

Whistler's Mother

Artwork labels

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The making of an icon

James McNeill Whistler's *Portrait of the artist's mother*, 1871, is among a select group of artworks that have transcended the times in which they were created to become universally known. Iconic works of art have an undeniable charisma that sees them admired, copied and even parodied. They are touchstones of what art means to many, and often connect the viewer to basic human qualities: a distillation of meaning that is, as Peter Schjeldahl recently noted of *Portrait of the artist's mother*, 'instantly recognized and forever inexhaustible'.

One unfortunate side effect of such popularity is that iconic art can become so familiar that the works almost 'disappear'. The purpose of this exhibition is to encourage the viewer to see Whistler's famed work afresh. The focus is on one painting only, with text and other related images and objects (often from the NGV Collection) used to contextualise *Portrait of the artist's mother* and highlight what is so intriguing and ultimately mysterious about the painting. The aim is that, by showing its importance to Whistler's life and career and providing a close analysis of elements of the work from stylistic and conservation points of view, a new impression of this extraordinarily loved painting will be revealed.

Who was Whistler?

James Abbott McNeill Whistler was born in Massachusetts in 1834 and moved with his family to St Petersburg, Russia, in 1843. After an inglorious period in the United States Military Academy, Whistler moved to Paris to train as a painter in 1855. Four years later he relocated to London where his first major oil painting, *At the piano*, 1858, was accepted by the Royal Academy. However, it was only with the completion of his best known painting, *Portrait of the artist's mother*, in 1871 that Whistler successfully combined realist and formalist elements in a manner that was referred to as Aestheticism.

Whistler's style was often criticised and, in 1878, he successfully sued the critic John Ruskin for accusing him of 'flinging a pot of paint in the public's face'. After massively exceeding his budget on the interior design of the so-called Peacock Room, Whistler lost the support of his patron Frederick Leyland and was declared bankrupt in 1879. Whistler was a passionate advocate of 'art for art's sake', and in 1896 the arts scene eventually recognised his importance when he was elected first President of the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Engravers in London. Whistler died in 1903.

Whistler the butterfly

'A charmer and a dandy, with a passion for work.'

WALTER SICKERT on JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER

Whistler was a dedicated, hard-working and sensitive artist, as well as a flamboyant and caustic personality. These twin aspects of his identity were acknowledged in his famous butterfly monogram to which, for his more barbed letters, Whistler added a scorpion-like tail. He understood the culture of performance and courted attention with his long mane of curly dark hair with a single white lock, monocle in one eye, beautifully tailored long frockcoat, French top hat and a distinctive slender cane he used to gesture with.

Given his extroverted public persona, Whistler's choice to paint his mother – a woman whose religious sensibilities and personal austerity seemed so at odds with his lifestyle – in an uncritical fashion is interesting. However, the artist's theatrical outward appearance hid another, if not more important, aspect of his personality: Whistler's dedication to his art. It is in this respect that mother and son were perhaps closer in temperament than might at first appear. Anna Whistler's belief in hard work and her stoic strength of character in the face of life's problems were certainly matched by her son's determined approach to painting.

Exhibiting Portrait of the artist's mother

At time when storytelling dominated British art, the uncompromising aestheticism of Portrait of the artist mother was confronting. Arrangement in grey and black no. 1 (as it was first titled) was rather grudgingly accepted into the Royal Academy exhibition in 1872 in London where a reviewer from The Times wrote, 'An artist who could deal with large masses so grandly might have shown a little less severity, and thrown in a few details of interest without offence'.

In 1872 the work travelled to the Durand-Ruel Gallery in Paris, and was subsequently included in Whistler's first one-person exhibition in Pall Mall, London. In 1881 the painting was shown in Philadelphia, and the following year in New York. It was exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1883, and was also displayed in Dublin, Amsterdam, Glasgow and Munich. Wherever the painting went it polarised opinions: while some critics thought it was painted as if in a fog, others appreciated its subtlety of tones.

When Whistler sold Portrait of the artist's mother to the Musée du Luxembourg, Paris, in 1891 it became the first painting by an American artist to enter a French gallery's collection.

An American icon

In 1933 the Louvre, Paris – then-owner of Portrait of the artist's mother – loaned Whistler's signature work to the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York. It proved to be an enormous drawcard and, as a result, subsequently went on a record-breaking tour around the United States, travelling in it's own dedicated train and making headlines wherever it was shown. At this time, when the nation was in the grips of the economic horrors of the Great Depression, Whistler's painting of a 'Puritan' mother stoically bearing the trials of her life touched a profound emotional chord with many viewers.

President of the United States Franklin D. Roosevelt visited Whistler's painting with his own mother when it was shown at MOMA. Soon after he suggested that the painting be used as a Mother's Day stamp, and even sketched how it should appear. Roosevelt's enthusiasm was critical in taking the painting from the ranks of popular artwork to iconic status. Controversially, when the stamp was produced its designer added a cheery pot of flowers to the composition so that the mother was not gazing into empty space, as in the original. The addition was the start of many often humorous parodies of the portrait in which the mother, or the object of her gaze, has been altered.

Whistler the etcher

Whistler learnt etching in 1854 while employed at the Coast Survey in Washington, DC. Four years later he produced his so-called 'French set' of etchings, based on his travels through France and the Rhineland. After his move to London in 1859, Whistler documented contemporary life on the River Thames in etchings he published in 1871. This 'Thames set' helped lead the way for a revival of etching and shows the influence of Japanese art on Whistler's practice; an interest that becomes more evident in the next room, where Japanese prints are displayed alongside his etchings.

On commission from the Fine Arts Society, Whistler left London for Venice in 1879 to produce etchings and pastels. His 'Venice set' was exhibited on his return to London in 1880. Although Whistler continued to etch, he did not publish further sets. Many of his prints were purchased by the NGV in the artist's lifetime and had an influential impact on Australian printmakers, including Victor Cobb, John Shirlow and, in particular, Adelaide artist Mortimer Menpes who was closely associated with Whistler from 1883 to 1887 and helped him print his Venice etchings.

Whistler's prints are shown in the black frames he favoured and are hung in a manner he preferred.

Whistler and Australia

Whistler's innovative creative approach influenced many artists, including those working in Australia. His 'Impressionistic' style (as it was called at the time) appealed to those Australians who visited him or viewed his exhibitions on their international travels. J. S. MacDonald briefly attended the short-lived Académie Carmen in Paris, founded by Whistler and his former model Carmen Rossi in 1898, and wrote of his experience, 'George [Coates] and I were the first pupils at James McNeill Whistler's School. We went there three weeks before he turned up! He had long hair, with a white lock tied with ribbon'.

In 1888 John Longstaff was in Paris on a travelling scholarship and his work changed stylistically under the influence of Whistler. It is almost certain that he saw Portrait of the artist's mother, which had been acquired with great fanfare by the Musée du Luxembourg in 1891. That same year Longstaff painted The young mother, seemingly in direct homage to Whistler's work.

What the painting tells us: a conservation perspective

As a result of his limited formal training, by the time Whistler painted *Portrait of the artist's mother* his studio methods had become increasingly unconventional and innovative. To begin the painting, Whistler took a prepared canvas containing an incomplete composition and reversed it so he could paint on the raw linen back whose rough woven texture and absorbent influence on his paint would contribute to the work's final harmonious appearance.

Whistler pre-mixed colours on a special tabletop palette with shallow pans attached to enable colour and tonal variations. In the middle he could mix what was referred to as his 'sauce', a blend of heavily diluted oil paint that enabled fluid, semitransparent washes to be applied in layers to build up soft, harmonious transitions. These darkened viscous slurries were reminiscent of the etching inks Whistler used with such confidence as a printmaker.

Numerous revisions made to *Portrait of the artist's mother* during its 'arrangement' are visible under close examination: the right-hand side of the central print was shifted left from its original position, and the figure's knees and head were lowered. Importantly, in his pursuit of harmony Whistler designed a frame for the work incorporating delicate reeding that reciprocates the texture of the unprimed canvas.

Whistler's studio

'The sky is grey, and the water is grey and therefore, the canvas must be grey.'

JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER

Portrait of the artist's mother was painted in Whistler's studio at 2 Lindsey Row, London, a small house located in the then-unfashionable area of Chelsea, opposite the Battersea Bridge and the River Thames. In the second-floor room, Whistler created a purposefully austere studio at odds with highly decorative interior design fashions of the times. The décor was essentially as it appears in the painting, with Chinese matting, grey walls and Japanese-style wainscoting; a few of Whistler's prints, framed in his favoured black frames, hang on the walls and a piece of Japanese-inspired fabric with designs representing water and possibly petals hangs to the left.

The light in Whistler's studio was dim, with curtains and shades used to deflect any direct sunlight from a window. Reduced lighting was part of Whistler's desire to avoid shadows which would sharply delineate his subject. His aesthetic concern was to envelop figures in soft light, and it is the realisation of this soft and suffused illumination that he achieved fully for the first time in this painting.

Art for art's sake: Whistler and Aestheticism

With sensibilities shaped over a thousand years of relative isolation, Japanese decorative arts, paintings, textiles and woodblock prints began reaching Europe in substantial quantities in the 1860s, inspiring innovative approaches to colour and graphic design, including the use of asymmetry, stylised natural forms, sparse use of ornament and the dramatically truncated framing of images. These innovations, referred to as Japonism, were embraced by progressive European artists such as Whistler.

The Aesthetic Movement which dominated English design from the late 1860s to the late 1880s, of which Whistler was a leading exponent, was profoundly influenced by Japonism. Aestheticism rejected the idea that art should convey a moral or social message; instead, artists of the movement argued for 'art for art's sake'. Japanese art provided perfect inspiration for such an approach. For Europeans its alluring imagery was devoid of the historical symbolic content inherent in Western art; Japanese art could be appreciated simply for its visual beauty.

Whistler collected both Japanese art and European works inspired by Japan. The curtain textile and ebonised chair in *Portrait of the artist's mother* are European productions influenced by Japanese aesthetics, while the painting's composition reflects Whistler's interest in Japanese art and design.

Whistler and Japanese prints

In the late 1850s Whistler's Thames etchings showed evidence of his growing interest in Japanese eighteenth-century woodblock prints, and by the early 1860s he had acquired his own collection of prints from a favoured shop in Paris. Whistler produced four paintings between 1863 and 1864 that directly reference Japanese prints. In *Caprice in purple and gold: the golden screen* (seen here in reproduction) Whistler's model and mistress, Joanna Hiffernan, dressed in elaborate silk kimono, views Japanese prints in front of a golden screen depicting episodes from the eleventh-century novel *Tales of Genji*, which the artist owned. One of these prints, Hiroshige's *Sakurajima, Osuma Province*, was also acquired by the NGV in 1910 and is on display here.

As Whistler's interests became more developed he moved from 'costume pictures', in which he took an eclectic approach to borrowing Japanese (and other Asian) motifs, to paintings which integrated Japanese pictorial approaches more comprehensively. By the time Whistler came to paint *Portrait of the artist's mother* he had synthesised the reduced blocks of colour of Japanese woodblock prints; the 'flatness' of their painted surface; and the truncated framing of objects within the image.

Whistler's mother and modern art

Whistler did not intend *Portrait of the artist's mother* to be seen primarily as a portrait. As his original title for the work, *Arrangement in grey and black no. 1*, suggests, it was painted as an exploration of form and colour and named in reference to the abstract qualities of music. Although most viewers have focused on the biographical aspect of the painting, it can also be considered in more formal terms.

Whistler's pronounced geometrical composition is divided into blocks of colour: the grey of the background, the strong silhouette of his mother's black dress and the brown tones of the floor matting. In 1943 Alfred Barr, director of the then newly established Museum of Modern Art in New York, described the painting as a precursor of modern abstract art. He wrote that, without the image of the mother, this angular, large-scale painting is 'a composition of rectangles ... not very different from the abstract *Composition in white, black, and red* [1936] painted by [Piet] Mondrian'.

Portrait of the artist's mother marked a pivotal moment in Whistler's career, as he increasingly pushed the boundaries of what was possible in art through an emphasis on the overall harmony of his picture-making.

Whistler's mother

Anna Matilda McNeill was born in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1804 and was a literate and much-travelled woman. In 1831 she married Major Whistler, and until his death from cholera in 1849 they enjoyed an affluent lifestyle in Russia with their children.

Lack of finances saw Anna move frequently, and for nine years from 1863 she lived on and off with her son James in London. This was clearly a testing time for Whistler, who wrote to a friend about preparing for his mother's arrival, 'Well! ... I had a week or so to empty my house and purify it from cellar to attic!' A devout Episcopalian, Anna tried (but largely failed) to exert a virtuous power over her son's life, encouraging him to reform his approach to money and women. Despite this, she greatly admired Whistler's talents and helped manage his career and domestic affairs.

Although it was a complex relationship, Whistler was devoted to his mother and would sign his letters 'Your truant son ... your Prodigal'; and 'Your fond though faulty son, J. A. McN. Whistler'. Anna would sign hers 'Your afflicted but ever affectionate widowed mother'. The ambiguity of Whistler's feelings is reflected in the psychological intensity of *Portrait of the artist's mother*, which shows her authority and fragility in equal measure.

Painting Whistler's mother

The main source of information about how Portrait of the artist's mother was painted is provided by the sitter herself. In November 1871 Anna wrote a letter to her sister in which she described how a model had fallen ill and her son came to her saying, 'Mother, I want you to stand for me! It is what I have long intended and desired to do, to take your Portrait'. Whistler began preparatory studies – seen in an etching illustrated to the right – with his sixty-seven-year-old mother standing, but as she been ill for some time the pose proved too tiring. Instead, Whistler painted his mother in side profile, seated in one of his armchairs and with her feet resting on a stool. The painting was made in three months, between August and October; relatively quickly for an artist renowned for his lengthy sittings. During this time Whistler shifted elements of the composition and softened outlines. Anna wrote, 'He had no nervous fears in painting his Mother's portrait for it was to please himself ... I observed him trying again, and oh my grateful rejoicing in spirits as suddenly my dear Son would exclaim "Oh Mother it is mastered, it is beautiful!"'

Portrait of the artist's mother: a turning point

When Whistler painted Portrait of the artist's mother at the age of thirty-seven, it had been a decade since his debut as an artist and he found himself in a difficult phase of his career. The painting came at a moment of artistic doubts, and its resolution marked a breakthrough in Whistler's creative life.

One of the striking aspects of the work is its reduced and subtly balanced colour palette: grey and black predominate giving the painting a grave mood in keeping with his mother's sombre demeanour.

Since her husband's death in 1849 Anna had worn black mourning dress, her austere appearance slightly tempered by a cotton cap with distinctive lappets, or decorative flaps, framing her face.

With this fully resolved tonal work Whistler overcame his creative doubts. As he wrote to his mother in 1876: 'The reward ... I now feel dawning upon me ... never have I done such painting as I am now executing'. He began a remarkable seventy paintings during the first half of the 1870s, all of them with the subtle tonal values that mark his mature work. It was Portrait of the artist's mother, however, that was to be his greatest lasting success.

Influences

‘Nature contains the elements, in colour 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.’

JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER

For such a seemingly simple painting, *Portrait of the artist's mother* appears to have been informed by a complex range of influences. It is known that Whistler was eclectic in his approach and drew on a wide range of ideas and inspirations.

Anna Whistler's simple pose is reminiscent of American folk portraits, such as silhouettes which showed the subject in profile. Photography too may have been an influence. The formality of Anna's pose – held so quietly and intently – is reminiscent of early photographic portraits, and the posing in Whistler's painting corresponds with a portrait of Anna's friend, Anne Rigby, by Scottish photographers D. O. Hill and Robert Adamson.

Japanese prints were another influence on *Portrait of the artist's mother*; indeed, the ‘flat’ perspectival space evident in both photographs and prints were to have an important transformative effect on how artists, including Whistler, created their own works.

Arrangement in grey and black no. 1: a 'musical' series of paintings

Portrait of the artist's mother was originally titled *Arrangement in grey and black no. 1* in a conscious attempt by Whistler to downplay its narrative content. Although the work held personal significance for him, the artist was unsentimental about how the public would relate to it. In 1878 he wrote: 'Take the picture of my mother, exhibited at the Royal Academy as an "Arrangement in Grey and Black". Now that is what it is. To me it is interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public to care about the identity of the portrait?'

Whistler continued the theme of 'arrangements' in 1872 with a second work in the series. This later portrait, also painted in his studio, is a compassionate (if less interesting) study of the world-weary Scottish philosopher and historian Thomas Carlyle. In this composition Whistler again posed his sitter in a chair, but this time in a slightly more relaxed fashion than in *Portrait of the artist's mother*. Prints in the studio, appear on the wall behind him, but otherwise the room is as plain (if not more so) as that seen in his mother's portrait.

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Arrangement in grey (Portrait of the painter) (detail)

c. 1872

Detroit Institute of the Arts, Michigan

Henri Fantin-Latour

Homage to Delacroix (detail, showing Whistler standing at centre)

1864

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Unknown

Whistler seated on Chippendale chair (detail)

c. 1860

Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Archives Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Sir Leslie Ward (Spy)

Whistler (detail)

1878

Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Mortimer Menpes

**Monocle right eye, portrait of J. M.
Whistler (detail)**

c. 1899

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

Aubrey Beardsley

Caricature of J. M. Whistler (detail)

c. 1893–94

Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

United States postage stamp 1934

The Thames set

In 1859 Whistler settled in Wapping and began depicting his surroundings, in particular the old docks and wharves of London's East End, many of which were being demolished. This theme was inspired by etchings that his contemporary Charles Méryon had produced of the remnants of medieval Paris. Sixteen etchings of scenes on the Thames, better known as *The Thames set*, was published in 1871. This set, together with prints by Méryon and others, was acquired for the NGV in 1891 and greatly inspired local artists to explore both the medium of etching and the depiction of intimate scenes of city life.

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Chelsea Bridge and church

1871, printed 1871/79

etching, drypoint and fowl biting, 7th of 7 states

Purchased, 1892

p.188.3.16-1

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Rotherhithe

1860, printed 1871/79

etching and drypoint, 6th of 6 states

Purchased, 1892

p.188.3.5-1

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Limehouse

1859, printed 1871/79
etching and drypoint, 5th of 6 states

Purchased, 1892

p.188.3.12-1

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The forge

1861, printed 1871/79
drypoint, 5th of 6 states

Purchased, 1892

p.188.3.3-1

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Thames warehouses

1859, printed 1871/79

etching, drypoint and fowl biting, 4th of 5 states

Purchased, 1892

p.188.3.13-1

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Eagle Wharf

1859

etching, only state

Purchased, 1892

p.188.3.11-1

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Old Westminster Bridge

1859, printed 1871/79

etching, drypoint and plate-tone, 3rd of 4 states

Purchased, 1892

p.188.3.4-1

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Millbank

1861, printed 1871/79
etching, 4th of 5 states

Purchased, 1892

p.188.3.14-1

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The little pool

1861, printed 1871/79

etching and drypoint, 9th of 9 states

Purchased, 1892

p.188.3.10-1

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The lime-burner

1859, printed 1871/79

etching, drypoint and fowl biting, 2nd of 2 states

Purchased, 1892

p.188.3.9-1

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

J. Becquet, sculptor

1859, printed 1871

etching and drypoint, 5th of 6 states

Purchased, 1892

p.188.3.8-1

The French set

In 1858 Whistler began to focus on the medium of etching. He made a number of plates in London, as well as more during a trip to the Rhine and on his return to Paris, where a selection of these were published as *Twelve etchings after nature* by the master printer Auguste Delâtre. Whistler later called this his French set, although not all of the scenes are French. The set comprises portraits (including of his niece Annie Haden), historic houses and shadowy doorway scenes of locals at work, as if glimpsed while walking by.

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The kitchen

1858

etching and plate-tone, 2nd of 3 states

Felton Bequest, 1947

1796-4

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The mustard seller

La Marchande de moutarde

1858, printed after 1888

etching and plate-tone, 5th of 5 states

Felton Bequest, 1939

719-4

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Rag pickers, Quartier Mouffetard, Paris ***Les Chiffoniers***

1858

etching and drypoint, 5th of 5 states

Gift of Mrs David Keppel, 1960

408-5

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Little Arthur

1857–58, printed 1858
etching, 4th of 4 states

Felton Bequest, 1939

718-4

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The old rag-seller

La Vieille aux Loques

1858

etching on chine collé, 3rd of 4 states

Purchased, 1959

129-5

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Liverdun

1858

etching and drypoint printed in dark brown ink, 3rd of 3
states

Purchased, 1966

1660-5

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The dog on the kennel

1858, printed 1858 or later
etching and plate-tone, 2nd of 2 states

Felton Bequest, 1923

1278.675-3

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Seymour

1858–59

etching, drypoint and plate-tone, 2nd of 3 states

Felton Bequest, 1961

1006-5

The Venice set

Whistler's Venice etchings were the result of a commission by the Fine Art Society, London. While engaged to produce a set of prints by December 1879, Whistler was captivated by the light, reflections and aesthetic possibilities of the city and did not return until the following November, with many more etchings than originally intended. A selection of the prints was exhibited and published as *Venice, a series of twelve etchings (The first Venice Set)* in late 1880; a second exhibition occurred in 1883; and *A set of twenty-six etchings (The second Venice set)* was published in 1886.

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Ponte del Piovan

1880, printed 1886

etching and drypoint printed in dark brown ink, 6th of 6
states, or undescribed 7th state

Gift of Miss Rosalind Birnie Philip, 1958

3768-4

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

San Biagio

1880, printed 1886

etching and drypoint printed in dark brown ink, 12th of 17
states

Gift of Miss Rosalind Birnie Philip, 1958

3767-4

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The little lagoon

published by the Fine Art Society, London, 1880
1880

etching, drypoint and plate-tone printed in dark brown ink,
4th of 4 states

Gift of Brenda Strang Mouritz in memory of Philip Strang, 2015

2015.147

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Nocturne: Palaces

1880–86, printed 1886

etching, drypoint and plate-tone printed in dark brown ink,
6th of 12 states

Presented anonymously, 1960

684-5

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The Venetian mast

1880, printed 1880–89

etching and drypoint printed in dark brown ink, 10th of 12
states

Felton Bequest, 1914

604-2

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Bibi Valentin

1859, printed after 1872

etching, drypoint and plate-tone, 2nd of 2 states

Gift of Miss M. E. Chomley, 1958

14-5

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Dancing girl

1889

transfer lithograph

Purchased, 1971

P10-1971

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The novel: Girl reading

1889

transfer lithograph

Presented anonymously, 1960

681-5

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Rue Furstenburg

1894, printed 1903
transfer lithograph

Purchased, 1971

P12-1971

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The smith's yard

1895

transfer lithograph

Felton Bequest, 1914

602-2

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Little Evelyn

1896, printed 1896/1903
transfer lithograph

Purchased, 1962

1054-5

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The Thames

1896, printed 1903/04

lithotint on chine collé, 3rd of 3 states

Presented anonymously, 1960

683-5

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Little draped figure, leaning

1893, printed 1894/1903

transfer lithograph on Japanese paper

Presented anonymously, 1960

679-5

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Model draping

c. 1889, printed 1904
transfer lithograph

Purchased, 1971

P11-1971

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The duet

1894, printed 1904
transfer lithograph

Purchased, 1971

P32-1971

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Girl with bowl

published in *L'Ymagier*, 2, no. 5, October 1895
1895

transfer lithograph printed in grey ink on Japanese paper

Presented anonymously, 1960

682-5

John LONGSTAFF

Australian 1861–1941, worked in Europe 1887–95,
1901–20

The young mother

1891

oil on canvas

Purchased with funds donated by the NGV Women's Association, Alan and Mavourneen Cowen,
Paula Fox and donors to the John Longstaff Appeal, 2013 2013.766

John Longstaff was in Paris when *Portrait of the artist's mother* was acquired by the Musée du Luxembourg in 1891. That year he painted *The young mother* which, in its subject matter, use of Japanese motifs and colour palette shows the influence of Whistler's painting.

For Kids

John Longstaff was visiting Paris when Whistler's painting *Portrait of the artist's mother* was bought by a big museum. Longstaff must have loved the work because it seems to have inspired his painting.

In what ways do the two paintings look the same, and how are they different?

Arthur STREETON

Australian 1867–1943, worked in England 1897–1919

Windy and wet

c. 1889

oil on cardboard

Purchased, 1955

3195-4

Frame: original, from *The 9 by 5 Impression Exhibition*, maker unknown

Arthur STREETON

Australian 1867–1943, worked in England 1897–1919

Princess & 'Burke & Wills'

1889

oil on wood panel

Purchased through the NGV Foundation with the assistance of The Hugh D. T. Williamson Foundation, Honorary Life Benefactor, 2005

2005.61

In 1889 Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton, Charles Conder and Frederick McCubbin presented their *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* in Melbourne. It is likely that Whistler's carefully stage-managed exhibitions were an important source of inspiration to them in terms of their planning, marketing and presentation. Following Whistler's example, the Australian artists presented many of their works in simple panel frames rather than in the more conventional gilt frames. The influence of Japanese art and design, which was so important for Whistler, is also evident in many of the Australian paintings exhibited.

Frame: reproduction, 1985, of a frame from *The 9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* of 1889

Charles CONDER

English 1868–1909, worked in Australia 1884–90

Dear Lady Disdain

1889

oil on canvas on composition board

The L. W. Thompson Collection Bequest, 2005

2005.5

Frederick McCUBBIN

Australian 1855–1917

Petit déjeuner – sketch for After breakfast

c. 1889

oil on wood panel

Purchased, 1956

3253-4

Frame: reproduction, 1985

Bernard HALL

English 1859–1935, worked in Australia 1892–1934

The connoisseur

c. 1890

oil on canvas

K.M. Christensen and A. E. Bond Bequest, 2004

2004.769

Bernard Hall was greatly influenced by the prevailing Aestheticism movement championed by Whistler, which prized knowledge and appreciation of Asian art. Depicted here examining a Chinese or Japanese vase, with the inscription

大明成化年製 (The Great Ming, Chenghua Reign), Hall's connoisseur is the height of turn-of-the-century fashion. In 1891 Hall was appointed director of the National Gallery of Victoria and is acknowledged with founding the Gallery's collection of Asian art.

Frame: original, by Samuel Coombes, London

William ROTHENSTEIN

English 1872–1945

Charles Conder

c. 1891–92

oil on canvas

Purchased, 1966

1579-5

John LONGSTAFF

Australian 1861–1941, worked in Europe 1887–95,
1901–20

Lady in grey

1890

oil on canvas

Gift of Mr John H. Connell, 1914

657-2

Frame: original, by John Thallon, Melbourne

JAPANESE

Flowers of the four seasons screen

Shikisōkazu byōbu

Meiji period, c. 1880, Japan

lacquer on wood, gold paint, ivory, shell, gilt

Unaccessioned item

For Kids

This beautiful screen is from Japan and is the kind of object that Whistler collected for his own home. The artist here has shown nature in autumn, winter, summer and spring. How is each season shown? Can you count the number of birds on the screens?

JAPANESE

Vase

Kabin

Meiji period, 1870–80, Japan
bronze, gold, pigment

Purchased, 1880

2036-D1A

MINTON, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire manufacturer

England est. 1793

Charger

1871

earthenware

The Dr Robert Wilson Collection
Gift of Dr Robert Wilson, 2012

2012.164

This ornamental charger is an example of the refined domestic objects produced under the influence of the Aesthetic Movement. Its decoration is directly inspired by motifs and compositional techniques from Japanese woodblock prints.

JAPANESE

Covered jar

Futatsuki tsubo

Meiji period, c. 1880, Japan
enamel (cloisonné) on metal

Accessioned 1890

2088-D1A

MINTON, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire manufacturer

England est. 1793

Charles TOFT senior (attributed to) designer and decorator

England c. 1828–90

Vase

c. 1875, porcelain (pâte sur pâte)

The Dr Robert Wilson Collection

Gift of Dr Robert Wilson and Colin Lane through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts
Program, 2012

2012.429

Eugène ROUSSEAU

France 1827–91

Vase

1880–85

glass

Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria
with the assistance of Australian Consolidated Industries Limited, Governor, 1982

D30-1982

C. H. BRANNAM, Barnstaple, Devon

manufacturer

England 1879–1913

Vase

1893

earthenware

The Dr Robert Wilson Collection
Gift of Dr Robert Wilson, 2006

2006.479

Japanese stonewares, with their austere aesthetic and appreciation of natural imperfections resulting from manufacturing processes, had a powerful influence on ceramicists in Europe during the 1880s and 1890s. This vase shows an interest in the texture of the ceramic body and the characteristics of the glaze, in contrast to the highly finished decorative ceramics typical of English manufacturers at this time. The carp motifs are directly inspired by Japanese woodblock prints.

Utagawa HIROSHIGE

Japanese 1797–1858

Golden pheasant in pine tree

Matsu ni kinkei

Edo period, 1843–45, Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1910

519-2

Utagawa HIROSHIGE

Japanese 1797–1858

Camellia and sparrows in snow

Yuki naka ni tsubaki ni suzume

Edo period, 1843–47, Japan

colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1910

522-2

Utagawa HIROSHIGE

Japanese 1797–1858

Bird on wisteria vine

Fuji ni kotori

Edo period, 1849, Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1910

520-2

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Chelsea

1878–79, printed 1879–89

etching and drypoint printed in dark brown ink, 5th of 5
states

Purchased, 1919

892-3

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Battersea dawn (Cadogan Pier)

plate 15 from *Sixteen etchings of scenes on the Thames*
(or *The Thames set*)

c. 1863, printed 1871/79

etching, drypoint and fowl biting, 2nd of 2 states

Purchased, 1892

p.188.3.15-1

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Old Hungerford Bridge

plate 6 from *Sixteen etchings of scenes on the Thames* (or
The Thames set)

1861, printed 1871/79

etching and drypoint, 4th of 4 states

Purchased, 1892

p.188.3.6-1

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Old Battersea Bridge

1879

lithograph, 2nd of 2 states

Purchased, 1971

P13-1971

Yashima GAKUTEI

Japanese c. 1786–1868

**Aji River, Osaka, eight views of Mt. Shin
*Osaka Aji kawa, Shinzan hakkei***

from the *Famous places of Naniwa, views of Mt. Tempō*
series

Edo period, c. 1834, Japan
colour woodcut

Felton Bequest, 1909

465-2

Yashima GAKUTEI

Japanese c. 1786–1868

Ships entering the bay of Mt.Tempō

Tempōzan bansen nyūshin no zu

from the *Famous places of Naniwa, views of Mt. Tempō*
series

Edo period, c. 1834, Japan

colour woodcut

Felton Bequest, 1909

462-2

Yashima GAKUTEI

Japanese c. 1786–1868

**Stone bridge over the Aji River at
Mt. Tempō, Osaka**

Osaka Aji kawa Tempōzan Ishibashi

from the *Famous places of Naniwa, views of Mt. Tempō*
series

Edo period, c. 1834, Japan
colour woodcut

Felton Bequest, 1909

466-2

Yashima GAKUTEI

Japanese c. 1786–1868

**Suehiro Bridge by moonlight at
Mt. Tempō**

***Tempōzan Suehiro Bashi – Tsukiyo
no zu***

from the *Famous places of Naniwa, views of Mt. Tempō*
series

Edo period, c. 1834, Japan
colour woodcut

Felton Bequest, 1909

464-2

Utagawa HIROSHIGE

Japanese 1797–1858

Hot Springs near Shūzen Temple, Izu Province

Izu shūzenji tōjiba

from the Famous views of the sixty odd provinces *Rokujū yoshū meisho zue* series 1853–56

Edo period, 1853–56, Japan
colour woodblock

Utagawa HIROSHIGE

Japanese 1797–1858

Sakurajima, Ōsuma province

Ōsumi Sakurajima

from the Famous views of the sixty odd provinces *Rokujū yoshū meisho zue* series 1853–56

Edo period, 1853–56, Japan

colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1910

505-2

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Caprice in purple and gold no. 2 – The golden screen (detail)

1864

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
Gift of Charles Lang Freer

F1904.75a

E. W. GODWIN designer

England 1833–86

WILLIAM WATT, London manufacturer

England 1857 – c. 1887

Sideboard

1867 designed, c. 1886–87 manufactured
ebonised wood, brass, gold paint

Felton Bequest, 1977

D154.a-g-1977

Like many artists and designers of his generation, E. W. Godwin was influenced by the European 'discovery' of Japanese art during the 1850s. In particular, Godwin absorbed the principles of Japanese art by studying the woodcut prints imported into Europe in vast quantities. The lessons of Japanese composition are apparent in Godwin's sophisticated manipulation of solid and void in this sideboard's design. The black ebonised finish of the piece is inspired by Japanese lacquer, while the incised and gilt decoration includes Japanese chrysanthemum *mon*, or heraldic emblems. A similar *mon*-like emblem is seen on the textile hanging in Whistler's *Portrait of the artist's mother*.

E. W. GODWIN designer

England 1833–86

Armchair

c. 1877

ebonised wood, cane

Purchased, 1975

D69-1975

E. W. GODWIN designer

England 1833–86

**WILLIAM WATT, London (attributed to)
manufacturer**

England 1857 – c. 1887

Folding chair

c. 1870

ebonised wood, cane, brass

Purchased, 1992

D27-1992

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

The artist in his studio (detail)

1865–66

The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection

Unknown

Photograph of Anna Whistler (detail)

c. 1860s–70s

The Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Whistler's Mother (detail)

1870–73

Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Archives Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59, England 1859–1903

Arrangement in grey and black no. 1 (Portrait of the artist's mother) (detail)

1871

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

UNKNOWN

Boudoir cap

c. 1871

cotton

Gift of Mrs Gwenda L. Davis and Mrs Ena Elder, 1977

D296B-1977

Boudoir caps were worn in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century by women in their private chamber or bedroom. These soft lace-trimmed caps with gathered crown and ruffled edge were often made of plain white linen or cotton. More formal dress caps, such as that worn by Anna Whistler in *Portrait of the artist's mother*, were sometimes fashioned from handmade lace. The long decorative strips hanging either side of the cap were called lappets.

**David OCTAVIUS HILL and Robert
ADAMSON**

Mrs Anne (Palgrave) Rigby (detail)
1843–1846

National Galleries Scotland, Special Collections

Walter Greaves

Whistler and his mother (detail)

1917

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts

James McNeill WHISTLER

American 1834–1903, worked in France 1855–59,
England 1859–1903

Arrangement in grey and black no. 1 (Portrait of the artist's mother)

1871

oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

RF 699

For Kids

Whistler painted his mother in 1871 when she was living with him. Do you think she looks happy in this painting? What might she be thinking? How would you paint your own mother?

