Whistler's Place in Nineteenth Century Art

American expatriate James McNeill Whistler is as elusive to fully grasp today as he was difficult to categorize during his long and innovative career. He was a significant painter, printmaker, and theoretician whose work is recognized as an important achievement in nineteenth century art, but whose importance as a precursor of twentieth century art movements remains undervalued. Whistler, in both his work and his writing, deserves to be mentioned with the same admiration and respect reserved for Manet and Cézanne, as a radical reformer of the pictorial arts and a pioneer in the development of nonrepresentational art. Yet, because his work does not fit comfortably into one of the major, easily-defined popular movements of the later nineteenth century, academics often give him short shrift. Aesthetically, Whistler always pursued his own single-minded vision of art. This has led to one of the supreme ironies of art history—although the gregarious painter both craved and received enormous attention in England, France, and the United States during his lifetime, his unique development and achievement placed him outside the traditionally accepted narrative of the history of art.

Whistler receives scant attention in the general overviews of Western art, and even in most surveys of nineteenth-century painting, owing to the difficulty in placing his work in a particular category or movement.[1] Occasionally, Whistler's *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (Slide 1) is illustrated in a survey, but mostly for its political role in the *Salon des Refusés*. More often the authors choose the familiar *Arrangement in Gray and Black, No. 1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (Slide 2) and one of the landscape nocturnes of the 1870s, sometimes *Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge* (Slide 3) or occasionally

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[1] For example, see Robert Rosenblum and H. W. Janson, *19th-Century Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, -1984), and Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *Nineteenth-Century European Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003).
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Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket (Slide 4), either of which allows for a discussion of Whistler's 1878 lawsuit against art critic John Ruskin. In a consideration of the increasing role of formal analysis in aesthetics, authors are often discomforted by both the inclusion and the placement of Whistler. The problem is understandable—if Cézanne receives credit as the revolutionary who wrenched Western painting away from an addiction to representation in the 1880s, how does one deal with Whistler's canvasses and aesthetic theories that teeter on the definition of abstraction, such as this one, in the 1870s:

> My picture of a "Harmony in Grey and Gold" is an illustration of my meaning—a snow scene with a single black figure and a lighted tavern. I care nothing for the past, present, or future of the black figure, placed there because black was wanted at that spot. All that I know is that my combination of grey and black is the basis of the picture. . . . As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and the subject-matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of colour.[2]

With Whistler, the difficulties increase when scholars approach the questions of nationality and style. Americans claim Whistler because he was born in Massachusetts to American parents, and because he always retained his identification as an American, as an outsider living in a hostile British artistic environment.[3] Yet, equally, he might be claimed by France, where he formed his aesthetic opinions in the cauldron of French theory at midcentury, and where his most significant training occurred. Or yet again, he might be (and often is) included in a survey of nineteenth-century art in Britain, where he lived for the majority of

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[2]Anonymous author, in conversation with James McNeill Whistler in "The Red Rag," in *The World*, London, May 22, 1878, as quoted by Nigel Thorp, ed., *Whistler on Art: Selected Letters and Writings, 1849–1903, of James McNeill Whistler* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1994), pp. 51–52.

[3] Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr. with Charles Brock, "Whistler and America," in Richard Dorment and Margaret MacDonald, *James McNeill Whistler* -(New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), pp. 29–38, and Linda Merrill, *After Whistler: The Artist and His Influence on American Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

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his adult life. It is prudent to recall that Whistler spent only fifteen of his first twenty-one years in the United States, never returning to this side of the Atlantic after attaining his majority. By a similar formulation, writers might admit the right of Greece to claim El Greco, of Italy to claim John Singer Sargent, of England to claim Thomas Moran, and of Denmark to celebrate Camille Pissarro, who was born and raised in Danish territory and retained his nationality throughout his life.

We encounter difficulties if we attempt to identify Whistler with a particular group among the avant-garde in France and England. He received his most serious training in France in the heyday of Gustave Courbet and his revolutionary promotion of realism, but Whistler worked only briefly as a realist in painting, and only a bit longer in printmaking. He retained his youthful friendships with Edouard Manet, Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Camille Pissarro, and many of the impressionists, but his work is impressionist only in a few etchings and in a very limited sense of the word. He spent most of his life working in England during the Victorian era, but scholars are reticent to refer to him as either English or Victorian, particularly given his own aversion to both labels. He became close friends with John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, but his work never engaged their ideals. Although friends of French symbolist artists and writers including Stéphane Mallarmé, and later a supporter of Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard and the Nabi circle, he did not identify closely with these French modernist groups. We are left with a generic description: Whistler was born in the United States, and called himself American but was a French-trained artist working in England in the second half of the nineteenth century. Yet that simple formulation ignores Whistler's international importance in setting the stage for nonrepresentational art and minimizes his tremendous influence on principles of abstraction in the twentieth-century

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Whistler as Printmaker

The problem of categorization that plagues Whistler as a painter is not considered as serious in appreciating his accomplishments as a printmaker. Influential writer Charles-Pierre Baudelaire commented on Whistler's talent in that area as early as 1862, "Just the other day a young American artist, M. Whistler, was showing at the Galerie Martinet a set of etchings, as subtle and lively as improvisation and inspiration, representing the banks of the Thames, wonderful tangles of rigging, yardarms and rope; farragos of fog, furnaces and corkscrews of smoke; the profound and intricate poetry of a vast capital."[4]

Four years prior to that, in spring 1859, Whistler's prints won acceptance at the Salon in Paris and at the Royal Academy in London. In Paris he exhibited two realist etchings he had executed the previous year, one identifiable as *La Marchande de Moutarde* (*The Mustard Merchant*)(Slide 5); in London he also exhibited two unidentified works. In the 1860s, even when Whistler's paintings met with mixed receptions and regular rejection from both the Academy and the Salon, critics simultaneously acknowledged his strengths as a draughtsman and printmaker. From the outset of his career, Whistler planned much of his graphic work in terms of sets, to be presented and marketed as groups of related images, inspired by both the vogue for Japanese woodblock prints, and that recognized master of the etching revival, Charles Meryon. By 1860, Whistler had already executed one set of etchings, the *French Set*, and planned a second set, which would not be published for another decade. These sets were conceived several years before the burgeoning revival of etching led to the *Société des Aquafortistes* and its annual volume of etchings. His earliest important prints were included in the "Twelve Etchings from Nature" of 1858, generally referred to as the *French Set.* He was planning a second set at the time of his immigration to

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[4] Charles Baudelaire, "Painters and Etchers," in *Le Boulevard,* Paris, September 14, 1862, as quoted by Robin Spencer, ed., *Whistler: A Retrospective* (New York: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1989), p. 60.
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England, although his "Sixteen Etchings of Scenes of the Thames," referred to as the *Thames Set*, was not issued until 1871. Later, he went to Venice in September 1879 with the explicit commission to render a set of twelve etchings of the city in a brief three-month period. That three-month period stretched to fourteen, during which he executed a sufficient number to publish both the original dozen, the *First Venice Set*, and a second series of mostly Venetian scenes, the *Second Venice Set*. A decade later, in 1889, he traveled to Amsterdam, the city of his artistic idol Rembrandt van Rijn, where he planned and executed the *Amsterdam Set,* which the Fine Arts Society, a commercial enterprise and publisher of the *First Venice* declined to handle. The artist also completed a set of twelve prints in one day that he sent to Queen Victoria as a Jubilee present. Even in his early lithographs Whistler thought in terms of series, and several of the sheets in this exhibition derive from the *Notes* that Whistler's printer Thomas Way encouraged him to publish in 1878. An examination of Whistler's evolution as a printmaker, and his ongoing quest for printed tone is possible through an examination and discussion of the chronology and characteristics of each set in the artist's career.

A few biographical notes are necessary background for an analysis of Whistler's development as a printmaker. On July 11, 1834, Whistler was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, a fact he regularly attempted to obscure for much of the rest of his life.[5] George Washington Whistler, the artist's father, was a civil engineer in the United States Army. In 1842, Major Whistler accepted the invitation of Nicholas I, Czar of Russia, to design and build the first railway line from Moscow to St. Petersburg. The family followed the Major to Russia a year later, and the young James spent much of the next six years in St.

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[5] Eric Denker, *In Pursuit of the Butterfly: Portraits of James McNeill Whistler* (Washington: National Portrait Gallery and University of Washington Press, 1995.) The volume also serves as a brief biography of the artist as illustrated through the portraits of the artist by Whistler and his contemporaries.
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Petersburg, taking his first art lessons at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts. His hosts at the Russian court, a cultivated and cosmopolitan circle in which French was spoken, regarded James as the child of an honored visitor. He appears to have been shaped in many ways by his experience during these formative years—he received a broad education, became familiar with art, and although often the center of attention, became accustomed to thinking of himself as an outsider. He also had the opportunity to spend time in London with his brother-in-law Francis Seymour Haden, a doctor, an amateur etcher, and an astute collector. The death of Major Whistler in April 1849 necessitated the family's relocation to Pomfret, Connecticut. Two years later, the young artist followed in his father's footsteps and entered the United States Military Academy at West Point, then under Commandant Colonel Robert E. Lee. Whistler excelled at drawing in classes taught by Robert W. Weir but exhibited a notable lack of discipline in his other coursework, which led to his dismissal from the Academy in June 1854. After a short apprenticeship at Thomas Winan's locomotive works in Baltimore, he arrived in Washington in November with an appointment to the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey. He stayed for less than two months, making it just into the New Year before being summarily dismissed for bad work habits and lack of attendance. Though his period at the Geodetic Survey was brief, it proved crucial to his later development, since this is where he learned to etch. A classmate and colleague, John Ross Key, later described their introduction to printmaking:

> Mr. McCoy, one of the best engravers in the office, a kindly, genial Irishman, always ready to aid or advise the younger men, listened while I explained our mission. He then went over the whole process with us—how to prepare the copper plate, how to put on the ground, and how to smoke dark, so that the lines of made by the point could be plainly seen.

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For the first time since his entrance into the office Whistler was intently interested. Always sedate, he was also singularly indifferent, but on this occasion he seemed to realize that a new medium for the expression of his artistic sense was being put within his grasp. He listened attentively to McCoy's somewhat wordy explanations, asked a few questions, and squinted inquisitively through his half-closed eyes at the sample of work placed before him. Having been provided with a copper plate such as was kept for the use of beginners, and an etching point, he started off to make his first experiment as an etcher.[6]

While at the Geodetic Survey, he executed several plates, including *Sketches on the Coast Survey* (Slide 6). The twenty-year old novice painstakingly rendered the landscape of Anacapa Island, and then added several large fantasy heads to the scene. Short parallel strokes indicate the contours of the landscape but crosshatching, a technique Whistler had learned in Weir's drawing classes at the Academy, is limited to the modeling of the heads. Six months later, in July 1855, Whistler turned twenty--one, at which point he began receiving an income from his father's estate, and soon thereafter moved to Paris to study art, leaving the United States never to return.

In France Whistler enrolled at the *Ecole Impériale et Spéciale de Dessin*, followed by study in the atelier of Swiss academician Charles Gleyre where he received his first training as a painter. He also engaged in the time-honored tradition of copying in the Louvre. At the same time as he was studying old master painting, however, he was inspired by Courbet's contemporary approach to realism, and his early drawings reflect this modernist vocabulary. Whistler's first series of etchings, the *French Set,* constitutes a realist venture,

[6] John Ross Key "Recollections of Whistler while in the Office of the United States Coast Survey," *Century Magazine*, April 1908, as quoted in Spencer, *Whistler*, p. 53.
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as *Street at Saverne* (Slide 7), *La Veille aux Loques* (Slide 8), and *The Kitchen* (Slide 9) demonstrate. *La Veille aux Loques (The Old Rag Woman*), a realist genre subject, presents a poor older woman sitting in the doorway of a humble dwelling. The tension between the two dimensionality of the image and the attempt at three-dimensional depth is rudimentary—we look from our space past a briefly described foreground into the darker recesses of the parallel space of the sitter. (Whistler wrestled with this tension between design and illusion throughout his career, resolving it in a variety of ways.) The draftsmanship, while confident, remained deliberately informal and sketchy. Heavily rendered areas of precise detail, such as the still-life elements on the shelf and wall behind the figure, sit beside broadly sketched areas that add nothing to the physical description of the elements of the composition. Whistler employed unusually dense crosshatching throughout the image, making it difficult to distinguish between the shadows, and giving the plate a certain overwrought appearance. Like the early works of many artists, whether in paint or print, this evidences a certain fear of empty spaces on the part of a young practitioner who does not yet comprehend the balance of light and dark and the virtue of economy. The sketchiness clearly is reminiscent of Rembrandt's early works which Whistler likely knew through Parisian dealers, impressions owned by his brother-in-law Francis Haden, and perhaps from those prints exhibited at the 1857 Art Treasures Exhibition at Manchester that the young artist had attended.

The Kitchen (Slide 9) is another heavily worked image from the *French Set*. Here, in a transparently realist subject, Whistler represented a woman seen from behind, silhouetted by a window at the far end of a deep space. Again, Whistler used dense networks of crosshatching and multiple hatching to create dark, murky areas of the composition, the shadowed interior walls meant to contrast and set off the brighter areas toward the window, and the silvery areas of the still life on the right side. Although he only etched one

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pure still life in the course of his career, *The Wine Glass* (Slide 10). Whistler had a wonderful eye for still-life details, as obvious from the rendering of the stove and plates of the wall, the latter of which may have been inspired by the work of Venetian artist Paolo Veronese whose monumental *Supper in the House of Levi* hung in the Louvre.[7]

In perhaps the most significant of the plates from the *French Set,* the nocturnal *Street at Saverne* (Slide 7) Whistler limited the heavy multiple hatching to the shadows dominating the lower left and center of the plate. However, Whistler was not entirely successful with either the recession of the buildings or with the shadows, which remain irreconcilable given the direction of the light.

Whistler's second print set, "A Series of Sixteen Etchings of the Thames," published a dozen years later, brought together plates that were mostly executed in 1859. His talents blossomed in *The Thames Set*, demonstrating his greater confidence as a draftsman, his greater sense of balance in design, and his greater command of economy in the details. In the new set, Whistler left behind the heavily-wrought figural scenes of the French and Rhine countryside. Instead he concentrated on working-class life along the industrial area along the lower Thames River. According to Whistler's cover sheet to the series, the entries began with *Black Lion Wharf* (Slide 11).[8] Frederick Wedmore, the most important critic of contemporary printmaking in London during the 1870s, wrote "The portfolio opens with a characteristic specimen, *Black Lion Wharf*—a work decisive and precise in execution,

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[7] Illustrated in the standard *catalogue raisonné* of Whistler's prints: Edward G. Kennedy, *The Etched Work of Whistler* (New York: Grolier Club, 1910), no. 27. Whistler's friend and colleague Henri Fantin-Latour copied the Veronese *Marriage Feast at Cana*, a version of which was purchased by Haden in 1859. Pennell

[8] reproduced in Kennedy, p. xl.

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emphatic where emphasis is needed, brilliant in contrast of dark and light, delicate in the handling of unobtrusive passages, slight and sketchy in the treatment of episode."[9]

Whistler celebrated the recognition of this etching by including it as the print on the wall in the back ground of the contemporary *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*. *Black Lion Wharf* (Slide 11) is the only Whistler print to appear in one of the artist's own paintings. In some ways, this appears a curious choice, considering how Whistler clearly delighted in the minute details in the print, including the names on the signs of the various wharfs and shipping establishments. All of that detail is lost, reduced to the most basic geometry that parallels his reduction of detail in the rendering of his mother's silhouette.

Overall *Black Lion Wharf* represents one of Whistler's early masterpieces, far more balanced, and more restrained than the plates of the *French Set*. He controlled the sketchiness by containing it within the foreground costume and ropes. In the line of dilapidated buildings in the distance, he differentiated between the fabric and roof of each structure. He limited crosshatching to a few boats in the background, a few roofs, and a bit of foreground shadow. These rich areas contrast with the expanse of untouched paper that becomes, in the viewer's eyes, the sky above and the surface of the water below. Throughout the series Whistler used the untouched areas of the plate as a foil of the heavily worked tone to give contrast and depth to his images. In *Thames Police* (Slide 12) Whistler labored on the variety of walls and roofs throughout the background, alternating parallel lines and crosshatching, to create a mosaic of urban fabric, while limiting the sky to a few wispy lines to indicate the clouds. In *Thames Warehouses* (Slide 13), he stippled and used

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[9] Frederick Wedmore, "Mr Whistler's Etching," *Saturday Review*, August 12, 1871, reproduced in Spencer, *Whistler,* p. 95.
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roulette to suggest areas of the fore- and middle-ground boats, but limited the crosshatching to the extreme right and left of the plate, setting off the broad expanse of the calm river. *Limehouse* (14), a more complex plate, forces the viewer to engage the boat in the foreground without providing any immediate relief for the eye below the untouched sky. It also demonstrates Whistler's penchant for details: note the writing on the walls. Other artists of the etching revival soon added legible signs to buildings in the middle- and background of a scene, including French artist Maxime Lalanne in two noted images of the demolitions for new boulevards in Paris (Slide 15), and Francis Seymour Haden in *Yacht Tavern* (Slide 16).[10]

Whistler limited his hatching to the passages most in need of definition, such as the wooden planking on the left side of *Limehouse*. He included a light veil of ink on the lower left to convey the fine, indistinct mist on the water. This tone contrasts with the clear sky above—Whistler rarely indicated clouds in any of the *Thames Set*.

Whistler was not averse to using heavily hatched areas to imitate dark shadows in a riverscape when appropriate, such as the stern of the boat *Jane No. 6* in *The Pool* (Slide 17) but tended to save them for interior and figural scenes. *Longshoreman* (Slide 18) has denser networks of shadow beneath the table, and on the planking of the table and walls. The figures still seem awkward and their expressions ambiguous.

Rotherhithe (Slide 19), dated 1860, is one of the most accomplished of the etchings in the series and was originally issued as *Wapping*. It is closely related to the painting *Wapping*

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[10] **Francis Seymour Haden**, *Yacht Tavern, Erith*, 1865, etching on zinc, Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, 1943.3.4746; **Maxime Lalanne**, *Demolitions pour le percement du boulevard Saint-Germain*, c. 1862, etching, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, National Gallery of Art, 1974.69.79, exhibited in *Prints by Whistler and His Contemporaries,* National Gallery of Art, 1995.
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(Slide 20) of 1860–64 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). In the etching, Whistler carefully controlled the contrasts of the deeply-bitten wood of the planks above each figure with the open view seen through the center of the plate. The line work in the rigging is masterful and assured, and the figures engage one another more naturally than in *Longshoreman*. The radical cropping of the half-length figures, provides an early indication of Whistler's interest in Japanese color woodblock prints and their aesthetics. The one portrait print in the set, the drypoint *Becquet* (Slide 21), seems a throwback to Rembrandt's early etchings in the sketchiness of both the background and in the articulation of the shadows on the face.

The *Thames Set* as a whole represents Whistler's first well-composed, mature set of prints. The series also suggests the variety of sources influencing the young artist, from the old master etchings of Rembrandt to the influence of contemporaries such as Charles Meryon and Francis Seymour Haden to the exotic formal elements of Japanese wood block prints.

Whistler moved to Chelsea in 1863 and lived there, with brief periods in Paris and Venice, for the rest of his life. Whistler largely abandoned etching during the second half of the 1860s, though many of the paintings of the period reflect these new surroundings. Nonetheless Whistler remained pleased with the etchings of the early *French* and *Thames Sets*, as they constituted a significant percentage of the twenty-four prints he exhibited in the Paris Universal Exposition of 1867.

Whistler only worked occasionally in etching in the early 1870s, preoccupied as he was with painting. The series of portraits that include his mother Anna Matilda McNeill Whistler, Cicely Alexander, Thomas Carlisle, and members of the Leyland family, advanced

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his reputation as a portraitist during this decade. His development of the nocturne as an approach to landscape parallels his portrait painting, establishing him as a pioneering champion and prophet of the overwhelming importance of formal elements in art. From 1878, *St. James Street* (Slide 22) represents a marvelous view rendered from an upper story window, reminiscent of the urban impressionist views of Whistler's colleagues Monet and Pissarro. The viewer can discern Whistler's use of only a bit of crosshatching in the foreground carriages to set off a rich contrast with the sunlight playing across the street. It is easy to forget Whistler's passion for detail in light of his goals in painting but his etchings present vivid data on everyday life, such as this example which includes over seventy people. The cancelled copper plate is in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

Whistler executed *"The Adam and Eve," Old Chelsea* (Slide 23) the following year. In this case he may have utilized a photograph as an aid.[11] However, he carefully reversed the design of the image onto the plate so that it would be correctly oriented in the reversal of the printing process, something he didn't always take care to do.

The lithographs Whistler executed in 1878 are far more atmospheric than anything he had yet attempted in etching and drypoint. This had to do with the expressive vocabulary inherent in the lithographic process, one that allowed the artist to conceive and work the design in tone rather than line. Thomas Way, the printer who taught Whistler lithography, arranged for Whistler to draw and paint on a stone while floating on a barge on the Thames in the dock area of East London where Whistler had first etched twenty years earlier.[12] For *Limehouse* (Slide 24) the artist worked with a half-tinted stone, darkening some areas and

[11] Nigel Thorp, "Studies in Black and White: Whistler's Photographs in Glasgow University Library," in Ruth E. Fine, ed., *James McNeill Whistler: A Reevaluation* -Studies in the History of Art, vol. 17, (Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, 1987), pp. 96–98.
[12] Martha Tedeschi et. al., *The Lithographs of James McNeill Whistler*, vol. I (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1998), pp. 58–62.
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scraping others to lighten the inking, creating a far more atmospheric image than he had previously done in any print technique. With *Nocturne* Whistler achieved a more subtle treatment of light playing across the river and the far shore of Battersea at dusk. *Nocturne* (Slide 25) clearly foreshadows the work Whistler would create in Venice, leaving some question as to why the astute artist never utilized lithography in rendering the lagoon city, the most atmospheric of urban centers.

Some background is necessary to full appreciate Whistler's Venetian period, since Whistler's achievements in Venice are at the center of the Whistler legend. The narrative begins with the Whistler-Ruskin trial of 1878, and concludes with two exhibitions at the Fine Arts Society in 1880–81. In the late 1870s Whistler's reputation for litigiousness reached its height with the artist's well-publicized libel suit against the eminent Victorian art critic John Ruskin. The events leading up to the trial began with a review by Ruskin that appeared in July 1877 issue of his *Fors Clavigera*, the now-famous condemnation of Whistler's work, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (Slide 4), in an exhibition at Sir Coutts Lindsay's new Grosvenor Gallery:

> For Mr. Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.[13]

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[13] John Ruskin, "Letter 79: Life Guards of New Life," *Fors Clavigera* 7 (July 1877), as collected in E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds., *The Works of John Ruskin* (London, George Allen, 1903–12), vol. 29, p. 160.
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Whistler made a calculated decision to bring suit against the critic for libel, resulting in perhaps the most celebrated trial in the history of art, *Whistler v. Ruskin*. The initial action in the suit took place in August 1877, with Whistler's attorney notifying Ruskin of his client's intention to seek damages for libel. Pre-trial motions, and frequent postponements due to Ruskin's ill health, delayed the proceedings until November 25, 1878. The trial focused attention on the artistic debates of the day and provided many memorable and sometimes humorous, exchanges between Whistler and the defense attorney.[14] Despite the series of delays that led up to the trial, the actual presentation of the case took only eight hours, and the jurors needed only a couple of hours the following day to reach a conclusion. They found in favor of Whistler, agreeing that Ruskin had committed libel, but awarded him only one farthing (about a quarter of a penny), rather than the £1,000 that he had sought in the action. Interpreting the jury's award as a strong reproach to Whistler for having brought the matter to trial, the judge directed that the two sides to each absorb their own expenses. The decision led to Whistler's bankruptcy in May 1879, a substantial price to pay for a largely pyrrhic victory. By the summer financial insolvency and a lack of new patronage resulting from adverse publicity left Whistler reeling; he accepted a commission from a commercial gallery in London, the Fine Arts Society, to etch a series of prints of Venice for December holiday sales.

In September, Whistler departed for Venice with the intention of producing twelve etchings over a period of three months. In the end, the artist remained in Venice for fourteen months, during which he executed more than fifty prints, a handful of paintings, and approximately one hundred pastels. The etchings are at the core of Whistler's Venetian achievement. Upon his return to England, the exhibitions of his Venetian etchings and pastels reestablished his artistic reputation, and provided a turning point in his career.

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[14] Merrill, *Pot of Paint*, pp. 59–71. Merrill has painstakingly reconstructed the arguments from various sources to produce the most complete account of the trial now possible.
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Whistler's stylistic innovations, as well as the influence of his vision on subsequent generations of printmakers, are embodied in the two Venice Sets. Whistler arrived in Venice late in September, and although he had agreed to finish the plates by December, it soon became clear that he would miss his deadline. During the unusually cold autumn and winter of 1879–80 Whistler suffered as Venice lacked the modern conveniences of London. In an early letter to his sister-in-law Helen Whistler, he lamented how he missed London, and complained about the Italian language, the Venetian food, and how the cold was limiting his progress on the commission.[15] Subsequently he wrestled with the subject matter of Venice, overwhelmed by the remarkable visual riches of the city. He wanted to develop his own approach to the city, one that would distinguish his work from the anecdotal sentimentality of established Victorian imagery. His achievement relied in part on this original conception of a Venice that was best known to contemporary Venetians— the long vistas, the back alleys, the quiet canals and idiosyncratic bridges that cross them, and the isolated squares of the everyday life of the city.

In his etchings Whistler generally eschewed certain subjects: landmarks of architecture, interiors, and large-scale figural scenes. The artist rendered few images of the usual sights, the Piazza San Marco, the Basilica, and the Grand Canal. Occasionally, Whistler did record a notable site, as in the etching *The Piazzetta* (Slide 26). In this case, as in all of the Venice prints, Whistler drew the image directly on to a prepared etching plate allowing the normal reversal of the printing process to render the scene in mirror image. He claimed that his intent was not to produce picturesque and recognizable scenes for the British tourist, but

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[15] Letters reproduced in Margaret F. MacDonald, *Palaces in the Night: Whistler in Venice* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Lund Humphries, 1988), pp. 141–145.

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to produce etched masterpieces of design and tone.[16] Whistler's refusal to reverse his
Venetian images on the plate often is mentioned as one of the artist's innovations, yet a
number of precedents have been overlooked: Canaletto's 1744 etching *The Marketplace on
the Molo* (Slide 27) clearly shows the church and island of San Giorgio Maggiore in reverse
in the back ground; British and French optical views sometimes reversed their images;
Adolphe Appian's 1878 etching *Boats at Anchor, Venice* represents the church of Santa
Maria della Salute and the customs house in mirror image.

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[16] Walter Sickert later complained about the reversal of the images, wishing them
reproduced in reverse for those who were familiar with the actual locations. Walter Sickert,
"The New Life of Whistler," *Fortnightly Review*, December, 1908, reproduced in *Walter Sickert: The Complete
Writings on Art*, edited by Anna Gruetzner Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 182.
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Throughout his career, Whistler was not above a calculated bit of misdirection in suggesting the reasons for his aesthetic decisions. While it is true that his direct work on a plate resulted in a mirror image of the site, other possible explanations exist for his rationale in this working method. He had come of age with a generation of artists in France, primarily the impressionists, who valued the informality and spontaneity garnered in the process of drawing and painting in the presence of the motif. Imagine the laboriousness for Whistler had he needed first to execute a careful drawing of a site, only to have to either trace it, or reproduce it freehand, upon the plate. The process would have robbed the plate of all of the immediacy Whistler hoped to capture in rendering the scene. Mortimer Menpes, Joseph Pennell, Otto Bacher, and other post-Whistlerian artists such as Ernest David Roth and John Marin understood this and employed the same idea for their prints of Venice. Unlike Whistler and many of his followers, Scottish artist James McBey believed that the etched view should be seen with the natural orientation of the subject, so that the plate initially should be drawn in reverse. McBey sometimes turned his back on the scene he was recording and drew his image looking into a rear view automobile mirror that he had mounted on his easel, as in *The Palazzo dei Cammerlenghi* (Slide 28).[17]

One of the singular characteristics of Whistler's Venetian etchings is the painstaking development of a key motif, the focal point of a design that expands out from the center of the image but not to the limits of the sheet. His predilection for detailing only the important elements of the design, leaving the marginal and other ancillary areas unarticulated, is part of the avant-garde nature of his art. The etching The *Doorway* (Slide 28) is an example of this approach. The artist added a film of ink to the lower portion of this

[17] Martin Hardie, "The Etched Work of James McBey," in *Print Collector's Quarterly* 25 (1938): 427 as cited in Eric Denker, *Whistler and His Circle in Venice* (London: Merrell Publishers, in conjunction with the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2003), p. 45.

plate prior to printing, to indicate the murkiness of the water in contrast to the precise delineation of palace. Whistler either printed each impression himself, or supervised the printing so that each of the images that utilize selective wiping is unique. His preference for images of contemporary Venice combined with his avant-garde compositional structure and his novelty in inking produced works of startling modernity.

Almost half of Whistler's prints are panoramas, distant vistas across or along an expanse of water, of the skyline of Venice and the lagoon islands. Whistler tended to position these views on horizontal sheets, exploiting the sense of distance through a broad horizon, as in *Long Lagoon* (Slide 30) where the format reinforces the suggestion of a spacious view. Whistler demonstrates a refined sensibility by matching his images with the appropriate shapes and orientations of each sheet. As in *Doorway*, Whistler sometimes added additional surface tone to his prints by selectively wiping the copper plates, leaving a thin film of ink on parts of the image. When he printed these plates, the veils of ink suggested particular lighting conditions resulting from his observations of different times of day and atmospheric conditions on the same scene. These selectively wiped prints are, in this regard, responses that parallel the impressionist program of capturing a subject under specific and accurate lighting conditions. The two varied impressions of *Nocturne* (Slides 31 and 32) in the *First Venice Set* and *Nocturne: Palaces* (Slide 33) from the *Second Venice Set*, are outstanding examples of Whistler's tonal wiping. These prints convey the sometimes dramatic, sometimes subtle effects of illumination the artist achieved employing this technique.

One of Whistler's favorite Venetian subjects was the close-up of a palace fronting on a small canal, closely cropped and seen straight on from across the water. Often he gave no visual

indication of the size or structure of the remainder of the buildings. Instead, using vertical formats, he focused upon the inherent geometric shapes of the doors and windows on the facades of the buildings, and the decorative patterns of the surface. *The Balcony* (Slide 34) from the *Second Venice Set* is one of the most beautifully composed and balanced of these subjects. Whistler's precision can be seen in his handling of the flat-bottomed *sandolo* (a Venetian vessel often mistaken for a gondola) moored at the palace on the subtly-wiped plate. In all Whistler's Venice etchings, the artist's graphic shorthand, indebted to his study of Rembrandt, adds to the freshness and sparkle of the city's palaces, canals and alleys. In the printing of the two Venice sets, Whistler began cutting his sheets to the plate mark, leaving just a tab for his penciled butterfly signature and the letters "imp.", signifying that he himself had printed the impression. He publicly maintained that British collectors put too great a stock in the amount of margin surrounding old master prints, extrapolating this to contemporary printmakers.[18] Other authors have suggested that the cost of rare and expensive papers forced this economy, or that the plates themselves often cut through the paper at the plate mark, and that Whistler made a virtue of these necessities.

Whistler left Venice in November 1880, returning to London where he immediately set about printing the twelve etchings for the Fine Arts Society. The initial exhibition of the *First Venice Set* opened in the small back room of the Society on December 1, 1880. The show failed to achieve great financial success, although it received extensive coverage in the daily periodicals and art journals. While critics debated the merits of Whistler's etchings, his fellow artists quickly perceived and embraced the freshness of Whistler's vision.

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[18] Katherine Lochnan, *The Etchings of James McNeill Whistler* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 212. Lochnan's book is the best examination of Whistler's career as a printmaker and the starting point for any scholar commencing a Whistler print project.

Whistler continued to create prints of exquisite refinement during the next fifteen years, including nearly half of his intaglio oeuvre. Among the most interesting is the *Grand Place, Brussels* (Slide 35) of 1887. This remarkable plate foreshadows the direction that Whistler would pursue in his later printmaking. He spent an enormous amount of energy capturing the details of windows and ornaments across the façade, clearly excited by the play of light that dissolves the substance of the monumental building. He kept surface inking to a minimum, preferring to create tone with intricate networks of linework.

On August 11, 1888, Whistler married Beatrice Godwin, the affluent widow of his friend and collaborator, architect E. W. Godwin. In September of the following year, Whistler and Trixie spent two months in Amsterdam where the artist drew ten plates that he hoped to publish as a set through the Fine Arts Society. However, since he had never completed the editions of the *First Venice Set* of 1880, understandably the Society declined his offer.[19] *The Embroidered Curtain* (Slide 36) and Pierrot (Slide 37), both 1889, are from the planned *Amsterdam Set*. These etchings represent the last stylistic phase of Whistler's printmaking career;-extensive networks of fine lines have replaced the economy so characteristic of the earlier Venice sets. In the Amsterdam series, Whistler creates his tones entirely in deeply-bitten and densely-drawn designs. This obviated the need for the tonal effects created by selective wiping employed in the laborious printing of the Venice nocturnes. Whistler believed the set to be the synthesis of the virtues of his earliest style in the *Thames Set* and the compositional advances of the Venice sets. In an article of March 11, 1890, in the *Pall Mall Budget*, he is recorded as having first displayed and discussed the individual Amsterdam etchings, and then to have summed up his etching career in this way:

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[19]Lochnan, p. 253.

"I divide myself into three periods," he says, being in his most serious and sensible mood. "First you see me at work on the Thames," producing one of the famous series. "Now, there you have the crude and hard detail of the beginner. So far, so good. There, you see, all is sacrificed to exactitude of outline. Presently, and almost unconsciously, I begin to *criticize* myself, and to feel the craving of the artist for form and *colour*. The result was the second stage, which my enemies call The Inchoate, and I call Impressionism. The third stage I have shown you. In that I have *endeavoured* to combine stages one and two. You have the elaboration of the first stage and the quality of the second."[20]

Whistler's early etchings from the *French Set* showed his youthful enthusiasm for detail with the *horror vacui* of the novice. Their achievements in composition lead to the greater confidence and economy of line that Whistler achieved in the *Thames Set*, mostly drawn within two years of the first set. His 1859 *Self-Portrait* drypoint (Slide 38) reveals his confidence in this early stage of his career. The two Venice sets reveal his reduction of detail to an ever-greater extent, while compensating for the more minimal line work with the exquisite inking that defines the atmosphere of the exotic lagoon city. The late Amsterdam work returns to the heavily worked passages of his youthful series, but with the mature sense of composition and design learned over an extended experimentation with the medium. The history of Whistler's development is read and appreciated through his advances in the application of tonal elements, most evident in the extended examination of his accomplishments in the sets of prints he conceived throughout his career as a printmaker.

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[20] Anonymous author, "A Chat with Mr Whistler," *Pall Mall Budget*, March 13, 1890 as reproduced in Spencer, Whistler pp. 269–70.

Shorter Technical Discussion

A short discussion of the technical aspects of etching helps place Whistler in the context of the developing vocabulary of printmaking in the nineteenth century. Etching, which goes back to the first years of the sixteenth century, may be seen as a variation of the technique of engraving. Both are in the family of intaglio printmaking, defined by the incising of lines and shapes to form a design on a metal plate. In engraving the design is cut with a burin that physically removes a strip of metal from the plate. A variant of engraving is drypoint, where a sharp, hard point is dragged through the metal surface, creating a scratch that has a delicate area of furrow of metal on the side of the line, burr, which gives the line a soft velvety appearance while it briefly lasts prior to wearing during inking and printing. In etching and its associated tonal process of aquatint, the design is created not by manually removing metal, but by coating the copper surface with an acid-resistant layer, and then drawing through that layer to expose the plate to acid. After allowing the acid to "bite" into the plate, the protective layer is removed revealing a surface with a similar incised design to the engraving. A thick, viscous ink is applied to the surface and forced into the grooves of the plate. Traditionally, the surface is wiped clean to allow the white of the paper to form a contrast to the dark lines of the composition. An artist may elect to leave a film of ink across the surface, adding tonal variations to the paper, or even to paint motifs on the surface of the plate that add to the composition but may only be printed once. Whistler selectively wiped images throughout most of his career.