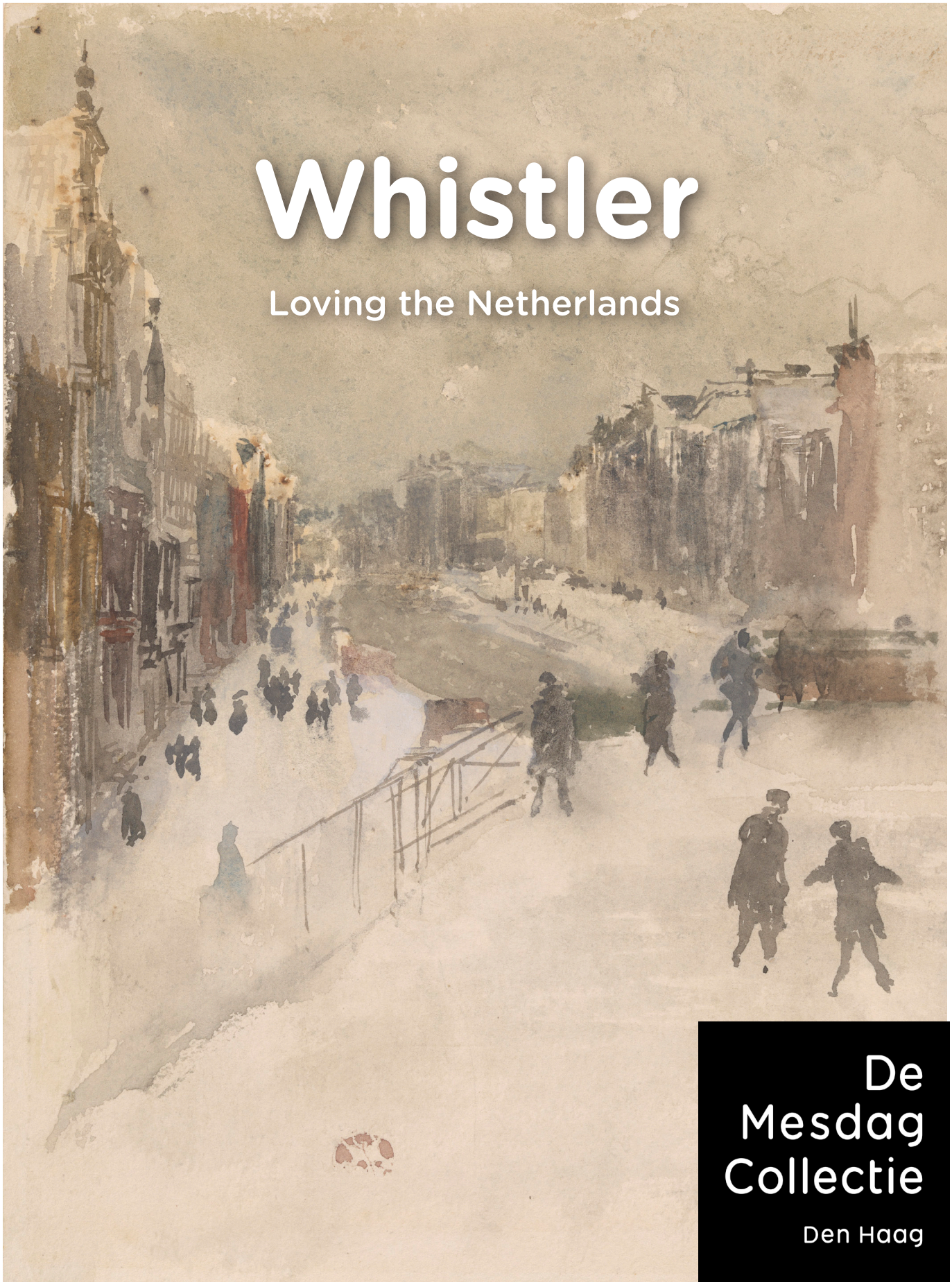


Whistler

Loving the Netherlands

De Mesdag Collectie

Den Haag

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Whistler

Loving the Netherlands

Throughout his life, James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) pursued a quest for timeless beauty in his art. He found it by approaching his subjects in an original manner, and painting them in an innovative style. He deliberately forged a reputation as a troublemaker who fought for his artistic ideals. This would lead to several court cases.

Whistler was born in the United States, grew up in St. Petersburg and worked in avant-garde circles in Paris and London. An avid traveller, he visited the Netherlands at least eleven times.

He was drawn to the Netherlands by his fascination with the 17th-century masters, but he also made dozens of watercolours, etchings and small-scale paintings that bore witness to his love for this country. ‘Holland is the country for artists. It has atmosphere’, he wrote.

His modern response to the watery Netherlands landscape helped many Dutch artists to see the beauty of their country in a new light.

This exhibition is presented in parallel with the exhibition ‘Whistler. Dandy and Disruptor’ at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, and is organised in cooperation with Tate Britain.

Whistler’s Monogram

Whistler typically signed his work with a monogram in which the letters J, M and W have been transformed into a butterfly. This was inspired by the potters’ stamps on East-Asian ceramics. The J forms the head and tail, while the M and W are the wings. As his pursuit of beauty became increasingly confrontational, a sting was added to the tail. He also used this symbol on his books and pamphlets, which he used to conduct public debates on art and beauty. There are several examples of Whistler’s monogram in the rooms of this exhibition. How many can you find?

‘(...) in Holland there is atmosphere,
and that means mystery.‘

Room 1

Whistler was here

Whistler visited the Netherlands regularly between 1863 and 1902. His destinations included Amsterdam, The Hague, Dordrecht and Zeeland. Almost all of the works he made here feature water: the sea, city canals and bodies of water in the countryside. He made poetic impressions that suited the mood of the landscape: ‘in Holland there is atmosphere, and that means mystery.’

On 31 August 1902, the last day he was ever to spend in the Netherlands, Whistler visited Museum Mesdag (now known as The Mesdag Collection). While staying at Hotel Des Indes and had been very ill, prompting Hendrik Willem Mesdag to visit him. Whistler’s Dutch works are now on display in these rooms more than a century later, giving us insight into his aesthetic view of our country.

James McNeill Whistler

Whistler with the White Lock, 1879

etching on paper
Joan M Winchell Collectie

Self image

Whistler often wore a broad-brimmed straw hat and a polka-dot scarf tied in Romantic style, without the usual white collar. His small stature and white lock of hair made him a striking figure. The contrast between dark and light in this self-portrait bears witness to his love of Rembrandt, whose work he had seen as a teenager while living in St. Petersburg. Whistler saw the Netherlands as 'the birthplace of Rembrandt', and this was an important reason for him to visit the country.

James McNeill Whistler

Chelsea in Ice, 1864

oil on canvas
Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine.
The Lunder Collection

Misty

Whistler was one of the first artists to paint evocative views of mist and fog on the River Thames in London. He found that nature was not always intrinsically beautiful, but as an artist, he created beauty by arranging colours and lines. In this painting, the mist and snow form a harmonious image. By reducing everyday images to line, colour and form, Whistler beat a path for more modern abstract art.

Hendrik Willem Mesdag

Stormy Sea, c. 1869-1905

oil on panel
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

The North Sea

Whistler and Mesdag crossed paths several times in The Hague. It is quite likely that The Hague's great painter of seascapes had suggested to Whistler that he work in Scheveningen. No matter what the weather, the sea was always an inexhaustible source of inspiration for Mesdag, and in that regard, there was little difference between the two artists. Mesdag probably painted this small panel while standing on the beach at Scheveningen on a blustery day.

Display cabinet

James McNeill Whistler

Village, 1887

watercolour on paper
The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Sketches

Whistler always had a sketchbook to hand while travelling, so that he could jot down quick impressions. With spontaneous brushstrokes he brought a typical Dutch landscape to life: a green meadow, red tiled roofs, a church tower and a windmill. The high horizon was typical of Whistler. The empty space beneath it suggests the water on which he was bobbing along in his small boat.

If you would like to see more of his sketches, go to the screen in this room and leaf through his booklets.

Display cabinet

James McNeill Whistler

Tree-shaded Alley in Domburg, 1900

pencil, pen and ink, on paper
The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Leaf through Whistler's sketchbooks. Note how he had the ability to capture the power of the watery landscape in a very surehanded way.

Display cabinet

James McNeill Whistler

Grey and silver – North Sea, c.1884

watercolour on paper
The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Map at the wall

Whistler travelled to the Netherlands on at least eleven occasions, visiting several cities, as well as the North Sea coast. This map shows you where he made the drawings, etchings and paintings in this exhibition.

‘You could not imagine a more pleasant companion: cheerful, friendly, without any form of pretension, enthusiastic, and besides, a hard worker like no other.’

Artist Carel Nicolaas Storm van ’s-Gravesande about his trip to Dordrecht with Whistler in 1884

James McNeill Whistler

The Mustard Seller, 1858

etching on paper
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Gift of the Art Institute of Chicago

Rotherhithe, 1860

etching and drypoint on paper
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Gift of the Art Institute of Chicago

Etching Sets

In the course of his life, Whistler made several series of etchings: the ‘French Set’ (1858), the London ‘Thames Set’ (1871) and the ‘Venice Set’ (1880 and 1886). The French series featured twelve scenes from everyday life, and made his name as a printmaker. This mustard seller, viewed through a small entrance, immediately betrays the influence of Dutch 17th-century genre art. In Rotherhithe, to the right, workers take a break in the local pub, with ships on the Thames in the background. Depicting leisure activities was a strikingly modern choice in 1860.

Display cabinet

James McNeill Whistler

De ingang, 1879-80

etching, drypoint and roulette on paper
The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Venetië

Financieel geruïneerd door verschillende rechtszaken, reisde Whistler naar Venetië in de hoop daar veel verkoopbaar werk te kunnen maken. De etsen uit de 'Venice Set' hebben opnieuw het alledaagse leven als onderwerp. Ze hebben kenmerken die een opmaat vormen naar zijn latere 'Amsterdam Set' (in de volgende zaal). Zo combineert deze voorstelling frontale, rijk geornamenteerde architectuur en een sprookjesachtige uitstraling, die we later terugzien op etsen van Amsterdamse grachtenpanden. Leuk detail: Whistler werkte in Venetië vanuit een gondel op het water.

James McNeill Whistler

Off the Dutch Coast, 1883-84

watercolour on paper
The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

The Dutch Coast

Whistler used subtle layers of green-blue hues and rhythmic, interweaving brushstrokes to paint the waves of the sweeping North Sea. The paper is spattered with sea water. Whistler may well have painted this sitting in a small boat among the waves. He used the rough texture of the paper, which broke the paint up into short, lively brushstrokes, to convincingly capture the turbulent sea. This is possibly Scheveningen. The watercolour exudes the same atmosphere as the seascapes of Mesdag, whose work Whistler knew.

James McNeill Whistler

View of the Harbor at Dordrecht: Grey and Green, c. 1883-84

oil on panel
Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine. The Lunder Collection

James McNeill Whistler

Zuyder Zee, 1884-85

watercolour on paper
Private Collection

James McNeill Whistler

Little Dordrecht, 1884-87

etching and drypoint on paper
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.
Purchased with the support of the F.G. Waller-Fonds

View on Dordrecht , 1884

etching and drypoint on paper
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

Dordrecht

In 1884, Whistler visited Dordrecht in the company of etcher Carel Nicolaas Storm van ’s-Gravesande, who wrote: ‘I spent a few days with him there [...] we sketched and took boat trips’.

In this etching, the Groothoofd in Dordrecht, with its recognisable dome, forms the background to a large stretch of water. In the painting on the top left, he has resolutely stripped the same area down to a depiction in grey and green, as emphasised by the title.

‘Whistler insisted on taking us for a drive to show us the ‘charming surroundings’ of The Hague and the Bosch. (...) He was full of admiration and love for The Hague.’

Artist George Sauter, 1902

James McNeill Whistler

Marsh in Zeeland, c. 1900

watercolour and gouache on paper
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection
(Bequest of James Parmelee)

A House at Flushing, c. 1900

watercolour on paper
Private collection

Zeeland

During his penultimate journey in 1900, Whistler spent longer in Zeeland, probably on the advice of artist Jan Toorop whom he had met in London in the 1880s. Whistler made sketches and sunny watercolours. Here he has immortalised a sweet scene between two figures, probably a mother and child, in a small format.

James McNeill Whistler

Canal Scene in Holland, c. 1900

watercolour on paper
Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine. The Lunder Collection

Room 2

Picturesque Amsterdam

Cosmopolitan Whistler loved the Dutch capital. In the winter, he would make watercolours of people having fun on the ice and in the snow; in the summer he took to a small boat to travel along the canals through poor, run-down neighbourhoods; he saw their raw, attractive beauty. On one occasion, this earned him a soaking when some women emptied buckets of dirty water over him from their windows.

In 1889, Whistler spent two months in Amsterdam, visiting exhibitions and museums and meeting many Dutch artists. He also visited antiquarian bookshops in search of Dutch paper from the 17th and 18th century, as this lent his etchings a warm glow. During this period, he made a series of extraordinary etchings, the ‘Amsterdam Set’, one of the highlights of his graphic work.

James McNeill Whistler

House by a Canal, Amsterdam, 1889

charcoal and watercolour on paper
The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

‘Amsterdam Set’

Whistler had an extraordinarily innovative approach to etching. He drew directly onto the copper plate, experimented extensively, and was closely involved with the printing process. Due to his demanding requirements, the ‘Amsterdam Set’ was never issued as a series. The core consists of eight images of the Amsterdam canals.

From a low viewpoint, he focused his gaze on the lower part of the facades of buildings. The people in the houses and on the quayside are reflected in the water, but the actual subjects are the light, the dark, and the unusual textures.

Dutch critics did not really appreciate this unrealistic ‘dreaming’, but many artists were enthusiastic, as was Whistler himself: ‘What I have already begun is of far finer quality than all that has gone before – combining a minuteness of detail (...) with greater freedom and more beauty of execution.’

James McNeill Whistler

The Pierrot, 1889

etching and drypoint on paper
Amsterdam City Archives

James McNeill Whistler

The Embroidered Curtain, 1889

etching and drypoint on paper
Amsterdam City Archives

James McNeill Whistler

Balcony, Amsterdam, 1889

etching and drypoint on paper
Amsterdam City Archives

Bridge, Amsterdam, 1889

etching and drypoint on paper
The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Square House, 1889

etching and drypoint on paper
Amsterdam City Archives

James McNeill Whistler

Nocturne: Dance house, 1889

etching and drypoint on paper
Amsterdam City Archives

The Steps, Amsterdam, 1889

etching and drypoint on paper
National Gallery of Art, Washington. Gift of John Nichols Estabrook and Dorothy Coogan Estabrook

Display cabinet

Long House – Dyer's – Amsterdam, 1889

etching and drypoint on paper
Victoria and Albert Museum

James McNeill Whistler

Amsterdam from the Tolhuis, 1863

etching and drypoint on paper
Amsterdam City Archives

First etching

Whistler made his first etching of Amsterdam on his second trip to the Netherlands in 1863. He immediately found a subject: boats on the water against a background cityscape. Compared with his later etchings of Amsterdam, these lines look somewhat tentative. Whistler experimented with the sky at various stages of making this print: a stormy sky full of clouds, a washed-out sky (as shown here), evolving towards more sharply delineated boats against a pale sky.

‘Mr Whistler looked about him for new worlds to conquer, and elected to visit Amsterdam, which he thinks one of the most picturesque cities in Europe.’

From: ‘A Chat with Mr. Whistler’, Pall Mall Budget, 1890

James McNeill Whistler

Zaandam, 1889

etching and drypoint on paper
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Aankoop uit het F.G. Waller-Fonds

The Mill, 1889

etching and drypoint on paper
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Aankoop uit het F.G. Waller-Fonds

Zaandam

Whistler considered these two etchings of Zaandam as belonging to the 'Amsterdam Set'. He was clearly fascinated by the mills at Zaandam, because he painted them both inside and out. He built up this dark interior of a paint mill with numerous refined hatchings, from which people and sacks full of milling products slowly emerge. The fading lines on the left and at the bottom and Whistler's butterfly monogram, incorporated into the picture, make this an intriguing composition.

James McNeill Whistler

Snow, Amsterdam, 1882

watercolour on paper
Private collection

Fun in the Snow

In the winter of 1882, Whistler spent some time in Amsterdam. During his visit, he made several wintry watercolours. Sitting in a café, he painted the Rokin, which had not yet been filled in, covered in a thick layer of snow. The cool tints are in perfect harmony. Together with the playful silhouettes of passers-by, it presents a picturesque scene in the capital city. Could anything be more Dutch?

Room 3

Influence in the Netherlands

In 1889, Whistler attended the opening of an exhibition of the Netherlands Etching Club at Museum Panorama Mesdag in The Hague. He dined with a group of artists that included George Hendrik Breitner, Floris Verster and Barbara van Houten. In the weeks that followed, he mixed in artistic circles in the Netherlands. According to composer Alphons Diepenbrock, 'he dines constantly at the homes of admirers, where he constantly gives speeches in the midst of great drunkenness'.

Among Dutch critics and collectors, opinions about Whistler were divided, but many young artists were full of admiration for his radical approach and his work. They thought the way in which the identity of the people in his portraits was overshadowed by a composition in a single tone, such as black, grey or white, was groundbreaking.

His evocative, experimental landscapes also made a huge impression on Dutch artists. Whistler's influence on these artists is unmistakable in the works displayed in this room.

James McNeill Whistler

The Bride, 1868-69

oil on canvas
The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Girl in White

Matthijs Maris was one of the Dutch artists who followed Whistler from the very beginning. Years after Maris made this intriguing painting, he called it his ‘sketch of a girl in white’. He was referring to Whistler’s celebrated series of three portraits of women dressed in white. The two artists shared an interest in painting ethereal women, as shown here. Maris spoke of ‘the simplicity and dignity of [Whistler’s] portraits’.

James McNeill Whistler

Arrangement in Yellow and Grey: Effie Deans, c. 1876–78

oil on canvas
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.
Gift of M.C. Baroness van Lynden-van Pallandt

James McNeill Whistler

Arrangement in Black and Brown: The Fur Jacket , 1877

oil on canvas
Worcester Art Museum, Worcester MA

Maud Franklin

Whistler's partner Maud Franklin posed for these life-sized portraits, which are displayed together here for the first time since they were exhibited in Amsterdam in 1889. The pair often worked together, and at the time, Franklin was pregnant with their daughter.

Whistler later added the name Effie Deans to the title, referring to a character from a novel by Walter Scott, the Scottish writer. This was probably because, just like Franklin, Deans was an unmarried mother. Whistler even added a quote from the novel to the painting, on the left at the bottom.

Too modern

Together, Franklin and Whistler made twelve modern, experimental portraits of this type. Here, Franklin is wearing a fashionable fur jacket. Her skirt seems to be fading into the background. Effie Deans ended up in Dutch hands, but art dealer Van Wisselingh was unable to sell this portrait: 'The Dutch are slow ... Now, I like it better than the first one even and some of our artists think very highly of it. James Maris, for whose opinion I care most thinks it is beautiful.'

Theo Molkenboer

Mother in Front of her Linen Closet, 1894-95

oil on canvas
Drents Museum, Assen. Gift of Stichting Schone Kunsten around 1900

Portraying Motherhood

Theo Molkenboer must have known Whistler's famous portrait of his mother. The painting was displayed in Amsterdam in 1889, where Molkenboer was living and studying at the Rijksnormaalschool voor Tekenleraren, the state training college for drawing teachers. Molkenboer's stylised portrait of his mother, made a few years later, shows clear parallels: the contrast between a woman in black against piles of white linen, posing en profil.

Menso Kamerlingh Onnes

Portrait of Jenny Kamerlingh Onnes, 1888

oil on canvas
Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden.
Gift of the heirs of M. Kamerlingh Onnes, 1946

Like a Lady

Menso Kamerlingh Onnes echoed Whistler's innovative figurative painting style in this portrait of his sister Jenny. The seated pose, viewed from the side, the sober colours, and above all the virtuous style are strongly reminiscent of Whistler's famous portrait of his mother, as well as other portraits by him of women that were displayed in the Netherlands and Belgium during these years. Jenny Kamerlingh Onnes herself wrote the following about the exhibition held in 1889: 'Whistler is wonderful, dazzling'.

James McNeill Whistler

The Little Nocturne, Amsterdam, 1889

etching on paper
The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Experimental

Whistler was at the forefront of the revolution in etching. He drew onto the etching plate on site, and allowed chance to play a role. Nocturnes (night views) were his most experimental genre, because they were already depicting what was not actually visible with the naked eye. If you look closely, you will see people on a narrow bridge between the houses, and this scene is also reflected in the water. Whistler used boldly etched lines and shading above the figures to evoke the mysterious nature of the twilight.

Willem Witsen

Waterloo Bridge at Night, c. 1890

watercolour on paper
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Voorstraatshaven VIII, Dordrecht, c.1898–1900

etching on paper
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, to be placed in The Mesdag Collection, The Hague (gift of the Visser 't Hooft family)

In Whistler's Footsteps

Whistler's dreamlike waterscapes and night-time scenes (nocturnes) made a huge impression on Dutch artists. His influence is often clearly visible. In 1884, Storm van 's-Gravesande travelled with him to Dordrecht and the surrounding area, where he made many evocative etchings of the city by moonlight. Breitner used photography and watercolour to capture reflections on the Amsterdam canals in a style that was similar to that of Whistler. Finally, Willem Witsen never met Whistler, but was a great admirer of his art, and his waterscapes exude the same serene, almost mystical, hushed atmosphere.

George Hendrik Breitner

Reflection of Canal Houses in the Water at Singel 377 to 385 in Amsterdam, c. 1890-1910.

photograph (modern print)
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

George Hendrik Breitner

Damrak by Night, c. 1890

watercolour and charcoal on paper
Amsterdam City Archives

Carel Nicolaas Storm van ’s-Gravesande

Harbor in Dordrecht by Moonlight, in or before 1887

drypoint on paper
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Gift of Jonkheer C.N. Storm van ’s-Gravesande

Richard Josey after James McNeill Whistler

Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1, 1879

mezzotint on paper
The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Icon

The famous portrait of Whistler's mother was exhibited in the Exhibition of Living Masters, held in Amsterdam in 1889. This print after the painting was later displayed in the window of a bookshop. The portrait with the musical title of Arrangement in Grey and Black made a huge impression, more for the sober, stylised arrangement of areas of colour than for any maternal quality. Despite this, it has become an iconic image of 'the mother'.

The painting is currently on view at the Whistler exhibition in the Van Gogh Museum.

Large Colenbrander room

Whistler and Music

Whistler believed there was a close connection between painting and music. ‘As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and the subject-matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of colour.’ This explains why he gave his works musical titles, such as ‘symphony’ and ‘nocturne’.

Whistler’s use of the term nocturne for a night-time scene later became a convention in art history. He was particularly inspired by Chopin’s nocturnes, but also by the music of Beethoven and Schubert. This inspiration The influence went both ways: Debussy’s compositions were inspired by Whistler’s evocative paintings.

Scan the QR code to listen to a playlist of music from the time of Whistler. Or take some sheet music and play something on the piano yourself.

A Promenade on a Copper Plate

‘Know ye what etching is? It is to ramble
on copper.’

Thus begins the poem ‘Aqua-forti’ (1876) by Carel Vosmaer, Rembrandt expert and etchmaker, who was well acquainted with Whistler and his etchings. It is an apt metaphor for Whistler’s way of both living and working. A true flâneur, Whistler approached his etchings in a light-footed, playful manner. The poem ends with an expressive description that may have inspired Whistler to occasionally add a sting to his characteristic butterfly monogram:

‘It is to paint on the soft gold-hued copper
with sting of wasp and velvet
of the wings of butterfly by sparkling
sunbeams glowed
Even so the etcher’s needle, on its point
Doth catch what in the artist-poet’s mind
Reality and fancy did create.’

Battles for Beauty

The serene atmosphere of Whistler's paintings was in stark contrast to his combative nature. He became famous for his ferocious responses to critics. In 1877, he sued the famous art critic John Ruskin, who had written that he '(...) never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's eye.' The legal costs resulted in financial ruin for Whistler.

In 1885, Whistler gave a lecture entitled 'Ten o'Clock', which he also published as a pamphlet. In it, he turned against his frenemy Oscar Wilde, making a masterly plea for his own ideals. In 1892, Whistler published several of his confrontational letters in a collection entitled The Gentle Art of Making Enemies.

Making cards

Whistler was always drawing – on postcards, loose sheets of paper, whatever he could find. Take a card and make your own sketch or drawing. Draw inspiration from Whistler's work. Sketch a canal, a landscape, a figure or a light reflection. Take your time.

Make a card for someone you would like to surprise: a friend, neighbour, someone to whom you have been meaning to send something for a long time. Put it in the post box, and we will send it. Or if you prefer, take it home with you, or hang it on the wall.

Etching

Line etching

Artists make a line etching by covering a copper plate with a layer of wax. They then scratch lines into the wax to expose the copper. The plate is then placed in an acid bath where these lines are ‘etched’ into it. After rinsing, several prints can be made from the plate using ink.

Drypoint

Drypoint involves scratching directly into the copper without using wax or an acid bath. This is quicker, but also produces rougher lines with ’a soft velvety effect, most painter like & beautiful’, as Whistler put it. He often combined drypoint with line etching. This method gave his work exceptional depth and texture.

Plate Tone

After applying ink to the plate, the artist then cleans most of it off. The ink that remains in the lines forms the image. The thin layer of ink that is sometimes left on the rest of the plate is known as the plate tone, and produces a warm, hazy background. Whistler experimented a lot with this, which is why each of his prints was slightly different to all the others.

States

Several prints can be made from a single etching plate. Whistler sometimes adapted the plate after printing by adding extra lines to produce a slightly different effect. Such a new print is known as the next state. This process can be repeated, meaning that there van be many different states of a single etching. If you look closely, you will see slight differences.

Would you like to try this?

Take a needle and carefully scratch a few lines into the plate. This is the drypoint technique. It is harder to make flowing lines this way than with a line etching. Feel the line after you have scratched it. The needle creates small raised edges, known as the burr, which produce a slightly different effect when printed on paper.

Audio

Here you can listen to a conversation between curators Renske Suijver and Edwin Becker about Whistler's life and work.

Listen at home?

Scan the QR code.