

Monday 12<sup>th</sup> December 2016

# THE STUDY FOR A MASTERPIECE ON DISPLAY AFTER 100 YEARS

An iconic pastel study given by the American artist, James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), to his leading patron, William Cleverly Alexander and not seen for over 100 years, is to enter a public collection at the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge, for the first time.

Whistler drew the pastel in preparation for his masterpiece painting now in the Tate, 'Harmony in Grey and Green: Miss Cicely Alexander' (1872). The sitter, Cicely (1864-1932), was the eight year-old daughter of W. C. Alexander, in whose family the study has remained ever since.

For 'Harmony in Grey and Green' Cicely had seventy sittings for her portrait; Whistler had already begun to paint May Alexander when he wrote to Alexander to ask if he could paint her younger sister, Cicely. He claimed, "I should work at the present moment with more freshness at this very "fair arrangement" I propose to myself than at any other..."

W.C. Alexander was inspired to commission portraits of his daughters after seeing 'Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1 Portrait of the Artist's Mother' which was first exhibited in 1872, the year the pastel was commissioned. With the portrait of Cicely Alexander now being considered as one of the most important works in Whistler's oeuvre, the pastel is an important and sophisticated work in its own right.

The study, is one of a group of three pristine pastels, accepted by H.M. Government in Lieu of Inheritance Tax and allocated to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. The drawings are amongst Whistler's finest and most complete works on paper.



Miss Cicely Alexander  
© Sotheby's



Girl in a long Blue and Red Dress  
© Sotheby's

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Just why W.C. Alexander bought the other two pastels; 'The Lady in the Long Pink Dress', and 'Girl in a Long Blue and Red Dress', is unclear, perhaps because of the similarity to the one of his daughter.

As was typical of Whistler's pastel portraits, the faces in all three pastels have been left imprecise to allow the viewer to focus on the harmonies of colour in the figures' drapery. Whistler wrote in 'The World' on 22 May 1878 "As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and subject matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or colour." Whistler imbued his works with musicality and emphasised his interest in colour and mood over a more conventional depiction of subject matter.



The Lady in the Long Pink Dress © Sotheby's

Whistler's famous signature, a stylized butterfly possessing a long stinger for a tail, can be clearly seen on 'The Lady in the Long Pink Dress' drawn between 1872 and 1876. The signature, was derived from his monogram JMW, which he began to use in the 1870s and is characteristic of his later period.

Not only are these pastels intrinsic to the study of Whistler's oeuvre, but they are in themselves of significant aesthetic importance. All three works play on the flat aesthetic of Japonisme of which he was a leading exponent and the vibrant colours on these drawings are as expressive and have the same musicality as his Harmonies and Nocturnes in oil. All three pastels will be on display at the Fitzwilliam from Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> December.

-Ends-

<http://www.sothebys.com/en/news-video/blogs/all-blogs/sotheby-s-at-large/2016/12/whistlers-women-to-form-part-of-fitzwilliam-museum.html>

**For further information and images contact the Press Office:**

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**Notes to editors:**

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 and Good Friday.

**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](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk)

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