

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The Mother of All Whistler Seasons

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March 29, 2014

By Kelly Crow



Few artists in the Gilded Age outshone James McNeill Whistler, a dapper man from Massachusetts who held feisty sway over London's cafe society. Besides sparring with art critics and writers such as Oscar Wilde, Whistler is known for painting a much-parodied 1871 profile portrait of his dour mother in a black dress and lace cap.

This spring, several museums, including Washington's Sackler Gallery, are mounting shows that look at Whistler's softer, even somber, side. A new installation opening March 29 at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams also explores Whistler's relevance to contemporary artists. Together, these shows amount to the largest re-examination of Whistler's work in decades.

The son of a railroad engineer in Lowell, Mass., Whistler was born in 1834. By age 21, he had left his home country for good to study art in Paris. Later, in London, he applied a realistic painting style popular at the time to win an early reputation for etching and painting the city's shipping barges and wharves. Around 90 pieces from this formative period are shown in "An American in London: Whistler and the Thames," on view through April 13 at the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Mass., a short drive from Lowell.

Whistler's crisp attention to detail appealed to London's newly wealthy collectors. Many of them had earned their fortunes in shipping, said Lee Glazer, a curator of American art at the Sackler, where "An American in London" will travel next, opening on May 3.

The problem, Ms. Glazer said, was that Whistler also remained in touch with his artist peers in Paris—including Impressionists such as Claude Monet—and over time, Whistler tried Impressionist-like experiments, shifting toward a blurrier and moody style.

Like Monet, Whistler was also poring over Japan's sumptuous woodblock prints and began retooling his own compositions to appear haunting and beautiful rather than gritty. He painted London's Battersea Bridge at twilight less like a bridge and more like a color study in blue.

The city's art elite balked. "Whistler was trying to create his own urban poetry," Ms. Glazer said, but his more abstract style met with less success. "He was pushing conventions of what art could be, but everyone laughed at it at the time," she added. These later works get more attention in the Sackler stop of "An American in London," in part because the Sackler plans to shuttle 50 Whistlers from its neighboring Freer Gallery, which isn't allowed to lend to any other institutions.

The artist didn't take criticism lightly. In 1877, he sued the art critic John Ruskin for libel—and won—after the critic wrote that Whistler had created his Battersea masterpiece, "Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket," merely by "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."

Around the same time, Whistler pulled a stunt that soured his rapport with his best collector in London. In 1876-77, the shipping tycoon Frederick Leyland enlisted the artist to touch up the colors on some 16th-century Renaissance painted panels he had bought to line the walls of his newly redecorated dining room. While Leyland was traveling, Whistler got carried away. He wound up slathering blue-green paint over all the antique panels and covering the entire room in a frenzy of floral motifs and gilded peacocks.



If the artist expected thanks, he didn't get it; the dining room's decorator had a mental collapse after he found out, and Leyland was so livid he only paid Whistler part of his fee. Later, the collector resold the entire Peacock Room to the industrialist Charles Lang Freer. The room is now a permanent fixture of his namesake museum next to the Sackler.

Whistler's Peacock Room—and the moneyed era that propelled and temporarily poisoned his career—fascinated contemporary artist Darren Waterston so much that he has spent the past eight months building his own disheveled, apocalyptic version of the same space within Mass MoCA.

Mr. Waterston, based in New York, said he tried to recreate the decadence of Whistler's original, but the shelves in his update are tilted as though they were collapsing into ruin. Pottery shards lie on the floor, and the peacocks on his walls have been painted to look as if they're disemboweling each other. "Whistler was a grandiose man, but his narrative is so current," Mr. Waterston said. "We're living in our own Gilded Age, surrounded by people obsessively amassing art at a price that excludes the masses. All this indulgence is beautiful, but it's also grotesque."

Mr. Waterston's installation, "Filthy Lucre," will stay on view at Mass MoCA through Feb. 1, 2015. The following summer, it will travel to the Sackler as well, allowing for a surreal side-by-side viewing of Peacock Rooms , old and new.