LADY MEUX: OF DUBIOUS AND QUESTIONABLE MEMORY

The annus mirabilis of 2020 concluded with an intriguing auction. On the block at Holt Auctioneers, in Norfolk, was a rare, hand-crafted shotgun. It attracted wide press coverage, with publications as varied as the Daily Mail and Town&Country reporting the event. Bids came from around the globe, including Europe, America, Australia, and South Africa. The gun had been valued at £3,000 to £5,000; it went to an undisclosed UK buyer for three times the high estimate.

That staggering sum as well as the pre-auction excitement was inspired as much by the identity of the gun’s original owner as by the beauty of the weapon. The whole affair acquired a deliciously salacious flavour when the auction house further identified that person as “a banjo-playing Victorian prostitute.” The owner had been Valerie Susan (née Langdon) Meux, and while the evidence for her being a fille de joie is circumstantial, she certainly led a flamboyant and controversial life. She also sat for two of James Whistler’s most sumptuous portraits.

The self-styled Valerie (she was christened Susan) claimed to have been an actress—reason enough to be thought a “fallen” woman in Victorian England—but she appears to have performed only briefly, and then chiefly in pantomimes and at music halls. It has been suggested that she sang and played the banjo at the Casino de Venise, at the corner of High Holborn and Kingsway, one of the most “fashionable” of several West End dance halls in the 1870s (later rebuilt as the popular Holborn Restaurant, now a Sainsbury’s.) However, the Holborn, as it was also known, employed a “celebrated band,” and a banjo hardly seems a likely instrument for a program of polkas and quadrilles. That said, Val may have entertained patrons in the casino’s “magnificent,” richly appointed saloon. A photograph from the early 1880s does show her strumming the instrument, although she had married and gone “legitimate” by then.

Val’s more questionable associations stem from reports that dance halls like the Holborn Casino were known haunts for prostitutes, both professionals and “amateurs.” Yet, every dance hall had its own, distinct atmosphere. Quite a few places were, indeed, rather “shady”, but the Holborn, known for its “mad gaiety” and as a “cheerful, bouncy sort of place,” boasted a “superior” clientele. Novelist and editor Edmund Yates, a good friend of
Whistler, described the male patrons as mostly young lawyers, medical students, government clerks, and shopkeepers. The women, he insisted, exhibited “some element of respectability.” Similarly, a visiting New York journalist thought the women “well and neatly dressed, and very quiet and well-behaved in their manners.”

Still, it was risky business for a woman to be associated with the “fast life” and flirtations of the casinos, and the admittedly unabashed, uninhibited Val was a known “habituée,” perhaps even a hostess, at the Holborn. At some point, she began living with a Corporal Reece of the Life Guards and, seeking at least a cloak of respectability, adopted his name. Those were her circumstances when she met young Henry B. Meux, heir to a thriving brewery but also bent on sowing his wild oats. Seeing a better chance than her corporal, Val, with her seductive figure and dazzling violet eyes (think Elizabeth Taylor), nabbed Meux, at least five (perhaps as many as ten) years her junior. Their secret marriage in 1878 stunned the groom’s family, but when Henry inherited the title of baronet five years later, the former Val Reece became Lady Meux.

London Society was not impressed, so that not even a house in Park Lane and a country estate in Herefordshire could spare Val from being shunned as a parvenu. She responded by flouting convention and tweaking the noses of her critics. Some of her most flamboyant acts, such as traversing London in a carriage drawn by a pair of zebras, passed into legend. More substantially, she joined her husband to stalk deer in the Scottish Highlands, rode to hounds, invested in race horses (one of which won the Derby in 1901), attended prize fights (in disguise), and enlarged and renovated her husband’s country house, Theobalds, even adding a Turkish bath and roller-skating rink. Most famously, she convinced Henry, who denied her nothing, to purchase Christopher Wren’s recently dismantled Temple Bar from the City of London and re-erect it as the entrance to the grounds of Theobalds. (The structure was returned to London in 2004; Theobalds is now a hotel, called The Birch.)

However, the irrepressible Val was no vacuous, air-headed bimbo. She became an enthusiastic collector of ancient Egyptian artifacts—a result of her honeymoon trip down the Nile River—and eventually amassed some 1,700 items. Known for her generosity and charitable work, she bequeathed the lot to the British Museum. She also exhibited an enquiring mind by attending meetings of the Theosophical Society. During the Second Boer War, she showed a patriotic side by purchasing six twelve-pounder cannons for the British army.

Her connection to Whistler began when Sir Henry, hoping to ease his wife’s way into Society, commissioned three portraits from the artist in 1881. Whistler completed only two of the pictures, but they are both stunners: Arrangement in Black: Lady Meux (YMSM 228) and Harmony in Pink and Grey: Portrait of Lady Meux (YMSM 229). The commissions, worth £1,500, came at an opportune moment for Whistler. Recently returned from his exile in Venice, he was still trying to recover
financially from bankruptcy and rehabilitate his artistic reputation after the Ruskin trial. Happily, he and Val proved kindred spirits in their rebellion against the Establishment. As Val told him in 1892, “I suppose we are both a little eccentric and not loved by all the world. Personally, I am glad of it as I should prefer a little hate.”

A year earlier, Whistler had suggested another portrait, this one to depict Val as “a Spanish female of the 15th Century.” She rejected the idea out of hand. “If you ever paint me again,” the lady replied, “I should like you to paint me in something dreamy. I look best in soft colours,” she purred. And, of course, meux meaning creamy. Unfortunately, Whistler was living in Paris at the time, which led Val to reason, “I fear you will never have the pleasure of painting me again now that you are not in England, as when in Paris I spend all my time at the dressmakers.”

The vivacious Val died in 1910, no doubt remembered by many—as Dr. Watson described the enchanting Irene Adler—as a lady of “dubious and questionable memory.”

THE WHISTLER SOCIETY PRESENTS

The Whistler Nocturnes – A series of online and, someday, in person events commencing with:

TRAVELS WITH WHISTLER - by Daniel E. Sutherland, author and historian

Do you know where Whistler made this painting? Join Daniel Sutherland as he escorts you on a tour of this and several other sites in London immortalized by Whistler.

One of the best ways to understand James Whistler and his art is to follow in his footsteps—literally. In this richly-illustrated talk, Daniel Sutherland will visit places in London where Whistler produced some of his best and least known work, comparing, when possible, the sites as they look today with their appearance in his paintings, etchings, and lithographs.

This virtual event is Free to all Members and Non-Members
Wednesday 24th March 2021 at 6:30 GMT

On the day use this Zoom: LINK
Meeting ID: 87431972465   Passcode: 936815
MEMBERS ONLY SPECIAL OFFER

ARTS AND CRAFTS PIONEERS: THE HOBBY HORSE MEN AND THEIR CENTURY GUILD - Stuart Evans and Jean Liddiard, Lund Humphries

Lund Humphries are offering members of the Whistler Society 20% off Arts and Crafts Pioneers, a new book surveying for the first time the Century Guild of Artists and its influential periodical, the Century Guild Hobby Horse. This original publication asserts the significance of the Guild in the development of the Arts and Crafts movement and its modernist successors. For more information, read co-author Jean Liddiard’s introduction here.

Members must email enquiries@whistlersociety.org to receive the code. Valid until May 31st 2021.

This offer is open only to Members of the Whistler Society.

To learn more about becoming a member, please contact enquiries@whistlersociety.org.

WHISTLER ONLINE

As museums, institutions and public collections saw their doors close in 2020, many took the opportunity to go digital and offer a wealth of public programming and educational material for free online. Here is a selection of lectures and tours that were made available in these past months.

THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR ART HISTORY - Online Event 14th – 17th April 2021

The Annual Conference brings together international research and critical debate about art, art history and visual cultures. This key annual event is an opportunity to keep up to date with new research, hear leading keynotes, broaden networks and exchange ideas. The Annual Conference is open to all, and members of the Association receive discounted rates. Attracting around 500 delegates each year, the conference is popular with academics, curators, practitioners, PhD students, early career researchers and non-art historians engaged with art history research.

In light of the ongoing global situation with COVID-19 the Association for Art History’s 2021 Annual Conference will take place online as a fully virtual event. For the full schedule of sessions click here, or to book tickets follow this link.
WATTS GALLERY TALKS: 'RUSKINLAND' - by Andrew Hill

For those who were unable to tune in in October 2020, The Watts Gallery have shared their talk 'Ruskinland' online. Marking 200 years since the birth of John Ruskin, Andrew Hill's new book 'Ruskinland' explores the enduring influence of one of the most radical thinkers of the Victorian age. As an art critic, social activist, early environmentalist, artist and tastemaker in architecture and design, Ruskin's ideas sowed the seeds for the welfare state, universal education for all, free healthcare and the foundation of organisations such as the National Trust. In his talk, Hill will trace the networks of Ruskin's influence across the globe, meeting the people who continue to be shaped by Ruskin's ideas and proving that, in part, we all inhabit 'Ruskinland'.

Watch the video here.

WHISTLER IN PRINT

'THE SLEEVE SHOULD BE ILLEGAL & OTHER REFLECTIONS ON ART AT THE FRICK' - Edited by Michaelyn Mitchell

"More was our favorite, More was sublime. I was into science fiction and knew he’d written Utopia. Whatever it was. And More had that outlandish beard stubble, the weird 'S-S-S' necklace, and, above all, the velvet sleeve. The sleeve was ecstasy, the sleeve should be illegal, the sleeve was Utopia. We fell into the sleeve. If you look close, we’re still in there, falling." - Jonathan Lethem on Sir Thomas More (1527) by Hans Holbein the younger.


'This book includes 61 reflections on the Frick's preeminent collection, with the contributors writing about an artwork that has personal significance, sharing how it has moved, challenged, puzzled or inspired them. Each text is accompanied by an illustration of the artwork.'
WHEN A MUSEUM FEELS LIKE HOME - by Peter Schjeldahl

“Welcome to my house,” I’ve said more than once while introducing people to the Frick Collection, my favorite museum. I’ve had to acknowledge an awkward domestic layout, extending to nine stops on the No. 6 train from the East Village. But I’ve meant it in a way that I share with a lot of art lovers, or even just art likers. The Frick stirs proprietary feelings as, say, the Metropolitan Museum of Art doesn’t. Big museums array works by a historical logic that is cold to the eye until thawed by your attention. Everything at the Frick is toasty at first glance. … Read more

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, THE PRE-RAPHAELITES: DRAWINGS AND WATERCOLOURS - Spring 2021

Assembled from their internationally-renowned collection of Pre-Raphaelite works on paper, The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, will present this major exhibition exploring the enormous range of techniques and media used by the artists that made up this movement – as well as the intimate and often complex friendships and love affairs between them.

The exhibition is slated to open in spring 2021, with dates to be confirmed.

THE WATTS GALLERY, HENRY SCOTT TUKE - 7 June 2021 - 12 September 2021

In this exhibition, our friends at The Watts Gallery, Compton, near Guildford, Surrey, will explore the complexities that surround the life and art of this British painter, famed for his depictions of sun, sea, and bathing during a late Victorian and Edwardian golden age. Tackling questions of artistic influence (James Whistler amongst them), art practice and a varied reception history, the exhibition brings together some of Tuke's most significant works.

DENVER ART MUSEUM WHISTLER TO CASSATT: AMERICAN PAINTERS IN FRANCE - 14 November 2021 – 13 February 2022

Whistler to Cassatt: American Painters in France, set to premiere November 14, 2021, will feature more than 100 paintings made between 1855 and 1913 in the first comprehensive examination of France’s stylistic impact on American painting of the period. From academic
training in Paris to exploration of the countryside landscape, Whistler to Cassatt reveals both the visual and conceptual influences of France on American painters in the 19th and early 20th century. Organized by the DAM and curated by Timothy Standring, curator emeritus at the DAM, Whistler to Cassatt will be presented in the Anschutz and Martin and McCormick galleries on Level 2 of the Hamilton Building through March 13, 2022. The exhibition will then travel to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts from April 16, 2022, to July 31, 2022.

FROM THE ROSTRUM: STORIES FROM THE AUCTION FLOOR

JOHN WILLIAM WATERHOUSE: A DISCOVERY - June 2021 - 12 September 2021

Destined for the bonfire and riddled with woodworm, this unsigned oil sketch by John William Waterhouse was uncovered in a dusty attic by the erudite eye of Paul Howard, a senior auctioneer at Great Western Auctions, during a house visit in Argyll. Subject to decades of neglect and covered in layers of dirt and grime, the work was in dreadful condition. Despite this, a flurry of fierce, global competitive bidding both from telephones and online confirmed the auction attribution and ensured a tremendous result for this Pre-Raphaelite painting. Follow the link above to read more about the unlikely discovery.

‘PICKFORD WALLER WITH HIS WIFE AND DAUGHTER SYBIL’, 1858/59 – by Maurice Greiffenhagen RA (1862-1931)

Pickford Waller, an avid collector of Whistleriana, first met Whistler when he visited his studio as a young man in the company of the artist Matthew White Ridley. At the sale of Dutch art dealer and collector, Murray Marks' collection in 1879, Waller bought twenty-nine drawings by Whistler of blue and white vases in the collection in Sir H. Thompson. Six drawings were lent by Waller for exhibition in London in 1905 as 'Illustrations to Sir Henry Thompson's catalogue of his Collection of Blue and White Nankin Porcelain, 1878'.

Following Whistler’s bankruptcy and the selling of the White House in 1879, the Butterfly Cabinet, ‘Harmony in Yellow and Gold: The Butterfly Cabinet’, designed by Whistler and E. W. Godwin, was auctioned. It later appeared in a second hand furniture shop, where, according to Pennell, it was bought by Waller. It was he who had what was originally a fireplace converted into a cabinet by replacing the grate with doors adapted from the dado.

According to Waller, ‘Scherzo in Blue: The Blue Girl’ was painted from his brother Major Charles Bullen Waller's second daughter Maud, who was a beautiful child and a pet of Whistler's. Waller recalled that when the portrait was halfway through it was put aside, but
that it was sent to the Grosvenor Gallery for the private view and taken away directly after. Waller drew caricatures of Whistler, one of which Guthrie reproduced.

**BECOME A MEMBER OF THE WHISTLER SOCIETY FROM £25**

Membership to the Whistler Society is available internationally to anyone with an interest in the life and work of James McNeill Whistler and the myriad of individuals he knew and influenced his life. Our members range from academics to general enthusiasts and include writers and historians, artists and art dealers, curators and teachers, as well as students and everyday aficionados who wish to share in the history and legacy of one of the most significant artistic influences in nineteenth century art.

For further information please email contact us for enquiries by emailing enquires@whistlersociety.org

**FOLLOW THE WHISTLER SOCIETY ON SOCIAL MEDIA**