection, X100801

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow, X100802

[WALL TEXT] SCENES FROM BOHEMIA

At 21, Whistler inherited a modest legacy and set off for Europe. He continued his artistic studies in Paris. At the Louvre Museum, he copied art of the past. But what excited him was how new writers, painters and illustrators were portraying real life.

Whistler threw himself into the romantically unconventional world of Paris's Left Bank. Artistic truth outshone money and status. People of different backgrounds came together. Male artists and writers often relied on the personal and creative support of working women.

Whistler stayed in run-down rented rooms, carousing in cafes and bars where debates about romanticism and realism raged. The poet Charles Baudelaire defined the artist as someone who could see a timeless beauty in the restless modern city. Whistler brought his love of 17th-century painters – especially Rembrandt – to his investigations of everyday life.

Scene from Bohemian Life

1855–7

Graphite, ink, watercolour and opaque paint
on paper

Whistler was inspired by reading biographies of Romantic artists and Henri Murger's 1851 novel **Scenes of Bohemian Life**. Here he imagines a poor painter's cluttered Parisian attic. Pipes, pictures, duelling swords and a dashing straw hat hang on the wall. The easel is pushed back for men and women to gather around the stove. They eat and drink at ease. One breathes out smoke from a cigarette, a new fashion.

The Art Institute of Chicago,
Gift of John F. O'Connell, 1956.350
X100768

[WALL GRAPHIC]



Top to bottom:

Au Sixième

1857–8

Etching on paper

Whistler moved on from imagined scenes, instead reflecting his own life in Paris. The title references his move up to cheaper rooms on the sixth floor while waiting for his allowance.

A woman smokes a cigarette as she makes coffee. This is Whistler's partner Héloïse, known as Fumette. Her last name is unrecorded. She earned her living as a milliner.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow
X100805

The Dutchman Holding a Glass

1857

Etching on paper

This drinking scene recalls Rembrandt's 17th-century etchings. Whistler made a detailed study of the Dutch artist's prints in London collections together with his brother-in-law, Francis Seymour Hayden, a fellow etcher.

The British Museum. 1868,0711.4

X101832

Top to bottom:

Fumette

1858

Etching on paper

Whistler's earliest portraits depicted friends and neighbours – his fellow bohemians. His partner Fumette, a milliner, often modelled for him. Her crouched pose here is unusual in portraiture. It is an example of Whistler's lifelong observation of people's movements and posture.

Whistler pays careful attention to Fumette's needlework in the pleated sleeve and lace collar of her dress. Like his contemporary Charles Baudelaire, he found in fashion the fleeting spirit of his age.

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100809

Venus

1859

Etching on paper

Whistler made this portrait of Fumette sleeping near the end of their relationship. Realist artists were turning away from idealised nudes. The French painter Gustave Courbet led this trend. This etching was also inspired by those made by Rembrandt, 200 years before. Etched lines trace the curves of Fumette's arms and shoulders, her compressed breasts and the weight of her belly. Deeply scratched bedclothes have caught blots of ink.

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100860

[QUOTATION ON THE WALL]

'Thousands of floating existences... in the underworld of a great city.'

Charles Baudelaire

Top to bottom:

Mère Gérard

1858

Etching on paper

The Mustard Seller

1858

Etching on paper

These prints show street vendors who sold low-cost items. Some added to their insecure income by modelling for artists. Whistler shows the flower seller 'Mère' ('Mother') Gérard without her wares. Her standing pose was associated with intellectual women and reflects her other professions, as a poet and manager of a people's library. A related painting of Gérard is on view nearby.

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100849, X100851

Top to bottom:

La Vieille aux Loques (Old Woman with Rags)

1858

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100853

The Kitchen

1858

Etching on paper

Dense etched lines weave the form of a woman and a staff leaning against the uneven wall. The marks become whisper-fine where they depict smooth pots and plates. They unravel into dynamic shadows across the floor. This neat kitchen and dramatic lighting might have reminded Whistler of domestic spaces represented by 17th-century Dutch painters.

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

X100857

Top to bottom:

The Rag Gatherers

1854

Etching on paper

Rag Pickers, Quartier Mouffetard, Paris

1854-5

Etching on paper

Gathering discarded rags to be recycled was some of the lowest paid work in mid-19th-century Europe. Whistler recorded this room in a run-down area of Paris. He added figures later, one based on his partner, Fumette.

Whistler sometimes drew directly onto the etching plate. Then he might make changes back in the studio. Finally, the plate was inked and printed at Auguste Delâtre's shop.

The British Museum. 1866,1013.607

X100808

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100858

Top to bottom:

The Unsafe Tenement

1858

Etching on paper

Street at Saverne

1858

Etching on paper

The 'French Set' demonstrated Whistler's skill in capturing lighting on buildings and interiors. Street at Saverne is his earliest known night scene – a genre that would later make him notorious. Strong shadow is cut off by the beam of a street light. The blue paper enhances the atmosphere. Throughout Whistler's life, he experimented with different textures and colours of paper.

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

X100811

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.

The Lunder Collection, 2019.855

X100810

Top to bottom:

**Title page from 'Douze eaux-fortes d'après Nature'
(Twelve Etchings from Nature)**

1858

Etching on paper

At 23, Whistler displayed his exceptional etching skills in a portfolio of 12 scenes of domestic life, children and backstreets. It became known as the 'French Set', but the varied settings reflect his travels: London, Paris, Cologne and the River Rhine in Germany. Auguste Delâtre printed 70 sets. It was Whistler's first success, winning him a reputation as a pre-eminent printmaker.

The Joan M Winchell Collection
X100852

En Plein Soleil (In Full Sun)

1858

Etching on paper

Critic and poet Charles Baudelaire urged artists to celebrate the 'heroism of modern life'. Whistler's generation took up the call. They moved beyond popular country scenes and observed their own world in the city. Here, a woman in city clothes relaxes outdoors, the town in the background. Whistler notices the strong shadow cast by her parasol – the effect of the 'full sun' of the print's title.

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100806

Whistler Smoking

1856–60

Oil paint on panel

From early on in his career, Whistler crafted his self-image. His clothes are knowingly bohemian: a rakish straw hat, a spotted cravat tied in Romantic style with no conventional white collar. Gustave Courbet, leader of French realism, painted himself with a pipe but Whistler holds a modern cigarette and casually breathes out smoke. The real challenge to the older artist lies in the bold brushwork. Whistler lays claim to a rawer style of realist painting, informed by his knowledge of historical art.

Collection of Jessica Soy

X100396



Bibi Lalouette

1859

Etching and drypoint on paper

Whistler was on good terms with the Lalouette family, often dining at their restaurant with his artist friends. The Lalouettes prized this image of their son. Whistler shows Bibi facing the centre of the composition, lost in thought. Whistler would later use a similar pose in the well-known portrait of his mother.

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X103562

Soupe à Trois Sous (Soup for a Penny)

1859

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X101359

Finette

1859

Etching and drypoint on paper

This is Whistler's first celebrity portrait. Joséphine Durwend, known as Finette, was a famous dancer from the island of La Réunion in the Indian Ocean. Her Parisian troupe adapted the can-can into a scandalous success.

Inspired by great portraits of the past, Whistler chose a low viewpoint that gives Durwend a grand air. She stands in her Paris apartment, cloaked and ready to leave. A mask and a fan hint at the audience that awaits outside.

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.

The Lunder Collection, 2019.880

X100859



Head of an Old Man Smoking

1859

Oil paint on canvas

This unnamed man is a seller of pots. Like **La Mère Gérard** (on view nearby), Whistler paints an individual rather than a social 'type'. The man's battered bicorn hat was practical for outside work, but its Napoleonic associations, and matching ribbon cockade, hint at military service in the past. Whistler had recently seen a picture of the same name attributed to Rembrandt. He responds to the Dutch artist's expressive paint handling and emotional sensitivity here.

Paris, musée d'Orsay; Legs Charles Drouet, 1909

X100593

La Mère Gérard

c.1858–9

Oil paint on millboard

'Mère' ('Mother') Gérard regards the viewer with a level gaze, one eye sightless, the other penetrating. The yellow pansy alludes to the flowers she sold in the street. It was also associated with thought, pensée in French, and Gerard's occupations as a poet and librarian. Her first name is unrecorded.

Whistler's psychological insight and varied brushwork show the influence of 17th-century masters such as Rembrandt. This painting was admired by the leader of the French realists, Gustave Courbet.

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.

The Lunder Collection, 2013.295

X100397

Head of a Peasant Woman

1855–8

Oil paint on wood

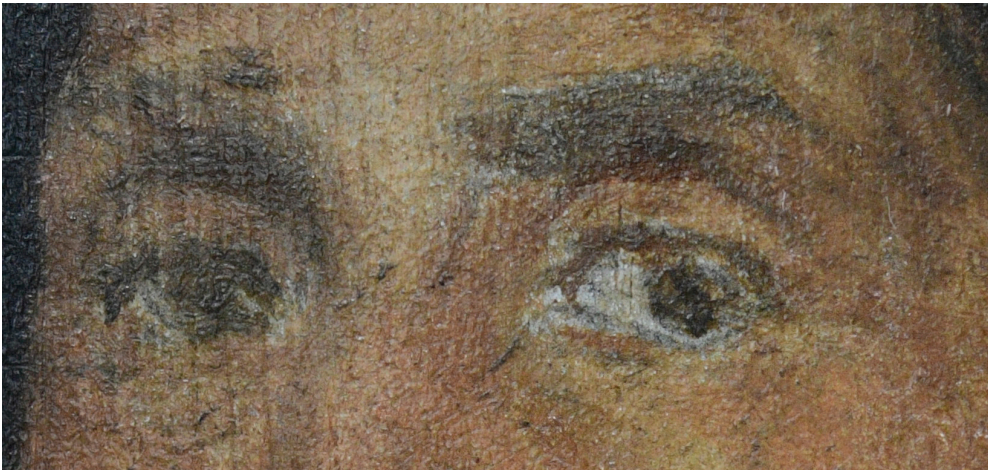
The identity of this woman is a mystery. Her serious gaze, neat lace cap and jewellery suggest she was someone from Whistler's bohemian circle. He painted small portraits in oil like this from life. These early works have not been seen together since his memorial exhibition in 1905.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100592

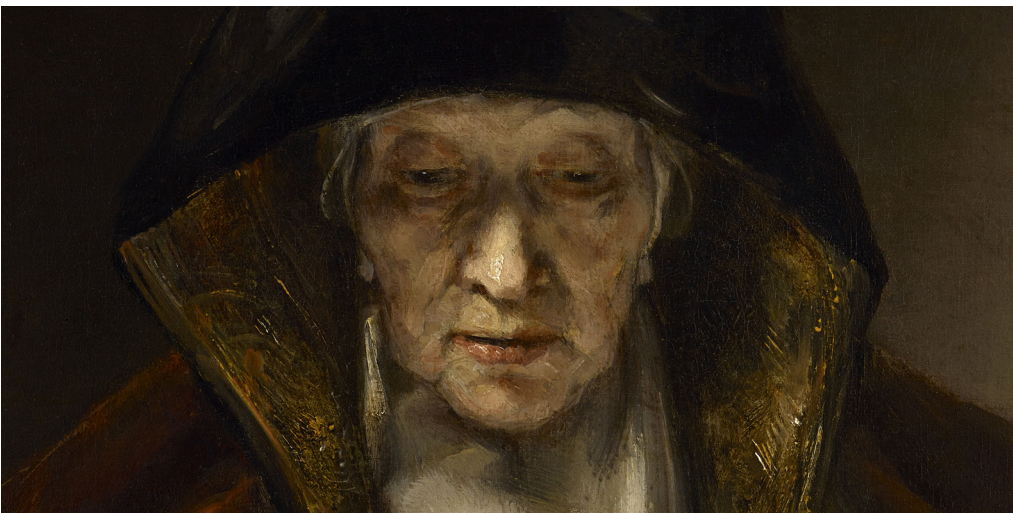
[INTERMEDIATE WALL TEXT] FIRST PORTRAIT?

In his early 20s, while Whistler was making etchings from life, he also made his first small oil portraits of neighbours and friends. They show his transition from line to colour.



A painting titled Head of a **Peasant Woman** appeared in Whistler's memorial exhibition in 1905. No one was sure when, or even if, he had made it. Recent conservation research reveals it is his earliest surviving painting from his Paris years. We see a young artist still grounded in drawing. The brushwork carefully follows the graphite drawing underneath.

As a child and young man, Whistler had studied the expressive brushstrokes of Rembrandt and other 17th-century masters. This fed into the varied brushwork and textures we see in **La Mère Gérard**. It was Whistler's first exhibited oil painting. In just a few years he had become an experienced and confident painter of modern urban life.



Rembrandt

An Old Woman Reading (detail)

1655

3. ACROSS THE WATER

CLOCKWISE FROM THE ROOM ENTRANCE

Whistler with a Hat

1859

Etching and drypoint on paper

Victoria and Albert Museum

X100864

[WALL TEXT]

3. ACROSS THE WATER

At 23, Whistler had triumphed as a printmaker but not yet made his name as a painter. He now embarked on a series of landscapes and interior scenes.

All around him, artists and writers were exploring what it meant to represent the modern world. Whistler's generation moved away from the 'realism' of Gustave Courbet's circle. They broke new ground, drawn to urban subjects and natural, luminous colours. To capture the fleeting beauty of movement and light, they sketched quickly and painted with visible, varied brushstrokes. Later this style would become famous as 'impressionism'.

After four years in Paris, Whistler's interest in modernity drew him to London. He moved to the city and to the teeming, industrial spectacle of the River Thames.

Clockwise from top left:

Tyzac Whiteley & Co. (Eagle Wharf)

1859, published 1871

The Pool

1859

Limehouse

1859

Thames Police

1859

All prints etching on paper

Victoria and Albert Museum. Bequeathed
by Alexander Constantine Ionides

X100872

Victoria and Albert Museum

X100866, X100865, X100867

The Coast of Brittany (Alone with the Tide)

1861

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler painted his first and largest landscape in the open air on the coast of northern France. He was sea bathing there while recovering from a bout of rheumatic fever, a recurring childhood illness. Whistler responded to fleeting effects of light and weather by painting quickly with a variety of brushstrokes and textures. The sand is softly blended, while sharp strokes carve the rocks. The blue horizontals of the sea are interrupted by vertical waves made with a wider brush.

The Wadsworth, Hartford, CT. In memory of William Arnold Healy, Given by his daughter, Susie Healy Camp

X100623

Green and Grey, Channel (The Sea)

1865

Oil paint on canvas

The ocean tested Whistler. 'I am not working quickly enough!' he complained. 'I have waited in vain for [the sea] to be the same colour as the one on which I started!' He made a fateful decision: 'a wave – a cloud – it's there for a moment – these paintings ... from nature can only be large sketches'.

Whistler painted this landscape at the French resort of Trouville, where he worked alongside artist Gustave Courbet. He had already broken with Courbet's more solid style of realism.

Montclair Art Museum; Museum purchase; Acquisition fund X100628



Chelsea in Ice

1864

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler's circle began to look at landscapes through what they called an 'envelope' of light and atmosphere. He was the first among them to paint London's famous smogs and mists. Claude Monet soon followed.

Whistler argued that nature was not always beautiful and it was up to the artist to create beauty through colour and line. Here he turns snow and fog into a harmony of white and grey. **Chelsea in Ice** was an early step towards abstraction.

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine. The Lunder Collection, 2013.293

X09300

[QUOTATION ON THE WALL]

'Painting from nature! needs to be done at home!'

James McNeill Whistler

Walter Greaves 1846–1930

Old Battersea Bridge

1874

Oil paint on canvas

Walter Greaves was a Thames boatman and self-taught painter. He and Whistler were neighbours and friends in Chelsea. Greaves taxied Whistler on the river and helped in the studio, becoming Whistler's first pupil. The Greaves family's boatyard can be seen in the foreground of this painting, with Battersea on the far shore and the Crystal Palace in the distance.

Tate. Presented by the Trustees of the Chantrey Bequest 1931
N04598

Brown and Silver: Old Battersea Bridge

1859–63

Oil paint on canvas

A group of boatmen talk while three others pull up a boat. One, perhaps Whistler's friend Walter Greaves, looks up at us. A barge passes, heavy with barrels. Whistler captures the wooden piles under the bridge with multi-directional marks. These contrast with blended horizontals showing the river's flow. Where the bridge disturbs the water, these fragment into shorter strokes. Distant figures are suggested by dabs or flickers of paint.

Addison Gallery of American Art, Philips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. Gift of Cornelius N. Bliss, 1928.55

X05347



The Last of Old Westminster

1862

Oil paint on canvas

Lively marks describe travellers and workmen on the wooden scaffolding of Westminster Bridge. A friend remembered Whistler looking carefully at a carriage, 'and in a few strokes, he got the look of it perfectly'.

Whistler worked from nature throughout his career. But he also wanted to create carefully in the studio. 'Painting from nature! Needs to be done at home!' he quipped. This work was a compromise, observed through a friend's window.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

A Shuman Collection - Abraham Shuman Fund

X100625

Francis Seymour Haden

1818–1910

Whistler's House, Old Chelsea

1863

Etching and drypoint on paper

Private collection

X101360

Clockwise from top left:

The Lime-Burner

1859

Rotherhithe

1860

Longshore Men

1859

Billingsgate

1859

All prints etching on paper

Victoria and Albert Museum

X100869

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100870, X100863, X100862

Victorian London handled cargo from the British empire and beyond. The thronging River Thames was bordered by new factories and warehouses. These prints capture its activity and diverse working population. Whistler had travelled widely and was interested in boats and ships. He made intricate observations of vessels, masts and rigging. Still inspired by Rembrandt's etchings, he created an extraordinary variety of marks in search of the precise line and tone for every detail he observed. Some Thames scenes were later published as the 'Thames Set'.

Wapping

1860–4

Oil paint on canvas

Working people relax on the balcony of a disreputable pub near the docks of Rotherhithe. The models were Whistler's friends, artists Joanna Hiffernan and Alphonse Legros, with an unidentified man. The warehouses of Wapping are glimpsed across the congested River Thames. The blunt title and lack of a moral message challenged Victorian tastes.

Whistler said **Wapping** was painted 'like an etching'. Using a range of brushes and palette knives, he found different marks to conjure the figures, ships and the play of light.

National Gallery of Art, Washington, John Hay Whitney Collection, 1982.76.8

X05522

A White Note

1862

Oil paint on canvas

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.

The Lunder Collection, 2019.818

X100595

[INTERMEDIATE WALL TEXT]

FINISHED?

A White Note 1862 depicts the model and artist Joanna Hiffernan. We can follow the quick movements of Whistler's brush and palette knife. He used buttery strokes for her skin and stiff swipes for the linen of her dress. We see where he changed his mind, simplifying and strengthening the picture. He scraped away the forearm and never painted it back.

The bold brushstrokes miss many details, but they capture a fleeting moment from life. A tiny red flick turns a dark green horizontal into a passing train. Such daring marks are known as 'taches' (from the French for splash). Their energy conveys atmosphere, light and movement.



Contemporary viewers complained that Whistler's paintings lacked 'finish'. But some appreciated their liveliness. It was another 12 years before 'impressionism' was recognised in France. Whistler did not exhibit **A White Note** until the first impressionist exhibition in London, two decades after he painted it.

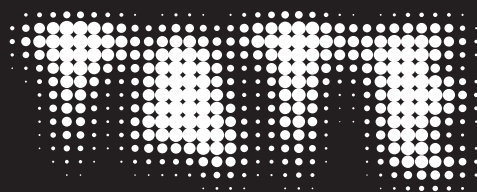
JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER

21 MAY – 27 SEP 2026

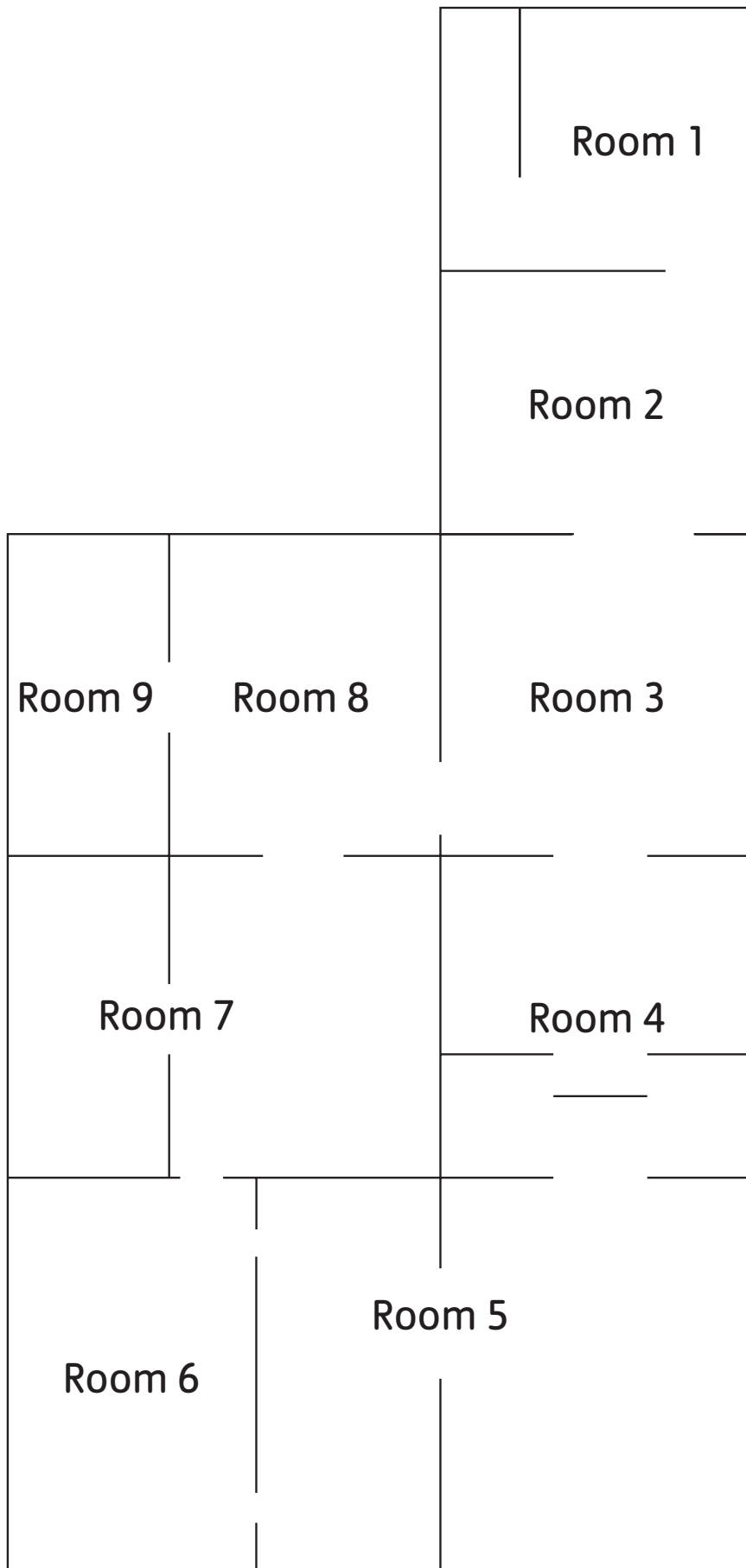
LARGE PRINT GUIDE ROOMS 4-6



Please return after use



EXHIBITION MAP



4. BREAKING-IN, BREAKING-UP

CLOCKWISE FROM THE ROOM ENTRANCE

At the Piano

1858–9

Oil paint on canvas

The musician here is Whistler's older half-sister, Deborah Haden. She plays the piano that had belonged to their father before he died. Her daughter Annie listens.

When Whistler first exhibited this painting, critics praised its lively execution and harmonious colours. He also attracted the attention of avant-garde artists. He befriended Gustave Courbet and Édouard Manet in Paris. In London, he grew close to the Pre-Raphaelite painters. With this work, Whistler claimed his place among his peers.

Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati, Ohio. Bequest of Louise Taft Semple. 1962.7

X100640



[QUOTATION ON THE WALL]

'As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight'.

James McNeill Whistler

Top to bottom:

Reading by Lamplight

1859

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Music Room

1859

Etching on paper

Whistler lived briefly with his half-sister, Deborah Haden, after moving to London. These prints show her home and family. Her husband Francis (on the left in **The Music Room**) was a doctor and amateur etcher. The two printmakers worked closely together at first, but became bitter enemies in the art world. Whistler soon felt stifled in the Hadens' bourgeois world.

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100889, X100875

Weary

1863

Drypoint and roulette on paper

Artist and model Joanna Hiffernan was Whistler's professional and romantic partner. Defying social convention, the unmarried couple lived together from 1860 to 1864. Their easy, bohemian home was designed for making art.

Hiffernan wears a fashionably tailored dress, but her free hair and relaxed pose suggest a private moment. Whistler worked directly onto a copper plate. He varied the fine lines that radiate around her face with bold scratches.

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

X100892

Annie Haden

1860

Etching on paper

Victoria and Albert Museum

X100891

Harmony in Grey and Green: Miss Cicely Alexander

1872–4

Oil paint on canvas

Eight-year-old Cicely Alexander stood for this portrait 70 times. She recalled how Whistler 'used to stand a good way from his canvas, and then dart at it'. The artist could be absorbed in his works for many hours. Exhausted, she 'often finished the day in tears'.

Her father commissioned Whistler having seen **Portrait of the Painter's Mother** (nearby). Cicely was painted in the same studio interior.

Tate. Bequeathed by W.C. Alexander 1932

N04622

Portrait of Dr William McNeill Whistler

1871–3

Oil paint on panel

Whistler's relationships with men were often marked by conflict or loss, but he was close to his younger brother. During the American Civil War, William served as an army surgeon for the Confederates, who fought to preserve enslavement in the southern states. He settled in London after the Confederate defeat. It is unclear to what extent Whistler shared his brother's political allegiance. He was strongly criticised by some in his circle for sometimes adopting the air of a southern gentleman.

The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mary T. Wentworth
in memory of her husband, John, 1977.235
X100650

Arrangement in Grey and Black, No.1 (Portrait of the Painter's Mother)

1871

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler's mother, Anna, arrived in London in 1863, escaping the American Civil War. She replaced Joanna Hiffernan in her son's household and sometimes modelled for him.

Wearing mourning black more than 20 years after her husband's death, Anna seems to look backward in a world that looks forward. She sits in the strikingly modern interior of Whistler's studio. His painting style was also new. Light strokes describe her face, hands and lace cap. Veils of thin paint flatten the figure and setting into an arrangement of dark and light.

Paris, musée d'Orsay

X100631



Arrangement in Gray: Portrait of the Painter

c.1872

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler adopts the pose and penetrating gaze of a Rembrandt self-portrait here. He was proud of his lock of white hair. The paintwork is daringly dramatic.

Reunited with his mother and younger brother in London, he made portraits of them (on view nearby). Their unified tone and composition suggest solidarity among the three surviving Whistlers. The newly successful painter took his place as head of the family.

Detroit Institute of Arts, Bequest of Henry Glover Stevens
in memory of Ellen P. Stevens and Mary M. Stevens
X100633

Miss May Alexander

1874–5

Oil paint on canvas

Mary 'May' Alexander was the elder sister of Cicely (opposite). She was 12 when Whistler painted her in the family home. After many sittings May became ill and the painting was left unfinished.

May's father shared the artist's enthusiasm for East Asian art. He commissioned Whistler to design this Japanese-inspired interior with plain lilac walls and an abstract carpet.

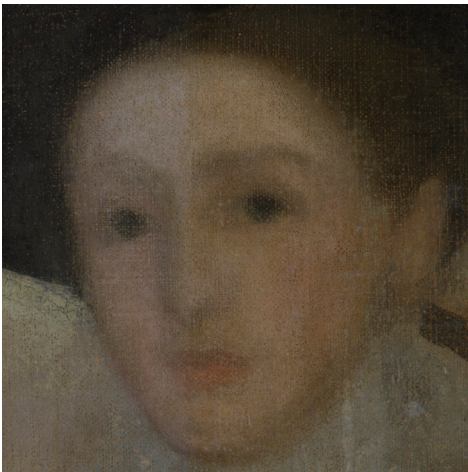
Tate. Bequeathed by W.C. Alexander 1950

N05964

[INTERMEDIATE WALL TEXT] UNFINISHED?

This portrait, **Miss May Alexander**, was recently studied and conserved. Removing a yellowed varnish revealed its original colours.

Whistler was changing his process. He spent months on this painting. Rather than building up layers, he scraped or rubbed down each one to keep the paint thin. He exposed the canvas weave, creating texture in soft veils of colour.



The paint is very liquid in some places. This microscopic view shows how the yellow calceolaria flowers pool into the jar behind. Looking through the layers using infrared reflectography reveals dark drips. Here, Whistler painted over the drips in yellow. But soon he would leave chance effects like this visible.



Many considered Whistler's works unfinished. When he exhibited **Miss May Alexander** towards the end of his career, it amused him to present his critics with a genuinely unfinished picture.

Top to bottom:

Greenwich Park

1859

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Joan M Winchell Collection
X100876

Nursemaid and Child

1859

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Joan M Winchell Collection
X100893

Top to bottom:

Greenwich Pensioner

1859

Etching on paper

Victoria and Albert Museum
X100890

Francis Seymour Haden 1818–1910

Sub Tegmine...(In the Shade)

1859

Etching and drypoint on paper

The British Museum. 1910,0421.14.
X100874

Top to bottom:

Edwin Edwards 1823–1879

Whistler at Moulsey (Molesey Lock)

1861

Etching on paper

James McNeill Whistler 1834–1903

Sketching

1861

Etching and drypoint on paper

Whistler and British artist Edwin Edwards captured each other working from nature beside the Thames. They scratched their images directly onto copper printing plates. The friends were part of a circle of young, mostly French, realist artists. Places of outdoor leisure were a key subject for them.

Private collection

X101361

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

X101362

Portrait of Luke A Ionides

1860

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler met this young businessman in Paris. They became lifelong friends. Whistler catches his likeness with bold brushstrokes, known as 'taches'. Ionides recalled his technique as like 'working in mosaic'. Whistler would 'put on some touch; then he would stand off, and re-compose his colour'.

Ionides's father commissioned this portrait after seeing **At the Piano** (nearby). He was Whistler's first patron.

Private collection

X100622

[WALL TEXT]

4. BREAKING IN, BREAKING UP

Whistler broke into the mainstream art world and then defied it from within. The sketch-like liveliness of his style appealed to progressive critics and attracted patrons. But he went further. His portraits, like his landscapes, tested the limits of painting from nature.

Whistler called his sitters back again and again so that he could scrape back their portraits and begin anew. Each time, he used fewer strokes. He was not satisfied until he summoned their presence with the most spontaneous touch.

He pushed beyond the innovations of impressionism. 'Nature is very rarely right,' he declared. Instead, beauty lay in art's abstract qualities – brushstrokes, composition and colour harmonies. Musical titles such as 'arrangement' reflected Whistler's aim to create a visual equivalent to music.

[BACK OF THE FREE-STANDING WALL]

[WALL GRAPHIC]



Variations in Flesh Colour and Green - The Balcony

1864–79, reproduction printed for display 2026

Vinyl reproduction of oil paint on canvas

Image courtesy of National Museum of Asian Art,
Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection

5. BUTTERFLY WORLD PEACOCK ROOM

CLOCKWISE FROM THE ROOM ENTRANCE

[WALL TEXT]

5. BUTTERFLY WORLD

Whistler's 'poetry of sight' developed from his study of East Asian art. This transformed how he saw nature.

In the 19th century, imperial expansion and global trade brought objects from China, Japan and other countries to Britain and Europe. Whistler and his circle were avid collectors of imported ceramics, textiles and woodblock prints. At first, he included them in his paintings. Soon, they reshaped his style.

East Asian culture encouraged Whistler to blur distinctions between art and design. He learned from the rhythmic lines, flat colours and balanced compositions of Japanese prints. In turn, his innovative work was soon appreciated by artists and critics in Japan.

Four Ladies in Japanese Costume

c.1870

Pastel on paper

Despite the work's title, the costumes shown here are imagined rather than specific. Whistler blended influences across cultures, seeking what he called a 'universal' beauty. In this drawing, he takes inspiration from East Asian dress and the light drapery of ancient Greek Tanagra figures. The four figures are arranged like a Greek frieze.

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

X101363

[QUOTATION ON THE WALL]

'Whistler opened the eyes of artists...

Painting is... the harmony of beauty.'

Hayashi Tadamasa

Seisen 1785–(?)

Fan

1854

Ink on tinted paper

The British Museum. 1973,0226,0.79. Purchase funded
by the Brooke Sewell Bequest
X100980

Unknown makers (Qing dynasty, China)

Sleevebands

1800s

Satin-weave silk with embroidery in silk and metallic threads

In Qing dynasty fashion, 19th-century Chinese women adorned their sleeves with embroidered panels. Here, the gourds represent prosperity, while insects such as crickets, dragonflies and mantises signal spring. The dahlias and butterflies refer to beauty that matures over time. Though the makers are unknown, such skilled commercial stitching was done by women artisans.

Victoria and Albert Museum.

Purchased with Art Fund support

X101466

[WALL GRAPHIC]



Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks

1864, reproduction printed for display 2026

Vinyl reproduction of oil paint on canvas

Image courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art,
John G Johnson Collection

Unknown makers (Kyoto, Japan)

Fukusa (Gift cover)

1840–80

Silk and embroidery

This fukusa covered a gift, probably food, for a present-giving ceremony. It could have commemorated the lunar new year, as the plum blossom evokes spring. Five birds appear in different stages of flight.

The cover was made, dyed and embroidered by male artisans in Kyoto. It was later purchased by the Victoria and Albert Museum from Charles William Deschamps, an art dealer who also sold works by Whistler.

Victoria and Albert Museum

X101891

Harmony in Flesh Colour and Red

c.1869

Oil paint and wax crayon on canvas

Three women appear in modern poses and dresses. Their flowing gowns are associated with the 'artistic dress' movement against rigid Victorian fashions. The figures recall Japanese prints by Torii Kiyonaga. The rug, shelves and the fans on the painted wall echo Whistler's interior designs.

The painting's title uses the term 'flesh colour' to denote the pale pink of the women's skin, their wraps and the wall behind them. It reflects a biased view of skin tone in Victorian times.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Emily L. Ainsley Fund
X100641

Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl

1864

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler paints Joanna Hiffernan leaning on the fireplace of their home in Chelsea, London. Her fan is decorated with Utagawa Hiroshige's woodcut print **The Banks of the Sumida River** 1857. In the painting Hiffernan displays a wedding ring, but she and Whistler never married. She adopted Whistler's middle name, presenting herself as 'Mrs Abbott' to manage their business affairs.

Tate. Bequeathed by Arthur Studd 1919

N03418



[OBJECT ON THE PLINTH]

Harmony in Yellow and Gold: The Butterfly Cabinet

1877–8

Oil paint on wood

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100897

Symphony in White, No. 3

1865–7

Oil paint on canvas

Joanna Hiffernan wears the same white cambric dress here as in **The Little White Girl**, shown nearby. Seated on the floor is model Milly Jones. But Whistler intended the painting as a study in colour, rather than a traditional portrait. It was an experiment using white on white. For the first time, he chose to give a portrait a musical title. Here it is boldly painted on the canvas.

The Henry Barber Trust, the Barber Institute of Fine Arts,
University of Birmingham

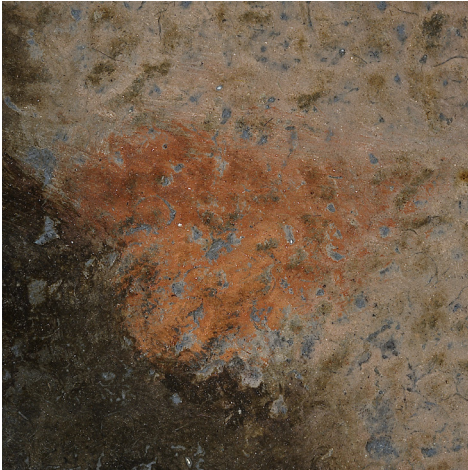
X100647

[INTERMEDIATE WALL TEXT]

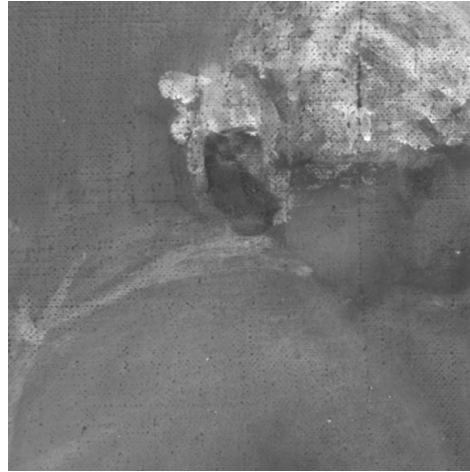
MORE THAN A COPY?

Whistler called **Three Figures: Pink and Grey** a 'rough copy' of a destroyed painting. The original was intended for his famous interior, **The Peacock Room**. Conservators have discovered that the copy was painted over many sessions. This suggests he started to see it as more than a replica.

As Whistler became more experimental, he would rub off and repaint more often. A microscopic view of the standing woman's mouth shows pink paint was removed to expose the grey beneath.



An infrared reflectogram sees through the layers to changes in the position of the crouching figure's head. The same figure's hands are incomplete.



Whistler rejected conventional ideas of completeness. But this picture did not satisfy him. He was outraged when a collector offered it for sale. He warned the public against a work 'in no way representative, and in its actual condition absolutely worthless'. We exhibit it as an unfinished work.

Three Figures: Pink and Grey

1868–78

Oil paint on canvas

This is Whistler's only full-scale painting relating to his **Six Projects**. The set of six interior designs for his patron, the shipowner Frederick Leyland, was never realised. The first version of this work was intended to hang in Leyland's dining room. Whistler destroyed it in a feud with his patron over unpaid bills. He later made this copy for himself.

Tate. Purchased with the aid of contributions from the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers as a Memorial to Whistler, and from Francis Howard 1950
N05971

Annabel Lee

1869–77

Oil paint on canvas

This work relates to Whistler's **Six Projects**, an interior decorative scheme with figures inspired by Japan and ancient Greece. The professional model is unidentified, recorded only as Maggie. The painting's first owner valued the work's ambiguous, unfinished quality. It was later given a narrative title, **Annabel Lee**, after Edgar Allan Poe's poem about a child who lived by the sea.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100649

Variations in Violet and Green

1871

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler adapted the visual language of 18th-century Japan to the banks of the River Thames. The ink gradations of woodblock prints inform his graded paint strokes. They create atmospheric effects with a musical rhythm.

During this period, Whistler began signing his work with a stylised butterfly based on his initials 'JW'. The monogram was inspired by potters' marks on the base of East Asian ceramics.

Paris, musée d'Orsay;

Achat avec le concours du Fonds National du Patrimoine
et la participation de Philippe Meyer, 1995

X100632

Sketch for 'The Balcony'

1867–70

Oil paint on panel

Inspired by his collection of Torii Kiyonaga's prints, Whistler shifts the setting of this sketch from Edo (now Tokyo) to London, from the River Sumida to the Thames. The models wear Japanese-style dress. One holds a fan, another plays a shamisen. Many Europeans saw Japanese ukiyo-e prints as windows onto a timeless past; the instrument was often likened to an ancient Greek lyre or Medieval lute. This sketch is squared up for transfer to a full-scale painting.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100648

Torii Kiyonaga 1752–1815

Shigatsu, Shinagawa Oki Shiohi (The Fourth Month) from the series Minami Juni-Ko (Twelve Months in the South)

1780s

Dptych, woodblock on paper

This Japanese print was owned by Whistler and inspired his painting **The Balcony**. Such scenes were known as ukiyo-e, or 'pictures of the floating world'. The 18th-century Japanese artist Torii Kiyonaga was a leading creator of bijin-ga, images of beautiful women. His works are known for their delicate colour and tall, elegant figures.

The British Museum. 1949,0409,0.66.1-2. Bequeathed by Miss Rosalind Birnie Philip in memory of her sister Mrs Beatrix McNeill Whistler, 1949
X100895



[VITRINE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM]

Left to right

Unknown maker (Japan)

Fish Bowl from the Arita Kiln

1800s

Porcelain with cobalt blue underglaze

Whistler owned this Japanese bowl, which reworks a 15th-century Chinese design. The lotus, a flower that blooms in muddy water, symbolises purity and harmony. A fish, painted inside the bowl, suggests abundance. Together they form a Chinese pun expressing prosperity every year. The bowl was made for export. Under a new Meiji government, Japan traded with the world. Artefacts like this were sold at Liberty's of London, where Whistler may have bought it.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X103309

**A Catalogue of Blue and White Nankin Porcelain
Forming the Collection of Sir Henry Thompson**

1878

Catalogue Plate XXIV

1878

Catalogue Plate XVIII

1878

University of Glasgow Library,
Archives & Special Collections, Sp Coll Whistler 271
Z91895

University of Glasgow Library,
Archives & Special Collections, Sp Coll Whistler 270
Z92354, Z92355

[SCREEN IN THE DOORWAY]

Origin of the Fighting Peacocks. A misunderstanding between Frederick Leyland and James McNeill Whistler, extracted from their letters.

[TRANSCRIPT]

Audio Extracts from the correspondence of Leyland and Whistler, 3 minutes, 2 actors:

Leyland: "Alright Jimmy; I've received your bill, and I think we should settle up our account. But as I told you, I cannot consent to the amount you spoke of; £2000. I really don't think you should have involved me in such a large expenditure without at least telling me ahead of time."

Whistler: "My very dear Leyland, it was you, after all, who asked me to help with the room last summer. I stayed behind when everyone else, including you, had left town for the season. Every morning up at 6, working into the evening, nearly blind with sleep, and blue peacock feathers."

Leyland: "But I only asked for a few modest changes."

Whistler: "And I gave you a brilliant surprise! The room is alive with beauty. Gorgeous! Delicate and refined to the last degree. There is no room in London like it, mon cher."

Leyland: "But you did the additional work without any order from me. The gilded shelves; the peacock feathers on the ceiling. And those shutters? The peacocks you put on those shutters? I don't require them. I can only suggest you take them away and sell them to someone else."

Whistler: "It is positively sickening to think that I should have laboured to build up that exquisite Peacock Room for such a man to live in."

Leyland: Jimmy, I'm sorry that there should be such unpleasantness between us. Come now, let's agree to a fair price. A £1000?"

Whistler: "Alright, we will split the cost of the room's true value. But, mon cher, art will outlive money. Your fame is assured; as the unappreciative owner of a room whose price you refused to pay."

Leyland: "Jimmy, it's scarcely necessary for me to notice your assertion that I shall only be known as the possessor of your Peacock Room. I hope it's not true. But if true, it's doubly painful to have my name so prominently connected with yours."

"You have degenerated into nothing but an artistic Barnum. A con artist! I shall forbid my servants to admit

you; and I shall tell my children I do not wish them to have any further intercourse with you. And if I find you near my wife, I'll publicly horse-whip you."

Whistler: "Theatrical in your threat; ridiculous in your rage; fuming in your frill. I refer you to the allegorical mural of the fighting peacocks. Behold the silver-crested peacock on the left; se moi; the Artiste. The other, bedecked with coins, and bristling silver feathers on its throat; well, that is the Patron in his customary frilled shirtfront."

"The painting is known to all London as 'Art and Money'"

"Forgive the tone, if you find it flippant."

CONTINUE CLOCKWISE INTO THE ROOM, STARTING FROM THE WALL TEXT

[WALL TEXT]

THE PEACOCK ROOM

Whistler's radical art found supporters, but it also provoked conflict. His friendship with Frederick Leyland, the leading patron of modern art in England, turned into a bitter quarrel.

The shipping magnate planned a sumptuous renovation of his dining room to display Whistler's paintings alongside his collection of blue-and-white ceramics. When the original architect fell ill, Leyland asked Whistler to make finishing touches to the room.

Without permission, Whistler transformed the entire space. He filled it with peacock motifs and gave it the title **Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room**. He later added a mural of himself and his patron as fighting peacocks.

The Peacock Room is the artist's only surviving decorative interior. It is on permanent view at the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and is recreated here for the exhibition.

George Ashdown Audsley and James Lord Bowes
1838–1925, 1834–1899



Harmony in Blue and Gold:

The Peacock Room

1876-7, vinyls printed for display 2026

Vinyl reproduction of oil paint and gold leaf on leather and wood

Images courtesy of National Museum of Asian Art,
Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection,
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.61

Keramic Art of Japan

1875

Whistler owned a copy of this illustrated book, one of the first publications on Japanese art written in English. It probably influenced Whistler's daring decorations for the Peacock Room. He combined the peacock motif seen here on a late 18th-century glazed vessel with patterns based on the feathers of the bird's neck and body.

Tate

Z92013

Cartoon of Rich and Poor Peacocks

1876

Chalk and wash on paper

The fighting peacocks symbolise the 'poor' artist and his 'rich' patron. Frederick Leyland objected to Whistler's unauthorised redesign of his dining room and refused to pay the high fee. Whistler then destroyed a painting commissioned for the room, **Three Figures: Pink and Grey**. He replaced it with this mural. He used this full-scale drawing, pricked with holes, to transfer the design to the wall before painting.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100894

6. NOCTURNES

CLOCKWISE FROM THE WALL TEXT

[WALL TEXT]

6. NOCTURNES

Whistler was fascinated by the asymmetry and flat colours in Japanese landscape prints. During a trip to Chile, he found these qualities in the subdued hues of the sea at dusk. He went further in London with a series of colour harmonies of the Thames at night. He called these 'nocturnes', borrowing a musical term to suggest atmosphere rather than a story.

Through Whistler's eyes, the twilight transformed the fog, smoke and pollution of the industrial river into timeless beauty. He abandoned unblended impressionist brushwork. Instead, he used long, ribbon-like strokes to evoke the moving river. He soaked the canvas in thin paint to conjure mist. Delicate touches created gleams of light reflected in the water.

Some mistook the subtlety of the nocturnes for haste. The leading art critic John Ruskin attacked Whistler's 'ill-educated conceit' in a harsh review. Whistler sued, using the court case as a stage on which to defend his art.

[QUOTATION ON THE WALL]

'Paint should not be applied thick. It should be like breath on the surface of a pane of glass.' James McNeill Whistler

Left to right:

Utagawa Hiroshige 1797–1858

Shibaura no seiran (Clearing Weather at Shibaura) from the series Edo Kinko Hakkei no uchi (Eight Views of the Edo Environs)

1837–45

Woodblock print on paper

James McNeill Whistler
1834–1903

Chelsea Bridge and Church

1871

Etching and drypoint on paper

Whistler's Thames views often include the square tower of Chelsea Old Church, where his mother Anna worshipped. Like Hiroshige's print in Whistler's collection, overlapping layers create both depth and pattern. The eye travels from the mooring post to the boats to the distant bridge. On the right, Whistler changed a Japanese-style tree into a boat to strengthen the vertical rhythms.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100929

Victoria and Albert Museum. Bequeathed
by Alexander Constantine Ionides

X100925



Nocturne: Blue and Silver - Chelsea

1871

Oil paint on wood

Whistler refined his idea that 'painting from nature... should be done at home!' He observed the Thames at night, in a boat or on the riverbank. He then recreated the memory in his studio, experimenting with new techniques. He used wide, stiff brushes to apply the liquid grey-blues that suggest the current. The lights and their dancing reflections are conveyed by tiny flicks of paint.

Tate. Bequeathed

by Miss Rachel and Miss Jean Alexander 1972

T01571

Nocturne: Blue and Silver - Cremorne Lights

1872

Oil paint on canvas

X-rays show that this painting began as a group of women. Whistler changed course, choosing to depict the lights of a disreputable pleasure garden and all-night factories across the Thames. For him, the scene's beauty was not in the subject matter, but in its decorative arrangement and colour. His patron, Frederick Leyland, suggested calling these works 'nocturnes' after the piano pieces of Frédéric Chopin.

Tate. Bequeathed by Arthur Studd 1919

N03420



Nocturne: Blue and Gold, Southampton Water

1872

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler exhibited his nocturnes for the first time in 1872. This is one of the works he presented. A reviewer for The Times praised their 'truth and beauty' and their 'silvery or golden colour'. But the critic worried that Whistler was stripping away detail and 'all that is commonly understood as "subject".'

The Art Institute of Chicago, Stickney Fund, 1900.52

X05411

Nocturne

1878

Lithotint on paper

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100904

Early Morning

1878

Lithotint on a prepared half-tint ground, on paper

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.

The Lunder Collection, 2013.342

X100926

Battersea, Dawn

1875

Drypoint on paper

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100903

[INTERMEDIATE TEXT]

Just a splash of paint?

Whistler probably painted his night scene of a London pleasure garden from memory. A year-long conservation treatment removed layers of yellowed varnish to reveal the details and blue-grey tones.

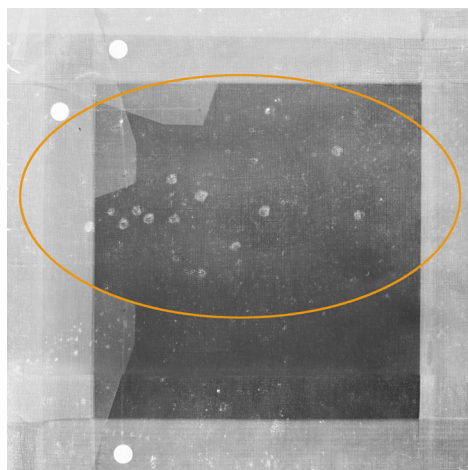
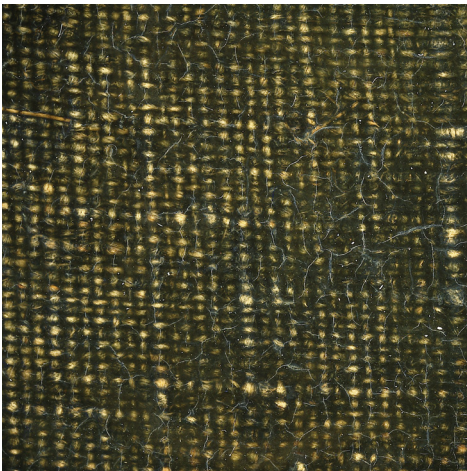


To the left, fairy lights decorate the garden's dancing pagoda. In the centre, visitors mingle by a refreshment kiosk. To the right, they watch a spinning Catherine wheel.



Painters usually covered their canvas with a preparation layer to start with a plain, smooth surface. Here, Whistler created hazy effects straight on the rough canvas. The fabric was soaked and stained with thin paint. He rubbed it back, adding texture from the warm-toned canvas weave to the cool bluish paint.

Whistler was accused of splashing on the fireworks. In fact, he applied each spark precisely, using small brushes with thicker paint. An X-ray reveals that some sparks were larger at first. He changed his mind, painting each one out to make a shower of tinier embers.



Nocturne: Black and Gold - The Fire Wheel

1875

Oil paint on canvas

People gathered in Cremorne Gardens in Chelsea to enjoy concerts, dancing and firework displays. The venue closed in 1877, two years after Whistler captured its giant Catherine wheel.

Whistler's night views of Cremorne Gardens are among his most abstract. This is emphasised in his little-known watercolour copy, made almost 20 years later, displayed nearby.

Tate. Bequeathed by Arthur Studd 1919

N03419

Nocturne: Blue and Gold - Old Battersea Bridge

c.1872–5

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler declined an invitation to exhibit in the first impressionist exhibition in Paris in 1874. In London, he took their treatment of urban subjects and fleeting light effects to audacious extremes. He captured fireworks exploding in the night sky, a sight that had never been depicted by painters before.

The leading art critic John Ruskin described Whistler's fireworks as 'flinging a pot of paint in the public's face'. The artist sued for libel. Although he won the case, Whistler damaged his reputation and was forced to declare bankruptcy.

Tate. Presented by the Art Fund 1905

N01959

Copy of 'Nocturne: Black and Gold - The Fire Wheel'

1893

Watercolour on paper

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100693

[VIRTINE ON THE WALL]

Okada Shuntōsai 1832–1861

Ryugoku Bridge, Book of Views of Edo

1857

Printed book, 31 sheets

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100930

Left to right:

Nocturne in Blue and Silver

1872–8

Oil paint on canvas

Nocturne

1875–8

Oil paint on canvas

These hazy later nocturnes look across the Thames to the Morgan Crucible Company factory in Battersea and its Italian-style tower. Whistler laid the canvases on the floor and soaked them with thin paint. He later described his vision in the 'Ten O'Clock' public lecture: 'when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry ... and the tall chimneys become campanili – and the warehouses are palaces in the night'.

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund

X100654

The White House

X100673

Nocturne: Blue and Gold - St Mark's, Venice

1879–80

Oil paint on canvas

Ar fenthyg gan / Lent by Amgueddfa Cymru -

National Museum Wales

X100655

Nocturne

1875–7

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler chose a vertical format, more common for portraits than landscapes, for this scene of ships on water. The near-abstract setting is still unidentified. His technique plays with flatness and depth. Exposing the textured weave of the canvas helped suggest misty distances. Whistler later described this effect as being like 'breath on the surface of a pane of glass'.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100652

[VITRINE ON THE WALL]

The Valparaiso Notebook

1865–75

After William Whistler moved to London, he was involved in a plan to sell a submarine and torpedoes to Chile and Peru. Both countries were at war with Spain. As William had no passport, his brother took his place and sailed to the Chilean port of Valparaíso. Whistler's travel sketchbook is a mix of maps, jokes and notes of ship movements, possibly intended as military intelligence. The conflict ended before the weapons arrived and Whistler returned home without payment.

Touch the screen to view pages from this notebook.

University of Glasgow Library, Archives & Special Collections,
GB 247 MS Whistler NB9
X100948

[TOUCH SCREEN]

Crepuscle in Pink and Green: Valparaíso

1866

Oil paint on canvas

The Spanish navy bombarded the port of Valparaíso during Whistler's six-month stay in 1866. Yet his seascapes of the harbour do not record military conflict. The ships appear calm and anonymous. Dusk flattens them into silhouettes against a harmonious weave of colours. Their vertical masts counter the horizontal sweep of sea and sky. X-rays reveal that Whistler rearranged the vessels into a more rhythmic arrangement.

Tate. Presented by W. Graham Robertson 1940

N05065

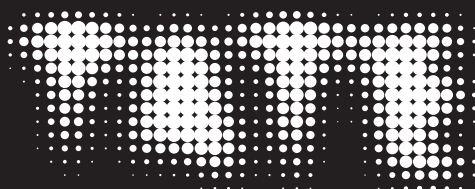
JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER

21 MAY – 27 SEP 2026

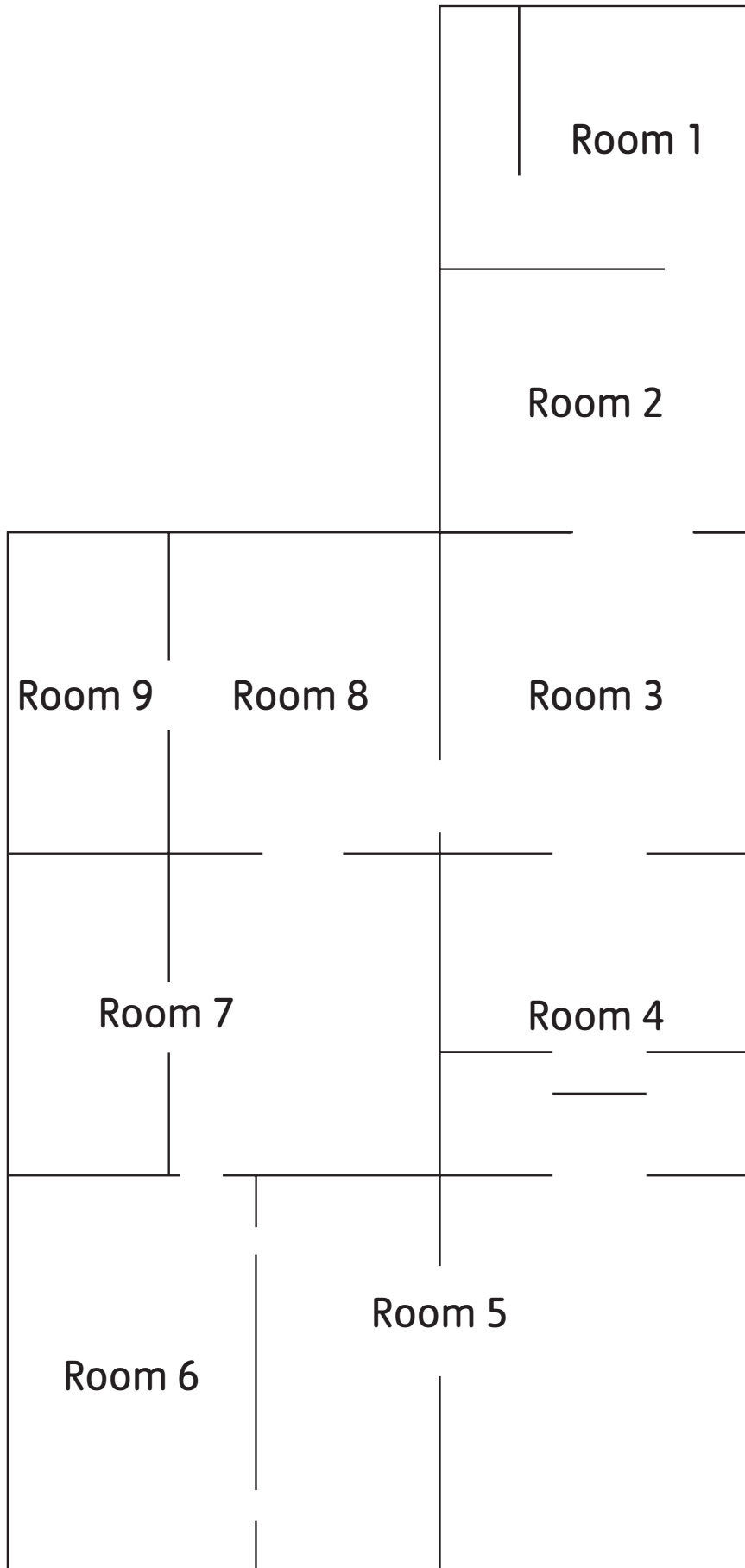
LARGE PRINT GUIDE ROOMS 7-9



Please return after use



EXHIBITION MAP



7. GOING AWAY

CLOCKWISE FROM THE ROOM ENTRANCE

Whistler with the White Lock

1879

Etching on paper

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X103563

[WALL TEXT]

7. GOING AWAY

At 45, Whistler was left bankrupt by legal battles, forcing him to give up his home and studio. He left London for Venice, living on a commission to make 12 etchings of the city. Despite his loss of reputation, Whistler stuck to his artistic beliefs. He stayed for 18 months and returned with 200 experimental etchings and pastels.

For the rest of his life, Whistler regularly roamed Britain and Europe working on small landscapes. He looked for scenes that were not traditionally subjects of art, often ordinary people and places.

Whistler chose his medium in response to each location. Working with speed and skill, he explored new effects from oils, watercolours, pastels, etchings and lithographs. The results transformed the observed world into visual poetry.

Whistler controlled how his small works were displayed. He curated his solo shows in rooms decorated in minimal Japanese style. These spaces can be seen as forerunners to the white-walled galleries of our time.

[EXTENDED CAPTION]

Etchings from the 'First Venice Set'

This etching commission allowed the bankrupt Whistler to leave London for Venice. As ever, he avoided picturesque views. Looking beyond the city's grandeur, he sought out everyday places and lives.

The prints are shown here as Whistler arranged them for London's Fine Art Society. He also chose plain white frames and stark white walls accented with yellow – highly unusual in 19th-century galleries. He even insisted the guard wore yellow.

Clockwise from top left:

The Palaces

1879–80

Etching, drypoint, and open bite on paper

The Venetian Mast

1879–80

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Piazzetta

1879–80

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Traghetto, No. 2

1879–80

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Little Lagoon

1879–80

Etching and drypoint on paper

Little Venice

1879–80

Etching on paper

The Little Mast

1879–80

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Riva

1879–80

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Beggars

1879–80

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Two Doorways

1879–80

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100943, X100941, X100940, X100945, X100939,
X100924, X103569, X100944, X100937, X100942

Bottom left:

Nocturne

1879-80

Etching and drypoint on paper

Whistler used his Venetian studies to find ever more spontaneous ways to conjure abstract beauty from observed experience. Here, he returns to his nocturnes. Sky and lagoon overwhelm the domes and towers on the city skyline. The ships' rigging blends into its rhythmic silhouette.

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100922

Bottom right:

The Doorway

1879–80

Etching, drypoint and roulette on paper

Whistler used Venice's arches and passageways to frame everyday life. An old palace houses a carpenter's workshop. Whistler hints at the piles of wood inside. Chairs hanging in the shadows are a ghostly echo of the iron grid above. A young woman looks into the water, suggested by a smear of ink deliberately left on the printing plate.

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

X100918

[VIRTINE BY THE WALL]

Left to right:

Etchings & Drypoints, Venice, Second Series

1883

London: Fine Art Society

Etchings & Drypoints, Venice, Second Series

1883, facsimile printed 2003

Whistler's exhibition catalogue for his second set of etchings of Venice mockingly quoted bad reviews for the previous set, such as 'slight in execution and unimportant in size'. Critics complained he had lost his skills and was offering rough work. But Whistler had no doubts about the powerful beauty of his prints.

Stephen Calloway

Z91897

Tate Library and Archive

Z92120

[QUOTATION ON THE WALL]

'A beautiful picture should be shown beautifully'.

James McNeill Whistle

Left to right:

Sunset; Red and Gold - Salute

1879–80

Chalk and pastel on paper

Salute - Sundown

1879–80

Chalk and pastel on paper

Pastel and chalk were unusual choices for landscape at the time. They allowed Whistler to work quickly to catch fleeting effects such as these sunsets. His lively marks interweave with the texture of the coarse brown paper. The distinct colour of each chalk encouraged his abstract approach. The church of Santa Maria della Salute is barely recognisable between bright sky and water.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100935, X100936

The Palace; White and Pink

1879–80

Pastel and conté crayon on paper

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Paul Mellon Fund
and Patrons' Permanent Fund, 2012.72.1

X100934

Fondamente dei Mori

1879–80

Chalk and pastel on paper

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.
The Lunder Collection, 2016.215

X100778



Venetian Canal (recto)

c.1879–80

Chalk and pastel on paper

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.

The Lunder Collection, 2024.040

X101839

Campanile Santa Margherita

1879–80

Chalk and pastel on paper

Away from tourist-friendly views, Whistler explored the colour and form of ordinary scenes. He turns the stumpy bell tower of the Campanile Santa Margherita into a weave of pastel marks, shifting from browns to pink. Diagonals and curves summon the figures and buildings beyond. The sky dissolves into scuffs of colour.

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, Gift of anonymous donor, 1928.37

X100781

Note in Pink and Brown

c.1880

Charcoal and pastel on paper

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917 (17.97.5)

X100785

Left to right:

Nocturne: Furnace

1879–80

Etching on paper

Nocturne: Palaces

1879–80

Etching on paper

Whistler explored light and dark in the second set of Venice etchings. In **Nocturne: Palaces** the buildings appear bleached by moonlight and a lamp on the bridge. The surrounding shadows vibrate with marks built up over 11 different stages. Further lines stir the water.

Working with his printer, Thomas Way, Whistler experimented with new methods of inking the plates. Extra ink – ‘plate tone’ – varies the damp darkness of sky and canal.

Each impression is different. Touch the screen to see earlier versions of **Nocturne: Palaces**.

The British Museum. 1887,1010.85. Donated
by Alphonse Wyatt Thibaudeau
X100920

The British Museum. 1887,1010.70. Donated
by Alphonse Wyatt Thibaudeau
X100921

[TOUCH SCREEN]

**CONTINUE CLOCKWISE INTO THE NEXT ROOM,
STARTING FROM THE ROOM ENTRANCE**

[SCREEN]

[VITRINE ON THE WALL]

Sketchbook [Dutch and Algerian views]

1900–1

Graphite and ink on paper in sketchbook

In his late 60s, Whistler spent part of the winter of 1900 in Algiers. He made 50 sketches in the North African port. He was drawn to the old areas of the city romanticised by other tourists and artists as 'exotic'. But his on-the-spot observations recorded ordinary life in the streets and shops. Some of these tiny sketches are signed proudly with Whistler's butterfly.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100949



Lobster Pots - Selsea Bill

1880–1

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100886

Marine: Blue and Grey

c.1884–5

Oil paint on wood

Whistler was drawn to coasts throughout his career. Small seascapes combined the freshness of the on-the-spot 'impression' with abstract harmonies, as their titles suggest. He painted **Marine: Blue and Grey** at St Ives, Cornwall. A stormy blue-grey sea and sky bear down on a wavering strip of sand, with hints of figures busy around a boat. Liquid ribbons of paint roil the ocean.

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.

The Lunder Collection, 2013.296

X100661

Green and White - Dieppe

c.1885

Watercolour and gouache on paper

Yale Center for British Art, Given in memory of John B. Oliver,
Yale BA 1941, by his widow and children

X100787

Top to bottom:

Evening, Little Waterloo Bridge

1896

Lithograph on paper

The Thames

1896

Lithograph on paper

Whistler made several lithographs of Thames views from the Savoy Hotel, where he and his wife Beatrix stayed during their last weeks together before her death.

The Thames is a lithotint brushed directly on a stone, rather than chalked like a lithograph. The stone went back and forth from Whistler's rooms to his printers for test prints and changes. Whistler insisted on having 'nature to refer to'.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100879

The British Museum. 1905,0621.13

X100880

Top to bottom:

By the Balcony

1896

Lithograph on paper

The Siesta

1896

Lithograph on paper

The Whistlers' happy marriage lasted only eight years. Soon after moving to Paris, Beatrix was diagnosed with cancer. She died two years later, aged 38. A series of rare and personal lithographic portraits date from their last days together, in the Savoy Hotel, in a room overlooking the Thames.

The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of the Crown Family in honor of James N. Wood, 2004.659

X05416

The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of the Crown Family in honor of James N. Wood, 2004.658

X100947

Top to bottom:

Confidences in the Garden

1894

Lithograph on paper

La Belle Jardinière (The Beautiful Gardener)

1894

Lithograph on paper

The 'beautiful gardener' in these prints is the artist Beatrix Godwin. After years of friendship, she and Whistler married in 1888. She shared Whistler's nomadic lifestyle but also set up a home in Paris, designing its interior and the garden seen here. She managed their studios and supported his turn to lithography. The couple created a joint signature: a butterfly with a three-lobed leaf.

Victoria and Albert Museum

X100884

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100882

[WALL GRAPHIC]



**Street Scene in Chelsea,
possibly depicting the Tobacconist, JW Nicholas,
located at No. 75, Cheyne Walk**

c.1888, reproduction printed for display 2026

Vinyl reproduction of watercolour on wove paper mounted
on card

Image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art

Top to bottom:

A Shop with a Balcony

1897–9

Oil paint on wood

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X79329

Yellow House, Lannion

1893

Lithograph on paper

Whistler brought colour into his lithographs. Working with a Paris printer, Henry Belfond, he tested the pastel-like quality of his new medium. They printed this image with coloured inks using several stones, altering the stones and inking many times. Artist and printer created only six delicate images before they fell out.

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100906

Top to bottom:

The Laundress: 'La Blanchisseuse de la place Dauphine'

1894

Lithograph on paper

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X103567

The Long Balcony

1894

Lithograph on paper

Whistler would roam, often early in the morning, carrying his chinks in an antique silver box in his pocket. With deft, spare marks he sketched glimpses of everyday life. They range from a plume of steam from a laundress's iron to crowds jostling to see the funeral procession of assassinated French President Sadi Carnot.

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X100887

Drury Lane Rags

1888

Lithograph on paper

In his 60s, Whistler returned to lithographic prints. Instead of scratching or etching a metal plate, lithographs are drawn with a soft, oily crayon onto stone or transfer paper. The technique was mainly used for commercial printing but Whistler saw artistic possibilities. He vowed to make it 'as important as etchings'.

Whistler tended to make lithographs in urban settings, especially London, where he was in easy reach of his printer, Thomas Way.

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X101432

Marsh in Zeeland

c.1900

Watercolour and gouache on paper

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection
(Bequest of James Parmelee), 2015.19.509

X101496

Top to bottom:

A House in Flushing

1899–1900

Watercolour on paper

Private collection, courtesy of Langdale and

Davis Company, NY

X101607

Canal Scene in Holland

c.1899–1900

Watercolour on paper

Whistler returned to the Netherlands during his last years of ill health. This view of the backs of buildings recalls the etchings of Amsterdam he had made a decade earlier. He constructs the houses with short strokes. The colours pool and bleed into each other in the canal reflections, where Whistler applied watercolour paint on wet paper.

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.

The Lunder Collection, 2019.914

X101490

Top:

Bridge, Amsterdam

1889

Etching and drypoint on paper

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100910

Bottom, left to right:

Long House - Dyer's - Amsterdam

c.1889

Etching on paper

Embroidered Curtain

1889

Etching and drypoint on paper

The 'Amsterdam Set' of etchings depicted ramshackle houses and ordinary pastimes. Women can be seen washing, caring for children, and sometimes looking back at the artist.

These two prints trace Whistler's lifelong fascination with textiles and the people who made and traded cloth. Rows of stilts and squared windows evoke patterned fabrics.

Victoria and Albert Museum

X100979

Amsterdam City Archives

X100909

Top:

Square House

1889

Etching and drypoint on paper

Amsterdam City Archives

X100908

Top to bottom:

The Pierrot

1889

Etching and drypoint on paper

Amsterdam City Archives

X101497

The Balcony, Amsterdam

1889

Etching and drypoint on paper

Amsterdam City Archives

X100912

Top to bottom:

Dance House: Nocturne

1889

Etching and drypoint on paper

Amsterdam City Archives

X100911

The Steps, Amsterdam

1889

Etching and drypoint on paper

Whistler considered his 'Amsterdam Set' his highest achievement in etching. He made intricate, geometric compositions of the city's architecture, reflected in the canals. His marks here emphasise the horizontal rhythm of the central steps. From there, he activates a varied network of lines depicting the building and its residents. **The Steps** was based on the watercolour **House by a Canal** (nearby).

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of John Nichols

Estabrook and Dorothy Coogan Estabrook, 1987.41.75

X101495

[QUOTATION ON THE WALL]

'To say to the painter that Nature is to be taken as she is, is to say to the player that he may sit on the piano.'

James McNeill Whistler

House by a Canal, Amsterdam

1889

Charcoal and watercolour on paper

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100692

The Little Nocturne, Amsterdam

1889

Etching on paper

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X101467

Amsterdam Nocturne

c.1882

Watercolour on paper

The British Museum. 1982,0227.4

X100783

Snow

1882

Watercolour on paper

The damp climate and watery landscapes of the Netherlands inspired watercolours. Snow was painted in the warmth of an Amsterdam café, looking through a window. The buildings, painted with washes, dissolve into the air. Whistler leaves areas of paper blank to suggest the snow. He captures details with a fine brush. Spontaneous strokes conjure the foreground figures with legs apart as they try not to slip.

Private collection

X102686

Grey and Silver - North Sea

c.1884

Watercolour on paper

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

X101492

Gold and Brown: Dordrecht

c.1884

Watercolour on paper

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Susan

Dwight Bliss, 1966 (67.55.150 recto)

X101493

Grey and Green: A River

c.1884–6

Oil paint on panel

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.

The Lunder Collection, 2013.309

X101491



Off the Dutch Coast

1883–4

Watercolour on paper

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100782

Amsterdam from the Tolhuis

1863

Etching and drypoint on paper

Whistler first visited the Netherlands when he was 29. His etchings were already winning awards there, a special honour, he said, 'in the birthplace of Rembrandt'. Whistler returned to the country at least ten more times.

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X103564

[VITRINE ON THE WALL]

Sketchbook [British and Dutch views]

1886–8

Graphite, ink, and watercolour on paper, in canvas covered sketchbook

In the last two decades of his life, Whistler travelled widely. His trips took him to Algeria, Belgium, Corsica, France and the Netherlands. He worked in small, portable formats. He was unusual in valuing these pictures as highly as larger works.

Whistler always carried a tiny pocket sketchbook to make spontaneous observations. He treated some small, abbreviated sketches as complete works of art, signing them with a butterfly.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100952

[TOUCH SCREEN]

[VITRINE ON THE WALL]

Whistler's paintbox

1800s

Wood

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Z91918

8. BATTLES FOR BEAUTY

CLOCKWISE FROM THE WALL TEXT

[WALL TEXT]

8. BATTLES FOR BEAUTY

As Whistler redefined art and design, he also reshaped the artist's public role. He crafted his reputation as one of the best-known personalities of his time.

Whistler returned from Venice determined to defend his ideas of 'art for art's sake'. He hired a theatre to deliver a provocative lecture, 'Mr Whistler's Ten O'Clock', to a paying public.

He understood that satire, even scandal, could be the best publicity. He engaged in sharp exchanges with Oscar Wilde and others. He also self-published pamphlets and books, such as **The Gentle Art of Making Enemies**. They were signed with his butterfly emblem, now with a sting in its tail.

Whistler courted controversy until the end of his career. Yet he attracted loyal followers and students across the world. His work and ideas influenced painting, photography and design well beyond his lifetime.

[QUOTATION ON THE WALL]

'I am not arguing with you – I am telling you.'

James McNeill Whistler

[VITRINE 1 BY THE WALL]

Whistler versus Ruskin: Art and Art Critics (Second Edition)

1878

Whistler versus Ruskin: Art and Art Critics

1878, reproduction printed for display 2026

This is the first booklet Whistler published to defend his ideas. It reflects on his lawsuit against critic John Ruskin. Although Ruskin was found guilty of libel, the legal costs contributed to Whistler's bankruptcy. He called it an opening 'skirmish' in a wider war between artists and critics. 'One might admit criticism,' he wrote, only 'from a man who had passed his whole life in the science which he attacks'.

Stephen Calloway, Z91896

Tate, Z92382

“Notes” - “Harmonies” - “Nocturnes”

1884

London: Dowdeswell Galleries

“Notes” - “Harmonies” - “Nocturnes”

1884, reproduction printed for display 2026

Whistler treated his exhibitions, catalogues and booklets as works of art. His ‘little brown pamphlets’, as he called them, transformed plain materials through elegant design and his ‘mark’, the butterfly with a sting.

“Notes” – “Harmonies” – “Nocturnes” accompanied an exhibition at the Dowdeswell Galleries, which he called an ‘Arrangement in Flesh Colour and Grey’.

Stephen Calloway

Z91902

Tate Britain

Z92383

Mr Whistler's 'Ten O'Clock'

1888

London: Chatto and Windus, First edition

Mr Whistler's 'Ten O'Clock'

1888, reproduction printed for display 2026

On the evening of 20 February 1885, a fashionable London audience gathered at the Prince's Hall in Piccadilly for 'Mr Whistler's Ten O'Clock' public lecture. His witty defence of 'art for art's sake' was a sensation. Whistler argued that art was not about stories, or morals, or even nature. 'Nature is very rarely right,' he said; only the artist 'brings forth from chaos, glorious harmony'. The lecture was later published and became widely influential.

Stephen Calloway

Z91901

Tate

Z92384

[VITRINE 2 BY THE WALL]

Eden versus Whistler: The Baronet and the Butterfly, a Valentine with a Verdict

1899

Paris: Louis-Henry May

Eden versus Whistler: The Baronet and the Butterfly, a Valentine with a Verdict

1899, reproduction printed for display 2026

Whistler fought for artists' control over their work. This book celebrates his court victory over the aristocrat William Eden. Whistler refused to deliver a portrait of Eden's wife, Sybil, instead destroying it and returning the fee. The case established the artist's right to control when an artwork is made public.

Stephen Calloway

Z91898

Tate

Z92386

The Gentle Art of Making Enemies

1890

London: William Heinemann

The Gentle Art of Making Enemies

1890, reproduction printed for display 2026

Whistler used print media to promote his ideas and defend his reputation. **The Gentle Art of Making Enemies** challenged an unauthorised publication of his letters to newspapers. They included a waspish war of words with Oscar Wilde, whom Whistler accused of stealing his philosophy of 'art for art's sake'. The book also reprinted the Ten O'Clock lecture and was translated into many languages.

Stephen Calloway

Z91899

Tate

Z92385

[FILM/PROJECTOR]

Performance of 'Mr Whistler's Ten O'Clock' (excerpt)

2026

Duration: 4 mins, 14 secs

James McNeill Whistler: Anton Lesser

Film by Reece Straw

On 20 February 1885, Whistler performed his 'Ten O'Clock' public lecture to a packed auditorium at Prince's Hall in Piccadilly. He rejected any moral or storytelling expectations for art. 'Nature is very rarely right,' he said, arguing that only the artist 'brings forth from chaos, glorious harmony'. The fashionable audience included the artist Louise Jopling, poet Algernon Swinburne and playwright Oscar Wilde. The lecture became widely influential and was translated into French by the poet Stéphane Mallarmé.

[TRANSCRIPT]

**Mr Whistler's Ten O'Clock, Prince's Hall, Piccadilly,
20 February 1885.**

Ladies and Gentlemen! –

.....

Nature contains the elements of color and form of all pictures
– as the keyboard contains the notes of all music –

but the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with
science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful – as
the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he
brings forth from chaos, glorious harmony. –

To say to the painter, that nature is to be taken, as she is,
is to say to the player, that he may sit on the piano! –

That Nature is always right, is an assertion, artistically,
as untrue, as it is one whose truth is universally taken for
granted – Nature is very rarely right, to such an extent even,
that it might almost be said that Nature is usually wrong –
that is to say – the condition of things that shall bring about
the perfection of harmony worthy a picture, is rare, and not
common at all –

This would seem, to even the most intelligent, a doctrine
almost blasphemous – So incorporated with our education

has the supposed aphorism become, that its belief is held to be part of our moral being – and the words themselves have, in our ear, the ring of religion! – Still, seldom does nature succeed in producing a picture – –

The sun blares – and the wind blows from the East – the sky is bereft of cloud – and without, all is made of iron – The windows of the Crystal Palace are seen from all points of London – the holiday maker rejoices in the glorious day – and the painter turns aside to shut his eyes –

How little this is understood, and how dutifully the casual in Nature, is accepted as sublime, may be gathered from the unlimited admiration, daily produced, by a very foolish sunset –

The dignity of the snowcapped mountain is lost in distinctness – but the joy of the tourist is to recognise the traveller on the top – The desire to see, for the sake of seeing, is, with the mass, alone the one to be gratified – hence the delight in detail – and when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil – and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky – and the tall chimneys become campanile – and the warehouses are palaces in the night – and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and faireyland is before us – then the wayfarer hastens home – the working man and the cultured one – the

wise man and the one of pleasure – cease to understand, as they have ceased to see – and Nature, who for once, has sung in tune, sings her exquisite song to the Artist alone, her son and her master – her son in that he loves her, her master in that he knows her –

9. ARRANGEMENTS IN BLACK

CLOCKWISE FROM THE ROOM ENTRANCE

Beatrix Whistler

1893

Lithograph on paper

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X101433

Beatrix Whistler 1857–1896

Top to bottom:

Girl Reading (verso)

1880–96

Oil paint on wood

Woman in an Armchair Reading a Book (Rosalind Birnie Philip)

1880–96

Oil paint on composite board

The Whistlers established their homes and studios in London and Paris. Beatrix managed their business with her sisters, Ethel and Rosalind Birnie Philip.

The bohemian household welcomed amateur and professional models, some of whom became friends. They appear in both James and Beatrix Whistler's work, in formal poses and at rest. Beatrix often painted women reading. Her subtle colour harmonies enhance the intimate atmosphere.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow
X101469, X101470

[WALL TEXT]

9. ARRANGEMENTS IN BLACK

Whistler returned to society portraiture during the last 20 years of his life. The genre was fiercely competitive, testing an artist's skill, reputation and commercial ambition.

For Whistler, each portrait was an aesthetic experiment. He summoned both wealthy patrons and paid models for increasingly long sittings. He spent years reworking some paintings, even after they had been signed, sold and exhibited. Yet he pursued an effect that looked effortless.

Whistler believed that beauty was intensified by brevity. He gave the title **Arrangements in Black** to a series of full-length figures emerging from the shadows. They were technical triumphs and spirited reflections on historic art.

By the end of the century, Whistler's enigmatic, tonal paintings were in demand. They influenced generations of younger artists.

The Chelsea Girl

1884

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler treats this young street vendor with the same confidence and scale as the aristocrats and celebrities who commissioned his portraits. She wears her battered hat with the jauntiness of high fashion.

Paid sitters allowed Whistler to experiment with ever less finish. Here, rubbed contours float the figure against the ground. Slashes of paint splay the scarf, while dry scuffs rumple the apron. Most striking are the sketched hands where Whistler captures the gesture without anatomy.

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, 2014.41

X102858

Arrangement in Black (The Lady in the Yellow Buskin)

1882–5

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler relaunched his career with this portrait of the theatre producer, writer and campaigner Lady Archibald Campbell. One glove on, one off, she turns into the shadows with a backward glance. Rubbed edges dissolve the figure into darkness.

Although Campbell stormed out of Whistler's studio during a demanding sitting, they remained friends. Whistler said they created the picture together 'for the pleasure'. He predicted that its 'jaunty sauciness' would offend Campbell's family, who rejected the work.

Philadelphia Museum of Art:

Purchased with the WP Wilstach Fund, W1895-1-11

X102658



Portrait of a Child

c.1885–90

Oil paint on canvas

An anonymous child looks at the viewer with a slightly guarded gaze. The cropped composition gives her an air of authority beyond her years. Whistler wished to convey a sense of a person's inner world as well as their outer appearance, 'something more than the face the model wears for that one day'.

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.

The Lunder Collection, 2019.816

X100663

[QUOTATION ON THE WALL]

'Completeness is a reason for ceasing to exist.'

James McNeill Whistler

Sketch of Miss Ethel Philip

1897–1900

Oil paint on canvas

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100669

Red and Black: The Fan (Edith Birnie Philip)

1891–6

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler's Spanish-inspired portrait of Edith Birnie Philip, his sister-in-law, developed his lifelong conversation with Velázquez. His late portraits sacrificed 'finish' for other aesthetic aims. Surfaces are spare, edges dissolve.

Though they were highly sought-after, Whistler continued to rework paintings even after they had been paid for and exhibited. **Red and Black: The Fan** had a ready buyer but remained in Whistler's studio until his death.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100665

The Jade Necklace

1896–1900

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler's portraits of his sisters-in-law, Ethel and Rosalind Birnie Philip underline their personal and artistic importance in his life. As well as posing for his paintings, they helped to manage his household. Rosalind was the executor of Whistler's estate after his death. Her legacy permeates this exhibition through over 50 objects from his estate, which she left to the University of Glasgow.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X101468

Gold and Brown: Self-Portrait

c.1896–8

Oil paint on canvas

Whistler's late self-portraits are perhaps the most elusive among his final works. **Gold and Brown** refers to Rembrandt with its flickering brushwork and mischievous expression. The picture was heavily rubbed down and described as a 'sketch' by contemporaries, yet Whistler still exhibited it. He then sold it to the American millionaire George W Vanderbilt. The red dab on Whistler's lapel indicates the ribbon of the Légion d'Honneur, France's highest decoration. According to Rosalind Birnie Philip, this was the image he 'wanted to be remembered by'.

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Gift of Edith Stuyvesant Gerry, 1959.3.2
X100675



Brown and Gold: Self-Portrait

c.1895–1900

Oil paint on canvas

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X06549

Violet and Rose: Carmen qui rit

1898–9

Oil paint on canvas

This is one of several portraits that Whistler made of his longtime friend, the Italian artist, art dealer and model Carmen Rossi. Together, they founded the Académie Carmen in Paris in 1898, where most of the students were women. Whistler taught alongside international artists, including Inez Eleanor Bate and Alphonse Mucha. Gwen John recalled him painting this portrait to 'hang in the studio for the students to learn from'.

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

X100671

Top to bottom:

The Little Nude Model, Reading (Rose Pettigrew)

1889–90

Lithograph on paper

The Joan M Winchell Collection

X103568

Nude Model Reclining (Carmen Rossi)

1893

Lithograph on paper

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine. The Lunder Collection, 2013.392

X101494

CREDITS

EXHIBITION CREDITS

TATE BRITAIN CURATORIAL TEAM

Carol Jacobi, Curator, British Art 1850–1915, with Isobel Muir and James Finch, Assistant Curators, 19th Century British Art, and Chloe Jones, Exhibitions Assistant

EXHIBITION REGISTRAR

Kiko Noda

COLLECTION & DISPLAYS REGISTRAR

Giulia Caverni

INTERPRETATION

Hannah McGivern, Minnie Scott, Sandra Sykorova, Fernanda Velasco

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Iombaert studio, Bethan Bowers, Lina Manrique

PAPER & PHOTOGRAPH CONSERVATION

Tanya Alfille, Arantza Dobbels Busto, Ibby Doherty, Elsa Money, Simon Philpott, Sophie Sarkodie

PAINTING, FRAMES & WORKSHOP CONSERVATION

Amy Griffin, Alexandra Lawson, Gabriella Macaro,
Jane McCree, Kevin Miles, Adrian Moore, Liza Nathan,
Rachel Scott

SCULPTURE CONSERVATION

Miyuki Kajiwara, Roger Murray, Gates Sofer

CONSERVATION SCIENCE & PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION

Sarah Bashir, Judith Lee, Joyce Townsend

RESEARCH

Jess Sully

PHOTOGRAPHY & IMAGING

Sam Day, Tori Miller

LIBRARY & ARCHIVE

Katie Blackford, Assunta Ferrera, Victoria Jenkins

DIGITAL

Angus Bamford, Sofia Contino, Susan Doyon,
Freya Hellier, Scott Morris

AV

Michael Fisher, Gareth Fox

EXHIBITION INSTALLATION

Kwai Lau, Bella Probyn, Andy Shiel, Liam Tebbs

ART HANDLING

Elliott Chambers, Alex Goodall, Patricia Gregory,
Gabriel Harris, Patrick Higgs, Sarah Kingham, Marine One,
Sarah Shalan, Rose Stuart-Smith, Isla Wickham

BUILD

MCD Heritage Ltd

GRAPHICS PRINTING & INSTALLATION

Albemarle Graphics

LIGHTING

Dalkia UK

WHISTLER'S FINISH RESEARCH & CONSERVATION PROJECT

Amy Griffin, Carol Jacobi, Alexandra Lawson, Judith Lee,
Gabriella Macaro, Jane McCree, Kevin Miles, Adrian Moore,
Rachel Scott, Jess Sully, Joyce Townsend

