



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

Dr Laurence Shafe www.shafe.uk

This presentation uses AI tools including Anthropic's Claude, ElevenLabs, and HeyGen. The art-historical content and editorial judgement remain my own.

- Welcome. I have finished the History of Western Art but I had some lectures that I gave many years ago and I thought I could use AI systems to convert them to my new design, improve the text and use a clone of my voice to give them.

GENERAL REFERENCES AND COPYRIGHT

- My talks and notes are produced with the assistance of AI systems such as Claude, Perplexity, ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Microsoft CoPilot.
- They are also based on information found on public websites such as Wikipedia, Tate, National Gallery, Louvre, The Met, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Khan Academy and the Art Story.
- If they use information from specific books, websites or articles these are referenced at the beginning of each talk and in the 'References' section of the relevant page. The talks that are inspired by an exhibition may use the booklets and books associated with the exhibition as a source of information.
- Where possible images and information are taken from Wikipedia under an [Attribution-Share Alike Creative Commons License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).
- If I have forgotten to reference your work then please let me know and I will add a reference or delete the information.



28-02 AESTHETIC MOVEMENT TO DEGENERATION PART 2


DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

WWW.SHAFE.UK



James McNeill Whistler
Arrangement in Gray:
Portrait of the Painter
c. 1872

This lecture follows the Aesthetic Movement from its most combative personalities to its darkest anxieties. We examine Whistler's etchings, nocturnes, and the libel trial that redrew the boundaries of Victorian criticism. We trace the Peacock Room, the Grosvenor Gallery, and Burne-Jones's monumental late canvases. And we follow the movement's satirical reception through Punch and Gilbert and Sullivan into the troubled territory of Decadence, Degeneration, and the fin-de-siècle.

A portrait painting of a man with a mustache, wearing a dark hat and a light-colored, textured coat. He is holding a pair of glasses in his right hand. The background is dark and indistinct.

James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)
Arrangement in Gray: Portrait of the Painter
c. 1872
Detroit Institute of Arts

James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Arrangement in Gray: Portrait of the Painter*, c. 1872, Detroit Institute of Arts

We turn now from the broad landscape of Victorian revolt to one of its most combative figures. **James McNeill Whistler**, born in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1834, was the son of a railroad engineer who died of cholera in St Petersburg, leaving the family without income. After a failed attempt at West Point — where his long hair, poor health record, and sarcastic manner earned him dismissal — Whistler spent two months as a draughtsman, long enough to learn etching. In 1855 he left for Paris permanently, training in **Charles Gleyre's atelier**, where he absorbed two principles the Impressionists would reject: that line outranks colour, and that black anchors tonal harmony. Through **Henri Fantin-Latour** he entered a circle that included **Gustave Courbet**, **Édouard Manet**, and **Charles Baudelaire**. His early **French Set etchings** of 1858 announced a gift that places him in a lineage stretching from **Albrecht Dürer** and **Rembrandt** through **Francisco de Goya**. His brother-in-law Francis Haden, an authority on Rembrandt's prints and a distinguished etcher himself, shaped that sensibility early. Today

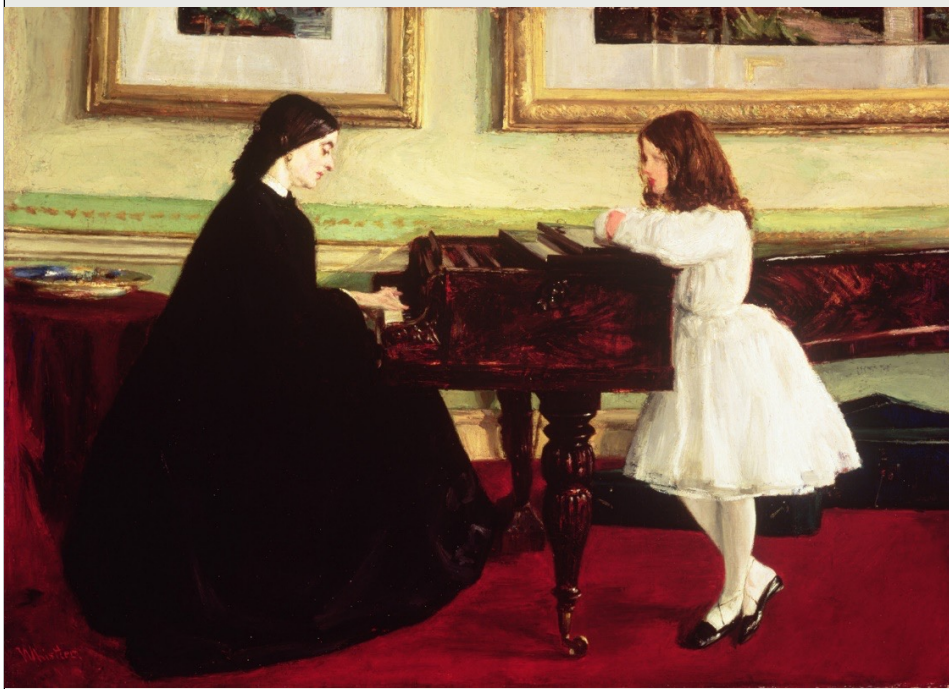
Whistler stands as the defining figure of the Aesthetic Movement in Britain.

Notes

Whistler was born in Lowell, America the son of a railroad engineer who died of cholera aged 49 (in 1849) in St Petersburg. Whistler was prone to fits of temper and insolence as a child but took to art and joined the Russian Imperial Academy of Fine Arts aged 11. He spent some time in London with his brother-in-law the physician and artist Francis Haden. When his father died the family had little income and moved back to his mother's home town in America. He started training as a minister but it did not suit him so he applied to the United States Military Academy at West Point where he was admitted on the strength of his family name as his father had taught drawing there and other family members had attended. He was nearsighted and had a poor health record, had long hair, floated the regulations and made sarcastic comments. He was dismissed and got a job as draughtsman and although he was only there two months learnt to etch. He decided to become an artist and in 1855 he set out for Paris never to return. He learnt traditional techniques in the Gleyre's atelier, in particular, line is more important than colour and black is the fundamental colour of tonal harmony both lessons rejected by the Impressionists. He produced 'The French Set' of etchings and in 1858 met Henri Fantin-Latour and through him Gustave Courbet, Alphonse Legros, Édouard Manet and Charles Baudelaire.

Today he is the best known artist of the Aesthetic Movement.

Whistler is one of the great etchers who Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) and James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903). Whistler may have been introduced to etching by his brother-in-law Francis Haden who was an authority on the etchings of Rembrandt and a master of etching himself.



James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)
At the Piano
1858-9
Tate Britain, London

James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *At the Piano*, 1858-9, Tate Britain, London

Whistler returned to London in **1859** and almost immediately produced this striking domestic interior — a scene set in the music room at **62 Sloane Street**, home of his half-sister Deborah and her husband, the physician and artist **Francis Seymour Haden**. The two figures are Deborah herself, dressed in black, and her daughter Annie in white, a contrast Whistler sustains without sentimentality. He keeps all other colour restrained, following the compositional discipline instilled by his teacher **Gleyre**. The composition works through bold structural decisions: the piano, table, and pictures are all deliberately cropped at the edges, and the reverse curve of the dado rail pushes the scene towards the viewer. One contemporary critic acknowledged what he called a recklessly bold manner and sketchiness of the wildest and roughest kind, but praised Whistler's genuine feeling for colour and splendid power of design. The **Salon** rejected the painting; the **Royal Academy** displayed it the following year. The personal story behind it turns sour: in **1867**, Whistler quarrelled with Haden and

pushed him through a plate-glass window. The two men never spoke again, and this image of domestic harmony quietly became a record of a relationship already doomed.

Notes

This was Whistler's first major painting after returning to London in 1859. It is his niece, Annie Haden, and her mother (Whistler's half-sister Deborah), in their London music room at 62 Sloane Street. Whistler's half-sister Deborah ('Debo' or 'Sis', the daughter of his father's first wife) married the physician, photographer and artist Francis Seymour Haden. A critic wrote of this painting, "[despite] a recklessly bold manner and sketchiness of the wildest and roughest kind, [it has] a genuine feeling for colour and a splendid power of composition and design, which evince a just appreciation of nature very rare amongst artists." The work is unsentimental and effectively contrasts the mother in black and the daughter in white, with other colours kept restrained in the manner advised by his teacher Gleyre. The reverse curve of the dado rail seems to project the painting outwards. The painting is anchored by its strong horizontal lines and the composition is strengthened by the daring technique of chopping off the piano, the table and the pictures.

In 1867 Whistler quarrelled with Francis Haden and pushed him through a plate glass window. They never spoke again.

It was rejected by the Salon but displayed at the Royal Academy the following year.

James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)
Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room
1860-1861
Freer Gallery, Washington



James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room*, 1860-1861, Freer Gallery, Washington

Harmony in Green and Rose, exhibited in 1861, began life as *The Morning Call*, then *The Music Room* — three titles tracking Whistler's evolving ambitions. Set in his sister's Sloane Street home, the composition is tall, narrow, and deliberately claustrophobic, contrasting sharply with the expansive horizontality of **At the Piano**. The tilted floor and strategic mirror reflect conversations then circulating in Paris about pictorial space. The mirror is the painting's most charged element. The reflected woman is **Deborah Delano Haden**, Whistler's half-sister, and her shadowy, conventional presence frames the central tension. **Annie Haden**, aged twelve, sits in white between Deborah's reflection and **Isabella ("Belle") Boott** a friend of the family who is wearing a riding costume, the fashionable dress of an elite sportswoman. Its masculine tailoring and severity was associated with Baudelairean *dandysme*, part of Whistler's own aesthetic programme. On a more practical note, **Frederick Leighton** told Whistler that Annie's head was out of harmony with the rest. Whistler

rubbed it out one week before the Royal Academy deadline and repainted it entirely. The strain on Annie was real: she wept from the exhaustion of extended sittings, and Whistler, recognising what he had asked of her, bought her a leather writing set. The painting later passed to Whistler's niece **Julia Revillon**, who sold it at auction in 1892 for £199 — well below the 800 guineas Whistler had demanded. He never forgave her.

Notes

The painting was originally titled *The Morning Call* and he renamed it *The Music Room* and later added *Harmony in Green and Rose*. It is set in his sister's house in Sloane Street and his distortion of perspective with the tilted floor and the use of the mirror reflect artistic ideas being discussed in Paris at the time. At the Piano is wide and expansive but *The Music Room* is tall, narrow and claustrophobic.

He painted the same mother and child a few years later in the same room and his intention may have been to exploit the contrast between Annie in white and her cousin Ethel Boott in black. This time the composition was more exciting. The mirror introduces an ambiguity in the space—who are we looking at in the mirror? The woman in the mirror is his half-sister, Deborah Delano Haden and her shadowy presence suggests her conventional marriage. Whistler added her reflection later.

The woman in black is wearing a riding costume associated with the French courtesan. Annie sits between the two life choices and maintains her privacy. A picture of a woman or girl reading is a sign of modernity as it implies education and advancement. It is similar to Degas family portrait of the period (*The Bellini Family*, 1859-60) but Whistler's high angle and use of overlapping forms predates devices that Degas would not use until the end of the century.

Annie explained later that on one occasion she burst in tears because of the strain of posing for so long. Whistler realised he was asking too much of a 12 year-old and was extremely kind to her. He went out and bought her a leather writing set as a gift to cheer her up. Whistler though could not get Annie's head right and when Frederick Leighton suggested it was 'out of harmony' with the rest of the painting Whistler immediately rubbed out the head only a week before the Royal Academy deadline. However, his mother heard had had painted a portrait of Annie and 'Debo' and asked for it.

This painting was given by Whistler's mother to Whistler's niece Julia Reillon who took it to Russia. On her return in 1892 she wished to sell it. Whistler insisted on at least 800 guineas but it was finally sold at auction for £199 10s. Whistler was very angry and reminded her it was a present from his mother to her mother (also called Julia).



James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)
Wapping on Thames
1860-1864
National Gallery of Art, Washington

James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Wapping on Thames*, 1860-1864, National Gallery of Art, Washington

Wapping on Thames, exhibited at the Royal Academy in **1864**, places Whistler's mistress **Johanna Heffernan** at the centre of a riverside scene, seated alongside **Alphonse Legros** and a sailor. Whistler renders her ambiguously — earlier versions displayed her with what contemporaries called a whorish air, but the final painting fuses sensual and spiritual registers in a manner consistent with **Rossetti**, whom Whistler met in July 1862 and with whom he was, by October, described as thick as thieves. Rossetti by then held genuine cult status among London artists. The critical reception split sharply. One voice welcomed Whistler even in his roughest work, but 'The Times' critic **Tom Taylor** condemned the trio of foreground figures as grim and mean, and 'The Realm' urged readers to turn away from their intrusion. This was precisely the tension Baudelaire had theorized: finding beauty in modern life meant confronting its uncomfortable inhabitants. Wapping itself was a district thick with poverty and disease. **Dickens** wrote of its accumulated scum of humanity. Whistler called the

background unbelievably difficult, yet praised the sky as splendidly painted. His **Thames Set** etchings, particularly **Black Lion Wharf**, proved equally influential, directly inspiring **Graham Sutherland** and a generation of etchers in the **1920s**.

Notes

Originally it was titled Wapping but it was exhibited as Wapping on Thames at the Royal Academy in 1864.

He represents the downtrodden of life in a picturesque manner. Finding beauty in modern life, as Baudelaire recommended.

One critic wrote, 'Let us welcome Whistler in the rudest of his works.' Other critics liked the representation of the Thames but were shocked by the figures, the *Realm* wrote, 'intrusion of the hideous figures ... we are glad to turn away', The *Times* critic Tom Taylor wrote that the painting was, 'marred by a trio of grim and mean figures ... even such powers as Mr. Whistler's do not excuse his defiance of taste and propriety'.

In the foreground is Whistler's mistress Johanna Heffernan with Alphonse Legros and a sailor. Whistler represents her as a prostitute enticing two sailors. In the early version of this painting her bosom was displayed with a 'superlatively whorish air'. But Whistler renders her more ambiguously in the final painting combining both the spiritual and sensual elements, like Rossetti. By the 1860s, Rossetti had acquired a cult status and Whistler met him in July 1862 and by October they were 'thick as thieves'.

Wapping was polluted and full of disease, Dickens wrote about the, 'accumulated scum of humanity' in Wapping.

The pub is still there and called The Angel and it is possible to sit where Heffernan was sitting.

Whistler described the background as 'unbelievably difficult' but he was pleased with the sky, 'splendidly painted'.

'Black Lion Wharf', the most famous of Whistler's Thames Set subjects, was one of his personal favourites; a framed impression of it appears in the background of his celebrated *Portrait of Whistler's mother*. It attracted many imitators. The minute and crisp delineation of bricks and old woodwork of the

wharf buildings inspired the romantic prints made by Graham Sutherland and other young etchers in the late 1920s.



James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)
*Rose and Silver: The Princess from
the Land of Porcelain*
1863–1865
Freer Gallery, Washington

James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, 1863–1865, Freer Gallery, Washington

Japonism — the sweeping influence of Japanese art, fashion, and aesthetics on Western culture — forms the essential backdrop for understanding Whistler's **Princess from the Land of Porcelain**, painted between 1863 and 1865. The model was **Christine Spartali**, sister of the Pre-Raphaelite artist Marie Spartali; Owen Edwards of the Smithsonian describes her as "**an Anglo-Greek beauty whom all the artists of the day were clamouring to paint.**" Whistler laboured through the winter of 1863 to 1864, repeatedly scraping back his canvas and beginning again, until Spartali fell ill and a separate model stood in for the final work on the gown. The painting depicts a Western woman in a kimono, surrounded by Asian objects — a screen, a rug, porcelain — rendered in a loose, impressionistic manner. Its early life was turbulent: Spartali's father declined to buy it, and Whistler's conspicuous signature deterred another buyer, an episode that likely prompted him to develop his now-famous **butterfly monogram**. The portrait eventually passed to **Frederick Leyland**, whose dining room full of

Kangxi ceramics set the stage for Whistler's unauthorised redesign of the space — the celebrated **Peacock Room**, and a lasting quarrel between artist and patron.

Notes

In the mid-1860s Japanese art and dress became fashionable.

Princess depicts a beautiful Western woman wearing a kimono and standing amidst numerous Asian objects, including a rug and screen as well as some porcelain. She holds a hand fan and looks at the viewer "wistfully". The entirety is rendered in an impressionistic manner.

Princess was painted between 1863 and 1865 by James Abbott McNeill Whistler when he was about 30, with Christine Spartali (sister of the great Pre-Raphaelite artist Marie Spartali) serving as the model; Owen Edwards of Smithsonian describes Spartali as "an Anglo-Greek beauty whom all the artists of the day were clamouring to paint". Princess is one of several of Whistler's works painted during this period that depict a Western woman in Asian surroundings and Asian clothes.

Whistler spend all winter of 1863-4 painting it and often scraped off everything he had painted and started again. The sittings went on until Spartali fell ill and Whistler used a model for the gown.

When the portrait was completed, Spartali's father refused to purchase it; Whistler's large signature led another would-be buyer to withdraw. This may have led Whistler to develop his butterfly-style signature. The early history of the painting afterwards is fairly uncertain. In 1865 Princess was displayed at the Paris Salon. The following year, it was displayed at Gambart's French Gallery in London; as Whistler was in South America when the exhibition finished, his friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti received the painting. It was then sold by either Rossetti or Joanna Hiffernan, Whistler's muse and lover, to an unknown art collector thought to be Frederick Huth. Princess was returned to Whistler in 1867.

Several years later, the portrait was bought by Leyland He displayed Princess in a dining room filled with Kangxi ceramics, but was displeased how it had been decorated by a previous artist, Thomas Jeckyll. Whistler suggested that Leyland modify the colouring of the room to better accent his new acquisition; the redesign was later handled by Whistler himself, as Jeckyll was ill. The result was the Peacock Room. However, Whistler's modifications were

more in-depth than those wished for by Leyland, resulting in a quarrel between the two.

Japonism

Japonism is the influence of Japanese art, fashion and aesthetics on Western culture. During the Kaei era (1848–1854), after more than 200 years of seclusion, foreign merchant ships of various nationalities again began to visit Japan. Japonism started with a craze for collecting Japanese art, particularly ukiyo-e, of which some of the first samples were to be seen in Paris. Whistler has been considered important in introducing England to Japanese art in the same way as Paris has been considered the centre of all things Japanese in the context of Fine Art. Whistler acquired a good collection during his years in Paris before coming to England in 1859. In England the study and purchase of Japanese art by institutions had begun as early as 1852. An essential element of Japanese art, the use of conventional or flat decoration (and lack of perspective, see above) was in fact one of the propositions in Owen Jones *The Grammar of Ornament* 1856. Decorative art, if not fine art, when influenced by the principles of the arts of Japan is referred to in England as Anglo-Japanese style, distinct from the Japonisme of France.

The first treaty was the Convention of Kanagawa (1854) between Japan and the US, negotiated by Commander Matthew Perry (1794-1858). Similar treaties were agreed with the UK (1854), the Russians (1855) and the French (1858). Through his mother, Perry was a direct descendant of the uncle of Scottish patriot William Wallace (d. 1305) who is commonly known as Braveheart. Among other mementos, Perry presented Queen Victoria with a breeding pair of Japanese Chin dogs, previously owned only by Japanese nobility. Perry had ten children and suffered from severe arthritis. He was awarded \$20,000 by the US Congress in appreciation of his work in Japan and used part of the money to publish a three volume report on the expedition.



James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)
*Rose and Silver: The Princess from
the Land of Porcelain*
1863–1865

James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, 1863–1865

This detail of **Whistler's** brushwork sits at the heart of a broader transatlantic conversation about modern painting. Whistler had spent formative years in Paris, meeting regularly at the **Café Guerbois** with **Manet**, Renoir, Degas, Monet, and Cézanne. As early as **1858**, Whistler, **Henri Fantin-Latour**, and **Alphonse Legros** had formed the *Société de Trois*, a tight alliance committed to a looser, more gestural approach to paint as we see here. Both Whistler and Legros moved permanently to London in **1863**, the very year Manet shocked Paris with 'The Luncheon on the Grass', a painting the Paris Salon rejected but which found its audience at the Salon des Refusés, established by Emperor Napoleon III after the Salon turned away over four thousand works that year. The Impressionists did not emerge publicly until the **1870s**, building on the fluid handling pioneered by Delacroix and Turner and committing to painted scenes of contemporary life, often executed outdoors. Their first group exhibition was in **1872**. The label itself came from critic **Louis Leroy**, who used Manet's title *Impression*,

Sunrise as a taunt — a dismissal that the painters promptly claimed as a badge of honour.

Notes

Detail of Whistler's painting showing the 'impressionistic' brushwork.

Whistler had spent a great deal of time in Paris and mixed at the Café Guerbois with Manet, Legros, Fantin-Latour, Renoir, Degas, Monet and Cezanne.

Whistler, Henri Fantin-Latour and Alphonse Legros had been close friends since the late 1850s while Manet only started sharing their vision in 1861. The three formed the Society de Trois in 1858 and in 1865 Legros was replaced by Albert Moore. Whistler flamboyance and temperamental personality would have made him a natural rival to Manet had he stayed in Paris but both he and Legros moved permanently to London in 1863.

The Impressionists did not come to prominence until the 1870s. They used loose brushstrokes and followed the example of painters such as Eugène Delacroix and J. M. W. Turner. They are best known for painting realistic scenes of modern life and for painting outdoors.

The first Impressionist exhibition was in 1872 and 12 were held between then and 1884. The name 'Impressionist' was a derisive descriptive by the critic Louis Leroy based on the title of Manet's painting Impression, Sunrise ((Impression, soleil levant).

Manet painting The Luncheon on the Grass (Le déjeuner sur l'herbe) and Olympia in 1863. The Paris Salon rejected The Luncheon for exhibition in 1863 but Manet exhibited it at the Salon des Refusés (Salon of the Rejected) later in the year. Emperor Napoleon III had initiated The Salon des Refusés after the Paris Salon rejected more than 4,000 paintings in 1863. Olympia was exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1865.



James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)
Symphony in White, No. I: The White Girl
1861-62
National Gallery of Art, Washington

James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Symphony in White, No. I: The White Girl*, 1861-62, National Gallery of Art, Washington

Whistler's use of the word '**symphony**' in his titles signals his core belief that painting, like music, should be valued for its formal qualities alone — colour, tone, and composition — rather than narrative or symbol. **James McNeill Whistler** developed this position into what he called '**art for art's sake**', and '*Symphony in White, No. 1*', painted in **1861 to 1862**, is its earliest major statement. The model is **Joanna Hiffernan**, an Irish artist's model who was Whistler's companion and muse from 1860. She stands against a muslin-filtered window, her red hair the only departure from an otherwise sustained arrangement of whites — exactly as Whistler described it in a letter to George du Maurier. The painting was rejected by the Royal Academy and the Paris Salon before appearing at the **Salon des Refusés in 1863**, alongside **Édouard Manet's** '*Déjeuner sur l'herbe*', drawing over a thousand visitors a day. Critics read it as a lost bride, a ghost, or an illustration of **Wilkie Collins's** novel '*The Woman in White*'. The animal-skin rug at her feet, generally read as controlled passion, attracted surprisingly little

comment at the time. Whistler's own account stays resolutely formal — light, cloth, and brilliant white.

Notes

The term 'symphony' was intended to emphasize the abstract quality of the paintings, like music they have no meaning.

The fan in 2 and 3 shows the Japanese influence. Joanna Heffernan (with the fan) and Emelie 'Milly' Jones, wife of an actor friend, were the two models in No.3.

However, the viewer can always search for a narrative in a figurative painting. A newly married woman after her wedding night (according to a French critic). After married life she looks sad standing by the fireplace.

Collapsed in the company of a sympathetic friend. The consequences of marriage?

Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl, 1861-2

This is one of his earliest paintings in the new style with a title linking it to the abstract nature of music

It was first shown at the Salon des Refusés in 1863 and critics had many interpretations of the meaning.

Whistler's The White Girl – Joanna Heffernan

This full-length painting is a portrait of Joanna Heffernan (c. 1843-after 1903) and Irish artists' model and muse romantically linked to Whistler and the French painter Gustave Courbet (1819-1877). Whistler had a six year relationship with her starting in 1860. She was described as not only beautiful but intelligent and sympathetic and was Whistler's constant companion. She had red hair and a violent temper. When they broke up, possibly because of her affair with Courbet when Whistler was away in South America, she helped to raise Whistler's son, the result of an affair with parlour maid Louisa Fanny Hanson. In 1861 she sat for this picture in a studio (Boulevard des Batignolles) in Paris.

This painting was originally called The White Girl but he later started to refer to it as Symphony in White, No. 1 to emphasise his commitment to his 'art for art's sake' philosophy. It was rejected by the Royal Academy and the Salon in

Paris but accepted at the Salon des Refusés in 1863. The Salon des Refusés was held as a result of the Salon jury refusing two-thirds of the paintings submitted including paintings by Courbet, Édouard Manet and Camille Pissarro. Emperor Napoleon III heard of the artists' complaints and, sensitive to public opinion, he decided to display the rejected works to allow the public to decide. This painting and Édouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* are the two most famous works on display. More than a thousand visitors a day crowded in critics had mostly favourable views of this painting. One thought it showed a new bride's lost innocence, others linked it to Wilkie Collins's novel, *The Woman in White*, others thought she was a ghost or apparition. French critics linked it to the English Pre-Raphaelite movement and so regarded it as somewhat eccentric.

The woman holds a lily and there are flowers scattered on the floor. Art historians have found the most interesting element is the bear or wolf skin rug she is standing on. Whether it is a bear or a wolf has been debated and the animal's face contains elements of both. It is generally regarded as signifying animal passions which have been controlled by the woman or women. When the painting is hung at the normal height it is the most obvious element of the painting but critics at the time did not comment on it. Perhaps we try to read too much into paintings. Whistler in a letter to George du Maurier described it as '...a woman in a beautiful white cambric dress, standing against a window which filters the light through a transparent white muslin curtain – but the figure receives a strong light from the right and therefore the picture, barring the red hair, is one gorgeous mass of brilliant white.' In other words, like many artists, he described it formally in terms of light and colour. The 'Symphony' title also suggest he intended it to be an abstract assembly of formal elements rather than a symbolic painting with a deep meaning.

James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)
Princess from the Land of Porcelain
1863-1865
Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



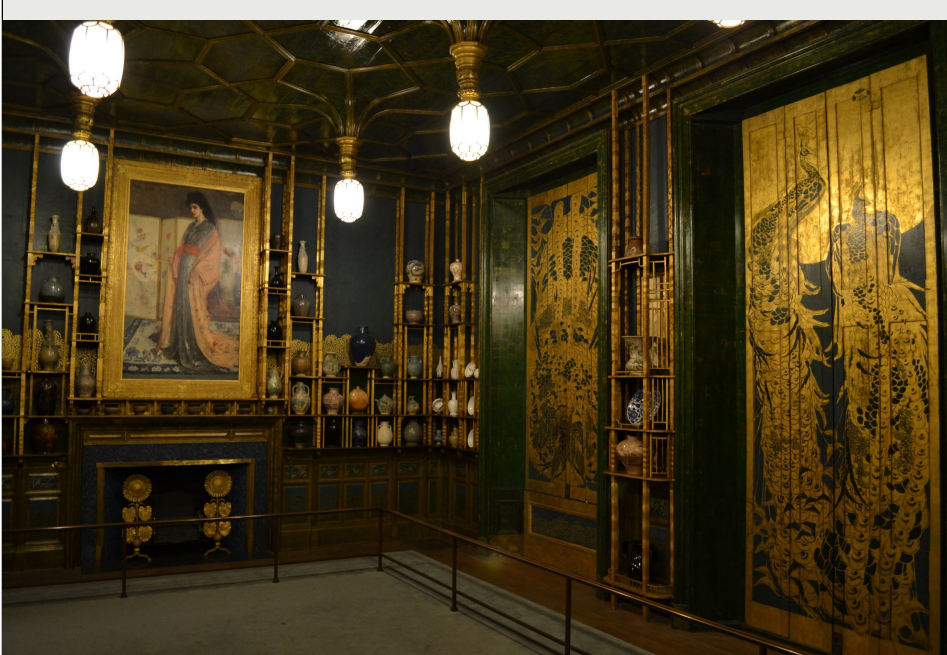
James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, 1863-1865, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

That painting belonged to the broader decorative scheme of the **Peacock Room**, one of the most charged confrontations between artist ego and patron authority in nineteenth-century design history. **James McNeill Whistler** overpainted the London dining room of shipping magnate **Frederick Leyland** in 1876 and 1877, transforming a space commissioned for another purpose into a total environment of iridescent blue-green and gold. Leyland had hired Whistler only to make minor adjustments; Whistler instead repainted the entire room without permission, covering priceless antique **leather wall coverings** imported from Córdoba. The falling-out was spectacular: Leyland paid him half the agreed fee, so Whistler retaliated by painting two peacocks fighting over gold coins on the shutters — a scene art historian **Linda Merrill** identifies directly as a portrait of the dispute itself. Whistler called the room "**Harmony in Blue and Gold**", insisting the decorative whole mattered more than any single object within it. The room now sits in the **Freer Gallery** in Washington, transported

there by collector **Charles Lang Freer** in 1904, preserved almost exactly as Whistler left it — a monument to artistic autonomy asserted at considerable personal cost.

Notes

The painting I showed earlier was part of the Peacock Room.



James Abbott McNeill Whistler
(1834-1903)

***Harmony in Blue and Gold: The
Peacock Room***

1876-1877

Oil paint, gold leaf on leather, wood,
and canvas

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian
Institution, Washington, D.C.

James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, 1876-1877, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

As we saw with *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, that painting was never intended to hang alone — it was the centerpiece of one of the most extraordinary interiors of the nineteenth century. ***Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room***, painted by **James McNeill Whistler** between **1876** and **1877**, began as a dining room in the Kensington townhouse of shipping magnate **Frederick Leyland**. Architect **Thomas Jeckyll** had nearly completed an Anglo-Japanese scheme of walnut shelving and historic leather wall hangings before illness forced him to withdraw. Whistler, already working elsewhere in the house, volunteered to finish the room — and then, during Leyland's absence, repainted virtually the entire interior in brilliant blue-green with gold leaf. Leyland was furious. The two men quarrelled bitterly over compensation, and Whistler retaliated by painting two fighting peacocks on the wall, titling the image **Art and Money: or, The Story of the Room**. The conflict grew uglier still when

Whistler's 1879 bankruptcy left Leyland as his chief creditor. American collector **Charles Lang Freer** purchased the room in 1904, and today it stands permanently installed in the **Freer Gallery of Art** at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.

Notes

The Peacock Room

Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room (better known as The Peacock Room) is James McNeill Whistler's masterpiece of interior decorative mural art. He painted the panelled room in a rich and unified palette of brilliant blue-greens with over-glazing and metallic gold leaf. Painted between 1876–77, it now is considered one of the greatest surviving aesthetic interiors, and best examples of the Anglo-Japanese style.

Albert Moore had used the peacock in room decoration in 1873 at 15 Berkeley Square but before then it was discussed most frequently in connection with Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection and evolution. Of course, the peacock has a long history in art and has been used since classical times to represent beauty as well as immortality, rebirth and pride.

The painting I showed earlier, *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, was part of the Peacock Room.

The Peacock Room was originally designed as a dining room in the townhouse located at 49 Prince's Gate in Kensington. It was owned by the British shipping magnate Frederick Richards Leyland. Leyland engaged the British architect Richard Norman Shaw to remodel and redecorate his home. Shaw entrusted the remodelling of the dining room to Thomas Jeckyll, another British architect experienced in the Anglo-Japanese style.

He covered the walls with 6th-century wall hangings of Cuir de Cordoue that had been originally brought to England as part of the dowry of Catherine of Aragon. They were painted with her heraldic device, the open pomegranate, and a series of red roses, Tudor roses, to symbolise her union with Henry VIII. They had hung on the walls of a Tudor style house in Norfolk for centuries, before they were bought by Leyland for £1,000.

Against these walls, Jeckyll constructed an intricate lattice framework of engraved spindled walnut shelves that held Leyland's collection of Chinese

blue and white porcelain, mostly from the Kangxi era of the Qing dynasty. Jeckyll had nearly completed his decorative scheme when an illness compelled him to abandon the project. Whistler, who was then working on decorations for the entrance hall of Leyland's house, volunteered to finish Jeckyll's work in the dining room. Concerned that the red roses adorning the leather wall hangings clashed with the colours in *The Princess*, Whistler suggested retouching the leather with yellow paint, and Leyland agreed to that minor alteration.

During Leyland's absence however, Whistler grew bolder with his revisions. Well, you know, I just painted on. I went on—without design or sketch— it grew as I painted. And toward the end I reached such a point of perfection—putting in every touch with such freedom— that when I came round to the corner where I started, why, I had to paint part of it over again, as the difference would have been too marked. And the harmony in blue and gold developing, you know, I forgot everything in my joy in it.

Upon returning, Leyland was shocked by the "improvements." Artist and patron quarrelled so violently over the room and the proper compensation for the work that the important relationship for Whistler was terminated. At one point, Whistler gained access to Leyland's home and painted two fighting peacocks meant to represent the artist and his patron, and which he title *Art and Money: or, The Story of the Room*.

Whistler is reported to have said to Leyland, 'I have made you famous. My work will live when you are forgotten. Still, per chance, in the dim ages to come you will be remembered as the proprietor of the Peacock Room.'

The dispute between Whistler and Leyland did not end there. In 1879, Whistler was forced to file for bankruptcy, and Leyland was his chief creditor at the time. When the creditors arrived to inventory the artist's home for liquidation, they were greeted by *The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre (The Creditor)*, a large painted caricature of Leyland portrayed as an anthropomorphic demonic peacock playing a piano, sitting upon Whistler's house, painted in the same colours featured in the Peacock Room.

He referenced the incident again in his book, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. Adding to the emotional drama was Whistler's fondness for

Leyland's wife, Frances, who separated from her husband in 1879. Another result of this drama was Jeckyll who, so shocked by the first sight of his room, returned home and was later found on the floor of his studio covered in gold leaf; he never recovered and died insane three years later.

Having acquired The Princess from the Land of Porcelain, American industrialist and art collector Charles Lang Freer, anonymously purchased the entire room in 1904 from Leyland's heirs, including Leyland's daughter and her husband, the British artist Val Prinsep. Freer then had the contents of the Peacock Room installed in his Detroit mansion. After Freer's death in 1919, the Peacock Room was permanently installed in the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. The gallery opened to the public in 1923.

References

See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Peacock_Room



E. W. Godwin (1833-1886)
Aesthetic Movement side cabinet
Ebonized mahogany with Anglo-Japanese brass fittings and painted decoration

E. W. Godwin (1833-1886), Aesthetic Movement side cabinet

We turn next week to the Arts and Crafts Movement, but the design reform tradition that fed into it begins here. **Owen Jones**, architect and Orientalist, laid the intellectual groundwork for both movements. His **Grammar of Ornament**, published in **1856**, remains the most rigorous systematic survey of historic world ornament ever assembled. Jones argued that modern design should learn from historical styles without merely recycling them — a productive tension between tradition and innovation that shaped a generation of designers. His student, and later Professor at the Government School of Design, **Christopher Dresser**, collaborated with Jones on the Grammar and on the **1863** decoration of the Oriental Courts at the South Kensington Museum. Dresser pressed further toward a genuinely new style in his own publications, **The Art of Decorative Design** of 1862 and **Principles of Design** of 1873. The **Aesthetic Movement** in the decorative arts drew on this reform tradition and on **Far Eastern influence** to produce a recognisable visual language: ebonised wood with gilt highlights, stylised **peacock feathers**, ginkgo leaves, and blue-and-white

porcelain. The movement attracted both devotion and ridicule — **Gilbert and Sullivan** sent it up memorably in their 1881 comic opera **Patience**.

Notes

Aesthetic Movement – Decorative Arts

This will be covered next week in the class on the Arts & Crafts Movement.

The design reform movement predated the Aesthetic Movement and Arts & Crafts and one of its leading exponents was Owen Jones, architect and Orientalist. He set out the key principles of design and these became not only the basis of the Government schools of teaching but also the propositions which preface *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), which is still regarded as the finest systematic study or practical sourcebook of historic world ornament.

Jones identified the need for a new and modern style which would meet the requirements of the modern world, rather than the continual re-cycling of historic styles, but saw no reason to reject the lessons of the past. Christopher Dresser, a student and later Professor at the school worked with Owen Jones on *The Grammar of Ornament*, as well as on the 1863 decoration of The Oriental Courts (Chinese, Japanese, and Indian) at the South Kensington Museum, advanced the search for a new style with his two publications *The Art of Decorative Design* 1862, and *Principles of Design* 1873.

Aesthetic style furniture is characterized by several common themes:

Ebonized wood (painted or stained to an ebony black finish) with gilt highlights.

Far Eastern influence.

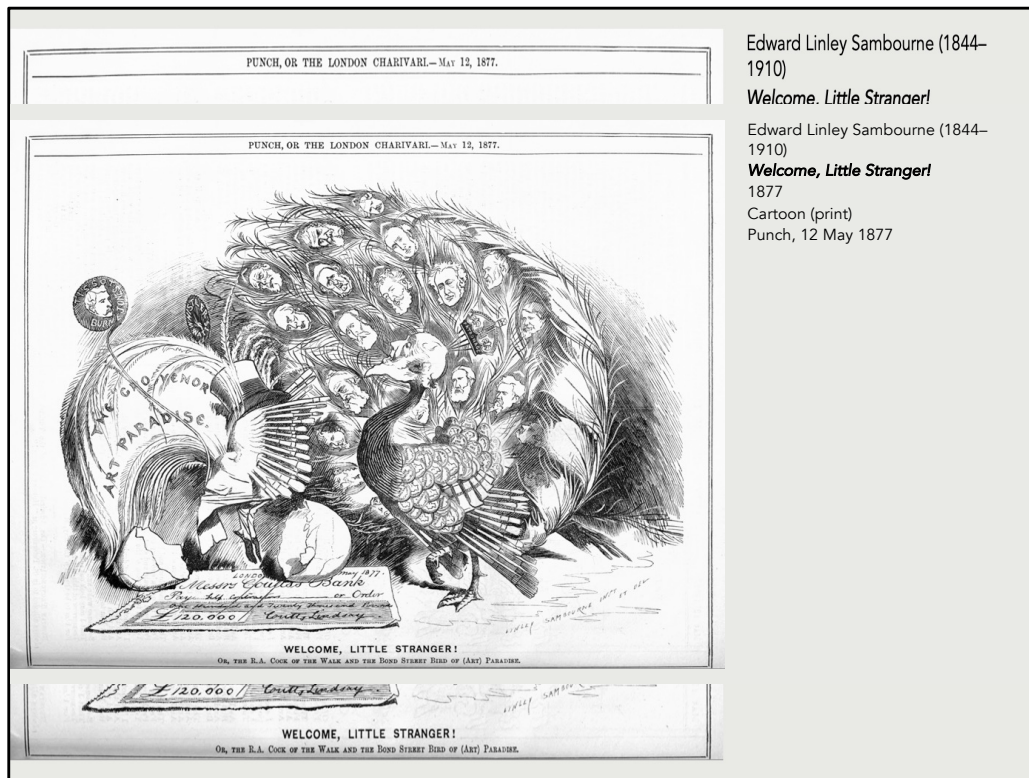
Prominent use of nature, especially flowers, birds, ginkgo leaves, and peacock feathers.

Blue and white on porcelain and other fine china.

As aesthetic movement decor was about sensuality and nature, nature themes often appear on the furniture. A typical aesthetic feature is the gilded carved flower, or the stylized peacock feather. Furniture may have realistic-looking 3-dimensional-like renditions of birds or flowers carved into the wood.

Contrasting with the ebonized-gilt furniture is the use of blue and white for porcelain and china. Similar themes of peacock feathers and nature would be

used in blue and white tones on dinnerware and other crockery. The blue and white design was also popular on square porcelain tiles. It is reported that Oscar Wilde used aesthetic decorations during his youth. This aspect of the movement was also satirised by Punch magazine and in the Gilbert & Sullivan comic opera *Patience* (1881).



Edward Linley Sambourne (1844–1910)

Welcome. Little Stranger!

Edward Linley Sambourne (1844–1910)

Welcome, Little Stranger!

1877

Cartoon (print)

Punch, 12 May 1877

Edward Linley Sambourne (1844–1910), *Welcome, Little Stranger!*, 1877, *Punch*, 12 May 1877

Linley Sambourne's cartoon for *Punch* stages the rivalry between the **Grosvenor Gallery** and the **Royal Academy** with biting precision. The new Grosvenor bird, freshly hatched and wearing a businessman's hat, trails tail feathers bearing the names **Tissot**, **Burne-Jones**, **Whistler**, and **Watts**. Its cheque for **£120,000**, drawn on Coutts Bank, signals that money was no obstacle — that sum covered the entire cost of building and opening the gallery. Opposite it, the Royal Academy peacock wears a crown labelled Patronage and carries the head of Sir Francis Grant, its President, while its plumage is dotted with shillings, the entrance fee. As Julie Codell argues, the Grosvenor, founded in **1877** by **Sir Coutts Lindsay** and Lady Blanche Lindsay on New Bond Street, generated a seismic shift in the Victorian art world by championing avant-garde, neglected, and women artists alongside watercolour and decorative work. Yet the gallery's life was short. Blanche withdrew her money and reputation in 1882 after finally acting on knowledge of Coutts's long-standing affair, and the gallery closed in **1890**, leaving

Coutts with an overdraft of £110,000.

Notes

This cartoon shows the rivalry between the Grosvenor on the left and the Royal Academy on the right.

The bird on the left is fresh from the egg and its tail feathers include 'Tissot, Burne Jones' and 'Whistler, Watts'. The bird wears a businessman's hat. The cheque for £120,000 is to the Contractors and drawn on Coutts Bank showing that money is no object for the new bird. £120,000 was the cost of building and opening the Grosvenor Gallery.

The peacock on the right has the head of Sir Francis Grant PRA and a crown labelled 'Patronage' and the heads include Linley Sambourne, Millais and Leighton. The plumage also includes shillings, the entrance fee.

Lindsay's aim was artistic and exhibition reform. Young and neglected artists and women artists, watercolour and decorative art.

The gallery was a success but short-lived as Coutts had a mistress which although Blanche had known about since 1869 she decided to leave him in 1882. She withdraw her money and her reputation. It closed in 1890 leaving Coutts with an overdraft of £110,000. He retired to Roehampton with his mistress Kate Burfield and when his wife died in 1912 Coutts, aged 88 married her, but he only lived another year.

Linley Sambourne

Grosvenor Gallery

Julie Codell, 'On the Grosvenor Gallery 1877-90'

'The Grosvenor Gallery (1877-90), founded by Sir Coutts Lindsay and Lady Caroline Blanche Elizabeth Fitzroy (a Rothschild on her mother's side) on 135-37 New Bond Street in London, generated a seismic change in the conventional Victorian art world in its exhibition of then avant-garde artists like Edward Burne-Jones, James McNeill Whistler and G. F Watts, and other leading members of the Aesthetic Movement, such as Frederic Leighton. Its unique methods of display, invitations to exhibit, support of women artists, and stunning building and interior decoration marked its ties to the Aesthetic Movement and its challenge to the Royal Academy.'

Exhibition Options for Artists

Private galleries, dealers and one-man shows

Royal Academy (from 1768)

The Royal Watercolour Society (from 1804, originally the Old Watercolour Society)

British Institution (1805-1867, but the members were aristocrats not artists and their tastes were conservative)

The Royal Society of British Artists (1823, granted a Royal charter in 1887)

The Free Exhibition (1847-1849), changed to the national Institution of Fine Arts (1850-1861)

Hogarth Club (1858-1864), in Waterloo Place, Piccadilly, founded by former Pre-Raphaelites Hunt, Rossetti, Burne-Jones

The New British Institution (1870-1876)

Supplementary Exhibition (1869-1871)

Dudley Gallery (1865-1918), one small room in the Egyptian Hall

References

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/%27That+mighty+art+of+Black-and-White%27%3A+Linley+Sambourne,+Punch+and+the...-a0220059010>

The Grosvenor Gallery, west gallery



The Grosvenor Gallery, west wing

The **Grosvenor Gallery**, founded in **1877** by Sir Coutts Lindsay and his wife Lady Blanche Lindsay on New Bond Street, London, reshaped how art was shown and argued about in Victorian Britain. Unlike the Royal Academy, works hung with generous space around each frame, and no commercial signage intruded. Lindsay chose artists himself, favouring the avant-garde, women, and younger voices. The inaugural exhibition included **Edward Burne-Jones**, **James McNeill Whistler**, George Frederic Watts, and Frederic Leighton, alongside women artists every year — fully a quarter of the gallery's 1,028 exhibitors over fourteen years were women. The gallery's most consequential moment came when **John Ruskin**, reviewing the **1877 opening** in his pamphlet *Fors Clavigera*, accused Whistler of flinging a pot of paint in the public's face. Whistler sued. At trial, Ruskin's side — including Burne-Jones and critic Tom Taylor — argued that art's worth lay in labour and professional discipline. Whistler's position held that aesthetic authority belonged to the artist alone. The case permanently altered how critics engaged with living artists; previously, hostility

meant silence, not attack. The Grosvenor also platformed the **Newlyn School**, the **Glasgow Boys**, and British Impressionists aligned with the **New English Art Club**.

Notes

Founded by Sir Coutts Lindsay and Lady Caroline Blanche Elizabeth Fitzroy (a Rothschild on her mother's side) on 135-37 New Bond Street in London

Unlike the Royal Academy and other exhibition spaces the paintings were hung individually with space around the frames. It was a commercial gallery but there were no signs of commerce.

Coutts Lindsay selected the artists to hang and he favoured young artists, women artists and the avant garde. Watts, Burne-Jones and Whistler all enjoyed a meteoric rise after the 1877 Grosvenor show.

John Ruskin went to the opening to see Burne-Jones but attacked Whistler in letter 79 of *Fors Clavigera*. Whistler sued leading to a watershed change in Victorian art appreciation.

At the trial *Nocturne Blue and Gold-Old Battersea Bridge* was attacked the most with the lawyer, Burne-Jones and the art critic Tom Taylor arguing for Ruskin on the labour value of art, the nature of professionalism in art and the source of aesthetic authority – artist or critic. Previously critics did not attack artists they did not like, they ignored them.

Artists were anti-establishment, the first exhibition included,

Edward Burne-Jones

James McNeill Whistler

George Frederic Watts

William Holman Hunt

John Everett Millais

Albert Moore

John Roddam Spencer Stanhope

Frederic Leighton

Lawrence Alma-Tadema

Edward Poynter

Among other RA members who regularly exhibited at the Grosvenor were

George Clausen, Herbert von Herkomer, Valentine Prinsep, William Blake Richmond, and American John Singer Sargent. Sculptors who exhibited included William Hamo Thornycroft (RA), Edgar Boehm (RA), who exhibited from 1877-89, American Auguste Saint-Gaudens, and French modernist Auguste Rodin in 1882 (A Bronze Mask). Late-century artists who blended Pre-Raphaelitism in the 1880s with Aestheticism included Walter Crane, John Melhuish Strudwick, Marie Spartali Stillman, and Spencer Stanhope.

The Grosvenor also hung works by women in its first exhibition and included them every year. Among the most well-known were: Sophie Anderson, Laura Alma-Tadema, Marie Spartali Stillman, Marianne Stokes, Louisa Starr Canzoni, Evelyn Pickering De Morgan, Louise Jopling, Anne Lea Merritt, Clara Montalba, Annie Louise Robinson Swynnerton, Princess Louise (Queen Victoria's daughter), and Dorothy Tennant. Of 1028 artists shown in the fourteen years of gallery exhibitions, 25% were women

It also highlighted,

The British Impressionists of the new English Art Club

The newlyn School

The Glasgow Boys (James Guthrie, John Lavery and others)

James Abbott McNeill Whistler
(1834-1903)
**Nocturne: Blue and Gold - Old
Battersea Bridge**
c. 1872-75
Tate Britain



James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), Nocturne: Blue and Gold - Old Battersea Bridge, c. 1872-75, Tate Britain

That journey to Valparaiso in **1866** — where Whistler hoped to fight the Spanish as a proud West Point man who had never seen battle — produced his first three night paintings, later renamed **nocturnes** at the suggestion of his patron **Frederick Leyland**. Back in London, his direction faltered. He showed almost nothing at the **Royal Academy** between 1868 and 1870, ran short of money, and made his domestic life explosive by pushing his brother-in-law through a plate glass window. The recovery began in **1871** with 'Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1', painted from his ailing mother, and with nightly trips onto the **Thames** alongside his neighbour **Walter Greaves**, whose father had been Turner's boatman. Whistler built his nocturnes from a thinned mixture of copal, turpentine, and linseed oil — his so-called sauce — laid in transparent sweeps, then lightly flicked with colour to suggest lights, hulls, and shoreline. Compositional echoes of **Hiroshige's** woodblock prints run through several of the Thames pictures. When **John Ruskin** reviewed the nocturnes shown at the

Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, he accused Whistler of flinging a pot of paint in the public's face. Whistler sued for libel, and the trial that followed redrew the boundaries of what Victorian culture would accept as art.

Notes

In 1866 Whistler decided to travel to Valparaiso, Chile to fight the Spanish. Scholars have puzzle over his motivation. Whistler stated he was asked by some South Americans as a 'West Point' man and he was very proud of his military training but, unlike his brother, he had never fought. He may have thought this the opportunity to display his military prowess as a swashbuckling Southern gentleman (even though he was born in New England). Whatever the reason Whistler's painted his first three night paintings while he was there. He later, thanks to the suggestion of his patron Frederick Leyland he re-titled them 'nocturnes'.

On his return him contributed *Symphony in White, No. 3* but critics in England and France were not sympathetic and between 1868 and 1870 he showed only a single painting at the Royal Academy and none in France. He experimented with classical nudes in drapes but criticized himself for his lack of formal training in the life class. He had lost his sense of artistic direction. He was short of money, despised the English and began a major family crisis by arguing with his brother-in-law and pushing him through a plate glass window. In 1869 his half-brother George died.

In 1871 he painted his ailing mother, *Arrangement on Grey and Black, No. 1* (colloquially called *Whistler's Mother*) and this to have been a turning point. At the same time he was rejecting Realism for Aestheticism and he chose to go out on the Thames at night with Walter Greaves (1846-1930) and paint his *Nocturnes*. Greaves was a neighbour who was a boat builder and waterman and his father had been the boatman for J. M. W. Turner.

Whistler painted several more nocturnes over the next ten years, many of the River Thames and of Cremorne Gardens, a pleasure park famous for its frequent fireworks displays, which presented a novel challenge to paint. In his maritime nocturnes, Whistler used paint he had thinned with copal, turpentine and linseed oil, creating what he called a 'sauce', which he applied in thin, transparent layers, wiping it away until he was satisfied. To this ground he applied lightly flicked colour to suggest ships, lights, and shore line. Some of the Thames paintings also show compositional and thematic similarities with the Japanese prints of Hiroshige.

The Whistler v. Ruskin Trial

This painting gave rise to one of the central artistic controversies of the Victorian period, known as the Whistler v. Ruskin trial. The trial tells us a lot about how the Victorians regarded art and the nature of the changes Whistler helped bring about.

This painting and the next were exhibited in the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, the year it opened. John Ruskin reviewed Whistler's work in his publication *Fors Clavigera* on July 2, 1877. Ruskin praised Burne-Jones, while he attacked Whistler:

For Mr. Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay [founder of the Grosvenor Gallery] 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.

Critics by convention did not criticize paintings as they knew the artist had to make a living. If they did not like a painting they ignored it or made a critical comment alongside some positive points.

Whistler, seeing the attack in the newspaper, replied to his friend George Boughton, "It is the most debased style of criticism I have had thrown at me yet." He then went to his solicitor and drew up a writ for libel which was served to Ruskin. Whistler hoped to recover £1,000 plus the costs of the action. The case came to trial the following year after delays caused by Ruskin's bouts of mental illness, while Whistler's financial condition continued to deteriorate. It was heard at the Queen's Bench of the High Court on November 25 and 26 of 1878.

Although, we do not have a transcript of the Whistler v. Ruskin trial sufficient reports were published to enable it to be reconstructed.


When asked 'Are those figures on the top of the bridge intended for people?' Whistler replied 'They are just what you like.'

When the judge asked if it was a barge beneath the bridge,

Whistler replied 'Yes, I am very much flattered at your seeing that. The picture

is simply a representation of moonlight. My whole scheme was only to bring about a certain harmony of colour.'

Whistler stressed the colour rather than a harmony of form and the form is suppressed by the overall similarity in tone and hue; with the exception of the gold dots the painting is a wash of blue, in places a thin wash that allows the canvas to show. Whistler mixed large quantities of the predominant tone that he called his 'sauce', and although he started on an easel, he often had to throw the canvas on the floor to stop the sauce running off. The sky and water were rendered by 'great sweeps of the brush of exactly the right tone.'



James Abbott McNeill Whistler
(1834-1903)
***Nocturne in Black and Gold: The
Falling Rocket***
c. 1875
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit

James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, c. 1875, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit

Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket, painted by **James Whistler** in **1875**, was the second work shown at the **Grosvenor Gallery** that **John Ruskin** attacked, and it remains the more radically abstract of the two. Where Ruskin saw reckless incompetence, Whistler saw a fully realised artistic argument. At the **1878 trial**, Attorney General **Sir John Holker** pressed Whistler on whether the painting was simply a view of **Cremorne Gardens**. Whistler was direct: a literal view would only disappoint. The work was, he insisted, an artistic arrangement — which is precisely why he called it a nocturne. Holker then pursued the question of labour. Whistler admitted to finishing a painting in roughly two days. When Holker asked whether two hundred guineas was a fair price for two days' work, Whistler delivered one of the most quoted lines in art-legal history: he was charging not for the labour of two days, but for the knowledge gained in a lifetime. That exchange crystallised the central conflict. Victorian convention held that price should reflect hours worked and representational difficulty. Whistler

rejected this entirely, insisting that artistic knowledge — not finishing time — determined a painting's worth.

Notes

This painting was the other one displayed at the Grosvenor gallery that Ruskin criticized. It received less discussion at the trial but is the most abstract and 'modern' in its freedom and exciting invocation of fireworks at night.

The lawyer for John Ruskin, Attorney General Sir John Holker, cross-examined Whistler:

Holker: 'What is the subject of Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket?'

Whistler: 'It is a night piece and represents the fireworks at Cremorne Gardens.'

Holker: 'Not a view of Cremorne?'

Whistler: 'If it were A View of Cremorne it would certainly bring about nothing but disappointment on the part of the beholders.

It is an artistic arrangement. That is why I call it a nocturne....'

Holker: 'Did it take you much time to paint the Nocturne in Black and Gold? How soon did you knock it off?'

Whistler: 'Oh, I 'knock one off' possibly in a couple of days – one day to do the work and another to finish it...'

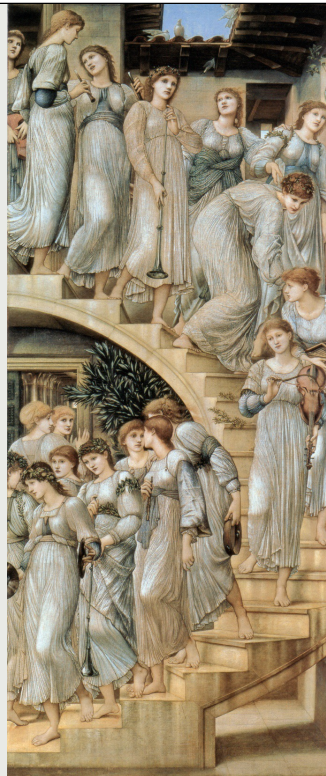
Holker: 'The labour of two days is that for which you ask two hundred guineas?'

Whistler: 'No, I ask it for the knowledge I have gained in the work of a lifetime.'

At the heart of the criticism was the idea that an artist charged for the number of hours work put into the painting and by implication an expensive picture was expected to be a clear representation of something, should be well finished and should exhibit the hard work put into it through its size, the skill the artist needed to accurately represent something and the attention to detail of its finish.

References

See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Abbott_McNeill_Whistler



Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898)
The Golden Stairs
1876–80
Tate Britain, London

Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898), *The Golden Stairs*, 1876–80, Tate Britain, London

Edward Burne-Jones completed **The Golden Stairs** in **1880**, exhibiting it at the **Grosvenor Gallery** after a gestation stretching back to a trip to Italy in 1872 and the first brushstrokes laid down in 1876. The work presents eighteen women in vaguely Renaissance costume descending a spiral stair, painted in a near-monochromatic palette that dissolves narrative into atmosphere. Burne-Jones refuses to tell a story here; the painting operates as mood, rhythm, and design rather than allegory or illustration. The very vertical structure of the canvas pulls the eye downward through a procession of near-identical figures, each carrying a musical instrument, their repetition functioning like a visual chord. This was one of Burne-Jones's first attempts at such ambitious scale, and the compositional control it demanded shaped his subsequent large-format work. The governing intellectual framework came from the critic **Walter Pater**, whose influential 1870s writing proposed that all the arts aspire to the condition of **music** — that pure form and sensation should outrank explicit meaning. Burne-Jones absorbs that

proposition completely. The painting does not ask what it means; it asks how it feels. In that sense, it stands as a defining statement of **British Aestheticism**.

Notes

This painting represents a mood rather than telling a story. The painting has provoked much debate and one view is that the eighteen women are spirits in an enchanted dream. The painting might also be purely decorative. It was first conceived in 1872 after a trip to Italy, the painting was begun in 1876, but not completed and exhibited until 1880 when it was shown at the Grosvenor Gallery. Clothed in vaguely Renaissance costumes, the women are painted in a monochromatic palette designed to create a sense of mood and timelessness. One of the artist's first attempts at working on such a large scale, the very vertical structure of the canvas draws the viewer's eye downward through the long parade of nearly identical women.

The underlying idea, popularised in the 1870s by the critic Walter Pater, is that 'all the arts aspire to the condition of music'. Paintings like this can be as much about design as meaning.

Notes

The film contains:

Van Eyck, Ghent altarpiece, 1432

John Everett Millais, Ferdinand Lured by Ariel, 1850, Tate Britain

George Frederic Watts, Paolo and Francesca, 1872-1884 (?)

Frederic Leighton, Return of Persephone, c. 1891, Leeds Museum and Gallery

References

See <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/burne-jones-the-golden-stairs-n04005>

See <http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/burne-jones-the-golden-stairs.html>

See <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/bj/paintings/gehler7.html>

Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833–1898)
King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid
1884
Tate Britain, London



Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833–1898), *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*, 1884, Tate Britain, London

King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid placed **Burne-Jones** at the centre of British painting in the **1880s**. The work draws on two literary sources: the Elizabethan ballad reprinted in **Bishop Thomas Percy's** *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* of **1765**, and **Alfred Tennyson's** sixteen-line poem *The Beggar Maid*. When it appeared at the **Grosvenor Gallery** in **1884**, *The Art Journal* named it picture of the year, and *The Times* called it not only the finest work Burne-Jones had ever painted but one of the finest pictures ever painted by an Englishman. Its Paris showing in **1889** earned Burne-Jones the **Légion d'honneur** and ignited French enthusiasm for his work. **Fernand Khnopff** responded to its mood of sweet regret, writing of an autumn landscape expressing all hope in vain for things that can never be. For a French generation shaped by **Symbolism**, the painting's rejection of wealth in favour of love carried immediate force. Robert de la Sizeranne wrote that standing before it felt like leaving a universal exhibition of wealth to confront the symbolic scorn of it. The **anemones** — traditional emblems of rejected

love — hint at something more personal. Burne-Jones painted it during his deepening estrangement from **William Morris** over Socialism, and his wife Georgiana believed it contained more of his own qualities than any other work he made.

Notes

Edward Burne-Jones: Picture of the Year

The painting illustrates the story of 'The King and the Beggar-maid', which tells the legend of the prince Cophetua (pronounced coe-FET-you-ah) and his love for the beggar Penelophon. The tale was familiar to Burne-Jones through an Elizabethan ballad published in Bishop Thomas Percy's 1765 *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* and the sixteen-line poem *The Beggar Maid* by Alfred Tennyson.

King Cophetua was exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1884 and became Burne-Jones's greatest success of the 1880s for its technical execution and its themes of power and wealth overborne by beauty and simplicity. It was heralded as the 'picture of the year' by *The Art Journal* and 'not only the finest work Mr Burne-Jones has ever painted, but one of the finest pictures ever painted by an Englishman' by *The Times*. The painting was exhibited in France in 1889, where its popularity earned Burne-Jones the Legion of Honour and began a vogue for his work. The artist's wife Georgiana Burne-Jones felt 'this picture contained more of Edward's own qualities than any other he did.'

On seeing the painting Fernand Khnopff (a major influence on Gustav Klimt) wrote,

'Two chorister-boys perched above are singing softly, and in the distance, between the hanging curtains, is seen a dream, so to speak, of an autumn landscape, its tender sky already dusk, expressing all sweet regret, all hope in vain for the things that are no more, the things that can never be. '

As mentioned the painting is based on the theme of the inferiority of riches and power of love. The rejection of the material for the spiritual held particular relevance for a French generation influenced by Symbolist writers and artists who had promulgated similar ideas. Burne-Jones's wife Georgiana stressed the importance of this aspect of *King Cophetua* and noted that her

husband painted it during the divergence of opinion between himself and Morris, on the subject of Socialism. Jean Maxime ('Max') Monier de la Sizeranne wrote that it seemed to him and his friends as though in standing before it they had 'come from the Universal Exhibition of wealth to see the symbolical expression of the Scorn of Wealth'.

There could be a more personal explanation as the face of the beggar girl looks like his wife Georgiana Burne-Jones (see his 1883 portrait of her). Burne-Jones had had an affair with Maria Zambaco Cassavetti from about 1866 to 1869. In 1869 Burne-Jones attempted to leave his wife, which caused a scandal, and she tried to persuade him to commit suicide with her by the canal in Little Venice. She continued to appear in his paintings, such as *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1872-7) and *Phyllis and Demophoön* (1870). Some have identified the face in this painting as that of Frances Graham who was born in 1858 and was the daughter of his patron William Graham, MP and merchant. She met him when she was 15 and he was 40 and described him later as 'my greatest friend for all my grown-up life). Burne-Jones doted on her and was distraught when she married John ('Jack') Horner in 1883 when she was 25 and he was 40. The anemones in the painting are a symbol of rejected love which may be a comment on his wife or his mistress.

Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898)
The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon
c. 1881–1898, 279 x 650 cm
Museum of Art in Ponce, Puerto Rico



Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898), *The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon*, c. 1881–1898, 279 x 650 cm, Museum of Art in Ponce, Puerto Rico

Edward Burne-Jones began *The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon* in 1881 and worked on it for seventeen years, never considering it finished. The **Earl of Carlisle** had commissioned it for his library, and the canvas stretches over six metres wide. As friends died through the 1880s, Burne-Jones grew increasingly isolated and identified himself directly with the sleeping king. He wrote, "above all the picture is about silence," and near the end of his life, "in my own land I am king of it." He was still painting it the day before he died. Loaned to the **Tate** in 1929, the painting was rolled face-inward when war came and stored in a box for twenty-four years. When **Christie's** offered it for sale in 1963, the unrolling went catastrophically wrong: the heavy canvas tore, collapsed, and shed paint flakes across the floor. **Brian Sewell**, then working at Christie's, spent thirty hours repainting the flowers alongside restorer **Joan Seddon** before the sale proceeded without disclosure. The work passed to the founder of the **Museo de Arte de Ponce** in Puerto Rico. When Sewell finally saw it again in 2009, he

could not determine whose hand had painted what he was looking at.

Notes

The Last Sleep of Arthur in Avalon is considered by some to be Burne-Jones 'last and greatest work'. It is certainly epic in scale. It was commissioned by the Earl of Carlisle to hang on a wall in his library and it is massive, over six metres wide. Burne-Jones started on it in 1881 and worked on it for 17 years. During the 1880s many of his friends died and he increasingly felt isolated and aware of his mortality. He agreed the commission should be cancelled but continued to work on the giant canvas. He immersed himself in the work and identified himself with Arthur. He wrote, 'above all the picture is about silence.' Towards the end of his life he wrote, 'I need nothing but my hands and my brain to fashion myself a world to live in that nothing can disturb. In my own land I am king of it.' His widow described Arthur as a 'task of love to which [the artist] put no limit of time or labour.' The day before he died he was still working on Arthur.

It was loaned to the Tate in 1929 and when the war started in 1939 it was removed from its stretcher, rolled up and stored in a box. In 1963 the owner's decided to sell it through Christies where Brian Sewell was working at the time. It was delivered only a week before the sale and when removed from the box 24 years of spiders and detritus fell out. To try to unroll the heavy canvas it was tacked to a tapestry bar which was slowly raised. Christie's Chairman, Peter Chance, arrived and as he reached the centre of the canvas it began to tear from the bar. Chance was a short man and the rapidly curling canvas surrounded and enclosed him. He fought his way out destroying the canvas. Some say that the person trapped in the canvas was Brian Sewell himself but this is the way he tells the story. A canvas should never be rolled face in but that is what happened as it fell and the floor was covered in paint flakes and the painting was extensively damaged. Sewell called a friend, Joan Seddon, who was a restorer and they both worked on it for 30 hours, from Friday to Monday morning, repainting the flowers. Nothing was said and it was sold to the founder of the Ponce Museum of Art in Puerto Rico. Burne-Jones was out of favour at the time so there was no objection to its export and the Museum relined, cleaned and stretched it. When the Ponce Museum was being refurbished in 2009-10 the work was shown at Tate Britain together with Leighton's Flaming June. Brian Sewell saw the painting for the first time in 45 years and was appalled by the quality of the irises, bluebells and forget-

me-nots but he could not tell if it was his work, restorers at the Ponce Museum or one of Burne-Jones assistants, or even by Burne-Jones himself.

References

<http://zooskbriansewell.blogspot.co.uk/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Sleep_of_Arthur_in_Avalon



George du Maurier (1834-1896)
The Aesthete
1876
Wood engraving
Punch, p. 33

STEEPED IN AESTHETIC CULTURE, AND SURROUNDED BY ARTISTIC WALL-PAPERS, BLUE CHINA, JAPANESE FANS, MEDIEVAL SNUFF-BOXES, AND HIS FAVOURITE PERIODICALS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, THE DILETTANTE DE TOMKYNS COMPLACENTLY BOASTS THAT HE NEVER READS A NEWSPAPER, AND THAT THE EVENTS OF THE OUTER WORLD POSSESS NO INTEREST FOR HIM WHATEVER.

George du Maurier (1834-1896), *The Aesthete*, 1876, *Punch*, p. 33

The **Aesthetic Movement** of the 1870s and 1880s drew intense satirical fire from the British press, and no publication wielded that weapon more effectively than **Punch**. This cartoon places us squarely in that cultural battle. The figure of De Tomkyns, surrounded by Japanese fans, blue china, and William Morris wallpapers, embodies the self-satisfied aesthete who mistakes collecting for wisdom and withdrawal from the world for refinement. The joke cuts sharply: his very pride in ignorance of current events is itself the punchline. **Edward Linley Sambourne**, who joined *Punch* in 1867 and remained for over four decades, drew with a dense, intricate line that suited the magazine's blend of social commentary and visual wit. His home at 18 Stafford Terrace in Kensington survives today as a museum, itself a remarkable record of Victorian aesthetic taste. **George du Maurier**, Sambourne's colleague at *Punch*, produced some of the sharpest sustained satire of Aesthetic pretension throughout the 1870s and 1880s. Born in Paris in 1834, du Maurier brought a continental eye to British social comedy. His later novel **Trilby**, published in 1894, confirmed his reach well

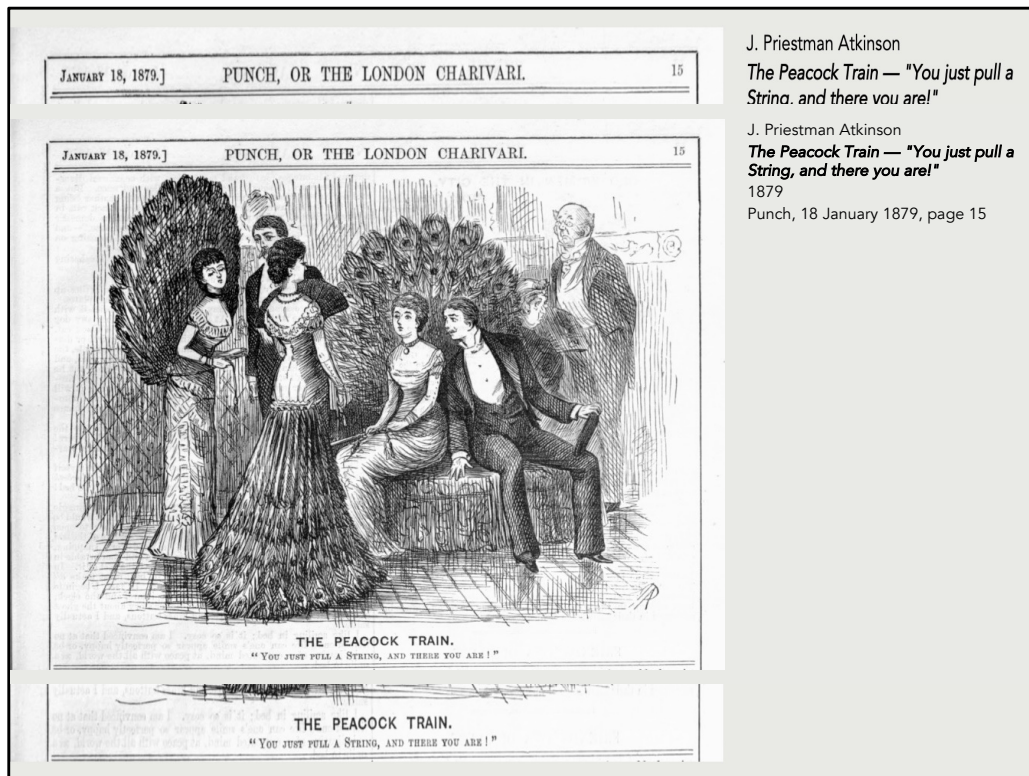
beyond illustration into mainstream literary culture.

Notes

“Steeped in aesthetic culture, and surrounded by artistic wall-papers, blue china, Japanese fans, medieval snuff-boxes, and his favourite periodicals of the eighteenth century, the dilettante De Tomkyns complacently boasts that he never reads a newspaper, and that the events of the outer world possess no interest for him whatever.”

Edward Linley Sambourne (1844-1910) was an English cartoonist and illustrator who worked for Punch for more than forty years. His house at 18 Stafford Terrace is open to the public and contains the Sambourne Museum.

George du Maurier (1834-1896) was a French-born British cartoonist and author known for his cartoons in Punch and his novel Trilby. He was the father of actor Gerald du Maurier and grandfather of the writers Angela du Maurier (1904-2002, novelist of eleven books including the autobiography It's Only the Sister) and Dame Daphne du Maurier (Rebecca, Jamaica Inn). He was also the father of Sylvia Llewelyn Davies whose five boys inspired J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan.



J. Priestman Atkinson
The Peacock Train — "You just pull a String. and there you are!"
 J. Priestman Atkinson
The Peacock Train — "You just pull a String, and there you are!"
 1879
 Punch, 18 January 1879, page 15

J. Priestman Atkinson, *The Peacock Train* — "You just pull a String, and there you are!", 1879, *Punch*, 18 January 1879, page 15

Punch was the Victorian era's sharpest lens on cultural life, and its stable of artists made it uniquely placed to lampoon the art world's every affectation. **John Leech** joined in 1841 and gave the word "cartoon" its modern meaning in 1843. **Richard Doyle** began contributing aged nineteen before resigning on grounds of Catholic conscience. **John Tenniel** held the coveted Chief Cartoon position for decades. **George du Maurier**, **Linley Sambourne**, and **Harry Furniss** — who produced some two thousand six hundred drawings for the magazine alone — completed a team of uncommon range and wit. Their target was frequently the **Royal Academy**, that most celebrated and contested of institutions, but aesthetic culture more broadly was fair game. Du Maurier's 1879 cartoon *Perils of Aesthetic Culture* shows a newlywed couple undone by their immersion in classical drawing: Edwin's runaway chin and absent beard, Angelina's upturned nose and tiny hands — defects invisible until measured against antique casts. J. Priestman Atkinson's *Peacock Train* cartoon from the same year takes

the same satirical logic to fashion. Together they signal how thoroughly **aesthetic culture** had penetrated middle-class life by **1879**, and how irresistible that penetration made it as comedy.

Notes

J. Priestman Atkinson, The Peacock Train — "You just pull a String, and there you are!" Punch, 18 January 1879, page 15

George du Maurier, Perils of Aesthetic Culture, Punch, 10 May 1879, p. 210

Uncle John (suddenly bursting on newly-wedded pair). "Hullo, my turtle-doves! What's the row? Not quarrelled yet, I trust?" Edwin. "Oh dear no. We've been going in for high art, that's all." Angelina. "And drawing from casts of the Antique." Edwin. "And Angy's nose turns up so at the end, and she's got such a skimpy waist, and such a big head, and such tiny little hands and feet! Hang it all, I thought her perfection!" Angelina. "Yes, Uncle John; And Edwin's got a long upper lip, and a runaway chin, and he c-c-can't grow a beard and moustache! Oh dear! Oh dear!"

Punch Artists

As the most prominent satirical weekly of the Victorian age, and the principal home of such graphic artists as John Leech (1817-1864, prolific, started contributing in 1841, first use of the word cartoon in 1843), Richard Doyle (1824-1883, started contributing in 1843 aged 19, a very devout Roman Catholic which resulted in his resignation), John Tenniel ('Chief Cartoon', Punch's leading artist), George du Maurier, Linley Sambourne and Harry Furniss (contributed 2,600 drawings, illustrated 29 books of his own), Punch was bound to pay frequent attention to the art world, and of course to that world's most famous, or infamous, institution, the Royal Academy.



THE SIX-MARK TEA-POT.

Aesthetic Bridegroom. "IT IS QUITE CONSUMMATE, IS IT NOT!"
Intense Bride. "IT IS, INDEED! OH, ALGERNON, LET US LIVE UP TO IT!"

George du Maurier (1834–1896)

The Six-Mark Tea-pot

1880

Print (periodical illustration)

Punch, 30 October 1880, p. 194

George du Maurier (1834–1896), The Six-Mark Tea-pot, 1880, Punch, 30 October 1880, p. 194

The **Aesthetic Movement** of the 1870s and 1880s made fine china not merely decorative but a statement of cultural identity, and du Maurier's Punch cartoons cut straight to the heart of that pretension. **George du Maurier** skewered Aesthetic devotees mercilessly: in 'The Six-Mark Tea-pot' of **30 October 1880**, a newlywed couple vow to "live up to" a piece of **Kangxi porcelain**, treating a ceramic object as a moral standard. The joke works on two levels. Socially, it ridicules the Aesthetic cult of self-improvement through beautiful objects. Technically, it nods to the genuine complexity of reading **Chinese reign marks** — a six-character mark signals Kangxi period manufacture, spanning **1662 to 1722**, but authentication is far more involved than simply counting characters. The earlier 'Aesthetic Pride' cartoon of **17 September 1879** sharpens du Maurier's portrait of the type: the young genius Algernon, unable to name a single superior, embodies the grandiosity the movement could breed in its followers. Together, the cartoons reveal how deeply **blue-and-white porcelain** had penetrated

the cultural imagination of late Victorian Britain, becoming shorthand for taste, status, and, in du Maurier's hands, magnificent self-delusion.

Notes

George du Maurier, The Six-Mark Tea-pot, Punch, 30 October 1880, p. 194
Aesthetic Bridegroom. "It is quite consummate, is it not?" Intense Bride. "It is, indeed! Oh, Algernon, let us live up to it!"

Simplistically, all genuine Kangxi period (1662-1722) marks should be of six characters. In practice, reading Chinese porcelain marks is much more complex.

George du Maurier, 'Aesthetic Pride', Punch, 17 September 1879, p. 142

Fond mother: "You live too much alone, Algernon!"

Young Genius (Poet, Painter, Sculptor, etc.), "'Tis better so, Mother! Besides I only care for the society of my equals, and – a – such being the case – a – my circle is necessarily rather limited."

Fond Mother, "But surely the society of your superiors - "

Young Genius, "My what, Mother! My superiors! WHERE ARE THEY!!!"

James Hadley (1837–1903)
**Royal Worcester 'Aesthetic' Teapot
and cover, double-sided**
1882
The Tea and Coffee Museum,
London



James Hadley (1837–1903), Royal Worcester 'Aesthetic' Teapot and cover, double-sided, 1882, The Tea and Coffee Museum, London

That context set the stage for one of the more unlikely intersections of art, satire, and science in the Victorian period. The teapot's design was registered on **21 December 1881**, its costume drawn directly from **Gilbert and Sullivan's** operetta **Patience**, which had opened in April of that year. *Patience* was a pointed satire on the **Aesthetic Movement**, with **Dante Gabriel Rossetti** and **Algernon Charles Swinburne** as its principal targets. Rossetti had already spent a decade under attack: **Robert Buchanan**, writing under the pseudonym Thomas Maitland, had condemned him in "**The Fleshly School of Poetry**", published in *The Contemporary Review* in 1871. Oscar Wilde, though associated with the movement, had not yet published his first volume of poetry and remained a minor figure at this point. The teapot sold at Sotheby's for five thousand pounds to the Tea and Coffee Museum in London — a fitting home. What makes 1882 particularly striking is the coincidence of deaths: Rossetti died on 9 April of kidney disease, and **Charles Darwin** died just ten days later on 19 April of a heart attack. That

proximity matters, because the inscription on the teapot's base draws art and Darwinian theory into direct, deliberate conversation.

Notes

The teapot was based on Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *Patience* which was a satire on the Aesthetic Movement particularly Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne. Oscar Wilde was not as well known as he had not published his first volume of poetry.

Coincidentally, 1882 was the year both Darwin and Rossetti died only 10 days apart.

I want to talk about the inscription on the base as it links art with Darwin's theory but first a little more about the operetta.

Notes

Sold at Sotheby's recently for £5,000 to The Tea and Coffee Museum, London

The teapot design was registered on 21 December 1881 and the costume is based on the first Gilbert and Sullivan opera *Patience* that opened in April 1881, a satire on the Aesthetic Movement.

Rossetti had been attacked for immorality by Robert Buchanan (under the pseudonym "Thomas Maitland") in an article called "The Fleshly School of Poetry", published in *The Contemporary Review* for October 1871, a decade before *Patience*.

Rossetti died on 9 April 1882 of a kidney disease and Charles Darwin on 19 April 1882 of a heart attack.

Elliott & Fry
*Frank Thornton, Durward Lely and
Richard Temple in Gilbert and
Sullivan's Patience*
1881
Cabinet photograph



Elliott & Fry, Frank Thornton, Durward Lely and Richard Temple in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, 1881

This photograph shows the original cast of **Patience**, the **1881** Gilbert and Sullivan opera that took direct aim at the **Aesthetic Movement**. The word 'effeminate', used freely by Victorian critics to describe these characters, carried a meaning distinct from anything we might assume today. It denoted men who were soft, insufficiently manly, and too intimately bound up in the company of women — a usage stretching back to Shakespeare, where the term signalled self-indulgence and feebleness rather than same-sex desire. Gilbert and Sullivan chose the Aesthetes as their target precisely because the movement had grown into a genuine cultural force. Like the counterculture of the 1960s, it was not merely a fashion but a fully articulated way of life — one organised around **beauty** rather than utility or moral earnestness. The plot turns on **Reginald Bunthorne**, the posturing aesthetic poet whom twenty lovesick maidens pursue, while he himself is consumed by desire for Patience, a straightforward milkmaid entirely indifferent to art. His rival **Grosvenor** ultimately wins Patience, leaving Bunthorne, as

the finale declares, nobody's bride. Gilbert understood that the most effective satire targets something its audience genuinely finds threatening — and in **1881**, aestheticism was exactly that.

Notes

This is the original cast of *Patience*. Victorians would have described them as effeminate, a word that was widely used during the period but it did not mean homosexual.

It referred to men who were not manly and who were regarded only as 'soft' men whose relationships with women did not respect the social conventions regarding separation of the sexes.

In Shakespeare's time, for example, effeminacy referred to being too womanish, feeble, self-indulgent and too intimately involved with women, and was most commonly used in relation to heterosexual young men.

Gilbert and Sullivan was parodying the Aesthetic Movement as it had become so important. It was like the hippy movement in the 1960s and in the same way the hippy movement was about love, the aesthetic movement was about beauty. It was not just a fashion but a way of life and a major cultural movement.


Notes

Effeminacy

I also think of the Count's page Cherubino in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), he is described as infatuated with all women and his punishment as it is the opposite of his character is to be sent to an army unit.

Patience

In *Patience* 'twenty lovesick maidens we' wait for the aesthetic poet Bunthorne but he is in love with a simple milkmaid called Patience. (In the end Bunthorne's friend Grosvenor goes off with Patience and 'Nobody [is] Bunthorne bride'.)



James Hadley (English, 1837–1903)
*Royal Worcester 'Aesthetic' Teapot
and cover, double-sided*
1882

James Hadley (English, 1837–1903), Royal Worcester 'Aesthetic'
Teapot and cover, double-sided, 1882

That comic skewering of Aesthetic posturing brings us directly to the inscription on the teapot's base, which reads: "Fearful Consequences Through the Laws of Natural Selection and Evolution of Living Up to One's Teapot." The phrase "living up to one's teapot" references **Oscar Wilde's** remark, made during his time at **Oxford**, that he found it harder every day to live up to his blue china. The inscription grafts that Wildean affectation directly onto **Darwin's** theory of **natural selection**, which tells us something significant: by **1881**, evolutionary thinking was sufficiently embedded in popular culture to fuel a joke on a novelty ceramic. Wilde himself would soon become the most spectacular casualty of the era's anxieties. In **1895**, at the height of his fame, the **Marquess of Queensberry** left a card at Wilde's club accusing him of posing as a sodomite. Wilde sued for libel, lost catastrophically, and was himself convicted of gross indecency under the **Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885**. Two years' hard labour broke him financially and physically. He left Britain for France on his release and died

destitute in Paris aged forty-six. His fall illuminates precisely the cultural tensions the teapot's Darwin joke was already touching: between aesthetic self-fashioning and the boundaries Victorian society was prepared to enforce.

Notes

Let us return to the teapot. The base is inscribed 'FEARFUL CONSEQUENCES - THROUGH THE LAWS OF NATURAL SELECTION AND EVOLUTION OF LIVING UP TO ONE'S TEAPOT'

First of all, why 'Living up to one's teapot'? Whilst a student at Oxford University Oscar Wilde once said "I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china". So clearly this part is a reference to Oscar Wilde's then famous comment

Why did this teapot, produced to cash in on the publicity around *Patience*, mention Darwin's theory?

To unravel the complex links between Darwin's theory of natural selection and evolution we need to imagine ourselves back in the Victorian world.

By the 1890s, Social Darwinism was giving rise to fears concerning the degeneration of society demonstrated by degenerate art, but more of that later.

It is clear from this inscription that Darwin's ideas were well known and seen to be relevant to the Aesthetic Movement.

But how well known?

Oscar Wilde

Wilde married Constance Lloyd (1884–98) in 1884 and they had two sons Cyril Holland (1885) and Vyvyan Holland (1886).

At the height of his fame and success, while his masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), was still on stage in London. The Marquess of Queensberry left his calling card at Wilde's club with 'For Oscar Wilde, posing sodomite [sic]' written on it. Encouraged by the Marquess of Queensbury's son Lord Alfred Douglas Wilde initiated a libel case. Queensbury was arrested for criminal libel, a charge that carried a penalty of up to two years in prison.

Male homosexual prostitutes were called as witnesses and Wilde dropped his charges but the evidence led to his own arrest and trial for gross indecency with other men. It also left Wilde bankrupt. Gross indecency was introduced in 1885 (Criminal Law Amendment Act) and was used if sodomy could not be proved. Until 1861 the penalty for sodomy was death (Buggery Act 1533). After two more trials he was convicted and imprisoned for two years' hard labour. In 1897, in prison, he wrote *De Profundis*, which was published in 1905, a long letter which discusses his spiritual journey through his trials in contrast with his earlier philosophy of pleasure. Upon his release he left immediately for France, never to return to Ireland or Britain. There he wrote his last work, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), a long poem commemorating the harsh reality of prison life. He died destitute in Paris at the age of 46.

How Did Homosexuality Evolve?

It has been shown that although there is some genetic basis to homosexuality it is limited. For example, if one identical male twin is homosexual there is only a 20% chance the other has the same sexual orientation even though their genes are identical.

It is not exclusive to humans, hundreds of species exhibit homosexual behaviour and in some animal species a percentage of the population is entirely homosexual, e.g. bonobos and male bighorn sheep.

Male homosexuality has been closely studied but lesbianism has not been studied as much.

There are various theories about how male homosexuality evolved:

That genes that code for homosexuality are associated with other traits that increase the likelihood of successful children, such as better parenting skills. There is evidence that women find effeminate men more attractive. So an exclusively homosexual male might be an unusual extreme example of an effeminate male and it might be cultural.

That the genes expressed in women make them more attracted to men and they have more children. There is some evidence that mothers who have homosexual children have more children.

Another theory is that one homosexual in a family might help bring up his related children more successfully, e.g. a helpful homosexual uncle can help children survive better. The evidence for this is mixed and it seems to depend

on the culture.

Men with older brothers are more likely to be homosexual. This might be because the mother develops an immune response to the proteins that have a role in developing the male brain. As this only develops after a number of heterosexual children have been born it is less likely to be evolved away.

We are assuming homosexual men don't have children but before the modern period homosexual men often married and had children.

The figures appear to be low, a survey in the UK in 2013 found that only 7% of men said that had ever had any sexual experience with another man.

Linley Sambourne (1844–1910)
*Illustration for Charles Kingsley, The
Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a
Land-Baby, p. 230*
1898



Linley Sambourne (1844–1910), Illustration for Charles Kingsley, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby*, p. 230, 1898

Degeneration — the dark counterpart to progress — runs through Victorian thinking about evolution and race in ways that shaped both science and art for decades to come. **Charles Kingsley** published **The Water-Babies** in **1862 to 1863**, partly as a satire on **Darwin's** 'The Origin of Species'. At the heart of the book is a cautionary vision illustrated by **Linley Sambourne**: a group called the **Doasyoulikes**, who, freed from labour and discipline, gradually lose the power of speech, regress into cavemen, then apes, and are finally shot by the explorer **Paul Du Chaillu**, newly famous for bringing the first accounts of gorillas back from Africa. Kingsley's argument is direct — evolution carries no guarantee of improvement. Darwin himself recognised that natural selection has no direction; complexity increases over time simply because life begins at its simplest possible point, not because organisms are advancing towards some higher state. This anxiety was not new. **Edward Gibbon** had mapped civilisational decline in his 'History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire', published

between **1776 and 1789**. What Darwin's ideas added was a biological mechanism, fusing the fear of cultural collapse with the possibility of racial degeneration — a fusion that would come to dominate aesthetic debate by the **1890s**.

Notes

The final interplay between science and beauty I would like to discuss is degeneration.

This is concerned with progress.

Although the concern about degenerate art did not develop until the 1890s this illustration from 1863 spells out the danger.

In *The Water Babies*, Kingsley tells of a group of humans called the Doasyoulikes who are allowed to do "whatever they like" so gradually lose the power of speech, degenerate into cavemen and then gorillas that are shot.

Kingsley was making the point that evolution does not necessarily imply improvement, it can lead to degeneration.

The idea was clear, for example in Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire* (1776-1789) but following Darwin's ideas it was linked to the degeneration of the human race and social Darwinism.

Notes

As early as 1862-3 and written partly as a satire on Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*.

It was very popular in England but fell out of favour because of its dismissive or insulting references to Americans, Jews, Blacks, Catholics and the Irish.

Kingsley also (controversially, nowadays) likens the Doasyoulikes to the natives of Africa, by mentioning that one of the gorillas shot by Du Chaillu "remembered that his ancestors had once been men, and tried to say, 'Am I Not A Man And A Brother?', but had forgotten how to use his tongue."

We can see in Linley Sambourne's illustration that the Doasyoulikes degenerate. At the top they are sitting around playing musical instruments and as they are not working hard they gradually degenerate, first into

cavemen, then apes and finally beasts. The last Doasyoulike is shot by Paul Du Chaillu who was very famous at the time the book was written.

He had just returned from Africa in the early 1860s with the first stories of gorillas, like, he thought a cross between humans and apes, as intelligent as humans and extremely violent.

The point being made by Kingsley is that evolution does not imply progress. As Darwin was aware evolution has no direction, we are not getting more and more evolved or better and better.

Some people say, 'but surely we are more advanced than bacteria?' Their argument is that over millions of years the complexity of organisms increases but this can be explained without progress.

Life starts out as simple as it gets so over time it will obviously get more complex and over a long period very complex. However, there is no direction and no steady progress. Evolution is all ups and downs.

The woman is a fairy who is teaching Tom, the water baby about life. She shows him a book which contains colour pictures illustrating the history of the Doasyoulikes.

Little pigs ran about crying 'Come and eat me' and they waited until the pigs ran against their mouths and took a bite.

"Why," said Tom, "they are growing no better than savages.", "And look how ugly they are all getting," said Ellie. "Yes; when people live on poor vegetables instead of roast beef and plum-pudding, their jaws grow large, and their lips grow coarse, like the poor Paddies who eat potatoes."

Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898)
Self-portrait
1892
Pen and wash



Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898), Self-portrait, 1892

Decadent art overlaps with but remains distinct from degenerate and **fin-de-siècle** art. The term decadent dates to the eighteenth century and was claimed proudly by **Baudelaire** as a rejection of banal notions of progress. **Aubrey Beardsley**, who died of tuberculosis aged twenty-five, trained under Burne-Jones and absorbed the poster art of **Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec** alongside Japanese printmaking. He declared his single aim to be the grotesque, stating bluntly that without it he was nothing. His illustrations for **Oscar Wilde's** adaptation of **Salome** enact that aim precisely — simultaneously beautiful and revolting, sordid and stylish. Shortly before his death he converted to Catholicism and begged his publisher to destroy his erotic prints. The publisher declined. The word grotesque entered English through Italian grottesco, meaning of a cave, after painted decorations were discovered in the buried corridors of **Nero's** Domus Aurea in the late fifteenth century. **John Ruskin** theorised three forms of the grotesque in high art: the bitter jest at death and sin, the playful imagination that darkens towards the moral and satirical, and the noble grotesque,

which uses tangible signs to gesture at truths that direct representation cannot reach. For Ruskin, the grotesque was fundamental to **Gothic architecture** — the mind's disciplined play with terror.

Notes

Aubrey Beardsley, self-portrait, 1892, pen and wash

Aubrey Beardsley, Oscar Wilde at Work, sketch

Decadent art is often confused with degenerate and fin-de-siècle art and with the Symbolism.

The term decadent dates from the eighteenth century and was applied to Victor Hugo and Romanticism in general. Baudelaire used the term proudly to refer to his rejection of banal 'progress'. In Britain the leading artists were Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley.

Aubrey Beardsley was a leading figure in the late Aesthetic Movement. He had a private income from his grandmother but had to sell property to pay off a 'breach of promise' claim. He took up art under the advice of Burne-Jones. He was influenced by the poster of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Japanese prints. He said, 'I have one aim—the grotesque. If I am not grotesque I am nothing.' and wore grey suits with yellow gloves and green hair. Later he converted to Catholicism and asked his publisher to destroy all his erotic prints which he did not do. He died of tuberculosis aged 25.

Beardsley has been called 'the dandy of the grotesque'. For example, Beardsley's illustrations for Oscar Wilde's adaptation of Salome are both beautiful and revolting, sordid and stylish.

He produced shockingly erotic images and yet with a year to live suddenly converted to Catholicism and asked for all his works to be destroyed. Luckily his editor did not carry out his wishes.

Max Nordau Degeneration

In Britain degenerate art is associated with Oscar Wilde

The term derived from Max Nordau's 1892 book *Entartung* (Degeneration). He drew on Cesare Lombroso the criminologist who attempted to prove people were born criminals and had criminal characteristics that could be measured. This in turn was allegedly derived from Darwin's work on evolution. Nordau attacked the Aesthetic Movement and Pre-Raphaelite artists such as

Rossetti. Which he thought could be explained as a product of mental illness. He thought the Impressionists suffered from diseased visual cortex. Ironically, Nordau was a Jew (later an agnostic) and one of the founders of the Zionist movement even though his theory was used by the Nazis to criticize 'Jewish art' and demand Aryan purity.

Ironically, the term 'degenerate art' (Entartete Kunst) was adopted by the Nazis and was enforced by book burning, artists being dismissed from teaching positions and curators being replaced by Party members.

Grotesque

The word grotesque, originally a noun (1560s), from Italian grottesco (through Middle French), literally "of a cave", from Italian grotta (see grotto).[1] The original meaning was restricted to an extravagant style of Ancient Roman decorative art rediscovered and then copied in Rome at the end of the 15th century. The word first was used of paintings found on the walls of basements of Roman ruins that were called at that time Le Grotte (The Grottoes) due to their appearance. These "caves" were in fact rooms and corridors of the Domus Aurea, the unfinished palace complex started by Nero after the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64, which had become overgrown and buried, until they were broken into again, mostly from above.

Since the 18th century it has been used as a general adjective for the strange, fantastic, ugly, incongruous, unpleasant, or disgusting.

John Ruskin defined the grotesque in high art as one of three forms:

We jest, sometimes bitterly, about death and sin and this gives rise to grotesque art such as Holbein's Dance of Death. There are lighter forms which aim to amuse using terror.

From a healthy and open play of the imagination, as in Shakespeare's Ariel and Titania. This delicate fairy art often descends into something more moral, serious, satirical and gloomy. In this way it connects with the evil-enjoying type of the grotesque.

A thoroughly noble art arises from the use of tangible signs to express and otherwise inexpressible truth. This includes symbolical and allegorical art and poetry. Ruskin thought that representing God's infinite work was impossible for the artist and the noble grotesque, a finite attempt, was the only approach for high art. One example he gave was the flames at the feet of the angel Gabriel in Rossetti's Annunciation rather than the wings which were normally

used to signify an angel and which were deplored by Ruskin.

Ruskin believed the grotesque was a fundamental ingredient of Gothic architecture with its fantastic, ludicrous and sublime images. He went on to distinguish between the base grotesque and the noble grotesque. All grotesque works can be separated into the ludicrous and the fearful. The interplay of play and terror is what creates the grotesque. The mind plays with terror.



Aubrey Vincent Beardsley (1872–1898)

Illustration for Rape of the Lock
1896

Aubrey Vincent Beardsley (1872–1898), *Illustration for Rape of the Lock*, 1896

Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations for **Alexander Pope's** satirical poem 'The Rape of the Lock' stand among the defining images of **fin-de-siècle** British art. Pope structured his poem as a classical epic to mock a real aristocratic scandal: Lord Petre cut a lock of hair from Arabella Fermor without her consent, fracturing two Catholic families. Beardsley's illustration places the Baron at the left of the composition, scissors poised at Belinda's hair, rendering the trivial act with the ceremonial gravity Pope intended. Beardsley's black-ink draftsmanship, shaped by Japanese woodcut traditions, made him a central figure in the **Aesthetic Movement** alongside **Oscar Wilde** and **James McNeill Whistler**. The movement held, in Wilde's own formulation, that art is quite useless — beautiful, pleasurable, but beholden to no moral programme. **Holbrook Jackson**, in 'The Eighteen Nineties', identified the defining traits of English decadence as perversity, artificiality, egoism, and curiosity — all visible in Beardsley's work. His decadence extended the earlier rejections of Victorian convention by **Rossetti** and

Morris, but pushed further into the erotic and grotesque. Beardsley died of tuberculosis aged just twenty-five, yet his contribution to **Art Nouveau** and the **Decadent movement** fundamentally shaped the visual language of modern art.

Notes

The Rape of the Lock

This was one of Beardsley's last major illustration projects. The poem is by Alexandra Pope (1688-1744) and it satirises a minor incident by comparing it to the world of the gods and in so doing satirises eighteenth century England. It is based on an actual incident and Pope satirises the story by structuring it as a classical epic and introducing sylphs, guardian spirits of virgins, and gods and goddesses. Lord Petre (the Baron in the poem), from an aristocratic, recusant Catholic family, lusted after Arabella (represented as Belinda in the poem) and cut off a lock of her hair without permission. This caused a breach between the two families. In Beardsley's illustration the Baron can be seen on the left of the picture snipping off a lock of Belinda's hair with a pair of scissors

Aubrey Vincent Beardsley

Beardsley was an English illustrator and author. His drawings in black ink, influenced by the style of Japanese woodcuts, emphasized the grotesque, the decadent, and the erotic. He was a leading figure in the Aesthetic movement which also included Oscar Wilde and James A. McNeill Whistler. Beardsley's contribution to the development of the Art Nouveau and poster styles was significant, despite the brevity of his career before his early death from tuberculosis.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde wrote, 'All art is quite useless'. In this one sentence, Wilde encapsulates the complete principles of the Aesthetic Movement popular in Victorian England. That is to say, real art takes no part in moulding the social or moral identities of society, nor should it. Art should be beautiful and pleasure its observer, but to imply further-reaching influence would be a mistake. The explosion of aesthetic philosophy in fin-de-siècle English society, as exemplified by Oscar Wilde, was not confined to merely art, however. Rather, the proponents of this philosophy

extended it to life itself. Here, aestheticism advocated whatever behaviour was likely to maximize the beauty and happiness in one's life, in the tradition of hedonism. To the aesthete, the ideal life mimics art; it is beautiful, but quite useless beyond its beauty, concerned only with the individual living it.

At the end of the century there was a wave of pessimism. We see this in *The Importance of Being Ernest* (Oscar Wilde) :

Algernon: I hope tomorrow will be a fine day, Lane.

Lane: It never is, sir.

Algernon: Lane, you're a perfect pessimist.

Lane: I do my best to give satisfaction, sir.

The works of the Decadents and the Aesthetes contain the hallmarks typical of fin de siècle art. Holbrook Jackson's *The Eighteen Nineties* describes the characteristics of English decadence which are: perversity, artificiality, egoism, and curiosity.

Perversity: a concern for the perverse, unclean, and unnatural. Romanticism encouraged audiences to view physical traits as indicative of one's inner self but the fin de siècle artists accepted beauty as the basis of life and so valued that which was not conventionally beautiful.

Artificiality: this belief in beauty in the abject leads to the obsession with artifice and symbolism, as artists rejected ineffable ideas of beauty in favour of the abstract. Through symbolism, aesthetes could evoke sentiments and ideas in their audience without relying on an infallible general understanding of the world.

Egoism: a term similar to that of ego-mania meaning disproportionate attention placed on one's own endeavours. This can result in a type of alienation and anguish, as in Baudelaire's case, and demonstrates how aesthetic artists chose cityscapes over country as a result of their aversion to the natural.

Curiosity is identifiable through diabolism and the exploration of the evil or immoral, focusing on the morbid and macabre, but without imposing any moral lessons on the audience.

The term 'decadence' was adopted by British Society in preference to the

French term 'Symbolism' even though they embraced the same tenets. Beardsley's decadence merges with rejection of contemporary society by Rossetti, Morris, Leighton and others but is more extreme. The overtones of 'decadence' merge into Max Nordau's pseudo-scientific idea of 'degeneration' and both signal the end of an era and the beginning of modern art.

References

See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aubrey_Beardsley

See <http://www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/issue-1/duggan/>

See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fin_de_si%C3%A8cle

Aubrey Vincent Beardsley (1872–1898)

The Peacock Skirt

Black and white line block print on Japanese vellum



Aubrey Vincent Beardsley (1872–1898), *The Peacock Skirt*

The preceding context reminds us how fluidly Beardsley moved between influences, and nowhere is that more visible than here. **The Peacock Skirt**, one of Beardsley's illustrations for **Oscar Wilde's Salome**, printed as a line block on Japanese vellum, centres on a woman viewed from behind, her robe cascading into an elaborate stylised peacock design. An ornate headdress trails peacock feathers down her back, whilst to her left a decorative scalloped border frames a second peacock, and to her right stands a male figure, presumed to be the Young Syrian, his arm half-extended in restrained gesture. **Stephen Calloway**, writing in his 1998 study of Beardsley published by the **Victoria and Albert Museum**, identifies this image as the clearest evidence of Beardsley's debt to **James McNeill Whistler's** painted decorations in **Frederick Leyland's** London house, the celebrated **Peacock Room**. Yet Calloway also notes surviving traces of what he calls Beardsley's Mantegnesque manner, a nod to the Italian Renaissance printmaker **Andrea Mantegna**, whose precise linearity Beardsley had absorbed earlier in his career. The result is a

composition that fuses japoniste flatness, Whistlerian decorative excess, and Renaissance draughtsmanship into something entirely Beardsley's own.

Notes

Black and white line block print on Japanese vellum depicting a woman, presumed to be Salome, viewed from the back, in a flowing robe with a dramatic stylised peacock design on the skirt, as well as an elaborate headdress complete with stylised peacock feathers, some of which trail down her back (remember the Punch cartoon of the woman with a peacock on her head). To her left is a stylised peacock within a decorative dotted, scalloped border, whilst on her right is a male figure, generally assumed to be the Young Syrian, with his left arm partially outstretched, wearing a pleated knee-length robe and a headdress.

According to Stephen Calloway in his book, *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: V&A Publications, 1998, p. 66):

'Whilst retaining some slight reminiscences and mannerisms of Beardsley's Mantegnesque style, *The Peacock Skirt*, of all the Salome pictures, most clearly reveals his great debt to Whistler's painted decorations in the house of Frederick Leyland.'



28-02 AESTHETIC MOVEMENT TO DEGENERATION PART 2

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

WWW.SHAFE.UK



Aubrey Vincent
Beardsley (1872–1898)
The Peacock Skirt

This talk followed the Aesthetic Movement from Whistler's combative early career through his nocturnes, the Peacock Room, and the libel trial that redrew the boundaries of critical authority. We traced the Grosvenor Gallery's challenge to the Royal Academy, Burne-Jones's absorption of Pater's musical ideal, and the satirical backlash in Punch and Gilbert and Sullivan. We closed with Beardsley, Wilde's downfall, and the Victorian anxiety about degeneration that shadowed the movement's final decade.



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

Dr Laurence Shafe www.shafe.uk