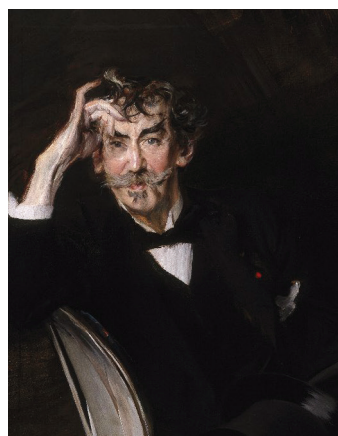
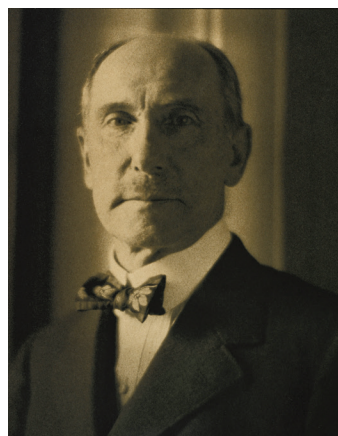


Whistler, Freer, and Their Living Legacy

BY PETER TRIPPI



Giovanni Boldini (1842-1951)
Portrait of James McNeill Whistler
1897, Oil on canvas, 67 1/4 x 37 1/4 in.
Brooklyn Museum, New York



Edward Steichen (1879-1973)
Charles Lang Freer
c. 1916, Platinum print
Freer Gallery of Art and
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives

There has always been something compelling about the American artist James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903). Even now, when the public's interest in 19th-century art has ebbed in favor of the contemporary, Whistler is riding a new wave of popularity, celebrated for his own achievements and cited by artists and designers as an ongoing source of inspiration. Why and how has this come to pass?

For one thing, Whistler was a global citizen before that term was coined. Born in Lowell, Massachusetts, to the pious mother later painted so famously in her white bonnet, he grew up in St. Petersburg, Russia, where his father worked as a railroad engineer. After an uncomfortable stay at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, young Whistler found his groove studying art in bohemian Paris. In the 1850s there were more wealthy collectors in London, however, so he headed there and relished his "outsider" status as the witty Yankee who could mingle easily with both aristocrats and laborers. He played the role of the outspoken dandy brilliantly, and earned a fortune selling art that was recognized as important and ahead of its time.

Starting with morally ambiguous arrangements of modern figures inspired by Edgar Degas and the equally gifted self-promoter Gustave Courbet, Whistler shifted gradually toward ethereally unfocused scenes of the city and sea that were harmoniously decorative compositions of color and form, paving the way for 20th-century abstraction. Recycling and personalizing advanced ideas he had picked up in Paris, he became the English-speaking world's loudest advocate for beauty and "art for art's sake," eschewing the specific and anecdotal in favor of imagery that, like music, could resonate wordlessly across all cultures and epochs — at least among elite viewers possessing the discernment needed to grasp their significance. Like other leaders of this so-called Aesthetic movement, he was smitten by the sudden arrival of authentic Japanese and Chinese art in the West, adapting it into his own work and arguing that Asian and Western art forms had more in common than not.

Alas, Whistler's ego and barbed wit went too far in 1878, when he lost everything — including his innovative studio-house — during a libel lawsuit against the comparatively conservative critic John Ruskin. (The painting that sparked Ruskin's outburst against Whistler's supposed sloppiness, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, was acquired

by the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1946.) Eventually, Whistler earned another fortune, began designing his own exhibitions, and resettled in Paris, which he perceived as more artistically liberated. He died there, mourned internationally as the godfather of the Tonalist and Pictorialist movements then underway. Though he never lived in the U.S. as an adult, Americans have always claimed Whistler as their own, and it is no accident that more than 100 museums in 35 states own his artworks.

The latest wave of Whistlermania has been triggered in part by Yale University Press's publication last March of the critically acclaimed book *Whistler: A Life for Art's Sake*. Author Daniel E. Sutherland has produced the first Whistler biography in more than 20 years, and also the first to make extensive use of the artist's private correspondence. Just last September, PBS aired the new documentary *James McNeill Whistler & The Case for Beauty*, written and directed by Karen Thomas, narrated by Anjelica Huston, and featuring Kevin Kline reciting Whistler's own words, which matched in acidic cleverness those of his friendly rival Oscar Wilde. Lavishly produced, the film even contains a re-enactment of the process that brought about *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1* — better known as "Whistler's Mother." Accompanied by an impressive website, the documentary can now be purchased as a DVD.

Further fanning the flames of Whistlermania have been two recent exhibitions. Organized by Glasgow University's Margaret MacDonald and Patricia de Montfort, who have spent decades combing the trove of art and correspondence bequeathed by Whistler's sister-in-law (and primary heir), the exhibition *An American in London: Whistler and the Thames* drew appreciative crowds in London, Washington, and Andover, Massachusetts. And in Japan (which Whistler admired but never visited), a large retrospective has closed in Kyoto and is now on view at the Yokohama Museum of Art through March 1.

A KINDRED SPIRIT

Few artists become household names without at least one major collector who also acts as a champion. For Whistler, that ally in America was Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919), who ultimately owned more than 1,000 Whistler works. Born in New York's Hudson



Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room as it now appears on a wintry afternoon
1876-77, Oil paint and gold leaf on canvas, leather, and wood
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.61

River valley, he was a hard-headed businessman who earned a fortune building railroad freight cars in Detroit, becoming rich enough to retire in 1900, aged just 47. In 1883, this lifelong bachelor had begun teaching himself about art, and he grew interested in Whistler three years later. (They met for the first time in 1890.) Guided by Whistler and various dealers, artists, and scholars in a successful quest to develop his own “eye,” knowledge, and instincts, Freer ultimately assembled outstanding collections of Asian and American art, and also bought in other areas such as Early Christian manuscripts. With Whistler’s encouragement, he sought out great artworks abroad, visiting Asia four times before 1911, when failing health forced him to spend more time in New York City near his doctors.

In 1892, Freer moved into a house he had built for himself on the edge of Detroit, one mile from his company’s headquarters. In contrast to the grandiose Gilded Age mansions nearby, this was an understated yet sophisticated structure. Today, quite unknown to most American art lovers, the “Freer House” still stands, located only two blocks from one of America’s greatest museums, the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), which has recently been spared a threatened sell-off of treasures sparked by the city government’s bankruptcy. Importantly, the DIA did not move to this neighborhood until 1927: it and Detroit’s

other cultural institutions came to where Freer and his fellow plutocrats had settled, with their generous encouragement.

In his comprehensive 1999 book about Freer House, Thomas W. Brunk highlights the close collaboration between its owner and his Arts & Crafts-minded architect from Philadelphia, Wilson Eyre, Jr. Together they created a Shingle-style residence with Japanese touches of horizontality and open planning. It was soon adorned with large, serenely colored paintings commissioned from Freer’s favorite U.S.-based artists, all of them Whistlerian in one way or another: Dwight W. Tryon, Abbott H. Thayer, Frederick S. Church (not the Church who painted in the Hudson Valley), and Thomas W. Dewing with his gifted artist wife, Maria Oakey. (These artists also decorated the house’s interior surfaces to better serve as backdrops for their paintings.) Many of their canvases were mounted in gilt-filigree frames custom-designed by Freer’s friend Stanford White, which glowed among the muted wood furniture and architectural carving all around.

Freer welcomed guests from around the world to stay at his home and view his collection. They included almost every active dealer, curator, scholar, collector, and enthusiast of Asian and American art, not to mention the contemporary artists Freer supported. From 1906, Freer permitted members of the public to

visit by appointment after collecting a ticket of admission at his office downtown. This was the same year he signed the deed of gift bequeathing his collection to the Smithsonian Institution, thereby creating America’s first national art museum, which he held in trust until his death. In 1913, Freer agreed to underwrite a new structure on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., and in 1923 (four years after his death), the Freer Gallery of Art opened in a Renaissance Revival palazzo designed by Charles A. Platt. This was the first museum in the Western world to focus on the fine arts of Asia.

The Freer Gallery of Art has fared well under federal ownership, but the Freer House has had a bumpier ride. In 1921, Freer’s executors sold it to the Merrill-Palmer School of Motherhood & Homemaking, which made various alterations. (For example, the original decorative paint finishes have been covered over.) Today it houses some faculty and staff members of what is now the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child and Family Development, a part of Wayne State University. The Institute also uses the larger and main-floor rooms for meetings and public events.

Added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973, the Freer House is revered among cognoscenti for a special room it once contained. Now the most popular feature of Washington’s Freer Gallery of Art, *Harmony*



The Freer House's main hall and staircase feature framed reproductions of Tryon and Thayer paintings
Photo: Alex Vertikoff, courtesy Merrill-Palmer Skillman Institute, Wayne State University



Dr. David R. Weinberg with the reproduction of a Tryon painting he underwrote



Anna Sui



Darren Waterston; photo: Art Evans

in *Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room* is among the world's most famous spaces. It started life in 1876, when the Liverpool-based shipping magnate Frederick R. Leyland decided to better showcase his collection of Chinese blue-and-white porcelains in the dining room of his grand London house. The room had been lined with tooled leather and bamboo-like shelving by the prominent designer Thomas Jekyll, and its centerpiece was Whistler's Asian-inspired painting *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*. But Leyland did not like Jekyll's color scheme and so asked his friend Whistler to harmonize it with the painting. He left Whistler in charge, and that — of course — was a mistake. Entire books have been written about the bitter legal battle that ensued between these strong-minded men, but the bottom line is that the room ended up tinted turquoise and gold to set off the porcelains, and at one end Whistler painted (on the leather wall) a huge caricature of himself and his patron as two peacocks fighting over silver coins. Whistler titled this mural *The Gold Scab: Eruption on Frilthy Lucre*, which is a pun on Leyland's taste for frilly shirts. Insulted though he was, Leyland realized that the widely nicknamed "Peacock Room" was an Aesthetic masterpiece, and so he did not actually change it before he died in 1892.

In 1903, Freer reached Whistler's deathbed a few minutes too late, then assisted with his estate affairs and made major loans to the memorial exhibitions in Paris and Boston. In 1904, Freer received a cable from a London dealer offering the entire Peacock Room, which was no longer wanted by Mrs. Watney, who owned Leyland's former home. Freer had already bought *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, so the dealer had reason to imagine that he might also want the very room that painting had once graced. Initially, Freer desired only the shutters and the mural of the fighting peacocks, but ultimately Whistler's sister-in-law convinced him to take the entire room. Though Freer initially downplayed his acquisition, which he called "the Blue Room," the American press was electrified when it learned he was the new owner. The room came to occupy its own specially built wing at Freer House until 1919, when it was disassembled and moved to Washington.

From the 1920s, the room's shelving had been adorned with Chinese blue-and-whites of the kind Leyland collected. In 2009, however, Freer Gallery of Art director Julian Raby visited the Freer House with the Detroit Institute of Arts' curator of American art, Kenneth Myers. Soon Raby decided to reinstall the Peacock Room as it had looked under Freer's ownership; three years later, Freer Gallery curator Lee Glazer finished reinstalling it with Freer's own subtly glazed ceramics from all over Asia. (A series of photographs taken in 1908 allowed her to place the vessels where they had once been.) On view through December 2015, this project (titled *The Peacock Room Comes to America*) is accompanied by a handsome publication and a nifty app; better yet, the room's shutters are opened to admit natural daylight on the third Thursday afternoon of every month, as if the room were still used.

Glazer and her counterparts at Wayne State have also launched *The Story of the Beautiful: Freer, Whistler and Their Points of Contact* (peacockroom.wayne.edu), a superb Web resource devoted to all of the American art



The Freer House seen from its back garden
Photo: Alex Vertikoff, courtesy Merrill-Palmer Skillman Institute, Wayne State University



Freer House director William Colburn (left) with members Jeanette and Edward A. Sui at the lecture they sponsored in October 2013

held by the Freer Gallery, including not only Whistler but also Tryon, Thayer, and Dewing.

SUCCESS STORIES FROM DETROIT

Detroit has recently been in the headlines for all the wrong reasons; the growing success of the Freer House is one story not heard enough. With the support of Wayne State University president M. Roy Wilson, Freer House director William Colburn welcomes everyone to join in preserving and restoring the site. Through regular public tours and lectures by major scholars (often co-sponsored with the DIA and other regional partners), the organization is raising awareness of Freer's legacy in Asian and American art and architecture, and of his contributions locally, nationally, and internationally.

Over the past five years, Wayne State University has committed major funds for a new historically appropriate roof with copper gutters and downspouts, and for a cleaning of exterior masonry. Underway now is a fundraising campaign by the Freer House to revitalize the garden and courtyard, where Freer once planted an unusual mix of Asian and Western plants that provided the harmoniously balanced colors he craved. Indoors, the organization is raising money to renovate the 1906 picture gallery, which Freer had created above a former carriage house and service block. This will be renamed the Whistler Gallery and used as a space for conferences,

exhibitions, and other educational activities. In addition, the Freer House plans a visitor center and permanent exhibit space in the former carriage house.

Of particular relevance to readers of *Fine Art Connoisseur* is the campaign to reproduce paintings that once hung in the house. To date, donors have underwritten 11 giclées of paintings by Tryon, Dewing, and Thayer, now installed in their original locations. The most recent success came in May, when President Wilson dedicated a giclée of Tryon's large *Early Spring: New England*. This was a team effort overseen by Freer House board member John Douglas Peters: the Freer Gallery provided a new high-resolution photograph, and Freer House member Dr. David R. Weinberg underwrote the giclée's fabrication. Also ongoing is the Freer House's first professional interpretation plan, as well as an inventory of the furniture and personal objects once owned by Freer and now by Dr. Brunk.

Among Freer House's members is a local family with a famous name. Based in New York City, the internationally renowned fashion designer Anna Sui grew up in Detroit, as did her brother Edward and his wife, Jeanette, who recently sponsored a Freer House lecture by the Harvard professor Yukio Lippit. Anna Sui says she has always admired Detroit's rich Arts & Crafts heritage, which is embodied by the luminous Pewabic Pottery tiles that still grace the mansion's fireplaces. As the daughter

of a structural engineer who brought her downtown often, Sui did not know about the Freer House because it was not publicly accessible then, yet she relished the chateau-like mansion built next door by Freer's business partner and close friend, Col. Frank Hecker.

Sui's first passionate encounter with 19th-century art came later, through reproductions of the proto-psychedelic designs of the English Aesthete Aubrey Beardsley, which led naturally to a crush on the Pre-Raphaelites. But it was actually while enjoying a Paris exhibition about Whistler and his patron Robert de Montesquiou that Sui learned the Peacock Room had once resided in Detroit. "I was amazed that the room I had always loved visiting in Washington had previously been in my hometown," she recalls. "I adore its coloring and patterns, and also the way it blends influences from different cultures into a completely original creation." In 2010, Sui even designed a special T-shirt celebrating the Peacock Room, the proceeds of which benefitted the Freer Gallery, and today she is delighted that the entrepreneur Rachel Lutz has opened a ladies' apparel shop, The Peacock Room, near the Freer House. (Sui knows the house well now, of course.) The sumptuousness of the Peacock Room can be glimpsed in almost every seasonal collection of Anna Sui designs, though she feels that her Fall 2008 show was particularly rich in those associations.



A view of Darren Waterston's *Filthy Lucre* looking toward the scene of fighting peacocks that he re-worked (as installed at MASS MoCA in 2014)
Photo: Amber Gray

A NEW TAKE ON PEACOCKS

Anna Sui is not the only contemporary artist enthralled with Whistler's most famous creation. To honor the fact that Frederick Leyland hailed from Liverpool, the 2014 Liverpool Biennial featured a small Whistler exhibition centered on a local stage designer's reconstruction of the Peacock Room.

More prominently, visitors to the huge Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) complex in North Adams, Massachusetts, have been buzzing about the artist Darren Waterston's exhibition *Uncertain Beauty*, on view there until February 22. Based in Manhattan and already admired for his abstract oil paintings, Waterston was invited by curator Susan Cross to mount a show of 30 paintings, and also to create a new work during his MASS MoCA residency.

Long fascinated by Whistler, Waterston proceeded to envision *Filthy Lucre*, an installation almost as large as the Peacock Room itself. Here, however, he re-presents it "in a state of decadent demolition — a space collapsing in on itself, heavy with its own excess and tumultuous history." Visitors walk inside it to discover gold stalactites, "mold," gold paint "dripping" down into puddles, and 250 ceramic vessels toppled or shattered on the floor, made still more haunting by a moody soundscape composed by the cult trio Betty.

"I wanted an environment where you ... are taken over by this visceral experience," Waterston explains, "in an almost claustrophobic way that is all about the physicality of paint. It's important to see the brushstrokes. The pottery items are mainly found objects that have been gessoed, and I treat each one like a little painting." Waterston collects 19th-century pottery for himself, and once worked as the studio assistant of the much-admired ceramist Beatrice Wood (1893-1998).

Filthy Lucre took Waterston six months to design and plan, and six more to construct and decorate alongside carpenters and lighting experts. One might normally expect the Freer Gallery to keep its distance from such a project, but in fact *Darren Waterston: Filthy Lucre* will soon appear a stone's throw from the original Peacock Room in the Freer's sister institution, the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. On view there from May 16 right through December 2016, it will be accompanied by curated installations exploring related themes.



From Anna Sui's Fall 2008 collection, a tie-dyed peacock feather pattern burnout blouse and skirt, with painted ombre velvet coat

Behind the fright-house effect of *Filthy Lucre* lies something more profound. Waterston notes that “the Peacock Room was built during the Gilded Age more than a hundred years ago, and no surprise, we are living in another Gilded Age right now, with wealth all around, and terrible hardship along with it.” Also looming here is the vexed relationship between Leyland’s money and Whistler’s artistry; who was controlling whom, and is it OK for beauty to emerge from power imbalances that are ugly?

Waterston is one of several contemporary artists represented in a completely different exhibition, *Strut: The Peacock and Beauty in Art*, now on view at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, New York, through January 18. Its co-curators Bartholomew F. Bland and Laura L. Vookles have borrowed more than 150 works in every possible medium from three dozen museums, galleries, and private collections. The fascinating result is the first scholarly survey of the peacock in art, focused particularly on works made from the mid-19th century onward.

The peacock is, of course, a walking contradiction. With its nasty disposition, ugly feet, screeching voice, unbalanced body, and awkward flight, it is among nature’s least impressive creatures — until it reveals its astonishingly brilliant plumage. Long associated with both beauty and vanity, “the peacock is,” notes Waterston, “the perfect motif for what Whistler was getting at in his room. I ask myself how beauty can so quickly turn into something monstrous and deformed. The exquisite peacock is mean; it’s the symbol of capriciousness. The thing luxuriates in its own decadence. It is extremely beautiful but there is a violence to its beauty. Is violence the underpinning of beauty?”

Named for the genus that includes the peacock, Waterston’s *Pavo* is one of his characteristically large, liquid-looking abstractions in oil. “I set out to paint a very dark rich palette — a kind of homage to Whistler. It’s a nocturne of sorts. The foreground and background fuse together in a palette that is ‘peacock-y’ and morphs realism and abstraction. Look and you see suggestions of talons and peacock heads. It seems like the peacock is painted often as a benign presence, so decorative. I’m looking at the darker side of the bird.”

If time machines existed, it certainly would be fun to put Whistler, Freer, Sui, and Waterston in a room together. Barring this possibility, both the Freer House and the Freer Gallery are ideal venues to gather kindred spirits for public programs about the complex images and ideas that excited both Whistler and Freer. Be sure to visit their websites for details on what’s happening at these venues throughout 2015. ■

INFORMATION: Freer House, 71 East Ferry Street, Detroit, MI 48202, 313.664.2500, mpsi.wayne.edu/freer, william.colburn@wayne.edu; Freer Gallery of Art, 1050 Independence Avenue S.W., Washington, DC 20013, 202.633.1000, asia.si.edu; Hudson River Museum, 511 Warburton Avenue, Yonkers, NY 10701, 914.963.4550, hrm.org. For the DVD, visit pbs.org/whistler. To learn more about Whistler, consider joining whistlersociety.org. Also visit annasui.com and darrenwaterston.com.

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Damaged ceramics line the walls and floors of *Filthy Lucre* at MASS MoCA
Photo: Amber Gray

Darren Waterston (b. 1965)

Pavo

2014, Oil on wood panel, 48 x 72 in.

Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York City

On view in *Strut* at the Hudson River

Museum through January 18

