

Whistler & Nature at the Fitzwilliam Museum



James McNeill Whistler, *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses* (1864/71)

Whistler & Nature (8 January – 17 March) explores James McNeill Whistler's (1834-1903) revolutionary attitude and relationship towards the natural world throughout his life, as expressed in works ranging from his celebrated London Nocturnes to his European coastal and pastoral scenes.

This fascinating exhibition of around 90 oil paintings, works on paper and objects - such as the Whistler's sketchbook - shows how his singular vision was underpinned by his enduring kinship with the makers of railroads, bridges and ships - the cornerstones of Victorian wealth and trade.

The exhibition is developed by Compton Verney, in partnership with The Hunterian, University of Glasgow. Professor Steven Parissien Compton Verney's former Chief Executive said *"Iconic portraits such as 'Whistler's Mother' are world renowned, but less well known is the influence of nature on Whistler's work. This exhibition was borne out of Dr Patricia de Montfort's (University of Glasgow) innovative research into Whistler's work from a particularly American standpoint and in the context of the US military. "*

Whistler came from a family of soldiers and engineers, with his father, Major George Washington Whistler, originally a US army engineer. Like his father, Whistler's brother was also involved in building America's railroads, while the artist himself was a military mapmaker, first as an officer cadet at West Point Academy in 1851-4 and subsequently in the Drawing Department at the US Coast and Geodetic Survey.

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Whistler's close observation of nature and its moods underpinned his powerful and haunting visions of 19th-century life. Finding a parallel between painting and music, Whistler entitled many of his paintings 'nocturnes', emphasizing the primacy of tonal harmony. His images explore the contrasts between the natural and man-made worlds: rivers and wharves, gardens and courtyards, the ideal and the naturalistic, which will be explored in the exhibition through works such as *The Bathing Posts*, *Brittany* (c.1893) *Nocturne: Chelsea* (c.1881), *Nocturne: Chelsea Embankment* (1883/4) and *Copy of 'Nocturne: Black and Gold - The Fire Wheel'* (1893), all from The Hunterian.



James McNeill Whistler *Nocturne*, 1875/77
© The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Whistlers' singular vision was always defined by his enduring kinship with the makers of railroads, bridges and ships, the cornerstones of Victorian wealth and trade.

Whistler inherited a tradition of British landscape painting forged at a time when land was the predominant source of wealth. Whistler's smoky images of warehouses, bridges, harbours and ships were themselves components of a new kind of productive, wealth-generating landscape.

By the 1880s and 90s, Whistler's images of parks, gardens, promenades and seaside resorts offer glimpses of the products of this wealth, in the form of suburban life and leisure, expressed in works such as *Sketch for 'The Balcony'* (1867/70), *Cliffs and Breakers* (1884), *A Distant Dome* (1901/04) and *Sketch for 'Annabel Lee'* (1869/70), all three from The Hunterian.

With rapid brushstrokes, Whistler captured the fleeting movement of figures – sometimes battling against the elements, at other times poised serenely in elegant robes. The figures in *Battersea Reach from Lindsey Houses* (c.1864, The Hunterian) (left), gaze out over the Thames, dwarfed by the vast, foggy expanse of the river that has been built up via layers of thin, liquefied paint, “like breath on the surface of a pane of glass,” as the artist himself put it. This is a view of nature constrained by man-made structures – the shadowy outline of the warehouses and chimneys on the far shore, the mast and rigging of a Thames barge in the mid horizon.

Whistler and Nature will showcase new research on Whistler's technique, notably in oil, watercolour and etching, and his writings on art undertaken by academics at the University of Glasgow. It will also review Whistler's work in the studio – his classicised figure studies in oil, pastel and chalk in the context of 19th-century revivalism, an area that has so far received only limited research attention. Taken together, the exhibition themes shed new light on the Western classical tradition that underpins Whistler's efforts to reinvent nature and the modern, and his reputation as the most innovative and modernizing American artist of his time.

The exhibition draws upon The Hunterian's collection alongside other UK collections, and will showcase new research on Whistler's technique (notably in oil, watercolour and etching) and his writings on art undertaken at the University of Glasgow. It will examine 19th century gradations of the productive versus the 'wild' landscape and review the work of Whistler – a modernising, innovative artist of his time - in the context of 19th century historicism, areas that have so far received only limited research attention.

Exhibition book: Whistler & Nature by Patricia de Montfort.

The exhibition will be shown next at Newcastle upon Tyne's Laing Art Gallery, before arriving in Glasgow in the spring of 2020.

You can download high resolution images for media use here.

Image Link <https://bit.ly/2EdTKAm>



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Notes to editors:

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About the Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Major Partner Museum programme, funded by The Arts Council. The Fitzwilliam's collections explore world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.

www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB | Free admission

OPEN: Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00;

CLOSED: 24-26 & 31 December, 1 January, Good Friday

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Founded in 1807, The Hunterian is Scotland's oldest public museum and home to one of the largest collections outside the National Museums. It is one of the leading university museums in the world and its collections have been recognized as a Collection of National Significance. It is also one of Scotland's most important cultural assets and houses the largest public display in the world of the art of the innovative American painter, printmaker, designer and writer, James McNeill Whistler. More at <https://www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian>

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