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Elevating the Ordinary

Colby College Museum of Art exhibits the paintings and prints of the Lunder Collection of James McNeill Whistler

Through January 10

Colby College Museum of Art

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Colby College has an enrollment of about 1,850 students. It overlooks the city of Waterville, Maine, which has a population of less than 16,000 people. Founded in 1813, it wasn't until 1959 that its museum of art began. The museum took off running. Gifts of collections and additions to the building have made it a dynamic, world-class destination.

In 2013, the museum inaugurated the Alford-Lunder Family Pavilion, which features a three-story wall drawing by Sol LeWitt, exposed to the campus behind a wall of glass.

Peter and Paula Lunder had given the museum over 500 works of art in 2007, including an extraordinary collection of 300 drawings and etchings by James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903). The Lunders also gave a collection of oils, watercolors and pastels, as well as a collection of archival material relating to the artist.

Highlights of the collection are in the exhibition *Whistler and the World: The Lunder Collection of James McNeill Whistler*, running through January 10. Curated by Justin McCann, Lunder Fellow for Whistler Studies, the exhibition celebrates the “depth and richness of his achievement, and featuring 57 works in a range of media, *Whistler and the World* explores Whistler’s travels across Europe in his quest to elevate his everyday



James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), *Black Lion Wharf*, 1859.
Etching in black ink on cream laid paper, fourth (final) state, 7 x 10 in. Colby College Museum of Art. The Lunder Collection, 2013.323.



James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), *A White Note*, 1862.
Oil on canvas, 14½ x 12½ in. Colby College Museum of Art. The Lunder Collection, 2013.418.



James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Chelsea in Ice*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 17¾ x 24 in. Colby College Museum of Art. The Lunder Collection, 2013.293.



James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Nocturne*, 1879-80. Etching and drypoint in brown ink on ivory laid paper, 8¾ x 11¾ in. Colby College Museum of Art. The Lunder Collection, 2013.387.



James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Note in Opal—The Sands, Dieppe*, ca. 1885. Watercolor on paper, 8⅞ x 4⅞ in. Colby College Museum of Art. The Lunder Collection, 2013.298.

surroundings to the realm of art,” according to the museum.

Among the works is *Chelsea in Ice*, 1864. McCann recounts, “*Chelsea in Ice* exemplifies Whistler’s use of atmospheric conditions in his art. He found in a wintry fog and an icy river visual effects that he could explore in his painting. Whistler wasn’t interested in registering exactly how the river looked iced over as much as he was in capturing the feeling and mood of a deep freeze that penetrated the body. The painting symbolizes a transitional moment in Whistler’s painting practice as he moved away from realism toward aestheticism, epitomized in his famous *Nocturnes* associated with the same stretch of the Thames as *Chelsea in Ice*.”

An account of Whistler painting the frozen Thames is in a letter from his mother, known around the world from his painting *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1*, 1871, called colloquially, *Whistler’s Mother*. Anna Whistler lived with her son in London from 1864 to 1875. McCann recounts, “According to her letter, the winters in England were ‘penetrating’ and the wintry fogs were ‘gloomy.’ Whistler captures both sentiments in *Chelsea in Ice*.”

Whistler adopted the techniques of Asian artists, flattening the landscape. He avoided detail, believing painting should be more expressive of the artist’s feelings than the reality of a scene. He wrote, “Paint should not be applied thick. It should be like a breath on the surface of a pane of glass.”

He was also known for his acerbic wit and often alienated people. There is one story that a female fan once enthused,



James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Draped Figure, Reclining*, 1892. Transfer lithograph in gray, green, pink, yellow, blue and purple ink on cream Japanese laid paper, 11¼ x 17¼ in. Colby College Museum of Art. The Lunder Collection, 2013.502.

“I know of only two painters in the world, you and Velázquez.” Whistler is said to have replied, “Why drag in Velázquez?” His relationship with his contemporaries was often caustic. The renowned English painter Frederick Lord Leighton (1830-1896) once commented, “My dear Whistler, you leave your pictures in such a sketchy, unfinished state. Why don’t you ever finish them?” Whistler replied, “My dear Leighton, why do you ever begin yours?”

Whistler was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, and moved to Russia with his family at the age of 9 when his father was named to work on railroads for the czar. He had his first art lessons there and entered the Imperial Academy of Arts. After his father’s death, he enrolled at West Point. He ranked first in his art classes,

but because of his lackluster performance in other subjects, he was dismissed. He then worked briefly for the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, where he received training in etching. During his career, Whistler created 490 etchings. Some of the finest impressions are in the exhibition.

He looked toward the Thames in 1859 when he made *Black Lion Wharf*. His biographers Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell wrote, “Whistler once told us that he worked about three weeks on each of the Thames plates. He therefore must have spent on dated plates alone 36 weeks in 1861, leaving but 14 weeks for other work and for play... There is no doubt that the Thames plates, notably the *Black Lion Wharf*, have, for artistic rendering of inartistic subjects, and for perfect biting, never been approached by anybody.”

Whistler and the World explores the complex relationships he had with the world and with other artists. A catalog to the exhibition, edited by McCann, contains 24 essays that “explore how Whistler transferred his immediate surroundings into a ‘realm of art,’ while he, in turn, was shaped by the encounters he had traversing the global art worlds of the 19th century.” ■

James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), *Bridge, Amsterdam*, 1889. Etching and drypoint in dark brown ink on ivory laid paper, 6¾ x 9½ in. Colby College Museum of Art. The Lunder Collection, 032.2013.

