

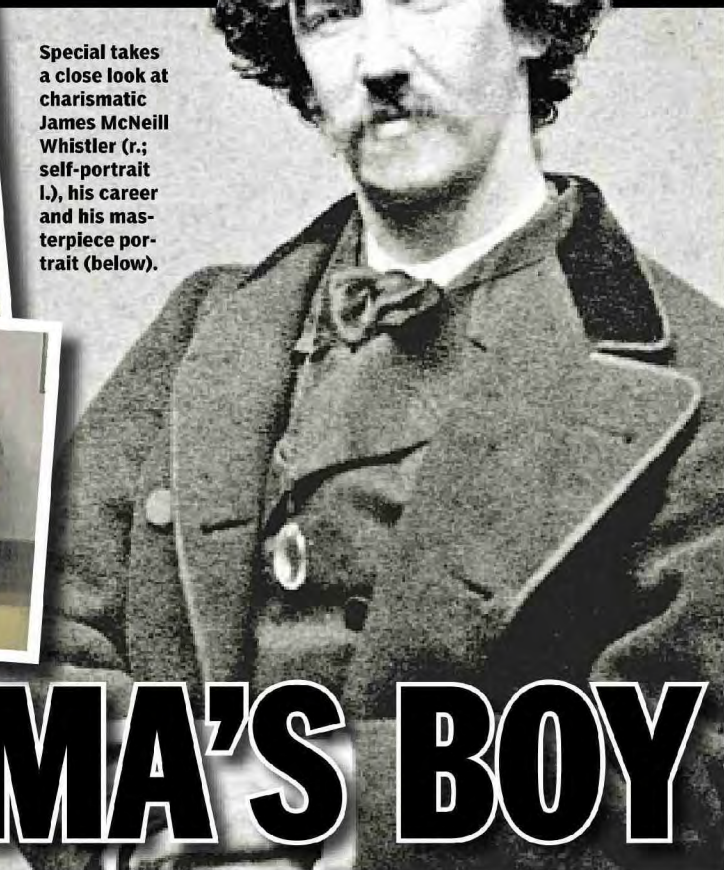
## TV WATCH TODAY

WHAT TO

TODAY



Special takes a close look at charismatic James McNeill Whistler (r.; self-portrait l.), his career and his masterpiece portrait (below).



# MOMMA'S BOY

## PBS looks behind the scene at artist Whistler

THE STORY behind “Whistler’s Mother” proves a bit more complex than the famous painting.

The producers of this new documentary on its creator, James McNeill Whistler, find the painter maddening, arrogant, charming and remarkably talented.

The show convinces us on all counts.

Whistler was one of the first rock stars of the art world, a good century before rock.

By birth an American, he lived much of his childhood in Russia before returning to America upon the death of his father. He attended

West Point, where he washed out, and promptly bolted for Europe, where he spent the remainder of his life as an expat.

His most famous painting, of course, featured his mother. Next to the Mona Lisa, she may be the most recognized face in classic art.

This show discusses why she was hanging around his home in the first place, because even as a grownup, young James needed someone to provide a little discipline.

Where he did have discipline, happily, was behind an easel. He blended several styles into his own. More important, he developed his own philosophy.

Whistler felt a painting needed only to convey beauty, which doesn’t seem like an exceptionally radical notion. However, the prevailing art theory at the time was that paintings needed to tell a story.

Nonsense, said Whistler, who relished the arguments his work inspired. Outward

confidence was something he never lacked, and in this case history seems to suggest he won.

Today Whistler would be a celebrity website’s dream. In the late 19th century he was an artist who was as good at selling himself as he was at painting his mother.

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**DAVID HINCKLEY**  
TV CRITIC

**‘James McNeill Whistler & the Case for Beauty’**



Friday at 9 p.m.,

PBS