

This Day in History... July 10, 1834

Happy Birthday James A. Whistler

James Abbott McNeill Whistler was born on July 10, 1834, in Lowell, Massachusetts.

Whistler's family briefly moved to Stonington, Connecticut, and later Springfield, Massachusetts, where his father found success as chief engineer for the Boston and Albany Railroad. Soon, word of his father's engineering ingenuity spread all the way to Russia. In 1842, Tsar Nicholas I offered Whistler's father a position engineering a railroad from St. Petersburg to Moscow.

As a child, Whistler often displayed a poor temper and lack of focus, but his parents discovered that drawing helped him to focus and calm down. Realizing his budding talent, Whistler's parents sent him to private art lessons and the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, where he earned top marks in anatomy. The Whistler family then spent some time in London, but following his father's death, had to return to Connecticut.

While Whistler dreamed of becoming an artist, his mother sent him to school to become a minister. Realizing that would not suit him, Whistler applied to West Point. In his three years there Whistler earned poor grades and was known to defy authority and spout sarcastic quips. He was eventually dismissed.

Whistler was more resolved than ever to embark on an art career. With help from a wealthy friend he established a studio in Baltimore where he made important contacts before moving to Paris in 1855. He'd never return to America.

In Paris, Whistler studied at the Ecole Impériale. He sold few originals at first, but managed to make money by selling copies of paintings at the Louvre. In 1858, Whistler's fortunes began to change as he met more artists that helped inspire him and mold his art theories. That year he exhibited his first work *La Mere Gerard* and moved to London the following year. In 1861 Whistler painted his first famous work, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, which raised both criticism and praise. People argued fiercely over the painting's meaning, though Whistler saw it more as an arrangement of colors in harmony than a literal story.

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In 1866 Whistler traveled to Chile, where he did his first nocturnal paintings. When he returned to London he continued to paint these night scenes for another 10 years. In the 1870s, he began to rename many of his earlier paintings with musical terms such as nocturne, symphony, harmony, study, and arrangement, emphasizing the tonal qualities and playing down the narratives.

Whistler painted his most famous work in 1871, *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1*, better known as *Whistler's Mother*. According to his mother, a model failed to show up for a session, so he asked her to stand in. When standing proved too tiring, she sat in the now famous pose for dozens of separate sittings. At the time, the painting wasn't well received. Most paintings at the time were more flamboyant and most criticized it as too simple and a failed experiment. It was initially rejected by the Royal Academy, which only accepted it after extensive lobbying, and hung it in an unfavorable location. While many criticized it, others saw it as a "perfect symbol of motherhood" that displayed "the dignified feeling of old ladyhood." Whistler would display the painting in several exhibits throughout his life and even authorized reproductions that led to its extensive fame.

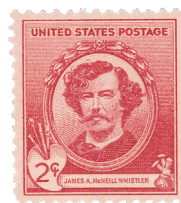
Whistler held his first solo show in 1874 after he grew tired of continued poor placement of his paintings at the Royal Academy. His show was noted for his decoration of the hall. As one reviewer noted, "The visitor is struck, on entering the gallery, with a curious sense of harmony and fitness pervading it, and is more interested, perhaps, in the general effect than in any one work."

In 1876 and 77, Whistler painted *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, a masterpiece in decorative mural art. He lost himself in the unending joy of harmonizing a room around Frederick Leyland's collection of Chinese artifacts.

By the late 1870s, Whistler's popularity was declining and his finances were suffering. He moved to Venice and experienced a productive boom, creating over 50 etchings, 100 pastels, and other works in about 14 months. Whistler also influenced American artists in Venice that brought his teachings back to the US. A younger generation of British and American artists idolized him and called themselves "pupils of Whistler."

Whistler published his first book, *Ten O'clock Lecture* in 1885, which shared his belief that art was for art's sake and that an artist's responsibility was to himself and not society. He was then elected president of the Society of British Artists. In that role he presented Queen Victoria with an album containing his own writing and illustrations that she called "beautiful and artistic illumination."

In the coming years Whistler experimented with color photography and lithography. His career reached its peak in 1890s, just as his wife was diagnosed with cancer. He continued to draw and paint from her hospital room and after her death. Whistler's health declined in the coming years, resulting in his death on July 17, 1903.



From the Famous Americans series



Flat Plate printing of the Mother's Day issue



Imperforate no-gum version of the Mother's Day issue

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