

James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834 – 1903) was an American-born, British-based artist active during the American Gilded Age. Averse to sentimentality and moral allusion in painting, he was a leading proponent of the credo "art for art's sake." His famous 'chop-mark' for each of his paintings was the shape of a stylized butterfly, possessing a long stinger for a tail. The symbol was apt, for it combined both aspects of his personality -- his art was characterized by a subtle delicacy, while his public persona was combative. Finding a parallel between painting and music, Whistler entitled many of his paintings "arrangements," "harmonies," and "nocturnes," emphasizing the primacy of tonal harmony. His most famous painting is "Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1" (1871), commonly known as *Whistler's Mother*, the revered and oft-parodied portrait of motherhood. Whistler influenced the art world and the broader culture of his time with his artistic theories and his friendships with leading artists and writers.

Lifetime output of prints: 442 (etchings, lithographs)

“As an etcher and lithographer, [Whistler] produced a body of work of the highest quality, of the most delicate perceptions, and in his maturity he showed a mastery of concise and vivacious line which enabled him to convey unforgettably his emotional response to certain places. His sets of etchings on Paris, the Thames, Venice, and Amsterdam are justly famous. His lithographs, with their velvety ash-greys, are handled with a wonderful lightness of touch. In the course of his evolution, his earlier technique, painstaking and minutely detailed, gave way to a much freer treatment of the subject, more concerned with conveying an initial impression than an accurate record of places. This translation of an impression, of sensations and emotions instantaneously aroused, is definitely an Impressionist approach. He was one of those who, in graphic art, best conveyed the Impressionist response to [subjects].”

“**The Rag Gatherers**” is an etching of c. 1877, signed in the plate. The composition is independent of any of Whistler’s ‘sets’ or suites of images -- and is the final V/V states: therefore, the one considered by the artist to be perfected beyond the prior four states. Originally, Whistler had depicted only the rag-hung doorway, but in 1861 the artist, dissatisfied with the plate, added the two figures in the interior. Rag gathering was an important vocation in European and Asian art history, since it was from ‘gathered’ rags that fine art paper would eventually be made by smashing them into a fabric pulp in water. Rembrandt did an etching, himself, entitled “Rag Gatherers,” and, considering Whistler’s love of Amsterdam and his set of Amsterdam townscape etchings, this work is probably an homage by Whistler to Rembrandt, the Grand Master of etching par excellence. Only Picasso is thought to have rivalled Rembrandt in the medium.

“**Seymour Standing under a Tree**,” (1859) is from the *French Set*, signed in the etching plate, and is a portrait of Arthur Charles Haden, the son of Whistler’s sister and brother-in-law, the famous etcher Sir Francis Seymour Haden. With Whistler, the two men are considered to be the prime force behind the British Etching Revival, c. 1860. The *French Set* is Whistler’s first set of prints, aka: *Twelve Etchings from Nature*, executed when the artist was only 24, and thought to be an homage to the Dutch School. Critics praised their picturesque charm, and Whistler considered them among his best work.

“The Barber’s Shop in the Mews” is an 1896 lithograph depicting an area of shops in Old London, only a short distance from the Fine Art Society’s premises at 148 New Bond Street, where Whistler’s lithographs were shown from mid-December 1895 through January 1896, including this work. Museum collections of this same piece include the Art Institute of Chicago, IL and The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. As one can see, the work comprises a large bay window and lively signs advertising “Haircutting,” “Rooms,” and “Cigars,” which must have caught the artist’s eye as he walked through the neighborhood. Today, New Bond Street is home to London’s most elite Old Master, antiquarian, and antiques galleries.

“Little Evelyn” is an 1896 lithograph depicting a shopkeeper's daughter near Bond Street, London. It was then published by Thomas Way, lithographic printer, for *The Art Journal* in 1896. Way had revived a technique called lithotint, with which the Whistler could achieve painterly, impressionistic effects, mimicking loose brushwork. In fact, Whistler deliberately referred to his lithographs as his “*drawings*,” and freely admitted his indebtedness to Way’s studio. Furthermore, Whistler loved the medium of the transfer litho, and used to claim his joy at being able to carry around an image on paper and then make a litho in any studio that struck his fancy, *en passant*. This *immediacy* is a metaphor for Impressionistic thinking: make art in the moment!

History of 19th-Century Master Prints

Starting in 1860, and coming into full force by 1890, there was a revival in printmaking in both London and Paris, an artform that had fallen out of favor since the glory days of Rembrandt. By 1890, the print revival was sweeping Paris and London by storm, supported by the newly widespread popularity of poster art and the invention of new lithographic inks, which made drawing on stones produce works of vivid color -- something the Impressionists required in the re-established medium. As for B&W prints, so many new techniques were being advanced that prints became a kind of nuanced and refined multiple ‘ink drawing,’ if you will. Furthermore, art dealers, notably Ambrose Vollard (publisher of *The Album of Painter-Engravers*) and Durand Ruel, began pressing their stables to create works in print media like etching and lithography that were more affordable to entry-level collectors. Ruel went so far as to underwrite print-only exhibitions at his famed gallery. Finally, enough cannot be said about the influence of the art patron Dr. Paul Gachet, M.D. -- who, being an amateur etcher himself, practically forced each artist who visited him to try their hands at printmaking! Gachet is ever famous for having cared for van Gogh in the last months of his life, and for van Gogh’s famous painting of Gachet.*

***Portrait of Dr. Gachet** is one of the most revered paintings by the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh. It depicts Dr. Paul Gachet who took care of Van Gogh during the final months of his life. There are two authenticated versions of the portrait, both painted in June 1890 at Auvers-sur-Oise, Gachet’s country hometown. One is in a private collection and the other, at the Orsay Museum in Paris. Both show Gachet sitting at a table and leaning his head on his right arm, but they are easily differentiated in color and style. In 1990, the first version fetched a record price of \$82.5 million (\$75 million, plus a 10 percent buyer's commission) when sold at auction in New York. When accounting for inflation, this is still the *highest price* paid for art at a public auction!

Here is a summary of the major shows dealing with the 1890 print revival in Paris:

General Exhibition of Lithography, École de Beaux Arts, Paris, 1891, a thousand prints on view

*Centenary Exhibition of Lithography, Champs de Mars, Paris, 1895***

**Lithography was invented in 1796 by German author and actor Alois Senefelder, as a thrifty method of publishing theatrical works. Thus, 1895 would be the centenary of the medium