James Whistler and Edgar Allen Poe rank as two of West Point’s most famous failures, at least as potential army officers. Whistler was dismissed from the Academy for both academic and disciplinary failings, Poe mostly for the latter. Whistler at least survived for three years as a cadet; Poe lasted less than one year. The two men never met. Poe died in 1849. Whistler, aged fifteen, had recently returned to the United States after living for six years in Russia and England.

When Whistler first read Poe’s work is uncertain, though it was most likely at West Point, where the poet already ranked as a legend. Whistler would have thrilled to Poe’s tales of horror and suspense, especially a story like “The Fall of the House of Usher,” in which the main character is an artist. The poetry, too, drew Whistler, just as it did such literary friends and influences as Charles Baudelaire, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Swinburne, Stephane Mallarme, Robert de Montesquieu, and Oscar Wilde.

Poe’s ideas about art, nature, and beauty, expressed in such essays as “Nature and Art,” “The Philosophy of Furniture,” “The Poetic Principle,” “The Landscape Garden,” and “The Philosophy of Composition,” also caught Whistler’s attention. Indeed, several of Poe’s essays helped to shape Whistler’s own ideas about art in the late 1860s and early 1870s.

To begin with, Poe proposed that Nature is imperfect but can be improved by the “artist.” Beauty alone, he declared, should be the purpose of art, and while it must serve “noble” ends, it should never promote moral values, facile emotions, or political sentiments. Art should avoid the concrete in favour of the atmospheric and ephemeral. Poe’s favourite paintings were “landscapes of an imaginative cast.” In portraiture, he preferred idealized pictures of beautiful women. Poe also disdained fashionable whims and deplored the public’s aesthetic tastes.

Sound like anyone we know? But there was something more. Deeply impressed by the scientific advances and debates of his own day, Poe drew on the imaginative power of science for his fiction. His tales and stories are filled with references to scientific phenomenon. His fictional detective C. Auguste Dupin preceded Sherlock Holmes in the use of deductive
reasoning. Poe even thought of writing as a rational process, governed by uniform laws and based on immutable principles. A poet, like an engineer, he insisted, must think in precise, deliberate terms. A poem or story had many moving parts—plot, characters, place, situation—but the whole must be calculated to create a single dramatic effect through “absolute truth of the entire design.” Nor did it arise from a sudden burst of inspiration, but only from careful construction. It unfolded “step by step, to its completion, with the precision and rigid consequences of a mathematical problem.” Elsewhere, Poe wrote of the “undeviating principles which regulate all varieties of art; and very nearly the same laws by which we decide on the higher merits of a painting.”

As the son of an engineer, Whistler understood. In 1867—coincidentally, the same year he began his painting Annabel Lee, the title of a Poe poem—Whistler abandoned the lavish colours of his earlier paintings to concentrate more on line and harmony. His solution, as it happens, echoes Poe’s essay “The Philosophy of Composition.” In explaining why he constructed his poem “The Raven” around a single haunting refrain, Nevermore, Poe emphasized that “repetition” and “variation” of the word held the poem together and produced a memorable climax. Applying this idea to painting, Whistler saw that a single colour, “the true colour,” like a literary refrain, could achieve the same ends. It was how Japanese artists, whom he already revered, “embroidered” a canvas, with “the same colour reappearing continually here and there like a thread . . . the whole forming in this way an harmonious pattern.”

In 1878, Whistler articulated many of Poe’s ideas in “The Red Rag,” but he required more time to appreciate fully the science that united them. He mentioned the “science of colour” in an 1872 letter to Henri Fantin Latour and spoke of the “painters science” in 1880, but not until “The Ten O’Clock” lecture, in 1885, did Whistler espouse the science of art. The lecture shows the influence of many and varied people on his thinking, but one hears Poe whispering to him throughout. Even as Whistler spoke of the “painter’s poetry,” he extolled “the science of the artist.” He insisted that art, and especially painting, was a science, and that the beauty of nature could be revealed only by applying scientific principles. “Nature,” he explained, “contains the elements, in colour and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of music. But the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful—as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he brings forth from chaos glorious harmony.”

That Poe also believed in the intimate links between language and music, defining poetry as the “Rhythmical Creation of Beauty,” would have pleased Whistler—scientifically speaking, that is.

We continue to be grateful to Dan Sutherland for his Letters from America. They originate from his notes and research for his forthcoming book which will explore the enduring influence of James McNeill Whistler and the lives of those he knew and inspired.
EXCLUSIVE OFFER

TOWARDS THE SUN: THE ARTIST-TRAVELLER AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY - by Prof. Kenneth McConkey’s

While there have been monographs on British artist-travellers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there has been no equivalent survey of what the writer, Henry Blackburn, described as ‘artistic travel’ a hundred years later. By 1900, the ‘Grand Tourist’ became a ‘globe-trotter’ equipped with a camera, and despite the development of ‘knapsack photography’, visual recording by the old media of oil and watercolour on-the-spot sketching remained ever-popular.

Kenneth McConkey’s exciting new book explores the complex reasons for this in a series of chapters that take the reader from southern Europe to north Africa, the Middle East, India and Japan revealing many artist-travellers whose lives and works are scarcely remembered today. He alerts us to a generation of painters, trained in academies and artists’ colonies in Europe that acted as crèches for those would go on to explore life and landscape further afield. Read more

For Whistler Society members and followers we are happy to offer Professor McConkey’s book at the reduced price of £50. (RRP £65) Simply use the code WHISTLER at the online checkout on the Paul Holberton Publishing website.

FUTURE EVENTS

THE NOCTURNES: A CHRISTMAS CAROL SéANCE
- with Mr Whistler!

Join us as once again Whistler-impersonator Darcy Sullivan brings James McNeill Whistler to life to address our member’s questions about his life and art. Darcy is a member of the Whistler Society and press officer of the Oscar Wilde Society and has written extensively on dandies and comic books. He played James McNeill Whistler in Oscar's People a short play written and directed by Oscar Wilde Society member Neil Titley in 2018. You can find him on Facebook at The Pictures of Dorian Gray, The Arkham Hillbilly and Proust Spoiler Alert.

Tuesday 23 November
18:00 – 19:00 GMT

Please register here
A NOTE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2021 - at Founder’s Hall, Chelsea

It was a pleasure to see so many members commemorating the life of James McNeil Whistler at his statute on the Embankment last month. In normal times we celebrate on Whistler's Birthday (July 11th) but this year our commemoration preceded our Annual General Meeting on 5th October. It was a privilege to introduce The Worshipful Mayor of Kensington and Chelsea, Councillor Gerard Hargreaves who spoke of the need for societies like ours to keep alive traditions and celebrate the history and diversity of the borough in particular and London as a whole.

Colonel David Waddell, chairman of the Cheyne Walk Trust, shared the laying of flowers with the Mayor and spoke of Whistler's long and colourful association with Cheyne Walk. My grateful thanks to them both for their time and enthusiasm.

Geoffrey Matthews and Ginger Gibbons, respectively Secretary and Chairman of the Chelsea Arts Club were also in attendance thereby reinforcing the strong association we have with the Club.

Pictured above is the chairman of the Whistler Society, Martin Riley (left), David Waddell (right) and Councillor Gerard Hargreaves (centre).

AGM Report to be issued to members shortly.
James Whistler was friendly with many French artists. In 1905, after his death, the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers (founded by Whistler in London) commissioned a memorial from Rodin. Rather than portraying the painter himself, Rodin borrowed the features of his own model and mistress, the Welsh painter Gwen John (1876-1939), to depict Whistler’s muse: an allegorical female figure, shown climbing the mountain of recognition.

The resulting figure is both majestic and disconcerting: arms were added later and are strangely proportioned. The figure’s pose is reminiscent of the Venus de Milo, but this tribute to antiquity—confirmed by the cast of a small altar from Rodin’s personal collection of antiquities—was not enough to convince the committee, which rejected the project when it was finally submitted in 1918 by Léonce Bénédite (1859-1925), curator of the newly-founded Musée Rodin, Paris.

This cast is on view in Berkeley Square courtesy of Gagosian Gallery until 18 December 2021

EXHIBITIONS

HOKUSAI: THE GREAT PICTURE BOOK OF EVERYTHING
- British Museum, London - Until 30 January 2022

Discover a collection of rare drawings by Katsushika Hokusai – one of Japan’s most celebrated artists, best known for his iconic print, Under the Wave off Kanagawa, popularly called The Great Wave. In a global first, this exhibition will display 103 recently acquired drawings by Hokusai, produced in the 1820s–1840s for an illustrated encyclopaedia called The Great Picture Book of Everything. For reasons unknown, the book was never published, presenting the opportunity to see these exceptional works which would otherwise have been destroyed as part of the woodblock printing process. Read more…

SUBLIME SYMMETRY: DE MORGAN CERAMICS
- Lady Lever Art Gallery in Port Sunlight, UK - until 9 January 2022

A stunning collection of ceramic objects by the Victorian, pre-eminent ceramic designer, William De Morgan, is opening at the Lady Lever Art Gallery in Port Sunlight, featuring around 70 objects on loan from The De Morgan Foundation. See here…
SARGENT, WHISTLER AND VENETIAN GLASS:
AMERICAN ARTISTS AND THE MAGIC OF MURANO
- The Smithsonian American Art Museum, USA - until 8 May 2022

The exhibition brings to life the Venetian glass revival of the late 19th century and the artistic experimentation the city inspired for visiting artists. It is the first comprehensive examination of American tourism, artmaking and art collecting in Venice, revealing the glass furnaces and their new creative boom as a vibrant facet of the city’s allure. Read here…

OTHERS TO SEE

THE MALE PORTRAIT - Wallace Collection, London - until 30 January 2022

THE SUMMER EXHIBITION – Royal Academy of Arts, London - until 2 January 2022


DATES FOR THE DIARY

ROSSETTI'S PORTRAITS - The Holburne Museum, Bath, UK
- 24 September 2021 - 9 January 2022

This autumn sees a unique show devoted to one of the giants of Victorian art open at Bath’s Holburne Museum – the first ever exhibition dedicated to Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s portraits. Rossetti’s Portraits features some of his most iconic artworks, including The Blue Silk Dress (Jane Morris), 1868, which reveal the artist at the height of his creative powers, alongside his less well-known, but equally compelling early drawings of friends, family and fellow Pre-Raphaelite artists. The exhibition also explores the artist’s intimate relationship with his muses and their influence on his depiction of beauty. Read more…

LATE CONSTABLE - The Royal Academy of Art, London
- 30 October 2021 - 13 February 2022

John Constable is one of Britain’s best-known artists: a graduate of the RA Schools and a regular exhibitor at the Summer Exhibition, his ascent to fame is closely tied with the history of the RA. Yet, until now, the RA has never staged a major retrospective of his work. This exhibition – which spans from 1825 until the artist’s unexpected death in 1837 – explores Constable’s late style through his paintings and oil sketches as well as watercolours, drawings and prints. Read more…
DÜRER'S JOURNEYS: TRAVELS OF A RENAISSANCE ARTIST

- The National Gallery, London - 20 November - 27 February 2022

Through paintings, drawings, prints, and letters, this exhibition follows Dürer’s travels across Europe, bringing to life the artist himself, and the people and places he visited. Charting his journeys to the Alps, Italy, Venice and the Netherlands, the exhibition will explore how Dürer's travels sparked an exchange of ideas with Netherlandish and Italian Renaissance artists, fuelled his curiosity and creativity, and increased his fame and influence across Europe.

Read more …

BOOK NOW

WHISTLER'S WOMAN IN WHITE: JOANNA HIFFERNAN

- The Royal Academy of Arts, London - 26 February - 22 May 2022

Many of James McNeill Whistler’s works feature the red-haired figure of Joanna Hiffernan. Her close professional and personal relationship with the artist lasted for two decades, yet little about her role or influence in his life has been explored – until now. This exhibition brings together portraits of Hiffernan, ranging from innovative paintings, prints and drawings that challenged cultural norms and established Whistler’s reputation as one of the most influential artists of the late 19th century. Book now

WHISTLER ONLINE

ESSAY: WILLIAM MORRIS, UTOPIAN SOCIALISM, AND THE VALUE OF ART OVER NUMBERS

- by Anna Neill, Los Angeles Review of Books

In the wake of the global Covid-19 pandemic, Anna Neill considers the true value of art in a heavily industrialised world, and how it enriches our lives. Read more…

FROM THE AUCTION FLOOR

A PORTRAIT OF DASHA (DEBORAH) WHISTLER

- by Frederick Beaumont (1861-1956)

An unusual and rare portrait of Deborah Haden (nee Whistler) has come up at London's Olympia Auctions. Deborah, affectionately known as Dasha, was the daughter of George Washington Whistler and his first wife Mary Roberdeau Swift. She had two brothers, George William and Joseph Swift, and also five half-brothers, including James Whistler, after her father, William McNeill, married his second wife Anna Matilda McNeill in 1831 following Mary's death four years previous. On 16 October 1847, Deborah married the collector and etcher, Francis Seymour Haden.
In November 1858, Whistler stayed with Deborah and her family at 62 Sloane Street, London. There he painted his half-sister along with her daughter Annie in At the Piano. Whistler also depicted the family in numerous etchings and drawings whilst he stayed with them. The siblings saw increasingly less of each other following a dispute in 1867. Whistler had quarrelled with Seymour Haden and pushed him through a plate-glass window in Paris. The two never spoke again, and it was a while before Deborah could communicate with her brother. She outlived Whistler by 20 years. This intimate portrait depicts Deborah in later life. 

AN AESTHETIC ODYSSEY: THE PETER ROSE AND ALBERT GALLICHAN COLLECTION - Christie’s, London

Those of you who were familiar with what was known publicly as The Albert Dawson Collection, will know that it went on sale last month at Christie’s in London. Peter Rose and Albert Gallichan were pioneering collectors of nineteenth-century fine and decorative arts, this unique collection was a shared passion assembled over the course of a lifetime by the couple from the 1950s onwards. Comprising over 300 lots of decorative arts and paintings spanning the major movements of the later 19th century, the collection has a distinct focus on works by British artists and designers. Academically important and highly regarded, this collection is a unique microcosm of the best of the period. Highlights can be viewed here

SOMETHING A BIT DIFFERENT

ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS STUDENTS' CLUBS

by Prof. Martin Ferguson Smith, OBE

Professor Fergusson - recent author of book In and out of Bloomsbury: Biographical Essays on Twentieth-Century Writers and Artists - This tale of two clubs is one that has never been told before. Each club had premises close to Piccadilly Circus. The earlier one, established in 1883, was very short lived, but hosted important and influential lectures on art by Oscar Wilde and James McNeill Whistler. The later one, opened in 1889, held regular meetings, especially smoking concerts – a sure sign that only men were eligible for membership! The exclusion of women is considered alongside discussion of their status and discriminatory treatment in the Royal Academy Schools in the nineteenth century. Most of the illustrations are of the posters and invitations designed by the students. Read here …
THE OXFORD UNION PRE-RAPHAELITE MURALS

Built in 1857 and originally the Society’s debating chamber, the Oxford Union Library is one of the most beautiful libraries in the world and a striking example of Victorian architecture.

The murals adorning its walls were painted by none other than William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and retain the stunning vibrancy typical of Pre-Raphaelite art. Read more…

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Mr Darcy Sullivan

Further to Dan Sutherland’s article, (The Literate Whistler, Summer 2021, ed. 35) where he mentioned that Whistler had read Huysmans’ A Rebours and La Bas, Huysmans wrote about Whistler in a book called Certains, which has just been published in English by Dedalus Press. Of further interest to Whistlerians is that the short sample chapter on the Dedalus website is the one on Whistler!

Huysmans was both perceptive and appreciative. Here's a taste:

“A clairvoyant artist, drawing out the suprasensible from the real, Whistler's landscapes make me think of several poems of a murmuring and caressing softness, as confessed, as whispered, by Verlaine. At certain moments be, like Whistler, evokes subtle insinuations, and at others, sways as if in an incantation from which an occult spell emerges. Verlaine has evidently gone to the limits of poetry, to where it evaporates completely and where the art of the musician begins. Whistler, in his harmonies of tones, goes almost beyond the limits of painting: he enters the country of letters, and advances along the melancholy shores on which Verlaine's pale flowers grow”

Read here…

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 £35

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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