

The Artist and the Marketplace



Bon Dieu! Did this wise person expect white hair and chalked faces? And does he then, in his astounding consequence, believe that a symphony in F contains no other note, but shall be a continued repetition of F, F, F.? ... Fool!

*James McNeill Whistler
Chelsea, June 1867*

When Whistler rebuked the critic of the *Saturday Review* for his literal reading of *Symphony in White No.3*, it was not the first time the artist had sparred with the critics. He jostled with the fourth estate throughout his career. Calling his critics “private assassins,” he dashed off so many angry responses to London’s newspapers and art journals, that one of those “assassins” wrote, “Mr. Whistler knows how to defend himself so perkily that it is a pleasure to attack him.” Whistler was “good copy.” No matter whether criticism was flattering or barbed, it served to publicize Whistler’s art.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the art press had developed as the arbiter of taste, and artists like Whistler needed to use “every means at their disposal to outbid their rivals for attention,” writes Whistler expert Robin Spencer. “He was very canny about the way he uses the opportunity of mass media to dramatize his image”, says social/cultural historian Sarah Burns. With his monocle and mannered style he was a brilliant self-advertiser. He carefully crafted a persona that would keep him in the public eye, and kept scrapbooks of his press clippings. Other artists, like Winslow Homer, created their promotional opportunities by adopting an air of mystery and shunning the press. Not Whistler.

“The genius of Whistler,” writes Burns, lay in his ability “to produce himself vividly and to act as if he were always on stage, all in the interest of creating a fascination about himself and his work that caused admirers and detractors to struggle to make sense of how that man – that bantam, that lightweight, that jester and poser – could have produced an art so serious, so authentic, so spiritual.”

Whistler aggressively placed himself in the public eye. He cultivated the notion of the dandy, the nonconformist, the eccentric. He was caricatured by the top cartoonists and illustrators of his day. His antics and eccentricities were common drawing-room topics. He was parodied (along with his friend Oscar Wilde) in the Gilbert & Sullivan operetta *Patience*, was satirized in newspapers and magazines, and became the model for characters in the best fiction of his age.

Whistler used the press to promote not only his fine art, but also his decorative art. Having re-worked patron F.R. Leyland’s dining room, Whistler invited the critics for a viewing, printing for them a special leaflet about the Peacock Room. Soon, articles on the art and the social pages were describing Whistler’s work. *The Pall Mall Gazette* praised “the fantastic freedom of [Whistler’s] design.”

According to Sarah Burns, any artist of the time “who refused to posture in the limelight of publicity stood the risk of failure, no matter how fine the work. ... Whether courting publicity or shunning it, the artist of the period had to confront an unavoidable fact of modern life: in addition to being a producer of aesthetic commodities, he (or she) had to become a commodity as well – a consumable personality, fodder for a curious public never satisfied for long.”

Lesson 1.5 The Artist and Marketplace Essay