

## Colby's 'Whistler and the World' is a gem

Pat Davidson Reef in *Sun Journal*, December 7, 2015

WATERVILLE -- Two major exhibits exploring the work of James McNeill Whistler and his historic period at the Colby College Museum of Art are a scholar's delight. Both exhibits are intellectual gems which make Whistler understandable to the general public and highlight his relevance to our times.

Black Lion Wharf, James Whistler, etching on paper, 1859

A teaching museum, Colby uses its exhibits to educate its students and to provide the public with information designed to increase its understanding of, and appreciation for the artists and artwork on display. For example, in a section of the first floor galleries is a one-hour PBS film, playing continuously, on the life of Whistler.

"Whistler and the World: the Lunder Collection of James McNeill Whistler," curated by Justin McCann, shows 57 works including: etchings, pastels, watercolors and oils selected from among 300 in Colby's Whistler Collection donated by Paula and Peter Lunder.

Whistler was born in Lowell, Mass., in 1834 and died in 1903. Although he was born in Lowell, he spent his childhood in Russia and became a world traveler, living in London, Paris, Venice, Amsterdam among other European countries.

In the magnificent catalogue created by McCann, the curator said "Whistler saw the potential of beauty everywhere. He turned his immediate surroundings; streets, rivers, canals and bridges into art, making the everyday exquisite and elegant."

Whistler was a romantic and saw beauty in nature, atmospheric suggestions, color harmonies and graceful accents of line which can be seen in his prints, watercolors and oils on view to the public on the first floor.

"Chelsea in Ice," an oil on canvas by Whistler (1864), greets the visitor as he walks into the gallery on the first floor. An almost abstract-mood painting, it sets the atmosphere of sensitive contemplation. Timeless in theme, it could be a contemporary work. Some critics of the period called Whistler a modern painter because he used suggested images and explored color combinations which were harmonious. His philosophy focused on capturing beauty.

Another oil painting in the exhibit titled "A White Note," created in 1862, is a realistic portrait of a woman standing, looking out at nature. Here, Whistler uses strong brush strokes in dashes going toward expressionism to define his figure. The woman's image is clear as in realism, but the trees in the background are simply suggested forms as in

impressionism. One can see Whistler's use of a mixture of styles in this work including realism, impressionism and expressionism.

Whistler was known for uniting many techniques and styles in his work. He explored oils and watercolors, as well as old forms of printmaking with the perfection. He was a great admirer of Rembrandt and many critics feel that he caused a revival of printmaking in England during the 1860s, '70s and '80s.

His many etchings in the exhibit focus on arches, doorways, corners, bridges and street scenes where he found beauty of form.

One of the most beautiful etchings in the exhibit is titled, "Bridge Amsterdam," an etching and drypoint created in 1889. Its cross-hatching in the foreground, use of perspective in the background and the reflection of water under the bridge make it a masterpiece.

Whistler was fascinated by subtle colors which conveyed harmony. White was a favorite color he used in his oils. His etchings are known for their detail of line, form and subtle shading. In another etching of the "Nocturne" series, we see a ship in the distance and a body of water in the foreground. His use of light, perspective and space creates a special atmosphere.

"Black Lion Wharf," an outstanding etching created in 1859, is a poignant work depicting everyday life in a harbor and reproduced on the title page of the catalogue. Its incredible focus on detail and use of perspective is amazing. Whistler captures three different levels in the work: a wharf in the foreground with a man in a boat and equipment found around the wharf, a body of water in the middle of the work, and using perspective, takes the viewer to the other side of the harbor and a fishing village in the background.

On the second floor is a companion exhibit titled "Aesthetic Harmonies: Whistler in context." This exhibit explores the visual language of Whistler and its impact on artists into the 21st century.

A selection of artists from the permanent collection was studied and selected by students during an art course which became a companion exhibit dealing with Whistler influences in the art world.

Associate Professor Art Tanya Sheehan guided a study of Whistler in context with six students during the fall of 2014. Outstanding works were pulled from the permanent collection, after research, focusing on works over the centuries using the same visual language as Whistler. This exhibit was curated by the students with Sheehan's guidance.

Exciting works from the permanent collection in this exhibit include: "Moonlight on the Narrows," by Edward Steichen, an oil on canvas created in 1905 with its magical atmosphere in varying shades of aqua; "Venice," a watercolor, gouache and pencil drawing by Maurice Prendergast, created in 1898 with muted harmonious tones of pastel colors; "Repose" an oil on canvas by Thomas Wilmer Dewing, created in 1921, which looks like a Whistler portrait (altogether ) in style; and "Veil,"oil on linen by Paul Winstanley, created in 2007, a totally abstract work that deals with a sensitive illusion of gray and white in muted tones which Whistler loved to explore in his own work with muted harmonious tones.

These works were done in another century, but are profound examples of art from different ages that speak the same visual language as Whistler explored. Whistler loved beauty, the night, harmony in colors, veiled illusions and printmaking.

This is an exhibit which merits many visits and a great deal of contemplative thought. It reveals that the Colby College Art Museum is an important art center for the study of James McNeill Whistler, and has some priceless, hidden treasures in its permanent collection.

The Whisler exhibit is up through Jan. 10.

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