

The Peacock Room, 1876–1877

Born in Massachusetts, James McNeill Whistler went to Paris at the age of twenty-one with the ambition to become an artist. He established his professional life in London and never returned to his native land. Over the years, he became one of the most artistically progressive painters of the nineteenth century. As an expatriate, Whistler was not influenced by the American tendency to endow art with moral purpose. In fact, he went so far as to embrace the philosophy of aestheticism, or “art for art’s sake,” which recognizes beauty as the only justification for art.

During the 1870s, at the height of his career, Whistler was concerned with the presentation of works of art. He designed frames for his paintings and sometimes even orchestrated the exhibitions in which they were displayed. His desire for an aesthetic that embraced everything was finally realized in the dining room he decorated for the London residence of the British ship-owner, Frederick Richards Leyland, his principal patron. That decoration, now known as the Peacock Room, strengthened Whistler’s repu-

tation as an artist whose aesthetic flair went well beyond the boundaries of a picture frame.

To Whistler’s way of thinking, the dining room should complement the frame of one of his own paintings, *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, which held the place of honor above the mantelpiece. Whistler had painted it a dozen years earlier, when he was seized by a passion for blue-and-white Chinese porcelain. According to his mother, he considered the porcelain among “the finest specimens of art,” and *The Princess* was conceived to celebrate the beauty of the figures that adorned it. Leyland himself possessed a large collection of blue-and-white china, and his dining room had been designed for its display, with an elaborate latticework of shelving that provided a beautiful “frame” for each pot.

Yet, Whistler was unsatisfied with Leyland’s room of porcelain, and with his patron’s permission he began to make modest changes to the original decoration. Eventually, his creativity ran wild. He went so far as to paint over costly gilt-leather wall-hangings, creating an uninterrupted field of peacock blue above the shelving (which he gilded). By the time he had finished, every inch of the room was covered in his designs. Except for the greenish-blue walls, every surface shimmers with gold and copper leaf; even the places half-hidden by the shelving bear a rich, tapestry-like design to set off the gleaming surfaces of the porcelain. Whistler imagined the Peacock Room as a painting on a grand scale and in three dimensions, a work of art that could be entered through a door. The overall aesthetic effect—which can never be adequately conveyed in words or pictures—has been likened to the beauty of a Japanese lacquer box.

Although Whistler was famously disdainful of nature (its “song,” he complained, was almost always out of tune), he admitted that the natural world could sometimes serve as a source of decorative motifs and color schemes. For the Leyland dining room, he adopted the natural patterns and iridescent coloration of a peacock feather. But for the peacocks themselves, he found models in art, rather than nature. The magnificent, life-sized birds adorning the floor-to-ceiling shutters allude to the bird-and-flower prints of the Japanese artist Hiroshige; the pair of golden peacocks on the broad wall opposite *The Princess* are copied from the ornamental birds Whistler had seen adorning Japanese vases.

The mural has a story to tell. Halfway through the project, Whistler quarreled with Leyland over payment for the decoration. Eventually he settled for half the amount he had originally demanded in exchange for Leyland’s promise to stay away while he finished the room to his satisfaction. Although Leyland would seem to have had the better part of that bargain, Whistler ensured that posterity would remember the offending patron as a rich man who couldn’t bear to part with his pennies, even in exchange for an immortal masterpiece. The proud peacock on the right, faintly ridiculous with his ruffled feathers, represents Leyland, whose fondness for ruffled shirts Whistler suggested with the silver feathers on his neck. At his feet lie the coins he had so carelessly cut out of Whistler’s fee. The put-upon bird on the left, crowned with a single silver feather, represents the artist, with his signature shock of white hair. Titled “Art and Money,” the Peacock Room mural was meant as a cautionary tale with a moral at the end—that riches may be spent, but beauty endures.



11-B James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, 1876–1877 (two views). Oil paint and gold leaf on canvas, leather, and wood, room dimensions: height 13 ft. 11½ in., width 33 ft. 2 in., depth 19 ft. 9½ in. (425.8 x 1010.9 x 608.3 cm.). Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.61.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at all the areas of this room.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE E M S

Ask students to locate four gold peacocks in this room.
Two are on a shutter on the left and two are on the back wall.
 In addition to the images of the peacocks, why do people usually call this room “the Peacock Room”?
It is peacock blue, the color of peacock feathers.

E M S
 Have students write a list of adjectives to describe this room. Ask them to share their words with the class. Many may mention riches or wealth. Ask them what makes this room seem rich.
There is an extensive use of gold here, and gold is associated with riches.

M S
 What objects in this room might seem exotic or foreign to Western Europeans and Americans?
The peacocks are Asian birds. Blue and white Chinese ceramics fill the shelves. The woman in the painting above the fireplace stands on an Oriental rug, in front of an Asian screen, and wears a robe like a kimono.

E M S
 How did Whistler create harmony in this room or make it seem as if it all goes together?
He painted most of the room peacock blue and repeated metallic gold details throughout the room. Only the warm pink tones of the painting contrast with the blues and greens.

E M S
 Where do repeated shapes in this room form patterns?
They occur in the ceiling, along the back wall, and around the fireplace.

E M S
 Describe how Whistler made his painting of the woman an important part of the room’s overall design.
The painting is centered over the fireplace and surrounded by gold shelves and panels that match its gold frame.

INTERPRET E M S

Imagine people in this room when it was first designed. How would they dress?
In the 1870s, women wore long, elaborately constructed dresses and men, cravats or bow ties, fitted jackets, and long trousers.
 What might they do in a room like this?
The room was originally a dining room. Students may imagine parties or groups of wealthy people dining and admiring the room and its collection of ceramics.

S
 How does this room embody Whistler’s philosophy of “art for art’s sake”?
The owner intended it to be a dining room and a place to display a collection of fine East Asian porcelain, but after Whistler painted it, the room draws more attention to itself as a work of art. It contains no moral message, but there is symbolism in the design of the peacock fight, which refers to a dispute between Whistler and the room’s owner.

CONNECTIONS Historical Connections:
 British/European imperialism; Imperial Japan; Spanish-American War

Historical Figures: Theodore Roosevelt; Commodore Matthew Perry
 Geography: U.S. territories

Arts: Impressionism; Japanese prints; “art for art’s sake”; influence of John Singer Sargent and William Merritt Chase