

The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler

Professor Nigel Thorp is Director of the Academy Research Project that has created an on-line edition of Whistler's correspondence. Here he gives an account of a source that is important not only for the artist himself, but also for the study of European and American art in the second half of the nineteenth century.

'Writing is not my forte.' – 'I am a deuced bad correspondent.' – 'I have given up writing altogether.' – 'You know how my not writing is only the result of my utter abhorrence of the pen.' – 'I am such a shocking correspondent! and if you only knew how much rather I would do anything than write you would perhaps understand this miserable scrawl I am guilty of now and forgive it.'

In his voluminous correspondence, the American-born painter and etcher James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) found many ways of claiming that he wrote letters only reluctantly, on account of the time that they took away from his work. He managed nonetheless to overcome this reluctance with remarkable energy. Scores of letters were dispatched to newspapers and art journals over forty years, taking issue with critics and other commentators. In personal circles, the stream of letters could become intense, with matters on one occasion becoming so heated that his elder brother George begged him to alter his ways:

'Nobody can indulge in the style of letter writing you permit yourself without

coming to grief [...] It is a very serious thing my dear Jim that you are afflicted with this mania – you will have to correct it to succeed in life.'

This followed Whistler's expulsion from the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1868 after a violent argument with a fellow member (indeed his brother-in-law), the surgeon and etcher Francis Seymour Haden, and a flood of letters that Whistler had written to put his side of the case. Not uncharacteristically, Whistler did not follow his brother's advice: he did nonetheless achieve outstanding success, though his brother, who died the following year, did not live to see it.

Whistler came to be one of the most influential artists in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. He was acknowledged as a master of etching at an early age, and his controversial position as a painter, as well as his own publications, kept him in the forefront of public attention throughout his career. His *White Girl*, for instance, was rejected by the Royal Academy in 1862 and also by the Paris Salon in 1863, though it went on to become one of the centrepieces of the Salon des Refusés later that year in Paris. His portrait of his mother, which is now perhaps his single best-known work, painted after she had left Civil War America to live with her

artist son in Chelsea, was only accepted by the Academy in 1872 after the portrait painter Sir William Boxall had threatened to resign. By



J.M. Whistler. *Whistler PH1/95, Carjat et Cie, Paris, c.1864*, Glasgow University Library.

Rec^d 21 Nov^r 1878

My Dear Rose - Another view of the case and a further note for ^{my} Parry - First I am known and always have been known to hold an independent position in Art and to have had the Academy opposed to me - That is my position and this would explain away the appearance of Academicians against me - and offering to paint my pictures in five minutes! and I fancy it would be a good thing for Parry to take the initiative and say that ~~the Whistler~~ this, - and prepare the Jury for all Academic Demonstration - Again I don't stand in the position of the popular picture maker with herds of admirers - my art is quite apart from the usual stuff furnished to the mass

and therefore I necessarily have not the large number of witnesses! - In defending me it would be bad policy to try and make me out a different person than the well known Whistler - besides I think more is to be gained by sticking to that character -

However here are one or two more men to be subpoenaed -
Richard Holmes - Queens Librarian - Windsor -
Reid . The print room - British Museum -
Charles Keen . 11. Queens Road West - (Chelmsford)
James Tissot . 17. Grove End Road. St. Johns Wood

Though I don't think that Whistler ought to have many more than Böcklin and Albert Moore -

What would you think of the Rev^d Haweis?
 you know he preached about the beauty of the Peacock Room - and I have his printed sermon - it is a perfect poem of praise - he could be subpoenaed to swear to what he had preached - - (Could you subpoena Ponce Deck? to swear that he thought the Peacock Room a great piece of art? -

Goodnight -
 J. M. W. Whistler

Another thing I have just heard - The other side is not at all so cock sure as they pretend to be! It's a game of bluff my Dear Rose - and we mustn't be bounced out!

1873 Whistler stopped submitting to the Academy altogether. His reputation was to be made, not by being part of an existing school or tradition, but by being, characteristically, himself. In 1878 he brought a celebrated lawsuit for libel against the critic John Ruskin in order to defend the artist's right to challenge adverse criticism. Ruskin had attacked Whistler for asking the outrageous sum of 200 guineas for a work that was completed in two days. Whistler's rejoinder, during the trial, was that the sum was asked not for the labour of those two days, but for the knowledge of a lifetime. (Ironically enough, Whistler seldom achieved the result he desired in his painting with only two or three sessions and could demand of his sitters to endure fifty, sixty and even a hundred sittings.)

Against the Victorian taste for abundant detail and moral narratives, Whistler stood for a simple and aesthetic approach to all matters of art and design, which extended beyond painting and graphic art to the design of interiors, furniture, books, inscriptions, and even items of daily use such as a parasol. Although he worked principally in England and France, he was awarded many international honours, and he had followers throughout Europe and North America. In a career of over fifty years, he produced some 3,000 works of art. After his death, his artistic and literary estate, with all his papers and correspondence, was presented by his family to the University of Glasgow, in recognition of the support that he had received from Glasgow in his career: the Corporation of Glasgow's purchase of his portrait of Thomas Carlyle was the first acquisition of any of his works for a public collection, and the University presented him with an honorary degree shortly before he died. Eighty paintings and a thousand other works forming the central collection of the Hunterian Art Gallery, together with his correspondence, books, photographs, furniture and other personal effects, have made Glasgow the centre for the study of Whistler and his circle.

MS Whistler R128, letter to James Anderson Rose, solicitor. This relates to preparations for Whistler's libel suit against John Ruskin, who accused Whistler of 'flinging a pot of paint in the public's face'.

The correspondence

Whistler's commitment to his art is one of the central themes of his extensive correspondence, which has now been edited on-line by the Centre for Whistler Studies. The correspondence constitutes a fascinating source of information, not only for the artist himself, but also for the study of European and American art in the second half of the nineteenth century. The letters record his contacts with fellow artists, dealers, collectors, literary figures, and a wide circle of acquaintance in Britain, France and America. In addition to documenting the development of his own art, they throw light on many of the central issues of art and art criticism of the day, including the Aesthetic movement in Britain and the development of Symbolism. No other artist of the period has left such an extensive record of his career.

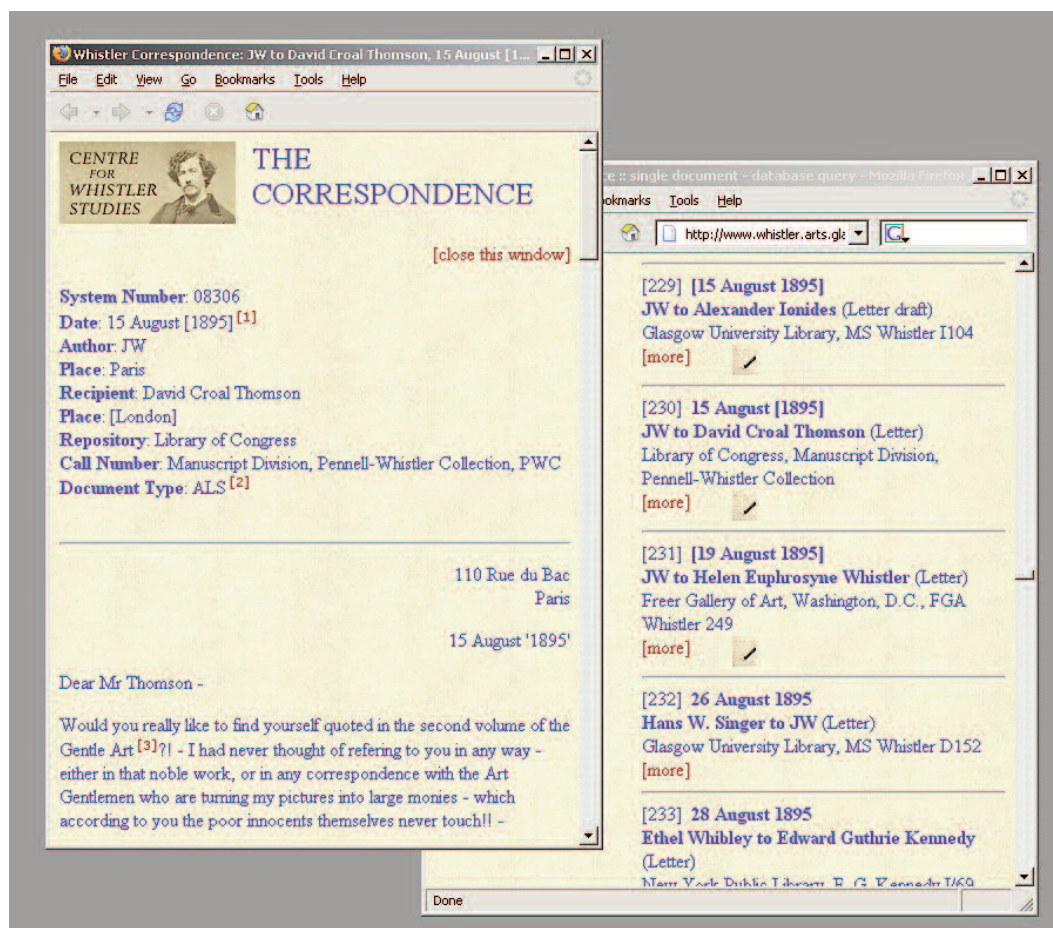
The challenge of editing the correspondence, which does so much to set his work in context, was taken up in 1991 when the Academy made the first of a series of grants to

the incipient Centre for Whistler Studies, and the project was adopted as an Academy Research Project. This initial funding allowed a survey to be made of letters surviving in over 2,000 public and private collections around the world, resulting in a list of some 12,000 original letters and copies. The University of Glasgow owns some 6,000 letters to and from the artist, and the other major groups of the correspondence in Washington, New York, Chicago, London and Paris had been consulted by the Glasgow researchers who had produced the catalogues raisonnés of Whistler's paintings, in 1980, and of his drawings, watercolours and pastels, in 1995. The survey, however, produced numbers of surprises, with the single largest unrecorded group of documents to emerge throwing new light on Whistler's six-month stay in Valparaíso in 1866. This episode, which has always puzzled his biographers, is now shown to be linked to the cause of Chilean resistance against Spanish forces then blockading sea lanes in the southern Pacific. Whistler's role was to escort a cargo of

'torpedos' (floating mines) to Valparaíso, and their arrival was a direct cause of the Spanish naval bombardment of the city in March that year: Whistler will perhaps have been reluctant to take credit publicly for provoking the attack. Other unrecorded letters have continued to emerge, and the overall total runs now to over 13,000 items.

The letters cover Whistler's techniques of painting, etching, and lithography, his choice of his titles, advice on composition, instructions for interior decoration, the role of the patron, the proper conduct of a dealer, views on exhibition and book design, and the right of the artist to decide when a work is complete. They show his intimate connections with leading artists and writers of the day, from Henri Fantin-Latour, Alphonse Legros, Gustave Courbet, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Swinburne in the 1860s and 1870s, to Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Stéphane Mallarmé, Robert de Montesquiou, Oscar Wilde, Henry James, Frederick Leighton and John Singer Sargent in the 1880s and 1890s. He pursues his own

artistic goals, but he also takes up the cause of progressive art on a national and an international level, as President of the Royal Society of British Artists and subsequently of the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers, which was responsible for introducing many foreign artists to Britain in its exhibitions. The general narrative is punctuated by a number of quarrels and not infrequent litigation, but the letters show his complete devotion to his art through his day-to-day preoccupations with individual works, his wrestling with technique, and his eagerness to experiment, as well as his response to the art world at large.



Screen shot from the on-line edition.

The edition

The development of electronic text-editing systems made it possible to consider publishing the letters on-line, and a major grant in 1996 saw the appointment of Dr Margaret MacDonald and Dr Patricia de Montfort to Institutional Fellowships awarded by the Humanities Research Board, then administered by the Academy. This secured a seven-year period for the letters to be transcribed and annotated; other awards in support of the work have been made by the Sloan Foundation, the Delaware Art

Museum, the Getty Grant Program, Cornwell Enterprises and private donors, as well as by the University of Glasgow.

The first period of the correspondence, covering 1855–1880, was launched on-line to coincide with the centenary of Whistler's death in 2003. The edition is now approaching completion. Overall, some 10,000 letters are included: all 5,500 letters written by Whistler between the beginning of his artistic career in 1855 and his death in 1903, some 3,000 letters written to him, and 1,500 letters written on his behalf or closely

connected with him, often as the result of legal proceedings. The edition also includes the correspondence of Whistler's mother, Anna McNeill Whistler, for 1855–1881, edited by Dr Georgia Toutziari. An editorial board of scholars in Britain and the United States, which includes a representative of the British Academy, has advised on general editorial matters.

Although the editors came to the project with IT skills limited to a knowledge of word processing and not much else, we settled fairly easily into the procedures required by



Nocturne: Blue and Silver – Chelsea by J.M. Whistler. By courtesy of Tate, London 2005.

SGML mark-up and the relational database system, with the sure guidance of our systems consultant Graeme Cannon. As part of the annotation process, letters are indexed for personal names, institutions, works of art and exhibitions, as well as other versions of the letter text. The relational tables and other databases supporting the letters database currently include over 6,000 personal names, 850 institutional names, 3,300 works of art, 300 exhibitions, a bibliography of 3,350 titles, and a chronology with 3,800 entries. The annotation incorporates links to text

entities which insert standard descriptions in all instances in which an entity is used. The text entities, which ensure uniformity of description and permit global updating of reference data, are used for biographical and bibliographical descriptions, exhibitions and individual works of art. Full-text searching is available for all letters as they are added to the electronic edition; initial subject indexing is carried out for each period of the correspondence as it is completed and will be supplemented when the texts of all the letters are available on-line.

Although the editorial work has had to concentrate on the textual content and chronology for the project to be completed within the funded timescale, the structure allows for the inclusion of reference images of works of art as these can be made available, as well as scans of photographs and original letters.

The address of the web site is
www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/

Whistler's views on art

Whistler doubted whether the public at large could be expected to share in the appreciation of what demanded long study and the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility. Nonetheless, he repeatedly set out his views on the general truths of art, in the hope that some, at least, could begin to understand them. 'Art,' he said, 'is the science of the beautiful': it is not concerned with narrative, or sentiment, but with the harmonious treatment of line, colour and form.

Moving away from the realist standpoint of his early career, Whistler came increasingly to emphasize the formal and decorative aspect of his work in all mediums. The Japanese preference for tonal harmonies, together with the flatness of Japanese perspective, became established among the underlying principles of his work. His search for atmosphere led to his night-time scenes, in particular those of the Thames, which he called Nocturnes. This term appealed to him on account of its musical overtones, and it underlined his view that it was not the business of painting to be concerned with narrative or historical detail. For Whistler, a painting should be appreciated on its own terms, as an arrangement of colours and lines and shapes. On occasion, he extended the idea of arrangement to include the frame as well, and subsequently also to the design of an entire exhibition.

His philosophy of art was set out in his *Ten O'Clock* lecture in 1885, one of what came to be a series of publications in which he expounded his views and challenged the competence of art critics who had no experience of painting. His views had considerable influence: his insistence, in particular, that art should be independent of all non-artistic concerns has led to his being seen as a precursor of the abstract art of the twentieth century. He accompanied his views with sharp attacks on the art of his time, as he sought to goad people into opening their minds as well as their eyes, to make them look *at* a picture, rather than *through* it. He attracted further public attention by his witticisms, his dandyish presence, his colourful activities and his repeated lawsuits, which were guaranteed regular attention in the press. No other artist conducted a personal campaign in this way. He presented himself as the 'gentle Master of all that is flippant and fine in Art', and the raillery bemused public and patrons alike. He came eventually to win widespread recognition for his art, as well as publicity for his views. In 1890 he published *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, in which he collected letters, reviews, legal argument, comment and exposition on his art that had appeared over the past decades.

Towards the end of his life Whistler instructed his dealers not to sell to English collectors, wanting his paintings instead to go to France, Scotland and America. The largest collection of Whistler's work in the United States was collected by Whistler's chief patron, the industrialist Charles Lang Freer, and is now in the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington. The Centre for Whistler Studies and the Freer Gallery of Art have co-operated in research on Whistler for many years and, with the landmark edition of his correspondence now being completed, there will be wonderful opportunities to approach not only Whistler's art but also that of many of his contemporaries with an absorbing view of their responses in their own words. This will contribute further towards a fuller understanding of Whistler's work and of his place in the artistic history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.