James Whistler has been the target of many accusations and slanders, but none seems more ridiculous than the suggestion that he was not well read. A clear statement of this misguided notion comes from Mortimer Menpes, one of Whistler’s most dedicated followers. The Master, Menpes asserted, “read very little—I never saw him read a book.” Time to expose this canard.

To begin with, Whistler was reared in an extraordinarily literate family. An early etching, done in 1859, shows his sister Deborah reading by lamplight. Not counting the Bible, which Anna Whistler required of all her children, Jamie was reading the novels of James Fenimore Cooper by age nine. A year later, he became immersed in a biography of Sweden’s Charles XII, very likely the one written by Voltaire. At age fourteen, he devoured a book about the Italian Renaissance and Sir Joshua Reynolds’ magisterial Discourses on Art, the latter being a Christmas present from his father. With that sort of grounding, and considering Whistler’s inquisitive mind and creative instincts, reading became a lifelong habit.

Like most of us, he was drawn mainly to subjects that interested him. Whistler did not, for example, read newspapers with any regularity, even though he always seemed well informed about current events. Symptomatic of his instinct for viewing the world with a “painter’s eye,” he preferred fiction and poetry. He confirmed his preference for novels at West Point. Besides Cooper, whom he continued to enjoy, he added Walter Scott, Samuel Butler, Elizabeth Southall, Oliver Goldsmith, and Charles Dickens. Menpes insisted that Whistler “could find no excuse for Dickens,” but that is nonsense, there being no greater literary influence on him. Whistler sketched scenes from the Englishman’s novels; colourful phrases and the names of memorable characters became part of his vocabulary. While working in Washington, D.C., following his dismissal from the military academy, Whistler bestowed Dickensian names, including Micawber, Heep, Swiveller, and Esmeralda, on several cronies, no doubt according to their personalities. He thought of himself as Sam Weller, the clever Cockney from The Pickwick Papers. In later years, his enemies became Pecksniffs and Podsnaps.

Whistler enjoyed French literature, too. The landmark novel À Rebours (1884), by Joris-Karl Huysmans, introduced him and the world to the Symbolist movement. He also read Huysmans’ more scandalous La Bas and savoured several other Symbolist writers and poets, including Francis Viele-Griffin, Octave Mirbeau, and Stéphane Mallarmé. He became dear friends with Mallarmé, whom he trusted to translate the Ten O’Clock Lecture into French.
Mallarmé had earlier translated the poems of Edgar Allen Poe, another Whistler favourite, whom even Menpes acknowledged had influenced Whistler’s thinking “immensely.” Other poets we know him to have read were Thomas Hood, John Gray, Algernon Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Robert de Montesquiou, and Charles Baudelaire. Whistler read Baudelaire’s essays and reviews, too, but one of his poems, The Red-Haired Beggar Girl, very likely helped inspire one of Whistler’s most famous paintings, Symphony in White No. 1, better known as The White Girl. Similarly, a Rossetti poem, Jenny, may have prompted a Whistler etching, Weary.

Two other literary connections are less speculative. A portrait of Maud Franklin as “Effie Dean,” the unwed mother in Scott’s Heart of Midlothian, was done when Maud was pregnant with her first child, in 1876. A few years earlier, the heroine of a poem by Poe inspired Annabel Lee. So much for Whistler’s aversion to “story-telling” in painting.

It is unclear how much of Shakespeare Whistler read. He was thoroughly familiar with the plays, although, in this case, familiarity seems to have bred laughter. More than one of Whistler’s friends heard him expound on the “practical impossibility” of performing the Bard’s plays. He thought their “poetic power” too boundless for the stage.

We have a good idea of the scope of Whistler’s readings because much of his personal library has survived in the Special Collections of the University of Glasgow Library. In addition to much history and books about art and artists, numerous novelists are represented. Besides those already mentioned, one finds the work of Bret Harte, George Moore, Theodore Dreiser, Honoré de Balzac, Émile Zola, Théophile Gautier, Bram Stoker, Walter Besant, Eliza Humphreys, Edmund Gosse, Margaret Oliphant, and Henry James. We also know that some books Whistler is known to have read, including James’s The Spoils of Poynton, are missing from the collection.

So, to say, as some have done, that Whistler rarely read a book sorely underestimates his breadth of knowledge. No one could have been as riveting a conversationalist, as we know him to have been, without being well read. His facility with language as a writer also marks him as someone who had learned from the very best authors and poets. The Ten O’Clock, for instance, is filled with literary allusions, turns of phrase, and ideas taken from other works, not least the Bible.

Interestingly enough, Whistler has himself been the subject of poetry and a character in novels, in both his own time and the 20th and 21st centuries. That topic, however, must be explored on another occasion.

Images
James McNeill Whistler, Reading by Lamplight, 1859, Etching and drypoint
James McNeill Whistler, Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl, 1862, oil on canvas, Harris Whittemore Collection
James McNeill Whistler, ‘Arrangement in Yellow and Gray’: Effie Deans, c. 1876 - c. 1878, oil on canvas, Rijks Museum Collection
MEMBERS’ EVENTS

WHISTLER’S WEST END - with Victoria Bennett

Join art historian and Whistler Society Committee Member Victoria Bennett for an in-person walk around Whistler's West End in September. Starting outside Sotheby's New Bond Street and culminating at the Fine Art Society for refreshments.

Registration details will be provided to members in August.

A NOTE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

WHISTLER’S CORNER - with the Cheyne Walk Trust

Looking at the marvellous work the Cheyne Walk are doing, our chairman, Martin Riley commented, “The work at Whistler’s Corner really has been a revelation. Whistler himself would have been delighted with the huge improvements to his special place on the Thames Riverside. His critical eye will twinkle as he surveys the scene.

Huge thanks are due to all who have helped with this project to date and for the work planned for the future.”

Whistler’s Corner does, of course, have a very special place at the heart of the society. The statue of Whistler was erected in 2005, and is the work of the sculptor Nicholas Dimbleby. A project backed by our co-founder, the late David Le Lay.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

WHISTLER SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING - 6th October 2021

We are pleased to announce that the Whistler Society AGM will be held at Founders Hall on Wednesday 6th October 2021. Further details will be distributed to members in the coming months.
WHISTLER ONLINE

‘THE NOCTURNES’: A SÉANCE WITH WHISTLER

NOW AVAILABLE ONLINE

Finally you can relive that evening back in April when we summoned Mr. Whistler from beyond the grave to regale us with stories from his life and answer our most urgent questions. To watch the video recording, please click here.

RUBENS TO SICKERT: THE STUDY OF DRAWING - University of Reading

James Anthony Betts (1897 – 1980) led the School of Art at the University of Reading from 1933 – 1963. His most important legacy is the little-known collection of master drawings he assembled for the University in the 1950s. Much of this is now on public display for the first time. Throughout Betts’ career, drawing the model from life was at the centre of the British art school curriculum. The works exhibited here reflect this focus and show how approaches to drawing shifted over time. Betts’ lifetime was a period of great change in drawing practices. Accurate drawings of perfect bodies were increasingly abandoned. Life drawing was soon overshadowed by abstract experiments in line, form and colour.
DATES FOR THE DIARY

**SICKERT: A LIFE IN ART** - The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, UK  
- 18 September 2021 to 27 February 2022

The Walker Art Gallery will present a major exhibition of artwork by Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942) from 18 September 2021 to 27 February 2022. Sickert: A Life in Art will be the largest retrospective of the artist’s work to have been held in the UK for more than 30 years. The exhibition will showcase around 100 loaned paintings and 200 drawings. The Walker holds 349 of the artist’s drawings, which is the largest collection in the world. Most of these have never been displayed before. Together, they demonstrate the varied, yet vital, role that drawing played in Sickert’s artistic practice.

**VISIONS OF VENICE** - The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA  
- 18 September 2021 to 27 February 2022

In 1879 American artist James McNeill Whistler was commissioned by the Fine Art Society, a commercial gallery in London, to produce twelve etchings of Venice over a three-month period. Finding a seemingly endless source of subject matter, the artist stayed in the city for fourteen months, creating fifty-one etchings, one hundred pastels, and numerous paintings. This exhibition showcases thirty of Whistler’s etchings of Venice on loan from the private collection of Ambassador C. Boyden Gray.

**PRINT REBELS** - The City Assembly House, Dublin, Ireland  
- 9th July to 27th August 2021

'Print REbels' presents a collection of 140 historical and contemporary original prints that was first brought together at the Bankside Gallery, London in 2018 to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of the founder and first President of the Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers, Francis Seymour Haden.

**WHISTLER: ART AND LEGACY** - The Hunterian, Glasgow, UK  
- 9 July to 31 October 2021

The Hunterian at the University of Glasgow is home to one of the world’s largest collections of the work of American artist James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) which includes paintings, drawings, watercolours, pastels, etchings and lithographs, as well as extensive holdings of his artist’s materials and the contents of his studio.

Whistler: Art and Legacy is a major new exhibition which showcases The Hunterian collection’s strengths and richness, exploring the development of Whistler’s artistic practice and how the University of Glasgow came to acquire this leading collection through the generosity of Whistler's sister-in-law, Rosalind Birnie Philip (1873–1958).
HOKUSAI’S WAVE – The Freer Art Gallery

Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai may be best known for his iconic woodblock print, “Great Wave off Kanagawa,” (which as you know has been frequently imitated and parodied – including on the side of this Georgetown house) yet few are familiar with another work—a breath-taking painting titled “Breaking Waves”—that was created 15 years later at the height of his career. Now that rarely seen painting, the culmination of Hokusai’s lifelong effort to capture the sea, is on view at the newly opened Freer Gallery of Art (Jefferson Drive at 12th St. S.W.).

BLENDING FOLKLORE AND ART IN THE WORK OF JOHN WILLIAM WATERHOUSE – A podcast by Icy Sedgwick

“Whenever you go looking for artworks to illustrate articles about folklore and mythology, one name keeps popping up. That’s Victorian artist, John William Waterhouse. He used many myths and legends to inspire his work, including the literary varieties available via the Romantic poets. In this article, let’s explore the link between folklore and art within Waterhouse’s work! We’ll look at three more artists throughout July.”

SOMETHING A BIT DIFFERENT

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER

by Beresford Egan (1905–1984)

Brought to our attention by Whistler impersonator Darcy Sullivan.

Egan was, like Whistler, a dandy and witty raconteur. It is also appropriate that the illustration appears in ‘Man About Town’ as this was perhaps the first modern men’s ‘lifestyle’ magazine mixing humorous articles with styling tips, in a manner later revived by @thechapmag.

Examples of Egan’s wit appear in his first semi-autobiographical novel, 'Pollen' (1933). It’s a tale of bohemian art-deco decadence set in the club-land of London's West End, with a quick visit to the dives of Parisian Montmartre for good measure. Good girls, bad girls and even an out gay character all make their appearance. It is also illustrated by the author in his earlier (and wonderful) art-deco style. This novel was re-issued (with extra material) by Side Real Press a few years ago.
The Side Real website also carries a lengthy essay on Egan and his art and includes many examples of his work.

BLUEGRASS WHISTLER

Whistler continues to pop up in the most unlikely of places. If you listen closely, you can hear Whistler’s Mother in There’s a Woman Behind Every Man, by one of the early bluegrass bands, The Osborne Brothers. Listen here...

WHISTLER REDISCOVERED

CAMPANILE AT LIDO October 23, 1879

“What appears 'slight' is the evident outcome of much thought, the scribble has no scribbling in it, and the colour is often attained by interweaving other colours, and breaking it all in lovely though measured spray over the brown or grey field.” –Edward William Godwin

In the Spring of 1879, The Fine Art Society, London, offered James McNeil Whistler a commission to travel to Venice to produce a set of twelve etchings depicting the city. Financially
bankrupt at the time, Whistler agreed and signed an agreement with the gallery on September 9, 1879.

On September 20th, Whistler arrived in Venice. Poverty stricken, he sought out the cheapest lodgings in the Sestieri of Dorsoduro and San Polo. The American artist Ross Turner recalled visiting Whistler on the Rio San Barnaba, where Whistler had a “small house with a garden,” though it is not clear if this was where Whistler first lived. Turner also remembered Whistler having a studio nearby in the Ca’ Rezzonico, an enormous and run-down studio building.

Whistler spent the first month “wandering the narrow streets of Venice, becoming acclimated to the unique environment of the lagoon city.” On at least one occasion he rode in a gondola to the Fondamenta Nove, located on Venice’s northern shore. On October 20, 1879, Maud Franklin joined Whistler in Venice.

Three days later, on October 23rd, 1879, Maud wrote to George Lucas in Paris: “We are just off to the Lido. Oh, isn’t this a lovely place and such a lovely day too.” Whistler and Maud made the day trip to the Lido by local waterbus. They disembarked at the landing located near the church of Santa Maria Elisabetta. From there, it is a short walk to the back of the Church of Santa Maria Elisabetta, where Whistler found a small square that backed onto the church and began his second inscribed extant Venetian pastel, Campanile at Lido. Whistler inscribed the Campanile at Lido, “No. 3.”

It is known Whistler left London with “a supply of small sheets of rough, toothy brown paper, excellent for pastels.” This suggests he was calculating producing pastels for an exhibition even before he left London. “At some point early on, Whistler must have begun to create pastels that he intended to sell” as he “undoubtedly saw his pastels as a business proposition.”

It is proposed that the reason Whistler began to inscribe pastels numerically is because he intended these works to be separate from his other pastels. By numbering a selection of them, he could keep a loose inventory of works he intended to include in future exhibitions. The first two important Venetian pastels he inscribed, The Cemetery (“No. 2”) and Campanile at Lido (“No. 3”), were not only the very first autonomous landscape pastels Whistler produced in Venice, but as importantly, the first he produced in his oeuvre to date. Until that point, the very few landscape pastels he did were color studies and not independent works of art. For the first time, in Venice “his pastels do not focus on figures but on scenes of Venice. When he returned to London and took up pastels again, the women return [as subjects]. . . . After Venice, he created no more pastels of [landscape] scenes....”

Whistler continued to inscribe pastels numerically during his time in Venice. In all, he numbered a total of twenty-five pastels and included twenty-one of these in the 1881 exhibition of Venice Pastels at The Fine Art Society, including the first two extant inscribed pastels, The
Cemetery (“No. 2”) and Campanile at Lido (“No. 3”). The pastels Whistler inscribed are not always consecutive and he omitted or removed several possible inscription numbers at different intervals, as well as using the same number twice (as evidenced by “No. 11”).

Of the twenty-one inscribed pastels included in The Fine Art Society exhibition, all are in museum collections with the exception of The Giudecca - Winter, grey & blue (“No. 23”) and Campanile at Lido (“No. 3”). Further, of the entire group of fifty-three pastels included in the Venice Pastels exhibition, only eight are in private hands, including Campanile at Lido. Campanile at Lido has no history after The Fine Art Society exhibition of 1881 and had disappeared from view until it surfaced in 1980 in the London sale at Sotheby’s. This one-hundred-year hiatus—plus the forty years since the Sotheby’s sale—has meant the pastel has been sequestered for nearly a hundred and forty years. The third known Venetian pastel, Campanile at Lido is an important early Venetian work and one that Whistler found important enough to inscribe and keep safe between silver paper during his time in Venice.

Text by Michael Owen, Owen Gallery

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Remember, if you have anything to contribute, submissions are open.

Simply email us at enquires@whistlersociety.org.

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

FOLLOW THE WHISTLER SOCIETY ON SOCIAL MEDIA