



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the James McNeill
Whistler Collection, 1863-1906, circa
1940, in the Archives of American Art

Stephanie Ashley

Funding for the processing and digitization of this collection
was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art

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Archives of American Art
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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	James McNeill Whistler collection
Identifier:	AAA.whisjame2
Date:	1863-1906, circa 1940
Extent:	0.2 Linear feet
Creator:	James McNeill Whistler, 1834-1903
Language:	English
Summary:	The collection measures 0.2 linear feet and provides scattered documentation of the career of American-born British-based painter and etcher James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) through 39 items from Whistler to various recipients, including 25 letters, 9 telegraphs, 3 invitations, one thank you card and a postcard. The collection also contains 4 letters from others, 7 catalogs of Whistler exhibitions, a note from the back of Whistler's painting <i>The Beach at Selsey Bill</i> , and a 1906 copy of <i>Wilde v. Whistler: being an acromonious correspondence on art between Oscar Wilde and James A. McNeill Whistler</i> , a pamphlet containing letters originally published in London newspapers between 1885 and 1890.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The collection was compiled from a series of accessions donated between 1959 and 2003. Most of the items in the collection were given to the Archives of American Art by Charles Feinberg in 1959. The pamphlet *Wilde v. Whistler* was donated by Mrs. Lois Field in 1964 and an invitation to Dr. and Mrs. Burnett was donated by Martha Fleischman in 2003.

Related Material

The Archives holds several collections relating to James McNeill Whistler including the Katherine Prince collection relating to James McNeill Whistler, 1835- 1892; Edward Guthrie Kennedy papers concerning James McNeill Whistler in the New York Public Library, 1850-1902 and Selected papers concerning James McNeill Whistler in the New York Public Library, 1830-1950 (available on microfilm only, reel N25; originals reside at the New York Public Library); and James McNeill Whistler collection in the University of Glasgow, Special Collections, circa 1830-1963 (available on microfilm only, reels 4600-4611 and 4683-4699; originals reside in the Glasgow University Library, Dept. of Special Collections).

Alternative Forms Available

This site provides access to the **James McNeill Whistler** collection in the Archives of American Art that was digitized in 2011. The collection has been scanned in entirety, and totals 243 images.

Processing Information

The collection was fully processed and a finding aid prepared by Stephanie Ashley in 2011. The collection was digitized in its entirety in 2011. Processing and digitization of the collection were funded by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Preferred Citation

James McNeill Whistler collection, 1863-1906, circa 1940. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions on Access

Use of original papers requires an appointment.

Ownership and Literary Rights

The James McNeill Whistler collection is owned by the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Literary rights as possessed by the donor have been dedicated to public use for research, study, and scholarship. The collection is subject to all copyright laws.

Biographical Note

London-based painter and etcher, James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) was born in Lowell, Massachusetts and lived in St. Petersburg and London as a child before returning to the United States on the death of his father in 1849. After a failed attempt at a military career at West Point from 1851-1853, he worked as a draftsman for the Coast Survey from 1854-1855 where he received technical instruction in etching. Whistler then left for Paris and remained an expatriot for the rest of his life, living alternately in Paris and London. He studied briefly in Paris at the Ecole Impériale, but was influenced more heavily by his own studies of the great masters and his contemporaries, including Henri Fantin-Latour, Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Courbet, and Edouard Manet.

Whistler's reputation as an etcher was firmly established with the 1858 publication of his group of "French Set" etchings. Shortly thereafter he settled in London and began work on his first major painting *At the Piano* (1859). His paintings, such as *Symphony in White No. 1 The White Girl*, (1862; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) and later portraits such as *Arrangement in Black and Grey No. 1: The Artist's Mother* (1871; Musée d'Orsay, Paris), won him international acclaim. His style was not easily defined although he was influenced by Realism and Impressionism and by Japanese art styles, which can be seen in his "Nocturne" landscapes, exhibited in 1877 at the Grovesnor Gallery in London, and influenced the development of his "butterfly signature" in the 1860s.

When art critic John Ruskin wrote a scathing review of the "Nocturnes" exhibition, Whistler sued for libel and won, although the resulting legal fees drove him into bankruptcy. He spent 14 months in Venice on a commission for the Fine Art Society and produced a succession of etchings and pastels that were subsequently exhibited in 1883 and helped to stabilize his financial situation.

In 1885 Whistler, famous for his witty and flamboyant personality, published his *Ten O'Clock Lecture* which espoused his belief in "art for arts sake," and asserted his refusal to ascribe narratives or morality to his art. Whistler's "Ten O'Clock" drew a response from Oscar Wilde and a public discourse between the two men followed in the London newspapers. It was later published in the pamphlet *Wilde v. Whistler: being an acrimonious correspondence on art between Oscar Wilde and James A. McNeill Whistler*.

In 1890 Whistler published *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, a collection of his best letters and witticisms. The book had originally been the idea of American journalist Sheridan Ford, to whom Whistler had advanced money which he then withdrew with the intent of completing the project alone. When Ford retaliated with a contraband edition of the book, Whistler pursued him through the courts and Ford was tried in Belgium in 1891.

Toward the end of his life Whistler focused increasingly on etching, drypoint and lithography, in addition to interior decoration such as the Peacock Room for Frederick Leyland's London residence begun in 1876. A happy marriage to Beatrix Godwin in 1888 ended in her death in May 1896. By the time of his death in London in 1903, Whistler was regarded as major artist of international renown.

Scope and Content Note

The collection measures 0.2 linear feet and provides scattered documentation of the career of American-born British-based painter and etcher James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) through 39 items from Whistler to various recipients, including 25 letters, 9 telegraphs, 3 invitations, one thank you card and a postcard. The collection also contains 4 letters from others, 7 catalogs of Whistler exhibitions, a note from the back of Whistler's painting *The Beach at Selsey Bill*, and a 1906 copy of *Wilde v. Whistler: being an acrimonious correspondence on art between Oscar Wilde and James A. McNeill Whistler*, a pamphlet containing letters originally published in London newspapers between 1885 and 1890.

The Whistler letters found here touch on some important events in Whistler's career. One letter to George Lucas, an American art dealer in Paris, discusses his plans to send *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* to the Paris Salon of 1863. Rejected by the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1862, the painting was also refused by the Paris Salon but shown ultimately in the landmark exhibition at the Salon des Refusés.

Also found are a circa 1879 letter to the eldest son of Robert E. Lee, General George Washington Custis Lee, with whom Whistler had been a cadet at West Point, recommending sculptor Joseph Boehm for an equestrian statue for memorializing Lee and expressing Whistler's veneration for the Confederate general; a circa 1880 letter from Whistler, written during his 14 months in Venice, to Katharine de Kay Bronson, who presided over the expatriate community there; 2 circa 1892-1893 letters documenting Whistler's determination to pursue Sheridan Ford through the courts in response to Ford's publication of a contraband version of Whistler's book *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*; and a circa 1897 letter to J. W. Beck, sent in response to Beck's request on behalf of the Royal Academy that he exhibit with the British contingent at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In the letter Whistler insults Sir Frederic Leighton, the Royal Academy's president, retaliating against previous slights including having his paintings hung well above eye-level, or "skied".

Although few, if any, records survive about the creation of The Company of the Butterfly, a syndicate established in 1897 for selling Whistler's work, the collection contains one letter from Christine Anderson, the secretary of the Company, to one of it's first clients, Herbert Charles Pollitt.

The collection also contains an 1883 invitation from Whistler to Dr. Swan Burnett and his wife, children's author Frances Hodgson Burnett, to view etchings and drypoints and a note written by Whistler and signed with the butterfly, taken from the back of the painting *Beach at Selsey Bill* (1865).

Seven catalogs dating from 1892-1910 and circa 1940 document Whistler exhibitions in London and the United States.

Seven of the Whistler items are signed with his butterfly signature and all letters sent after his wife's death in May 1896 are on mourning stationary.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged as 1 series:

- Series 1: James McNeill Whistler Collection, 1863-1906, circa 1940 (Box 1; 0.2 linear ft.)

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Art dealers -- France -- Paris
Etchers
Painting, American

Types of Materials:

Pamphlets
Postcards

Names:

Anderson, Christine
Beck, J. W.
Boehm, Joseph Edgar, Sir, 1834-1890
Bronson, Katharine de Kay, 1834-1901
Burnett, Frances Hodgson, 1849-1924
Burnett, Swan M. (Swan Moses), 1847-1906
Company of the Butterfly
Ford, Sheridan, d. 1922
Lee, George Washington Custis, 1832-1913
Lee, Robert E. (Robert Edward), 1807-1870
Leighton of Stretton, Frederic Leighton, Baron, 1830-1896
Lucas, George A., 1824-1909
Pollitt, Herbert Charles Jerome, 1871-1942
Royal Academy of Arts (Great Britain)
Salon (Exhibition : Paris, France)
Salon des refusés
Wilde, Oscar, 1854-1900
World's Columbian Exposition (1893 : Chicago, Ill.)

Occupations:

Painters

Container Listing

Series 1: James McNeill Whistler Collection, 1863-1906, circa 1940

0.2 Linear feet (Box 1)

Letters, invitations, telegraphs and cards from Whistler are arranged alphabetically by recipient, either in individual named folders or grouped by letter. These are followed by letters from others. The pamphlet *Wilde v. Whistler*, the note from *The Beach at Selsey Bill*, and exhibition catalogs can be found at the end of the series.

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Box 1, Folder 1 | From Whistler to Frederick H. Allen, circa 1892-1893 June 6
Image(s)
(reports that Sheridan Ford has left Paris for New York under an assumed name and is anxious that the "shocking scoundrel" not "slip through the very clever fingers of the New York Police.") |
| Box 1, Folder 2 | From Whistler to Correspondents, B, circa 1890s
Image(s)
(correspondents include Caroline Van H. Bean, Miss Bird, and W.H.J. Boot) |
| Box 1, Folder 3 | From Whistler to J. W. Beck, 1892 July 13
Image(s)
(handwritten copies of letter from and response to, J. W. Beck insulting the Royal Academy's president Sir. Frederick Leighton and stating his belief that "no previous desire on his part ever to deal with work of mine, has prepared me with the proper sort of acknowledgment. No! no Mr. Beck-"Once hung-twice Sky!") |
| Box 1, Folder 4 | From Whistler to C. B. Bigelow, 1891 Oct. 5
Image(s)
(mentions the advance he gave to Sheridan Ford that was never returned and refers to Ford's upcoming prosecution in Antwerp, Belgium) |
| Box 1, Folder 5 | From Whistler to Katharine de Kay Bronson, circa 1880, circa 1896
Image(s) |
| Box 1, Folder 6 | From Whistler to Dr. Swan Burnett and Mrs. Burnett (Frances Hodgson Burnett), 1883
Image(s) |
| Box 1, Folder 7 | From Whistler to Mr. Dubourg, circa 1890
Image(s) |
| Box 1, Folder 8 | From Whistler to Katherine Bayard Heyward, circa 1890
Image(s) |
| Box 1, Folder 9 | From Whistler to George Washington Custis Lee, circa 1879 |

- [Image\(s\)](#)
(draft of a letter recommending the sculptor Joseph Boehm for the commission of an equestrian statue of Lee's father Robert E. Lee. Whistler and G. W. Custis Lee had been cadets at West Point when Robert E. Lee had been the Academy's superintendent. Letter closes with "Let me recall myself to your recollection as an old West Point comrade who has never forgotten the high opinion all held of yourself and the veneration we had of your Father.")
- Box 1, Folder 10 From Whistler to George Lucas, 1863 Mar. 16
[Image\(s\)](#)
(states he is sending the "White Girl" to the Paris exhibition. "I have set my heart upon this succeeding, as it would be a crusher for the Royal Academy here..." He asks Lucas to meet the painting and deliver it)
- Box 1, Folder 11 From Whistler to W. Nicholson, circa 1890
[Image\(s\)](#)
- Box 1, Folder 12 From Whistler to Correspondents, P, circa 1890-1894
[Image\(s\)](#)
(includes letter to William Patten regarding being an agent for Whistler's paintings; see also letter from Voglein to Patten)
- Box 1, Folder 13 From Whistler to Herbert Charles Pollitt, 1896-1897
[Image\(s\)](#)
(includes card on mourning stationary postmarked 12 days after the death of his wife Beatrix, thanking Pollitt for "kind expressions")
- Box 1, Folder 14 From Whistler to Correspondents Illegible/Unidentified, circa 1880s-1902
[Image\(s\)](#)
(includes 1902 letter probably to rare prints dealer Frederick Keppel)
- Box 1, Folder 15 From Christine Anderson to Herbert Charles Pollitt, 1897 October
[Image\(s\)](#)
(October letter from secretary of the "The Company of the Butterfly" to one of it's first clients requesting that Pollitt send a check "for the baby you so brilliantly carried off...")
- Box 1, Folder 16 From W. Nicholson to Herbert Charles Pollitt, 1897
[Image\(s\)](#)
- Box 1, Folder 17 From Voglein to William Patten, 1890 Dec. 14
[Image\(s\)](#)
(letter asking Patten to be an agent for Whistler's paintings; see also related Whistler letter to Mr. Patten)
- Box 1, Folder 18 Note from *The Beach at Selsey Bill*, circa 1884

[Image\(s\)](#)

(Whistler note with butterfly signature found pasted on the back of "Beach at Selsey Bill" stating that the "rag of canvas" was "never meant to be signed"; also a printed note stating Whistler's request that "the public should be warned against the possible purchase of a picture in no way representative, and in its acutal condition absolutely worthless.")

- Box 1, Folder 19 *Wilde v. Whistler: Being an Acrimonious Correspondence on Art Between Oscar Wilde and James A. McNeill Whistler*, Pamphlet, 1906
[Image\(s\)](#)
- Box 1, Folder Exhibition Catalogs
- Box 1, Folder 20 *Nocturnes, marines & chevalet pieces: small collection kindly lent by their owners*, London, Goupil Gallery, 1892
[Image\(s\)](#)
- Box 1, Folder 21 *Etchings by James McNeill Whistler*, Boston, St. Botolph Club, 1894
[Image\(s\)](#)
- Box 1, Folder 22 *Etchings and Dry Points by Whistler Recently Acquired and Etchings and Lithographs by Whistler* (annotated), New York, H. Wunderlich & Co., 1905, 1907
[Image\(s\)](#)
- Box 1, Folder 23 *Etchings and Lithographs of James McNeill Whistler*, Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, 1907
[Image\(s\)](#)
- Box 1, Folder 24 *Whistler Exhibition*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1910
[Image\(s\)](#)
- Box 1, Folder 25 *At the Piano Painted by James McNeill Whistler*, New York, Scott & Fowles, circa 1940
[Image\(s\)](#)

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