

James McNeill Whistler (1834 – 1903)

James Abbott McNeill Whistler's deft brushwork and mighty ego made him one of London's best-known painters in the second half of the 1800s. Born in Massachusetts, Whistler spent most of his adult life in England and France, in an era when an American artist in Europe was something of a rarity. He specialized in landscapes and (especially later in his career) portraits; stylistically he is often linked with Claude Monet and August Renoir, though he was not exactly part of the Impressionist movement. His etchings are very highly regarded. Witty, cranky and a bit of a devil, Whistler was a regular gadabout in British society. He had a famous long-running feud with the playwright Oscar Wilde, each of them trying to outwit the other with cutting public remarks. Some critics of the era considered Whistler's work to be smudgy and too radical; after viewing Whistler's 1875 study of fireworks over the Thames, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: the Falling Rocket*, John Ruskin 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." Whistler successfully sued Ruskin for libel but was awarded only a farthing in damages, and the legal fees helped drive Whistler into bankruptcy in 1879.

After two successful one-man exhibitions at Dowdeswells in 1884 and 1886, Whistler's reputation steadily began to mount. In 1884, he was invited to become a member of the Society of British Artists and two years later was elected its president.

In 1886, Whistler painted *Harmony in Red: Lamplight. Portrait of Mrs. Beatrice Godwin*. Her husband died in 1886 and two years later she became Whistler's wife. The daughter of the sculptor John Bernie Philip, she was also an artist in her own right and Whistler frequently turned to her for advice while painting his portraits. With Beatrice, Whistler moved to Paris in 1892. She died four years later, in 1896. Meanwhile Whistler's reputation had soared. In 1891, *Arrangement in Grey and Black No 1: The Artist's Mother* was acquired by the French State and that same year Glasgow Corporation paid a thousand guineas for the *Portrait of Thomas Carlyle*. Having exhibited at several important international exhibitions, Whistler was awarded honors by Munich, Amsterdam and Paris.

"James McNeill Whistler's position in the history of British art is as paradoxical as his personality: flamboyant dandy and wit, he was also a serious craftsman, tirelessly dedicated to the perfection of his art. Having learned much from his French and English contemporaries, he nevertheless emerged as an isolated figure who attracted followers but established no leading style".