THE SPIRITUAL WHISTLER

Whistler listened attentively one evening as three friends, Sir Richard F. Burton, Burton’s wife, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, engaged in a “heated religious discussion.” It seems that Burton (an avowed “Mahometan”), his wife (a Catholic), and Rossetti (a “pagan”) held strongly divergent opinions about the meaning of faith. Finally, Lady Burton, seeking to break the stalemate, asked Whistler his religious preference. Feigning surprise that his opinion should be sought, the artist replied, “I, Madam? Why, I am an amateur.”

Well, not quite. Whistler’s parents had reared him as an Episcopalian, which required daily Bible readings into his teens. By the time he left West Point, aged twenty, his naturally rebellious nature had led him to abandon organized religion in both ritual and substance. Yet, he could not escape his spiritual training. It reappeared often during his life, sometimes in perverse ways.

So steeped in Scripture was he that biblical references, phrases, and quotations sprinkled his correspondence and public statements. “The Ten O’Clock” lecture was structured as a sermon, with Whistler serving as “The Preacher.” Granted, much of its phrasing and cadence may be seen as a parody of the Bible, but then Whistler always contended that he loved the Old Testament for its “wide range of invective.” “Behold! and forsooth!” one imagines him
saying, “I summon the language of the Prophets in rightful wrath against all who sin against Art!”

One admirer declared him an “Artistic Evangelist.”

Whistler’s fascination with seances and spiritualism, so vividly displayed for us by Darcy Sullivan at the Society’s most recent “Nocturne,” betrays vestiges of genuine religious faith. Anyone attempting to contact those beyond the veil must surely have some hope for a Hereafter and the possibility of eternal life.

Some spiritual quality or association is less obvious in Whistler’s art. He drew Biblical scenes as a boy, very likely to please his devout mother, but the only overt religious connections in his mature work appear in sketches, etchings, and lithographs of churches. In my “Nocturne” talk for the Society, I mentioned the most telling examples. During his wife Beatrice’s ultimately fatal illness, in 1896, the artist suddenly began a lithographic series of London churches. With no precedent for such a deliberate turn in his work, it was as though he sought solace in quiet churchyards, his drawing employed as a form of prayer. He abandoned the project when Beatrice died, with only two drawings completed (St. Anne’s, Soho and St. Giles-in-the-Fields), but soon after, while visiting a church in France, he thought of lighting a candle for her. Emotionally devastated, he wrote to his sister-in-law Ethel Whibley, “I wish I were a Catholic.” He repeated that repressed desire so often to other people over the coming days that word spread through London of Whistler “turning to Rome.”

Now, consider the other images of churches in Whistler’s work, nearly all of them dating from the 1880s. He made several pastels of churches and religious houses during his exile to Venice in 1880 and some etchings of churches while traveling through France, Belgium, and Holland later in the decade. The only known images of London churches prior to 1896 are an etching of one in Edgware, a drawing of St. Paul’s Cathedral, and a pair of lithographs done in the churchyard (but not of the church) at St. Bartholomew the Great. He also made an 1894 lithograph titled The Priest’s House, Rouen.

The one exception to all this is Chelsea Old Church, but that, too, tells us a lot. The church appears in numerous sketches, etchings, and paintings, beginning in the 1860s, but despite it being his mother’s favorite place of worship, Whistler never drew or painted the structure itself, no “portrait,” as it were. It only appears in panoramic views of Chelsea, as part of the landscape. He treated most other churches the same way, or alternatively, focused on particular architectural features, such as a doorway, window, or tower. He rarely drew an entire church, as he did in his 1896 “series.” The most notable exception is an etching of a church in Amsterdam, done in 1889, and even that one is seen from a distance.

A telling example of how little reverence these buildings inspired in him is an etching of a church interior, done in Brussels. He had only entered the church to escape a sudden rainstorm, but once inside, he passed the time by sketching a group of worshippers, heads bowed in prayer. When finished, he mischievously inserted his butterfly signature above and in front of the congregation, with rays of light streaming down upon them. He titled the etching The Church-Brussels (Adoration).
But what of Whistler’s painted Nocturnes of the Thames? Frequently praised for their “poetry,” “mystery,” and “ephemeral qualities,” one may easily see in them a type of reverence, if not for a supreme being, then for nature. Perhaps, while finding no spiritual element in stone structures, Whistler could divine it in mists, fogs, and shadows. Perhaps that is why his mother, who had been disappointed by his indifference to the rituals of her faith, accepted the fact, while living with him in Chelsea, that her eldest child at least adhered to a “natural religion.”

Images

*Chelsea Bridge and Church*, 1871, etching and drypoint
*St Giles-in-the-Field*, 1896, lithograph
*Church Amsterdam*, 1889, etching
*Under the Frari*, 1879-80, chalk and pastel, Colby College Museum of Art
*The Church - Brussels (Adoration)*, 1887, etching and drypoint
THE TEN O’CLOCK
WHISTLER SOCIETY JOURNAL: OPEN CALL FOR PAPERS

Our editors Dr Georgia Toutziari and Dr Dan Sutherland are soliciting contributions to the fourth issue of The Whistler Society’s popular journal. The theme for No. 4 will be The Portraiture of Whistler.

Whistler engaged a variety of subjects during his long artistic career, but the underlying impulse in nearly all his work was portraiture. From his student days in Paris to his waning years in London, Whistler portrayed a remarkable cross-section of society, whether in paintings, etchings, lithographs, or mere sketches. Seamstresses and longshoremen, glamorous women and famous men, family members and street urchins, not to forget numerous self-portraits, his representations of people were of such variety and richness that one hardly knows where to begin. He labeled his finished work symphonies, harmonies, and arrangements to minimize a subject’s identity and emphasize his desire to record “something more than the face the model wears for that one day.” He intended his portraits to penetrate and reveal, as he saw it, a person’s character, their personality, the mystery of their nature. Yet, in the end, these were real people, each one with a story to tell, and each playing some role in Whistler’s life.

We invite and encourage anyone wishing to explore some aspect of Whistler’s portraiture to submit a succinct abstract of their proposal (no more than 300 words) to gtoutziari@gmail.com. by September 1, 2021.

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

Even as the world reopens, there is still plenty of opportunity to go online and explore the wealth of public programming and educational material relating to James Whistler and his circle.

PRESENTING WHISTLER ONLINE - Margaret F. MacDonald

Professor Margaret F. MacDonald and Dr Grischka Petri present a major new online publication: James McNeill Whistler: The paintings, a catalogue raisonné. Ranging from small sketches to full-length oil portraits, the collection made available through this free resource is both beautiful and fascinating, and throws new light on Whistler’s body of work. This post provides a peek behind the scenes on both the technical and cultural aspects of this work, as Professor MacDonald and Dr Petri reflect on the years of research that inform this significant publication. Read here...

THE DE MORGANS AND LEIGHTON HOUSE - Leighton House

In 1877 William De Morgan was called upon by Lord Leighton and his architect George Aitchison to install Leighton's collection of Damascene tiles into the new Arab Hall extension of his Holland Park home. Although De Morgan couldn't have known it then, this started a relationship between Leighton House and the De Morgans which would last well into the next century.

In this talk, De Morgan Curator Sarah Hardy will discuss the Leighton commission and William De Morgan's work, the relationship and marriage of William and Evelyn De Morgan, the exhibitions of De Morgan artwork at Leighton House in the early 20th century, and Ida Perrin and the Bushey Heath Pottery, which continued De Morgan's ceramic legacy decades after his death. Watch here...

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Friday 9th July 2021 - Whistler Birthday celebration, The Chelsea Arts Club.

Wednesday 6th October 2021 - Whistler Society AGM at the Founders Hall, Radnor Walk, Chelsea SW34 4BN
A NEW LOOK FOR THE WHISTLER SOCIETY - Summer 2021

We are pleased to announce that the Whistler Society will be benefiting from a well overdue redesign to its website, including a new platform to view our journal online, as well as a blog to host our *Letters from America* written by the Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Arkansas, and renowned Whistler scholar, Dr Dan Sutherland. We will also be developing a brand new newsletter to work in tandem with our social media and website, to provide you with all our news and content relating to James McNeill Whistler and his circle, as well as lectures, discussions and events hosted by the society in the future.

Watch this space…

FROM THE ROSTRUM: STORIES FROM THE AUCTION FLOOR

MORTIMER MENPES REDISCOVERED March 19th 2021

A work by Mortimer Menpes went on sale under the radar at Parker Fine Art Auctions in March this year. The small oil on panel was one of a group of small works exhibited by the artist in 1885, only three of which have previously been traced. The following text, adapted from Julie Robinson’s *The World of Mortimer Menpes. Painter, Etcher, Raconteur* explains the background of this understated work, which this editor hopes to see in a public collection soon.

In 1885 and 1886 Mortimer Menpes became engrossed in oil painting, producing small-scale figure studies indebted to the aesthetic style of James McNeill Whistler. These years marked the height of Menpes’s association with Whistler and his circle: in December 1885, Menpes was one of four artists to publicly identify himself as a 'pupil of Whistler'. 'Whistler, as an influential council member and then President of the Society of British Artists,' encouraged his pupils' involvement with the Society. This gave Menpes the impetus to focus on his paintings — eight were shown in the Society’s Winter exhibition, which opened in December 1885, while eleven were shown in the April 1886 exhibition.'

Until now, just three of these paintings have been traced: *A little boy blue (Toby no. 1)* c.1885, *His début* c.1885-86 and *Dolex fariente* c.1885-86. They reveal Menpes's interest in portraiture or, more particularly, 'aesthetic figure studies', since in these paintings he was less interested in producing
likenesses than in creating arrangements of forms and harmonies of colour and tone. His debut is an especially minimal composition, which could be regarded as a study in tones of red with black and brown. A reviewer referred to Menpes's paintings in the April 1886 exhibition as: a dozen small splashes of colour in silver-gilt frames, in which the theory of ran pour l'art is carried out to its logical conclusion ... they are chromatic experiments, arrangements in this, or harmonies in that.'

In this period, in common with other members of Whistler's circle, Menpes often used family members and friends as models.' This new portrait, along with Dolce far niente, which translates as 'the sweetness of doing nothing', portrays a young woman standing side on, her face turned away from the viewer. Her identity becomes inconsequential, with the viewer's attention focused instead on the pictorial details of the painting: the delicate beauty of the colours in the oriental robe, fan and background curtain.

The subject, however, is Maud Franklin (1857-1941), Whistler's mistress from 1877 until 1888. She was an artist herself, exhibiting under the pseudonym of Clifton Lin, and was a popular model for Whistler and others. As Margaret MacDonald has noted, in one exhibition Franklin was represented both as an artist and as the subject of two paintings by other artists." Dolce far niente is one of at least three paintings Menpes made of Franklin at the time. The full-length pose and shallow pictorial space are typical of Whistler's approach to portraiture and the touch of Japonaiserie also reveals the influence of his 'Master'—Whistler, a leading Japoniste, had begun to include Japanese motifs in his portraits from the mid 1860s.

Mortimer Luddington Menpes (1855-1938) British. "Light and Shade", Oil on panel, Signed, and Inscribed on labels on reverse, (21.5 x 12.2cm). 19 March 2021 Parker Fine Art Auctions, Farnham, Surry, lot 638

Adapted from The World of Mortimer Menpes. Painter, Etcher, Raconteur, Julie Robinson, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2014
This bookcase stood in the study of ‘The Pines’, a large Victorian villa in Putney, shared by the poet, playwright, novelist, and critic Algernon Swinburne (1837-1909) and his companion, the poet and critic Theodore Watts-Dunton (1832-1914). A label affixed to the interior of this bookcase reads: “These two bookcases which for thirty years were in Swinburne’s study at The Pines are of a special interest. They were designed and executed by Whistler at the conclusion of the settlement of the quarrel of Leyland over the Peacock Room. Watts-Dunton acted as solicitor in the affair & Whistler gave one each of the bookcases to the Housemates at The Pines. Both however find themselves in the study of the Poet. Whistler painted the insects and fr** etc himself”.

The bookcase, made up with Japanese lacquered panel ends, can be seen in situ at ‘The Pines’ in a photograph of circa 1904 and later gilt embellishments can also be made out on one of the end panels. The author of the note is unknown but may have been a subsequent owner. The ‘pair’ of bookcases may allude to the fact that the bookcase is double-sided. Another piece of lacquer furniture in the room was a gift from the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), a friend of Watts-Dunton and it seems that quite several pieces of furniture at ‘The Pines’ were a gift of the artist.

“Mr. Watts-Dunton’s allusion to the Rossetti mementoes requires a word of explanation. Rossetti, it seems, was very fond of surprising his friends by un-expected tokens of generosity. I have heard Mr. Watts-Dunton say that during the week when he was moving into ‘The Pines,’ he spent as usual Wednesday night at 16 Cheyne Walk, and he and Rossetti sat talking into the small hours. Next morning after breakfast he strolled across to Whistler’s house to have a talk with the ever-interesting painter, and this resulted in his getting home two hours later than usual. On reaching the new house he saw a waggon standing in front of it. He did not understand this, for the furniture from the previous residence had been all removed. He went up to the waggon and was surprised to find it full of furniture of a choice kind. But there was no need for him to give much time to an examination of the furniture, for he found he was familiar with every piece of it. It had come straight from Rossetti’s house, having been secretly packed and sent off by Dunn on the previous day. Some of the choicest things at “The Pines” came in this way. Not a word had Rossetti said about this generous little trick on the night before. The superb Chinese cabinet, a photograph of which appears in this book, belonged to Rossetti.”
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

An eagle-eyed reader of ‘Lady Meux: Of Dubious and Questionable Memory,’ printed in our March newsletter, noted …

“I much enjoyed the March Newsletter, particularly the piece about Lady Meux. I did not know she had been responsible for the preservation and re-erection of Wren's beautiful Temple Bar which used to stand as the City gateway in Fleet Street. Her country estate at Theobalds Park, where Temple Bar stood during its long exile from the City of London is incidentally in Hertfordshire not Herefordshire. Its re-erection in Paternoster Square in 2004 was a great triumph and had she not preserved it when it was dismantled it may well have disappeared altogether. I have attached an image.” - Michael Biscoe

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 contact us at enquires@whistlersociety.org

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