



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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28-01 JAMES MCNEIL WHISTLER

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James McNeill Whistler
***Symphony in White,
No. 1: The White Girl,***
1861-1862,

- This is Section 28 on **Aestheticism**. and this talk is about the American artist **James McNeill Whistler**.
- He was born in **Lowell, Massachusetts** but spent his childhood in **Russia** because his father engineered the **St Petersburg-Moscow railway**. After his father died in 1849, the family returned to America. Whistler briefly attended **West Point Military Academy** but was expelled for failing chemistry. He later said, jokingly, "**Had silicon been a gas, I would have been a major-general.**" In 1855 aged 21 he left for **Paris**, never to return to America.

JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER (1834-1903): A BIOGRAPHY

- Born in **Lowell, Massachusetts**, **James Abbott McNeill Whistler** spent his childhood in **Russia** where his father engineered the **St Petersburg-Moscow railway**. After his father's death in 1849, the family returned to **America**. Whistler briefly attended **West Point Military Academy** but was expelled for failing chemistry. "**Had silicon been a gas,**" he later quipped, "**I would have been a major-general.**"
- In 1855 he left for **Paris**, never returning to **America**. He studied with **Charles Gleyre** and befriended **Courbet, Manet, Fantin-Latour, and Baudelaire**. Moving between **Paris and London**, he became a leading proponent of

Aestheticism and "art for art's sake," titling works as "arrangements," "harmonies," and "nocturnes" to emphasise tonal qualities over narrative.

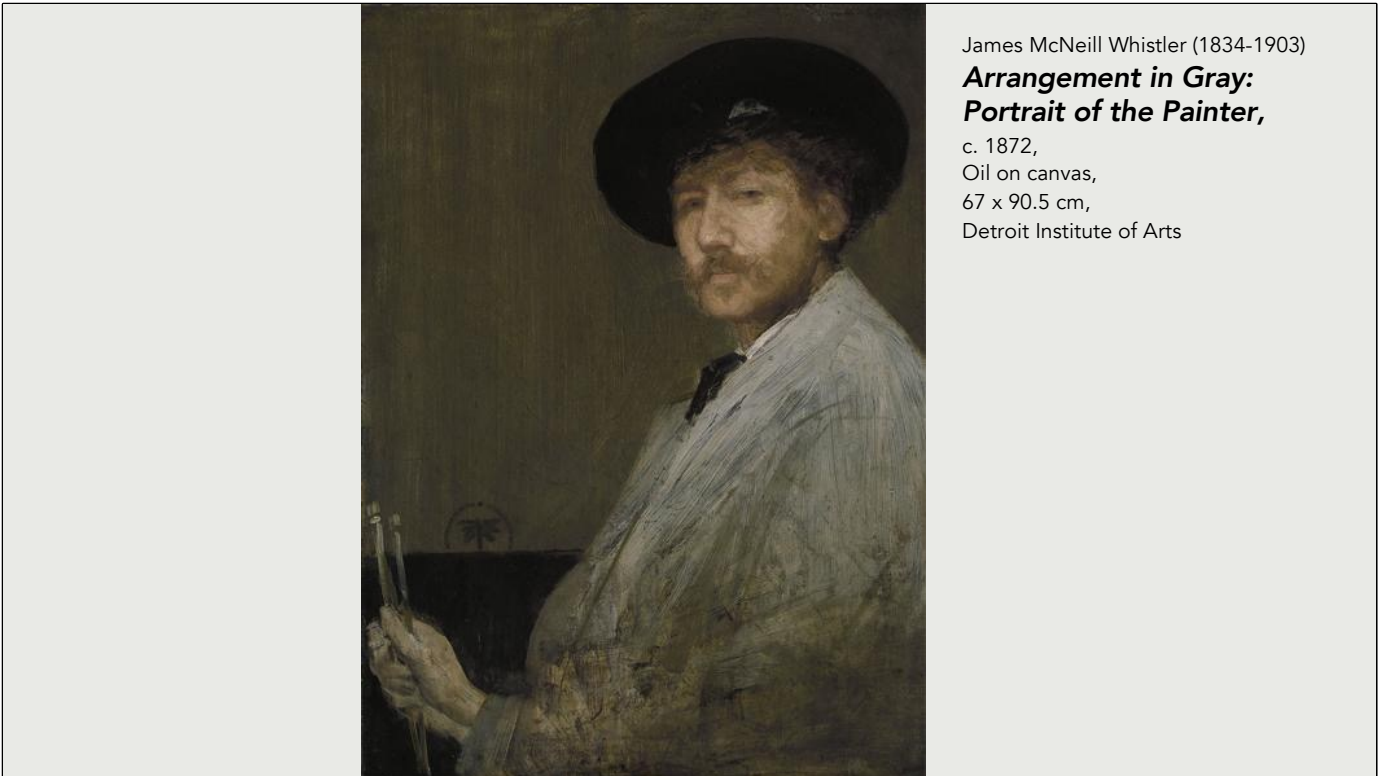
- His most famous painting, **Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1** (1871)—"**Whistler's Mother**"—became an American icon. His atmospheric **Nocturnes** proved revolutionary but sparked the infamous 1878 **libel trial** against critic **John Ruskin**, who accused him of "**flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.**" Whistler won but was bankrupted by legal costs.
- A wit, dandy, and combative personality, Whistler influenced generations through his elegant portraits, innovative etchings, and aesthetic theories. He died in **London** in 1903, recognised as a **pioneering modernist** who transformed nineteenth-century art.

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- This self-portrait shows him in his studio, wearing a grey smock, seated and turning his head to examine his reflection. The muted palette exemplifies his **aesthetic philosophy**. The painting emerged during a pivotal period when Whistler began titling works as "**arrangements**," "**symphonies**," and "**nocturnes**" to emphasize the fact that painting, like music, is a harmonious arrangement not a representation or a narrative.
- Whistler was known as a **dandy** and wit in **London** and **Paris** society. His famous **butterfly signature** combined a stylized insect with a sharp stinger – representing both the delicacy of his art and his combative personality. He cultivated friendships with **Courbet**, **Manet**, **Baudelaire**, and **Oscar Wilde**, and became a pivotal link between European and American **avant-garde** circles.
- Contemporary reviews noted his unconventional approach. *The Times* observed that Whistler "**treats his canvas as musicians treat their instruments.**" His mother **Anna** served as his supporter, model, and even art agent, tolerating his bohemian lifestyle while maintaining her devout Victorian values.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Whistler - WISS-lur

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James McNeill Whistler
(1834-1903)

At the Piano,

1858-1859,
Oil on canvas,
67 x 90.5 cm,
Taft Museum of Art,
Cincinnati

- This tender domestic scene depicts Whistler's half-sister **Deborah Haden** playing piano whilst her daughter Annie stands beside her. Painted during the Christmas holidays at the Haden household in London, the work shows a woman in black seated in profile and a young girl in white standing attentively. The composition's careful balance of dark and light masses demonstrates Whistler's emerging mastery of tonal relationships.
- The painting was rejected by the **Paris Salon** in 1859 but exhibited in **François Bonvin's** studio alongside other unfairly rejected works. **Gustave Courbet** admired it immediately. **The Pennells** wrote that Whistler's fellow students "**recognised his talent as an etcher**" and "**now admitted as generously his accomplishment as painter.**" When exhibited at the **Royal Academy** in 1860, **Thackeray** "**went to see the picture and admired it beyond words, and stood looking at it with real delight.**"
- **At the Piano** established Whistler as a serious artist. The work reflects the influence of **Courbet's Realism** whilst foreseeing Whistler's later **Aestheticism**. The careful arrangement of rectangles (the piano, the picture frame on the wall, the dado) shows his interest in abstract design principles that would define his **mature** style.
- The painting's history proved dramatic. Whistler gave it "**in a way**" to his brother-in-law **Francis Seymour Haden**, who constantly pointed out its faults and insisted "**it would never get into the Academy.**" Whistler proved him wrong. Their relationship later ended in a violent quarrel when Whistler pushed Haden through the plate

glass window of a restaurant. Haden, a founder of the Royal Academy of Painter-Etchers used his influence to keep Whistler out even though Whistler was one of the all-time great etchers.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Deborah - DEB-or-ah

Courbet - koor-BAY

Bonvin - bon-VAN

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James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)
***Symphony in White, No. 1:
The White Girl,***
1861-1862,
Oil on canvas,
214.6 x 108 cm,
National Gallery of Art, Washington

- We see **Whistler's** model and mistress **Joanna Hifferman** standing in a flowing white muslin dress on a wolfskin rug, holding a white lily, against a white curtain. The **near-monochromatic** palette was **radical** for 1862. **Whistler** instructed Jo to "**keep her face absolutely free from expression**" because "**we do not want even a hint of story in this painting.**" His aim was pure aesthetic experience – **art for art's sake.**
- Both the **Royal Academy** and the **Paris Salon** rejected the painting in 1862. Critics found it baffling – where was the narrative? What did it mean? When finally exhibited at the 1863 **Salon des Refusés** alongside **Manet's** scandalous **Déjeuner sur l'herbe**, it caused a sensation. Frustrated critics "**searched to find meaning in the painting. But most of all, they struggled to find a story.**"
- **Whistler** originally titled it **The White Girl** but later renamed it **Symphony in White, No. 1** to emphasize its musical qualities. This naming strategy became his trademark. He explained: "**By using the word 'nocturne' I wish to indicate an artistic interest alone, divesting the picture of any outside anecdotal interest.**"
- During this period, **Whistler** was living with **Jo Hifferman** in bohemian poverty in Paris and London. The painting shows **Pre-Raphaelite** influence in its attention to textures and symbolic elements. Some interpreted the wolf skin and lily as symbols of innocence lost, though **Whistler** vehemently denied any allegorical intent. Between 1867-1872, he reworked the painting to make it more "spiritual."

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Hiffernan - HIF-er-nan

Salon des Refusés - sa-LON day ruh-few-ZAY

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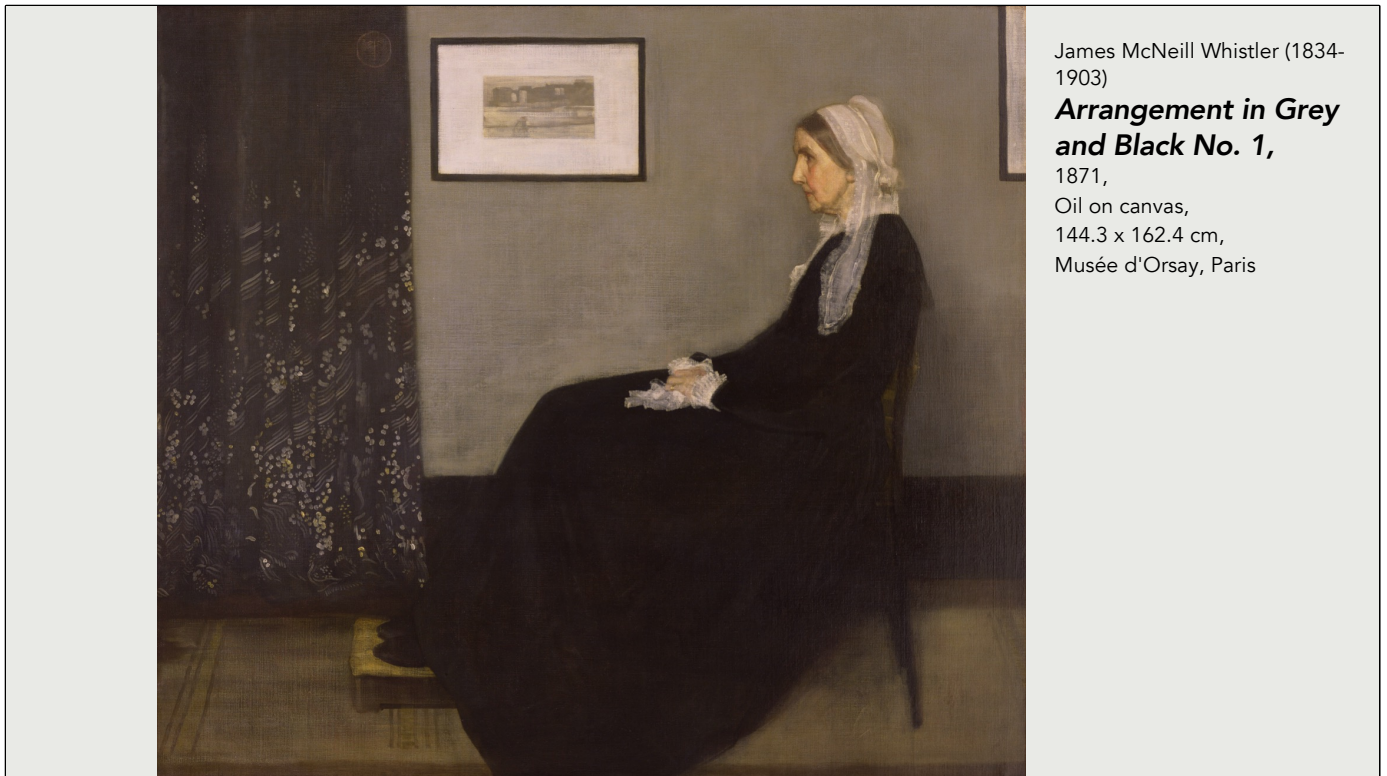
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- Whistler's mother **Anna McNeill Whistler**, aged 67, sits in profile in a black dress with white lace cap, holding a handkerchief. The composition is severely geometric – rectangles of wall, curtain, framed etching, and footstool create abstract patterns. Whistler insisted the portrait's title emphasize formal arrangement over sentimental content, though the public christened it "Whistler's Mother."
- Anna was a last-minute replacement when another model failed to appear. She found standing too tiring, so Whistler changed the composition to seated. According to Anna's letters, he greeted her: "**Mother, I want you to stand for me!**" The portrait required numerous sittings. Whistler later explained: "**Take the picture of my mother. To me it is interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public to care about the identity of the portrait?**"
- The **Royal Academy** nearly rejected it in 1872 – it came "**within a hair's breadth**" of exclusion. This was the last painting Whistler ever submitted to them. The work exemplifies his **Aesthetic philosophy**: Alfred Barr, first director of **MoMA**, described it in 1943 as "**a composition of rectangles**" not very different from **Mondrian's** abstract paintings.
- The French government purchased it for **4,000 francs** in 1891, making it the first American painting acquired by the **Musée du Luxembourg**. Whistler was ecstatic, writing: "**Just think – to go and look at one's own picture hanging on the walls of Luxembourg – remembering how it had been treated in England.**" The painting became an American icon, reproduced on a **1934 US postage stamp** honouring

mothers.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Musée d'Orsay - mew-ZAY dor-SAY

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James McNeill Whistler
(1834-1903)

Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge,

1872-1875,
Oil on canvas,
68.3 x 51.2 cm,
Tate Britain, London

- A firework shower falls like gold rain above the exaggerated arc of **Battersea Bridge**, with **Chelsea Old Church** and the newly-opened **Albert Bridge** visible in the atmospheric distance. Whistler created a special "**sauce**" medium of copal, turpentine, and linseed oil so thin he had to lay canvases flat to prevent it running off. He mixed tones in continuous gradations on his palette and kept mixed paints in water to continue work on subsequent days.
- The term "**nocturne**" came from Whistler's patron **Frederick Leyland**, suggesting musical associations with night scenes. Whistler loved it: "**I can't thank you too much for the name 'Nocturne' as a title. You have no idea what an irritation it proves to the critics and consequent pleasure to me.**" He explained nocturnes as "**an arrangement of line, form and colour first**" – problems to solve rather than scenes to describe.
- When exhibited at the **Grosvenor Gallery** in 1877, **Oscar Wilde** quipped it was "**worth looking at for about as long as one looks at a real rocket, that is, for somewhat less than a quarter of a minute.**" John Ruskin was less kind, writing that he "**never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.**"
- This painting became central evidence in the infamous 1878 **Whistler v. Ruskin** libel trial. When asked if it was "**a correct representation of Battersea Bridge,**" Whistler replied: "**I did not intend it to be a correct portrait of the bridge, but only a painting of a moonlight scene.**" Whistler won the case but was awarded only one

farthing in damages. The trial costs bankrupted him.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Nocturne - nok-TURN

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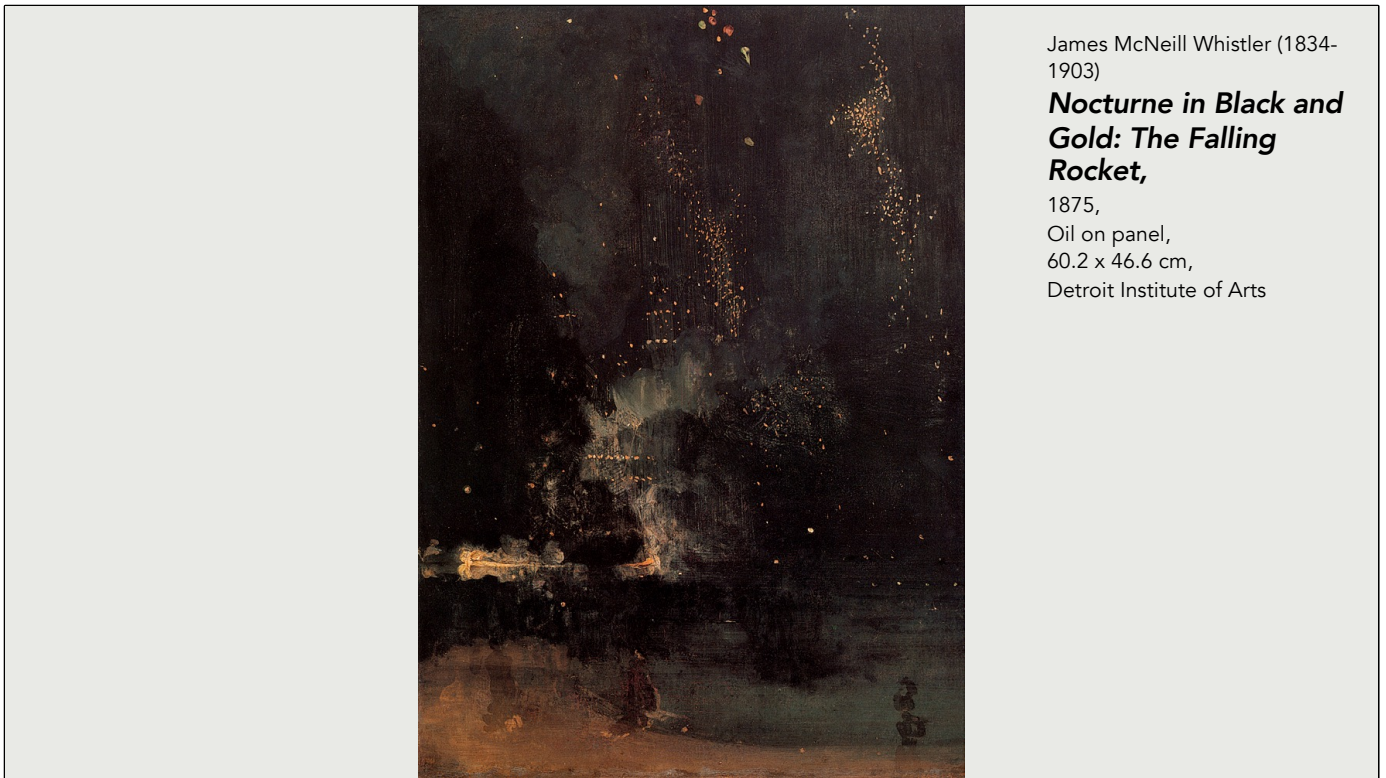
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James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)

Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket,

1875,

Oil on panel,
60.2 x 46.6 cm,

Detroit Institute of Arts

- This **near-abstract** depiction of fireworks at **Cremorne Gardens** pushes towards the edge of representation. Against a dark night sky, explosive bursts of gold and colour cascade downward, reflected in water below. The painting is atmospheric, evocative, almost dreamlike – closer to music than to literal depiction. Whistler later added some fireworks in Naples yellow, a pigment not found elsewhere on the painting, suggesting he revisited the work whilst painting other pieces.
- **John Ruskin**, Britain's most powerful art critic, saw this at the **Grosvenor Gallery** in 1877 and exploded with rage. In **Fors Clavigera** he wrote: "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." The word "coxcomb" meant a vain pretender – a devastating insult.
- Whistler sued for libel. At the trial, Ruskin's attorney mockingly asked: "How long did it take you to knock off this painting?" Whistler replied magnificently: "I ask it for the knowledge I have gained in the work of a lifetime." When pressed on whether £200 wasn't excessive for "two days' work," Whistler insisted the price reflected decades of training, not hours of labour.
- **Edward Burne-Jones** testified against Whistler, calling the painting unfinished – "simply a sketch." Whistler won the case but was awarded only a **farthing** (one-quarter penny) in damages. Legal costs bankrupted him. He had to sell his house and possessions, spending months in **Venice** producing etchings to survive. The trial became legendary, defining battles between artistic innovation and

conservative taste.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Cremorne - krem-ORN

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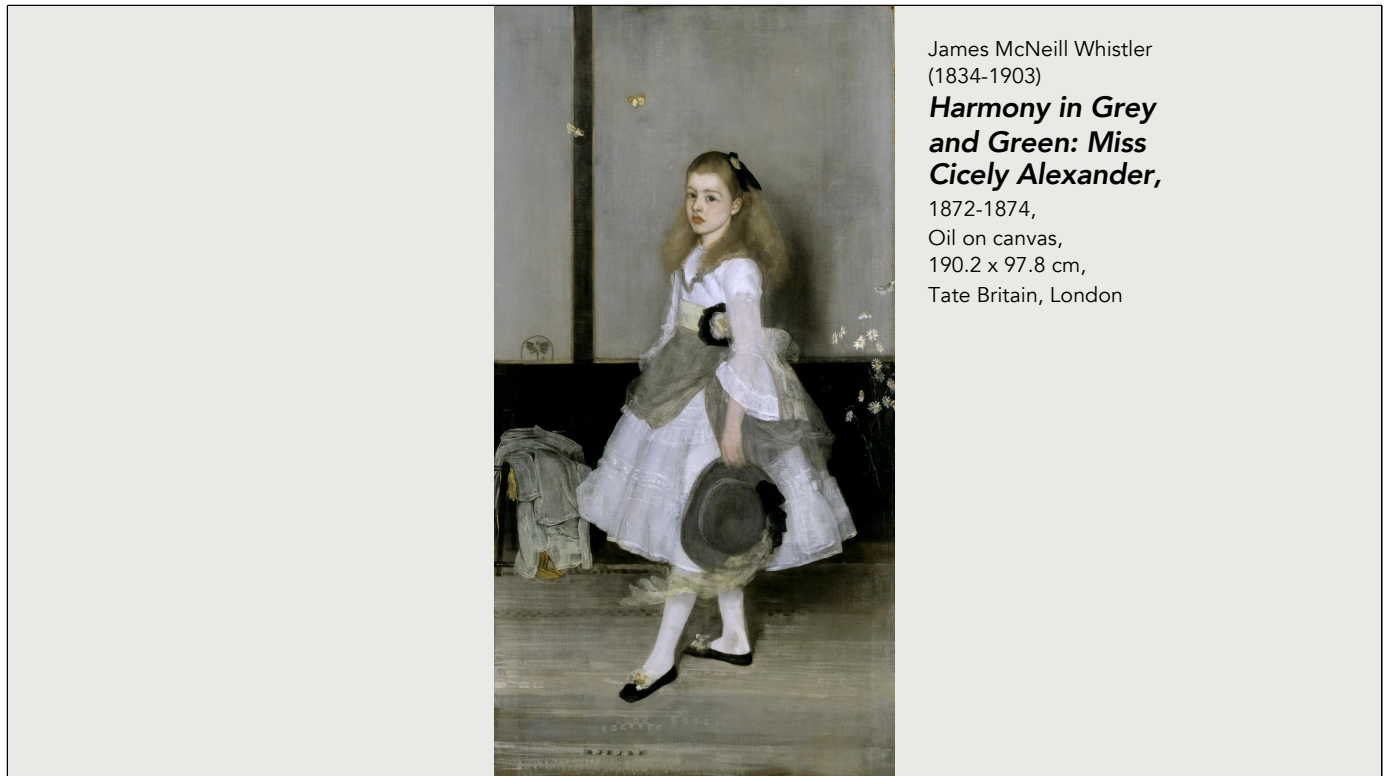
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James McNeill Whistler
(1834-1903)

***Harmony in Grey
and Green: Miss
Cicely Alexander,***

1872-1874,
Oil on canvas,
190.2 x 97.8 cm,
Tate Britain, London

- Eight-year-old **Cicely Alexander**, daughter of wealthy banker **W.C. Alexander**, stands in a grey muslin dress on a specially commissioned black-and-white carpet. A pale green feather in her hat echoes the green bows on her shoes and dress sash. Every detail was meticulously controlled – Whistler designed the dress himself, specifying "**perfect fine Indian muslin material,**" and had **Walter Greaves** procure the exact carpet needed.
- The portrait required **over 70 sittings**, each lasting several hours. Young Cicely's mounting frustration is visible in her accusatory expression. Whistler apologized afterward: "I think I may promise to make very little 'mess' and to give not so much trouble to my new sitter as I did to poor **Cissie!** How is **Cissie** and am I forgiven yet?" His mother **Anna** chaperoned during sittings and helped as needed.
- **The Times** praised it in 1894 as "**a delightful harmony in grey and silver, an absolutely unaffected portrait of a child.**" American art dealer **Edward Kennedy** wrote: "**I set out merely to express my admiration for your masterly portrait of Miss Alexander. I take off my hat Sir, & salute you.**" The painting shows clear influence from **Velázquez's Las Meninas** – Whistler owned a photograph of the Infanta figure.
- **W.C. Alexander** commissioned the portrait in 1872 because he admired **Whistler's Mother**. He refused an offer of **£10,000** from an American collector in 1913. The portrait influenced a generation of British portraitists including **James Guthrie, John Lavery, and William Orpen**. **Marcel Proust** drew inspiration from Whistler for the character "**Elstir**" in **À la recherche du temps perdu**.

Pronunciation Guide:

Cicely - SISS-uh-lee

Velázquez - veh-LASS-keth

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James McNeill Whistler
(1834-1903)

***La Princesse du pays
de la porcelaine,***

1863-1865,
Oil on canvas,
199.9 x 116.0 cm,
Freer Gallery of Art,
Washington

Christine Spartali, an Anglo-Greek beauty whom all artists were clamouring to paint, posed for this striking work wearing a **kimono** in Western fashion. She stands amongst Asian objects from Whistler's collection: a Japanese folding screen, decorative porcelain vase, and ornate carpet. The imposing scale (nearly 2 metres tall) signals Whistler's high ambitions for this **Japonisme** masterpiece.

Spartali's sister **Marie** recalled: "The first day, when they arrived in the studio, Whistler had his scheme prepared. The Japanese robe was ready, the rug and screen were in place, and he gave the pose at once." The painting required numerous sittings through winter 1863-64. When completed, **Spartali's** father refused to purchase it – Whistler's large signature at the top offended him. This may have led Whistler to develop his later **butterfly signature**.

At the 1865 **Paris Salon**, critic **Gustave Vattier** dismissed it as unfinished: "a child's breath could blow it over." The painting passed through several hands before shipping magnate **Frederick Leyland** purchased it around 1867, hanging it in his London dining room filled with **Kangxi porcelain**. This led to the creation of the **Peacock Room** when Whistler redesigned Leyland's dining room to complement the Princess – a commission that ended in bitter quarrels over payment.

Charles Lang Freer acquired both the painting and the **Peacock Room** in the early 1900s. The Princess now presides over the **Peacock Room** at the **Freer Gallery**, exactly as Whistler intended. The work represents the height of Victorian **Japonisme** – not authentic Japanese culture but an exotic fantasy realm conjured through aesthetic arrangement.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine - la pran-SESS dew pay-EE duh la por-sell-EN

Japonisme - zhah-poh-NEEZM

Spartali - spar-TAH-lee

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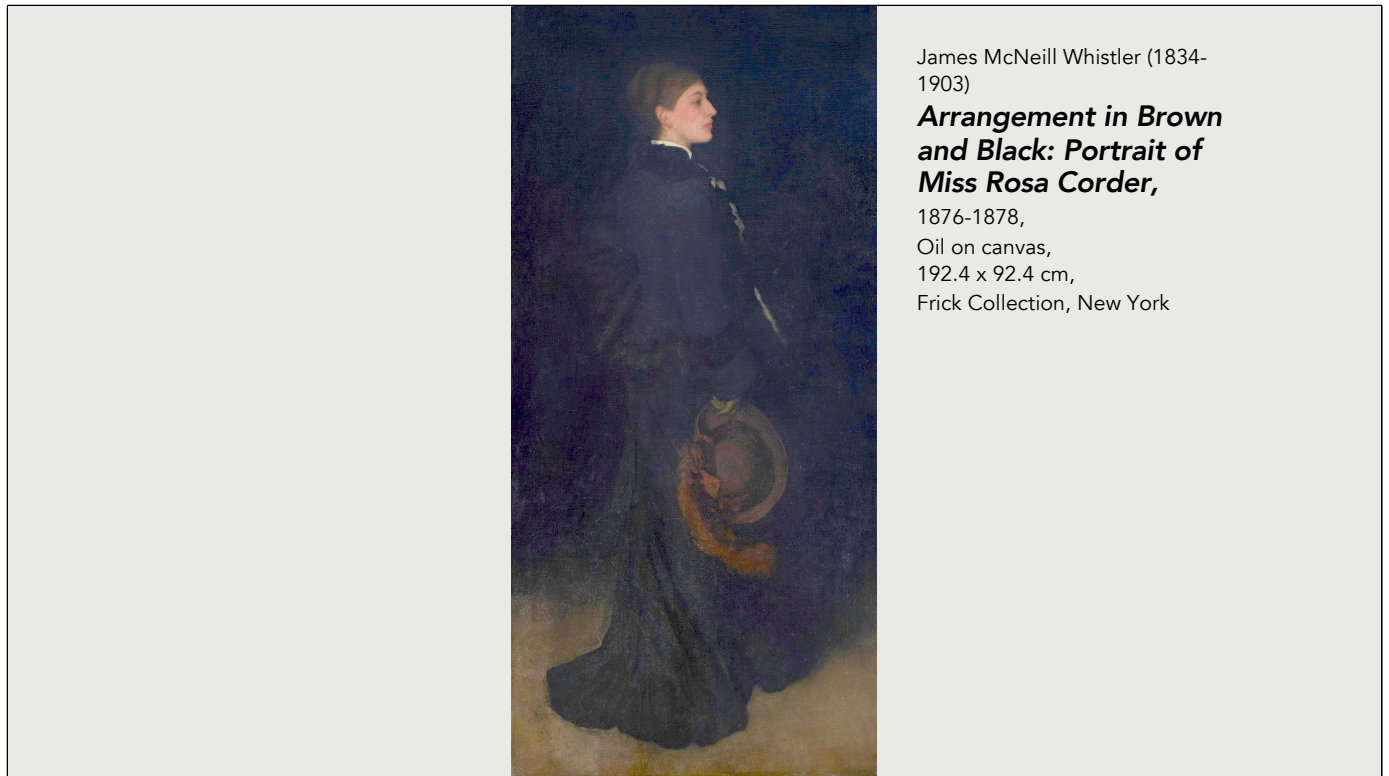
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James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)

Arrangement in Brown and Black: Portrait of Miss Rosa Corder,

1876-1878,

Oil on canvas,

192.4 x 92.4 cm,

Frick Collection, New York

York

Rosa Corder was a Victorian artist who trained under **Felix Moscheles** and **Frederick Sandys**, exhibiting at the **Royal Academy**. She also served as artist's model and was the mistress of **Charles Augustus Howell**, the notorious art dealer and alleged forger. Whistler painted this full-length portrait when he may have had a brief dalliance with her. She wears a brown fur-trimmed jacket against a dark background, embodying austere elegance.

The portrait was commissioned by Howell around 1876. Corder had studios in Southampton Row and Newmarket, where she built a reputation painting racehorses and jockeys for the sporting fraternity. Her portrait of theologian **Edward Pusey** was considered "**the best likeness**" and engraved as frontispiece to his biography. She was a serious professional artist navigating Victorian art circles.

When exhibited at the **Grosvenor Gallery** in 1879, reviews were mixed. **The Globe** praised its "**subtle colour**," whilst the **Pall Mall Gazette** questioned its finish. **Max Beerbohm** later caricatured Corder's relationship with Howell in **Rossetti and his Circle** (1922), immortalising Victorian bohemian scandals.

The painting demonstrates Whistler's mature portrait style: restricted palette, simplified forms, emphasis on tonal harmony over detail. The full-length format and dark tonalities recall **Velázquez**, whom Whistler deeply admired. This was painted during the tumultuous period around the **Ruskin trial**, when Whistler's financial difficulties intensified. Corder died in 1893, aged just 40.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Corder - KOR-der

Moscheles - MO-shel-ess

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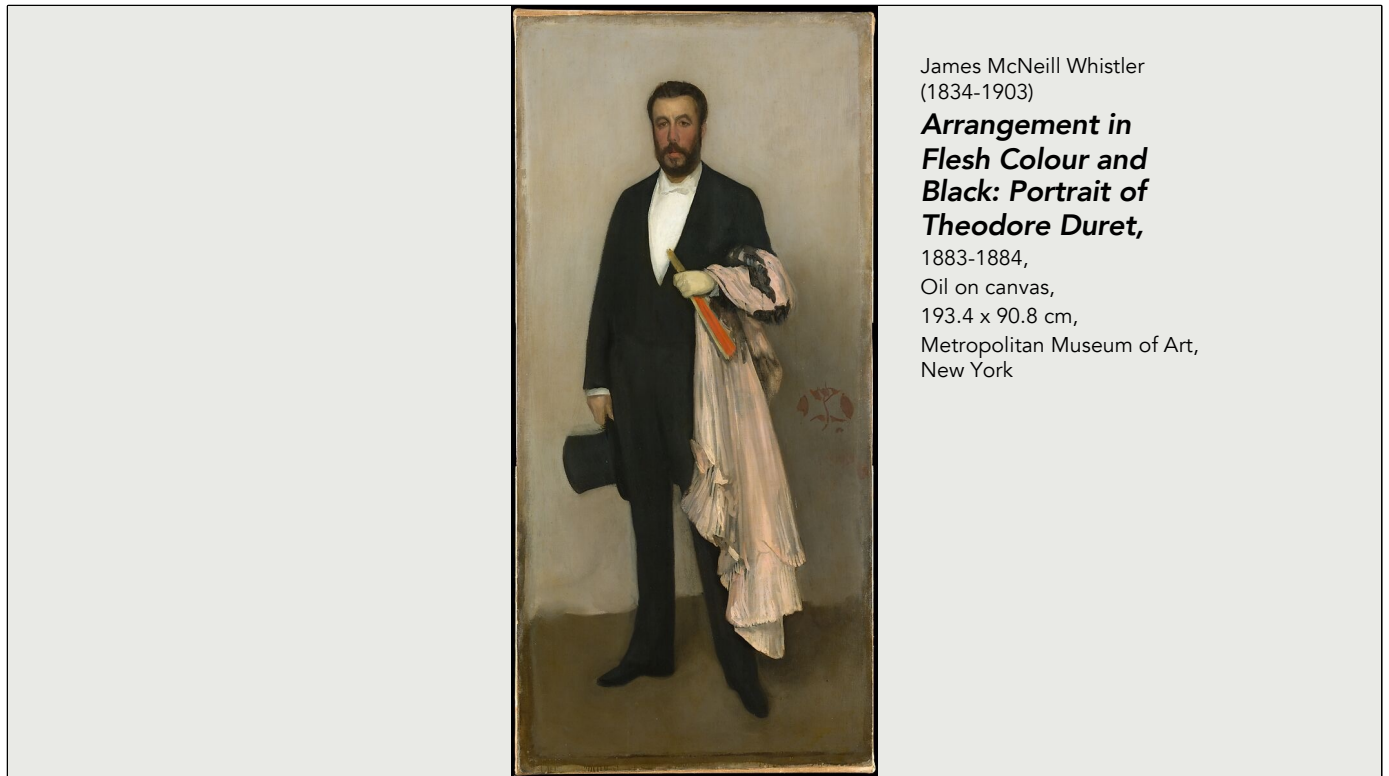
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James McNeill Whistler
(1834-1903)

***Arrangement in
Flesh Colour and
Black: Portrait of
Theodore Duret,***

1883-1884,

Oil on canvas,

193.4 x 90.8 cm,

Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York

Museum of Art, New York

Théodore Duret was a French art critic, journalist, and early champion of the **Impressionists**. He wrote the first major book on **Manet** and supported **Monet**, **Renoir**, and **Pissarro** when critics dismissed them. Whistler painted him in **evening dress** – black tailcoat, **pink domino** cloak casually draped over one arm, holding a **lady's fan**. The portrait combines formal elegance with playful irreverence.

Duret and Whistler became friends in the 1880s. **Duret** commissioned this portrait, specifying he wanted to be shown in **evening dress** holding a **lady's fan** – deliberately eccentric choices that challenged portrait conventions. The **pink domino** (a type of hooded cloak worn to **masquerade balls**) adds unexpected colour to the austere black-and-grey composition.

When exhibited in Paris in 1885, the portrait caused sensation. Critics debated whether the fan and domino were brilliantly original or merely bizarre. Some praised Whistler's virtuoso technique; others mocked the theatrical props. **Duret** later wrote appreciatively about the portrait in his 1904 book on Whistler, defending its unconventional elements as expressions of artistic freedom.

The painting shows Whistler at peak confidence, deliberately flouting Victorian portrait conventions. The subject is cropped unconventionally, props are whimsical, and the whole composition prioritises aesthetic arrangement over social propriety. **Duret** wrote an influential book on **Japanese art** in 1882, which may explain his comfort with Whistler's aesthetic innovations. He owned the portrait until 1909.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Théodore Duret - tay-oh-DOR dew-RAY

domino - DOM-in-oh

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A full-length portrait of Frederick Richards Leyland, a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit and a white shirt with a dark tie. He is standing in a dark, minimalist setting, possibly a hallway or a room with a dark floor and walls. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his face and the texture of his clothing.

James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)

**Arrangement in
Black: Portrait of F.R.
Leyland,**

1870-1873,
Oil on canvas,
192.8 x 91.9 cm,
Freer Gallery of Art,
Washington

Frederick Richards Leyland was a **Liverpool** shipping magnate and passionate art collector who became one of Whistler's most important patrons. Self-made and cultured, **Leyland** amassed superb collections of **Chinese porcelain** and contemporary British art. Whistler painted him standing in austere black evening dress, creating a portrait of refined elegance that suggests both wealth and aesthetic sophistication.

The relationship began promisingly. **Leyland** commissioned multiple works and bought others, including **La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine**. He allowed Whistler considerable freedom, trusting the artist's aesthetic judgement. This portrait shows that trust – **Leyland** appears not as a pompous industrialist but as a discerning gentleman of taste, almost indistinguishable from the artist who painted him.

Their friendship spectacularly collapsed during creation of the **Peacock Room** (1876-77). Whistler was hired to make minor adjustments to **Leyland's** dining room but instead completely transformed it, covering walls, ceiling, and shutters in painted peacocks. When **Leyland** refused to pay the full amount Whistler demanded, the artist retaliated by painting fighting peacocks representing himself and **Leyland**, titled "**Art and Money**."

The quarrel became legendary. Whistler never forgave **Leyland** and painted vicious caricatures of him. **Leyland** died in 1892 whilst still owning many Whistler works. This portrait, painted during their cordial early years, shows what was lost – a genuine meeting of artistic vision and generous patronage. The painting demonstrates Whistler's ability to create commanding portraits through minimal means: restricted palette, simplified forms, psychological penetration.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Leyland - LAY-land

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James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)

Nocturne in Blue and Silver: The Lagoon, Venice,

1879-1880,

Oil on canvas,
50.2 x 65.7 cm,

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

- After his **bankruptcy** following the **Ruskin trial**, Whistler fled to **Venice** in September 1879 to produce etchings for the **Fine Art Society**. He stayed fourteen months, creating not just etchings but also pastels and a small number of oils. This nocturne captures the Venetian lagoon at twilight, with gondolas silhouetted against shimmering water and distant architecture dissolving into atmospheric blue-grey mist.
- Whistler arrived in **Venice** penniless and stayed in cheap lodgings. He wrote to friends that **Venice** was "**quite delightful**" but admitted financial desperation. Working primarily in etchings and pastels (cheaper materials), he produced relatively few oils. Those he did create, like this nocturne, show **Venice** not as the bright, detailed city of **Canaletto** but as a mysterious, atmospheric dream.
- The **Fine Art Society** expected twelve etchings. Whistler produced fifty, plus numerous pastels. When he returned to London in November 1880, his **Venice** etchings were exhibited to critical success, re-establishing his reputation after the **Ruskin debacle**. Critics noted his unique vision transformed familiar Venetian views into something entirely original.
- This painting exemplifies Whistler's mature style: thin paint applied rapidly, limited palette, emphasis on mood over topographical accuracy. The lagoon's surface creates horizontal bands of colour – deep blue water, pale sky, darker landmass – all dissolved in silvery atmosphere. It's painting as poetry, prioritising sensation over description. **Venice** saved Whistler's career both financially and artistically.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Nocturne - nok-TURN

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James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903),

The Doorway, from the First Venice Set,

1879-80,
29.2 × 20 cm,
The Met

- **James McNeill Whistler** arrived in **Venice** in September 1879 a broken man. The **Ruskin libel trial** had bankrupted him despite his legal victory. Awarded a derisory **farthing** in damages whilst facing enormous costs, he was forced to sell his **White House in Chelsea** and most possessions at humiliating public auction. The **Fine Art Society** commissioned him to produce twelve etchings of **Venice** for £150 – barely enough to survive, but his only lifeline.
- Whistler remained fourteen months, producing not twelve but **over fifty extraordinary etchings**. **The Doorway** exemplifies his radical approach to printmaking. Where conventional topographical prints emphasised famous monuments in sharp detail, Whistler captured **Venice's** crumbling backstreets, mysterious doorways, and atmospheric decay. His technique was **revolutionary**: delicate line work combined with selective inking created luminous effects impossible in traditional etching.
- When the **First Venice Set** was exhibited in December 1880, critics initially balked. **The Times** dismissed them as "sketchy" and unfinished. But collectors recognised genius. Whistler's **Venice** etchings became hugely successful, re-establishing his reputation and finances. They influenced generations of printmakers, demonstrating that etching could be as expressive and atmospheric as painting. **Venice** saved Whistler's career, transforming exile into triumph through sheer artistic brilliance.



James McNeill Whistler
(1834-1903)

***Arrangement in
Black and Gold:
Comte Robert de
Montesquiou-
Fezensac,***

1891-1892,
Oil on canvas,
208.6 x 91.8 cm,
Frick Collection, New York

Collection, New York

Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac was a French aesthete, poet, and art collector – the living embodiment of **fin-de-siècle** decadence. Aristocratic, wealthy, and flamboyantly cultured, he inspired both **Huysmans' Des Esseintes** in **À rebours** and **Proust's Baron de Charlus** in **À la recherche du temps perdu**. Whistler painted him in evening dress, holding a cane, exuding hauteur and refinement.

Montesquiou commissioned the portrait in 1891, specifying he wanted to be shown full-length in black. Over 100 sittings followed. Whistler worked obsessively, scraping down and repainting repeatedly. **Montesquiou** later recalled the ordeal with mixed feelings – endless hours of standing still whilst Whistler fussed over minute tonal adjustments. The count's famous arrogance occasionally clashed with the artist's equally formidable ego.

When finally exhibited in 1894, critics recognised a **masterpiece**. The portrait captures **Montesquiou's** personality perfectly: elegant, aloof, supremely self-assured. The restricted palette – black coat against grey wall with touches of gold – creates maximum effect from minimum means. Whistler's **butterfly signature** gleams in gold, asserting the painting as aesthetic achievement rather than mere likeness.

Montesquiou adored the portrait and prominently displayed it. He wrote appreciatively about Whistler in his memoirs, though their friendship was turbulent. The painting represents Whistler's late mastery: decades of experimentation distilled into seemingly effortless sophistication. It stands among his greatest portraits, rivalling **Carlyle** and the artist's mother in psychological penetration and painterly skill. **Montesquiou** kept it until his death.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Comte Robert de **Montesquiou**-Fezensac - KOHNT roh-BAIR duh mon-tess-KEE-oo
fay-zon-SAK

À rebours - ah ruh-BOOR

fin-de-siècle - fan duh see-EK-luh

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James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)

Harmony in Blue and Silver: Trouville,

1865,

Oil on canvas,

49.5 x 75.5 cm,

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

In autumn 1865, Whistler visited the fashionable French seaside resort of **Trouville** with his model **Joanna Hiffernan**. He painted several beach scenes showing elegant figures on the sand, waves breaking offshore, and vast skies. This painting captures three women in crinolines and a small dog on the beach, with sailing boats visible on the horizon. The palette is restricted to blues, greys, and sandy tones.

Trouville attracted wealthy Parisians escaping the city. **Courbet** was also painting there that season, producing vigorous seascapes. Whistler's approach differed markedly – where **Courbet** emphasised material reality and physical presence, Whistler created **atmospheric poetry**. The figures are sketched with minimal detail, the sea and sky merge in silvery-blue tones, and the whole composition prioritises mood over narrative.

The painting technique is deliberately sketchy – thin paint rapidly applied, forms suggested rather than precisely delineated. This approach shocked Victorian viewers accustomed to highly finished surfaces. Critics complained Whistler's paintings looked unfinished, mere preparatory studies rather than completed works. Whistler countered that traditional finish was irrelevant; what mattered was achieving the right tonal harmony and atmospheric effect.

Isabella Stewart Gardner, the legendary Boston collector, acquired this painting for her museum. She met Whistler in the 1890s and admired his work immensely. The painting now hangs in her Venetian-style palazzo, testament to Whistler's transatlantic reputation. It represents a crucial moment when he began moving away from **realism** towards the poetic suggestiveness that defined his mature style.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Trouville - troo-VEEL

Hiffernan - HIF-er-nan

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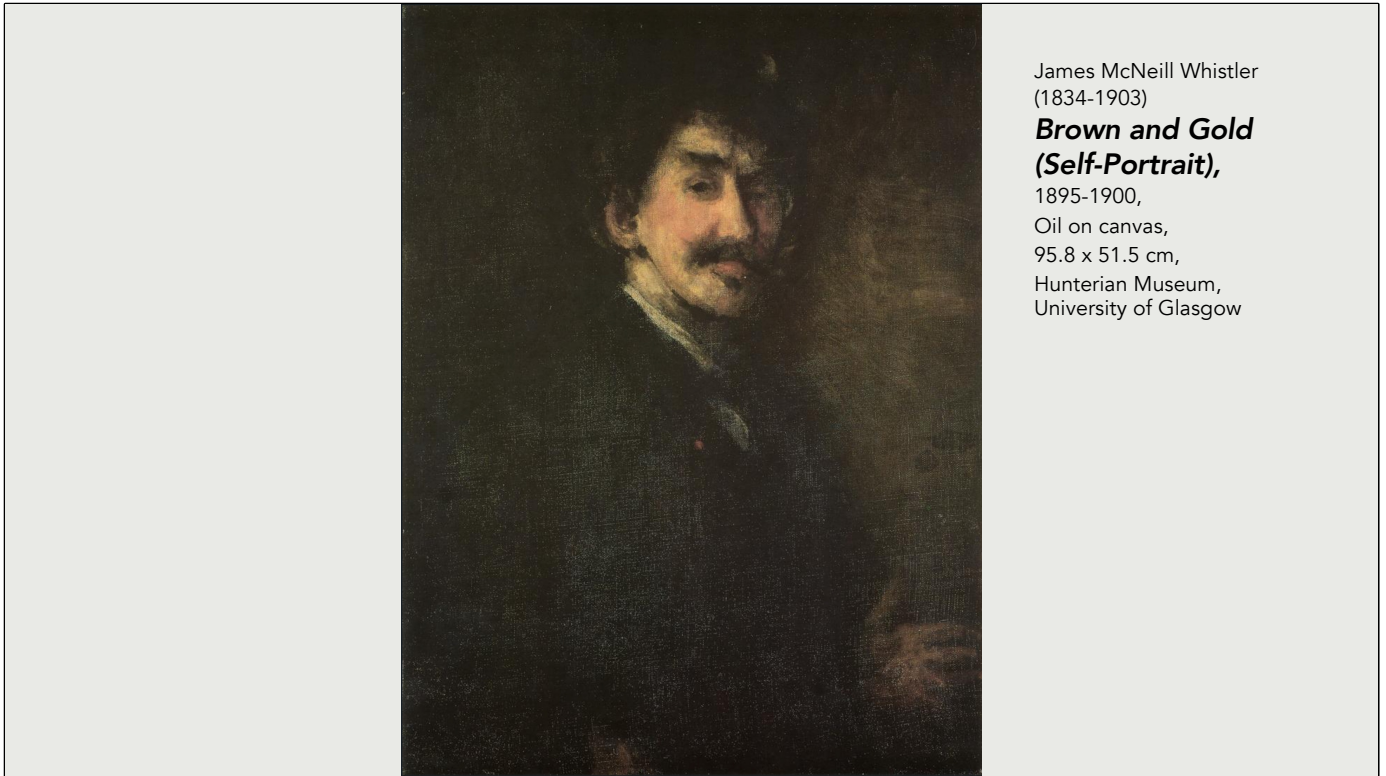
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James McNeill Whistler
(1834-1903)

***Brown and Gold
(Self-Portrait),***

1895-1900,

Oil on canvas,

95.8 x 51.5 cm,

Hunterian Museum,
University of Glasgow

- Whistler's final self-portrait, painted in his sixties, shows him standing in elegant brown coat and hat. The pose was based on **Velázquez's** portrait of **Pablo de Valladolid** in the **Prado** – Whistler's lifelong artistic hero. He worked on this painting until his death in 1903, never declaring it finished. The brushwork is nervous and flickering, the paint thinly applied, suggesting both physical frailty and undiminished artistic ambition.
- By the 1890s, Whistler's reputation had transformed. Once mocked and bankrupted, he was now celebrated as a master. He won major awards, influenced younger artists across Europe and America, and was recognised as a **pioneering modernist**. He founded an art school in 1898 but poor health forced its closure in 1901. His last years brought both triumph and decline.
- Whistler died in **London** on **17 July 1903**, six days after his 69th birthday. His funeral was attended by artists, critics, and society figures who had once dismissed him. He was buried in **Chiswick Old Cemetery**. His entire estate went to his sister-in-law **Rosalind Birnie Philip**, who spent decades defending his reputation and managing his legacy. Much of his work eventually went to **Glasgow University**.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE:

Velázquez - veh-LASS-keth

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James McNeill
Whistler
***Brown and Gold
(Self-Portrait),***
1895-1900,

- Whistler's influence proved enormous. He pioneered "**art for art's sake,**" insisting paintings should be valued for formal qualities rather than narrative content. His **nocturnes** presaged **abstraction**. His elegant portraits influenced **Sargent, Orpen, Lavery**, and generations of society portraitists. His aesthetic theories shaped the **Aesthetic Movement** and **Art Nouveau**. **His wit, combativeness, and dandyism** made him a legendary character. He remains one of the **most innovative and influential artists** of the 19th century – an American who conquered Europe, transforming how we understand the relationship between art and beauty.
- Thank you for your time and attention and goodbye for now.



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