

JAMES ABBOTT McNEILL WHISTLER

By M. Sue Sawvel



Biography

NAME: James Abbott McNeill Whistler

OCCUPATION: Painter

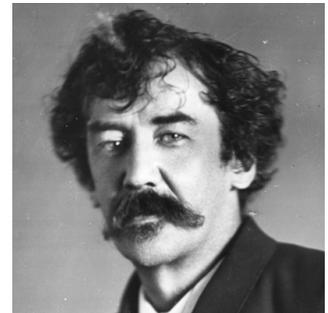
BIRTH DATE: July 11, 1834

DEATH DATE: July 17, 1903

PLACE OF BIRTH: Lowell, Massachusetts

PLACE OF DEATH: London, England

Full Name: James Abbott McNeill Whistler



This work is *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, oil on canvas, 1874.

James Abbott McNeill Whistler, the American expatriate whose philosophy “l’art pour l’art” [art for art’s sake] significantly influenced European and American artists in the late nineteenth century, was born in Lowell, Massachusetts. In 1843 Whistler moved with his family to St. Petersburg, Russia, where his father, an engineer, supervised the construction of a railroad line. Whistler received his first instruction in art in Russia. Returning to the United States, he entered the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1851, but was dismissed for poor grades. To earn a living he became a draughtsman for the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, drawing and making etchings for topographical maps.

Whistler soon left for Paris, where he studied in the atelier of Charles-Gabriel Gleyre. Formal instruction influenced him less, however, than his friendship with the French realist painter Gustave Courbet, and his own study of Japanese prints. Many of his early paintings, notable for their clarity of design and harmonious hues, featured both friends and family members, as his sister and her husband also resided in Paris. His first series of etchings, “The French Set,” resulted from a sketching tour in 1853, and his work in this medium was widely acclaimed. In 1859, after moving to London, he began a series of etchings of scenes along the River Thames, and by the mid 1860s began to incorporate oriental design and tonalities in his work.

In 1877 Whistler exhibited a number of loosely painted, subtly hued landscapes called “nocturnes,” composed in layers of atmospheric color. These works outraged conservative art critics, who did not understand the lack of narrative detail and “form.” The English art critic John Ruskin wrote a caustically critical article, and Whistler, charging slander, sued Ruskin for damages. Whistler won the case, one of the most

celebrated of its kind, but the expense of the trial forced him into bankruptcy. Selling the contents of his studio, in 1879–1880, Whistler made an extended trip to Venice, where he worked intensively on his etchings, a primary source of income for him. Throughout the following decades Whistler continued to work in his distinctive loosely painted, delicately hued, atmospheric style in oil, watercolor, and pastel, and to pursue his printmaking in Venice and in Holland.

Successful retrospectives in 1889 and in 1892 reestablished his popularity with the British public as he came to be regarded as a major artist. He lived briefly in Paris again, but in 1895 returned to England, where he was elected President of the International Society of Sculptors, Painters, and Gravers in 1898. Portraits, printmaking, and small oil landscapes and seascapes continued to absorb his energy. Whistler's popularity and the demand for his work continued to grow throughout his later years, but ill health kept him from the studio. He died in 1903 in London.

Personal Style and Motivation

This work is *Arrangement in Grey and Black, no. 1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother, oil on canvas, 1871.*



Influenced by Realism (especially by [Courbet](#)), Whistler then in turn personally influenced the Pre-Raphaelites. Later partially influenced by Impressionism., Whistler moved on to his own style, one which was a precursor of Abstract Expressionism.

Whistler had no easily defined style and spent most of his life traveling abroad. As a result, his work was multi-faceted. His earlier pieces were etchings, thanks to skills he picked up working as a cartographer. He painted portraits in the style of Realism, and later turned out abstracted landscapes, which he called "nocturnes." Whistler then returned to etching (drypoint) and tried his hand at lithography and interior decoration.

Below are quotes from Whistler about the methodology and inspiration of making art, one of the most intuitive methods to analyze an artist and his or her intention.

- "Paint should be applied thick. It should be like a breath on the surface of a pane of glass."
- "Art is a goddess of dainty thought, reticent of habit, abjuring all obstructiveness, purposing in no way to better others. She is, withal selfishly occupied with her own perfection only – having no desire to teach."

- “Frederic Leighton to James McNeill Whistler: ‘My dear Whistler, you leave your pictures in such a sketchy, unfinished state. Why don’t you ever finish them? James McNeill Whistler to Frederic Leighton: ‘My dear Leighton, why do you ever begin yours?’”
- “A picture is finished when all trace of the means used to bring about the end has disappeared.”
- “Nature contains the elements, in color and form, of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music. But the artist is born to pick and choose...that the result may be beautiful – as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he brings forth from chaos glorious harmony...”



This painting is *Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl*, oil on canvas, 1862.

http://quote.robertgenn.com/auth_search.php?authid=537
<http://www.biography.com/people/james-abbott-mcneill-whistler-9529133> and
http://www.phillipscollection.org/research/american_art/bios/whistler-bio.htm