REMATRI-
ATING

JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER

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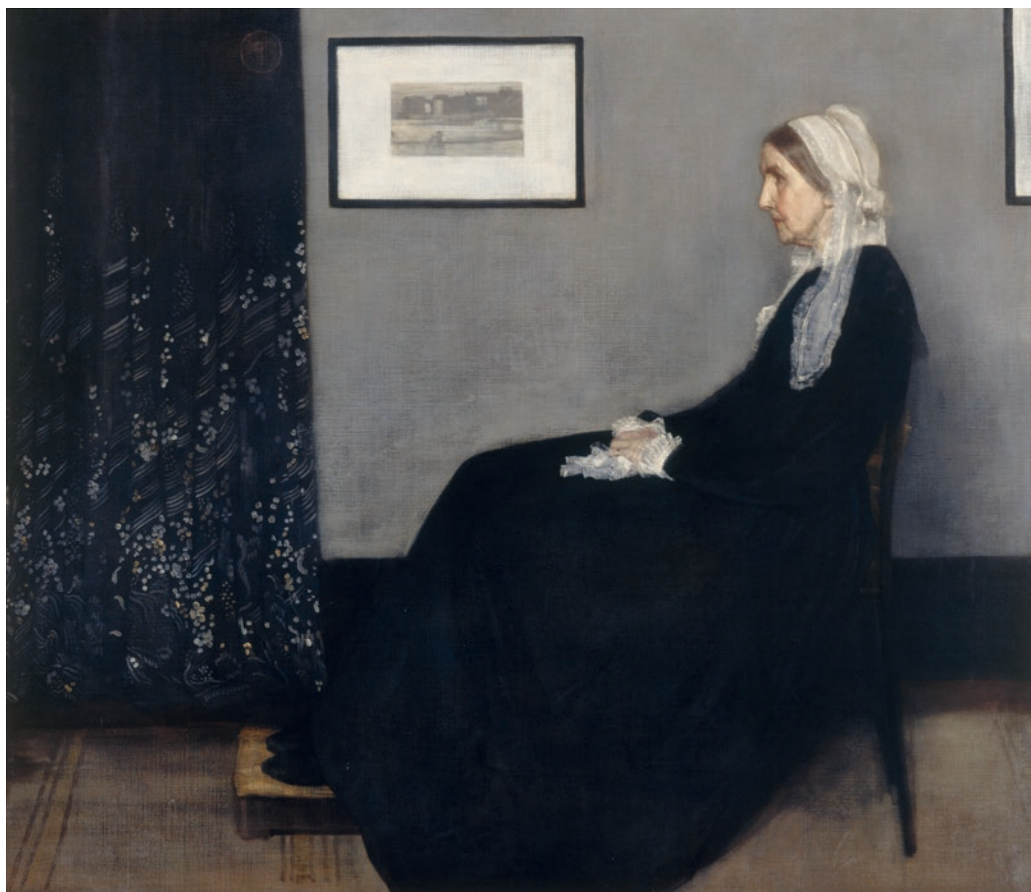
Rematriating James McNeill Whistler: *The Circulation of* Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother

Late in the month of October 1871, Maggie, a model for James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), fell ill and told the artist she could not sit for the portrait he intended to make of her. The weather being too bad for him to continue working outdoors on the Thames landscapes project he had recently started, Whistler, who was then living in Chelsea with his mother, asked her to pose for him.[1] Anna McNeill Whistler (1804–1881) later recounted the experience in a letter to her sister: "I so interested stood as a statue! but realized it to be too great an effort so my dear patient Artist (for he is greatly patient as he is never wearying in his perseverance) concluding to paint me sitting perfectly at my ease, but I must introduce the lesson experience taught us, that disappointments are often the Lord's means of blessing, if the youthful Maggie had not failed Jemie . . . he would have had no time for my Portrait."[2] Here, while she appeared aware of the way anecdotal circumstances shaped the painting, Anna McNeill Whistler also expressed confidence in its artistic value. The exceptional destiny of the painting proved her right: *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1871) (fig. 1) came to be, to quote a recent review, "one of the world's best-known masterpieces," one audiences are so familiar

Walter Greaves, *Whistler and His Mother* (detail, see fig. 2).



1
James McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother*, 1871. Oil on canvas, 56¼× 63⅞ in. (144.3 × 162.5 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris, RF699.

with they could "probably draw it, from memory, at least its outlines, and which way the artist's mother faces in her chair and the square of the painting on the wall."[3] Many Americans would indeed instantly identify the portrait's spare composition and the unusual position of the old woman seated in profile, looking away from the viewer, her feet resting on a footstool.

The work was already so well known in 1917 that Walter Greaves (1846–1930), who had been a student and friend of Whistler's, felt compelled to celebrate its creation in a painting he entitled *Whistler and His Mother* (fig. 2). Greaves's canvas works almost as a mise en abyme of Whistler's portrait. Greaves imitated the sober tonalities of Whistler's painting, barely altered the flatness of the sitter's figure, and simply enlarged the scope of the scene, taking a step back from the first vision, in a move that parallels that of the artist pausing to consider his arrangement of elements. Early twentieth-century viewers would

have been familiar enough with Whistler's work to recognize Greaves's few additions—the profile of the painter, mirroring that of his mother, the accumulation of frames on the wall, and the delicate flowers in their Japanese vases—as so many allusions to Whistler saturating the canvas's meaning. They could also mentally cut out the original canvas from the larger composition, encouraged to do so by Whistler's own gesture, tracing an imaginary frame around his sitter with the tip of his maulstick. Greaves's homage to Whistler's work stood as a sort of pictorial making-of, referring simultaneously to the finished form of the painting and to its genesis.

But if Greaves's tribute to Whistler acted as a narrative reiteration, it also operated a significant shift. In *Whistler and His Mother*, Greaves reintroduced not only the figure of the painter but also that of his actual mother, insisting on the relationship that united them. In his reinterpretation of Whistler's painting, Greaves put the emphasis on the personal dimension of the portrait, giving the biographical content of the work at least as much weight as its original formal qualities. The comparison between *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother* and *Whistler and His Mother* raises a number of questions that are still relevant to the celebrity of Whistler's work today. What happened in the few decades that separated the creation of these two works resulted in the change of perspective visible in Greaves's

2
Walter Greaves, *Whistler and His Mother*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 24 ¾ × 29 ¾ in. (62.9 × 75.6 cm). Harvard Art Museums/ Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stuart P. Feld, 1975.75.

work, a transformation that to some extent affected the way *Arrangement in Grey and Black* was circulated and received, and even shaped later understandings of the portrait.

Only decades after its creation, then, *Arrangement in Grey and Black* had already become what Whistler scholar Margaret MacDonald calls "an American icon." MacDonald states that today "it is an image as familiar as Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* and Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, joining Michelangelo's *David*, Botticelli's *Flora*, Munch's *Scream*, as cultural commodities familiar throughout the Western world."[4] Indeed, the painting still has a significant presence in contemporary popular culture. One of the remarkable paradoxes in the painting's trajectory is the very popularity of "Whistler's Mother," given the artist's outspoken execration of popular taste and culture. Whistler, who feared nothing more than seeing "the gentle circle of Art swarm[ed] with the intoxicated mob of mediocrity,"[5] distanced himself ostensibly from the masses. The artist loved to be hated, and liked to quote his friend Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), who once said that "popularity is the only insult that has not yet been offered to Mr. Whistler."[6] But while throughout his life Whistler tried, through elitist attitudes and sophisticated aesthetics, to set himself apart from the crowds of "Philistines," his portrait of his mother has suffered the fate of all the extremely famous works of art MacDonald cites. Like them, it has undergone many reuses in popular culture, ranging from homage to parody.

In a strange conflation of the "high" and "low," Whistler's Mother can now be found on a hoard of everyday objects such as mouse pads, coffee mugs, key chains, umbrellas, ties, T-shirts, and hats, artifacts that surely would have caused the dismay of the artist had he had the chance to encounter them. In the age of digital images and Internet spoofs, Whistler's portrait of his mother, perhaps precisely because it represents a severe-looking old woman in a stark composition, has offered a fertile terrain for parodists and satirists. Internet users have introduced cats, dogs, televisions sets, laptops, music instruments, and laser swords into the old woman's room, adapted her dress to contemporary styles, and reemployed the portrait to convey sarcastic comments on popular culture or on political events—for example, deriding Angelina Jolie's dress at the Academy Awards in 2012, and commenting on the "pepper spray incident" during student protests at UC Davis in 2011. Whistler's mother's face has been replaced by that of other major characters of popular culture such as Minnie Mouse and Marge Simpson, and was completely erased and redrawn by the comically awkward Rowan Atkinson in the 1997 movie *Bean*.

3
Eisen Bernardo,
The View of Whistler's Mother,
2014. Digital image.

More than a famous artwork, Whistler's portrait of his mother has turned into an icon of old age in women: one of the latest examples of these parodies, part of the *Mag+Art* project by Eisen Bernardo (b. 1985) (fig. 3), superposes the face of Barbara Walters, the eighty-five-year-old American television personality, onto Anna McNeill Whistler's body. This rearrangement of the portrait attests at once to the painting's value in the public eye as a remarkable work of art and to its main character's status as one of the most famous figurations of mature women in American culture. Similarly, MacDonald acknowledged Anna McNeill Whistler's significance in the American imagination by publishing her cookbook, explicitly presenting her as a model of domesticity.[7] Despite its appearance of extreme rigidity, *Arrangement in Grey and Black* actually proved particularly plastic: the image of Whistler's mother has become, symbolically, that of every American mother.

Yet this diffusion, and the recycling and reinterpretation it implies in every instance, demonstrates the wide gap between the artwork and its circulated image. The metamorphosis of *Arrangement in Grey and Black* into one of the most celebrated images of popular culture has relied on dynamics that ran counter to Whistler's proclaimed aesthetic

beliefs. This essay confronts the artist's intentionality, and the work's autonomy, with its context and reception—issues particularly relevant here, given both Whistler's artistic convictions and the work's remarkable career. The essay explores the construction of the painting as an American icon through time, underlining the contradictions involved in this canonization. First, as Jonathan Weinberg has noted, writing for an American audience, "It is bizarre that a work that was painted in England, by an artist who spent most of his mature life in Europe, and that was purchased by the French government should figure so large in our consciousness."[8] And beyond the issue of the painting's national identification, the process of popularization itself appears problematic: What, in the history of the painting's reception, allowed it to become such a symbol, and one that strayed so far from Whistler's own convictions? Paradoxically, although it has been evaluated one of the best-known works of American art, *Arrangement in Grey and Black*'s reception stems from displacement, both literal and figurative. Reactions to the painting cannot be understood, for instance, outside the complex network of influences and competition between American and European artistic identities, which Whistler navigated with a skillful ambivalence. While the artist showed, on occasion, some reluctance to share it beyond his private circle, the painting moved into the very public domain of national icons only decades after its creation. And whereas it was intended to remain in the high spheres of culture, its innumerable reiterations in popular culture made it the perfect emblem of kitsch. *Arrangement in Grey and Black* exemplifies many aspects of circulation, as it has moved with an extreme flexibility across time and geographic borders, but also sociocultural categories and medias, acquiring new meanings through these multiple transfers.

The definition of the painting as an "American" icon is, first, quite surprising, given the cosmopolitan character of Whistler's life and career. The artist left the United States at age twenty-one, spending the rest of his life in London, Venice, and Paris. Although he talked about visiting his native country, he never returned there. The European dimension of Whistler's career is reflected in the painting's own history, starting with its creation in England. On the wall behind the elderly woman, Whistler included a copy of *Black Lion Wharf*, a view of the banks of the Thames he created in 1859. The etching, published the same year Whistler painted the portrait of his mother in a series he entitled *The Thames Set*,[9] situates this interior scene within the larger environment of late nineteenth-century London. For decades, the painting's home was indeed definitely on the European side of

the Atlantic, and although Whistler sent the portrait to his native country for an extended time in the hope that he would be able to sell it, he never managed to do so. In 1881, the artist showed *Arrangement in Grey and Black* at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and exhibited it a few months later in New York. The artist's biographer Jerome Eddy (1859–1920) reported, "It is said on good authority that the painting was offered for sale in New York for twelve hundred dollars but found no buyer."[10] The painting went back to England, where Whistler, then in debt, had to leave it with one of his creditors.[11] Eventually in 1891, twenty years after its creation, a group of friends and supporters of the artist's in Paris lobbied to have the French government acquire the work.[12] The painting went to the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris, then to the Musée d'Orsay. After his death, Whistler's biographer Sadakichi Hartmann (1867–1944) clearly identified Whistler and his work as European: "It was France who gave him that final great recognition of his genius when it purchased 'The Artist's Mother' portrait for the Luxembourg, and made him an officer of the Legion of Honor. In England, on the other hand, he fought the great battles of his life for social as well as artistic recognition. In England he married, and was for many years one of the most conspicuous characters of London art and social life." Hartmann continued: "America really did nothing for him, and he did nothing for America."[13]

Until the 1890s, Whistler had mostly been regarded with distrust by his compatriots. The artist had an exceptional presence in the public sphere, and was, as Sarah Burns has demonstrated, one of the first artists to expertly craft the construction of his persona by actively engaging with the press. Long before the portrait of his mother became a popular icon, Whistler already marketed his own image: "Whistler attracted and held the spotlight of celebrity just when celebrity—a public, consumable image—was in the process of becoming a cultural commodity in America's emergent consumer economy."[14] Burns has shown how Whistler's reception in the American press, hostile reviews included, was eventually crucial in his radical transformation from "old maverick" to "Old Master." In Burns's view, while critics stereotypically resorted to a rhetoric dissociating Whistler's turbulent personality from his appeasing *Nocturnes* and *Harmonies*, the discrepancy between these two apparent extremes was bridged in a discourse recasting the artist as a high-strung genius unable to fit in a vulgar and materialistic society. Burns's argument, although it does not consider *Arrangement in Grey and Black* in detail, is in part relevant to the

reception of the painting. Whistler's portrait of his mother acted as the pivot of the dialectical dynamics that transformed the artist into a canonical American painter. Its exceptional destiny, combined with its attractive subject matter, opened it to its reinterpretation as the work of a misunderstood genius—and, ironically, to a type of reading Whistler had always vigorously resisted.

Before the painting was acquired by the French government, Whistler's reputation in the United States amounted to little more than a succès de scandale. The painter was more easily perceived as a Bohemian womanizer, an eccentric provocateur, a "buffoon,"[15] and a "mountebank"[16] than as a respectable artist. This perception grew out of his particularly pugnacious attitude with his critics, starting in 1877 with the infamous *Whistler vs. Ruskin* trial: after John Ruskin (1819–1900) had severely reviewed Whistler's quasi-abstract *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (1874) and accused him of being an impostor flying a "pot of paint in the face of the public," Whistler took him to court, turning the dispute into a show.[17] The lawsuit raised an enormous interest at the time, with the press and public following with enthusiasm the exchange of repartees between this young and extravagant expatriate and the lawyers of the much-respected Ruskin he had dared to challenge. Whistler repeatedly resorted to these conflicts to attract attention, publishing sarcastic accounts of his various court litigations as well as mordant remarks on the critiques his works and ideas received in books, articles, and lectures, among which the most prominent remain *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1890) and *Ten O'Clock*, a lecture he delivered in 1885 and first published in 1888. These reveal a strong personality, showing at once how wary Whistler was of what he saw as misreadings of his work and how much he enjoyed playing the provocateur.

To his compatriots, this skillful yet aggressive manipulation of celebrity made him, at best, a fascinating source of amusing anecdotes. *McClure's Magazine*, for instance, published a five-page article on the artist entitled "Whistler, Painter and Comedian," which practically never discussed his art, focusing instead on his queer appearance and ferocious humor.[18] However delighted they were to read about Whistler's whims and quips, most Americans did not recognize him as one of their own. *The Collector* thus published a letter from a San Francisco woman claiming to be the artist's cousin, narrating her visit

to her parent in London: "I stayed with my cousin, James Whistler, the artist, when I was in London last summer . . . and I must say that he is a most curious individual. . . . His house at Chelsea is called 'the White House,' and is painted in the most abominable colors. It is really an eyesore, but Cousin James thinks it is very artistic. You would never imagine that he was an American. He and his brothers are all thorough Johnnie Bulls."[19]

According to Whistler biographer Jerome Eddy, the artist resented bitterly his fellow countrymen's attitude, allegedly complaining that "the papers in America seem content to publish second-hand whatever they find about me in English journals that is mean and vindictive or that savors of ridicule." Whistler reproached Americans for their lack of solidarity with their compatriot, alleging that the American press "leans to the side of the bully" and badly chooses its allies in an international war on artistic taste:

> *One would think the American people would back a countryman—right or wrong—who is fighting against odds; but for thirty years they laughed when the English laughed, sneered when they sneered, scoffed when they scoffed, lied when they lied, until,—well, until it has been necessary to reduce both nations to submission. . . .*
>
> *But when France—in all things discerning—proclaimed the truth, America—still blind—hastened to shout that she, too, saw the light, and poured forth adulation ad nauseam.*[20]

Indeed, after *Arrangement in Grey and Black* was purchased by the French government, Whistler's reputation in America changed dramatically. In the eyes of the American public, this success in the artist's career almost acted as an antidote to the Ruskin trial. The prestige of the institutions made up for the eccentricities of the painter: the portrait entered the national collection of living artists in the Musée du Luxembourg and was sure to join the Louvre's collections after his death. Whistler himself was aware of the advantageous publicity this would offer him. The sale to the French government had quickly followed the acquisition of *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 2: Portrait of Thomas Carlyle* (1872–1873) by the National Gallery of Scotland, and Whistler, with more self-confidence than ever, explained to one of his patrons that he preferred not to see too many of his works go into private hands: "When a picture is purchased by the Louvre or

the National Gallery, all can come and see it on the walls but when a painting is bought by a private gentleman, it is, so to speak, withdrawn from circulation, and for public fame is missing from the story of the painter's reputation."[21] In 1892, the French government added to Whistler's triumph by making him an officer of the Legion of Honor.

Such honors bestowed on an American artist immediately awoke interest in the United States. The diffidence Whistler had inspired in the 1870s in the press gave way to praise, with journalists taking an immense pleasure in detailing the marks of distinction conferred on the artist:

> *[The Luxembourg] is admittedly the ante-chamber of the Louvre. It contains the flower and ripe fruit of French art of the period; the gems of the Salons for many years past.*
>
> *It is into this select and admirable company that Mr. Whistler has been admitted—nay, invited, since the proposal came direct and unsolicited from the government. The highest honor that can be conferred on any artist by that government has been conferred upon him.*[22]

In this slightly exaggerated account (the journalist obviously omitted the lobbying that preceded the "invitation" of the French government), Whistler was reclaimed as an American: "He is our countryman, and though art may not have a country, artists have. Mr. Whistler, I am certain, would claim no favour because he is an American. But are we Americans to be silent when a great distinction is bestowed upon an American artist?"[23]

The thorny question of Whistler's nationality gave way to awkward discussions where Americans were chastised for their indifference to the artist and at the same time authors saw his triumph in France as a vindication over the English. One journalist accused his fellow Americans of having treated Whistler "with even more ignorance and coldness than England; this, of course, coming from the desire of the Anglomaniac to out-English the English."[24] Whistler's own opportunistic exploitation of this triangular competition complicated the situation, as he chose to exhibit alternately in British and American sections of international exhibitions,[25] and derided the English as "Pecksniffs and Podsnaps"[26] as soon as *Arrangement in Grey and Black* was acquired by France.

Yet increasingly, reviewers tried to reassert Whistler as "an American of Americans."[27] In 1892, the *New York Daily Tribune*

detailed the debates around a commission for a painting by Whistler that would "beat the Luxembourg affair" and be displayed at the World's Columbian Exposition the following year.[28] The journalist admitted that some regarded Whistler as a "bizarre Austrian or French master," but insisted it was a good idea to bring back "erratic Jimmy" in the city where his own grandfather was born. Commentators strove to reconcile Whistler's lifelong exile with his American identity: "Despite his long residence abroad, in person and speech Whistler was a typical American. . . . No one who knew him failed to perceive that he was always a lover of his native country," asserted one journalist after the artist's death.[29] Whistler's friend and biographer Joseph Pennell (1857–1926) even went further, making his exile the very proof of his attachment to America: "It is rare in America to find so patriotic an American as James McNeill Whistler, and the mere fact that he lived his own life in his own way as an American in the heart of England proved that he had a courage and determination far beyond the conception of detractors."[30] Many writers, like Pennell, shifted the focus on Whistler's nationality to make it an intimate matter, and at the same time affirmed that this interiorized national identification was a superior kind of Americanness, calling Whistler "the most intensely American of Americans."[31]

Whistler thus emerged as a member of the American pantheon: after his death in 1903, a monumental "Whistler memorial" exhibition was organized in Boston, accompanied by dozens of biographies of the artist, which celebrated him as a national hero. In 1912, Ezra Pound placed the first issue of his *Poetry* magazine under the tutelage of the painter, with a dedicative poem entitled "To Whistler, American," where he put the painter on an equal footing with Abraham Lincoln himself.[32]

The painting that won Whistler such popularity—*Arrangement in Grey and Black*—became an object of national worship, acclaimed by journalists as "the most unquestioned and unquestionable master-pieces of the last half of the nineteenth century."[33] As early as 1913, its influence among the younger generation of American artists was such that Sadakichi Hartmann wrote: "No modern painting has been more talked about and more frequently imitated than this one."[34] Whistler's imitators self-consciously copied the composition of the painting and its characteristic dark tones, simultaneously exhibiting their admiration for Whistler and their ambition to emulate him in his international success. Among these imitations, one can think of, for instance, *Les derniers jours d'enfance* (1883–1885) (fig. 4) by Cecilia

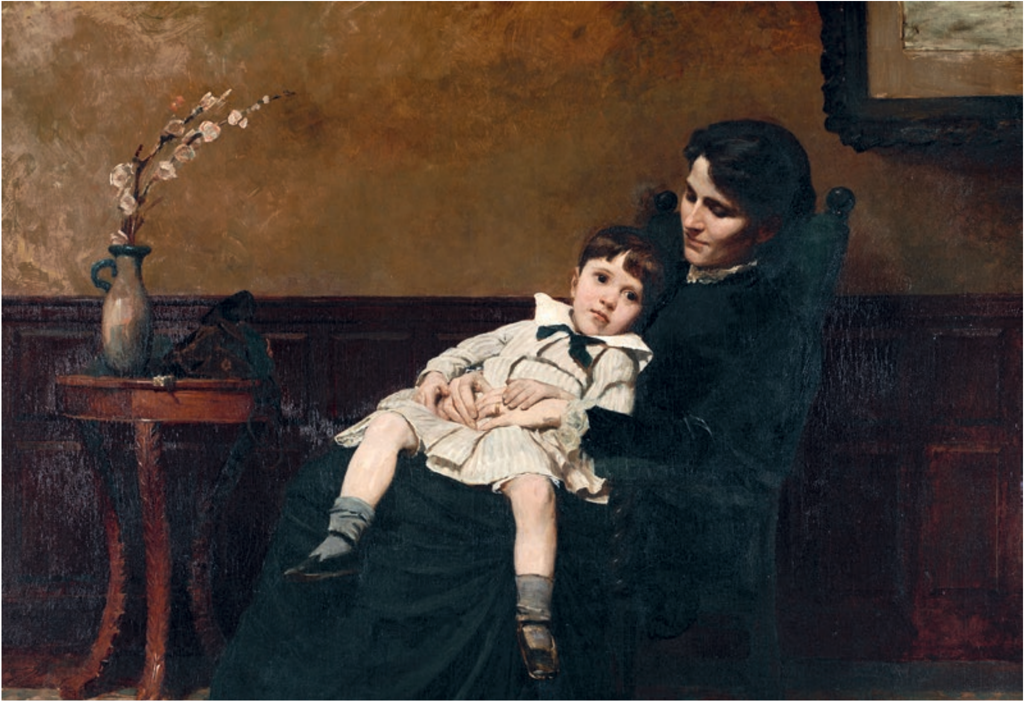
Beaux (1855–1942) and *Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1897) (fig. 5) by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937).[35] Tanner, an African American expatriate painter who lived most of his life in Paris, saw, like Whistler, one of his own works, *The Raising of Lazarus* (1896), bought by the French government in 1897.[36] For Tanner, painting the portrait of his own mother in the style of Whistler was a way to align himself with his predecessor, to inscribe himself and his art in a Franco-American success story, and perhaps also to show that his own mother, who had been born a slave, could be portrayed with the same dignity as the genteel Anna McNeill Whistler.[37]

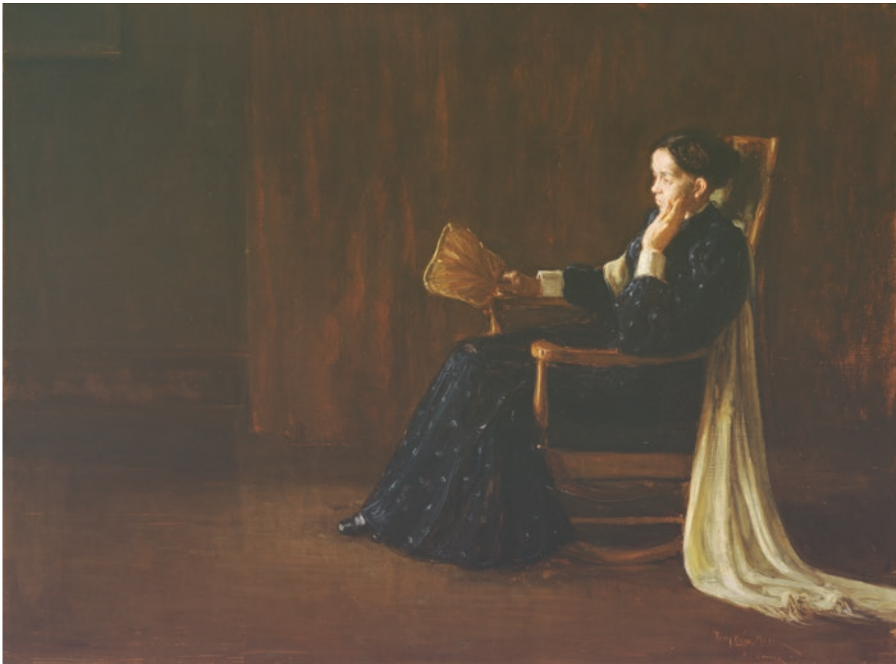
4
Cecilia Beaux, *Les derniers jours d'enfance*, 1883–1885. Oil on canvas, 45¾ × 54 in. (116.205 × 137.16 cm). Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Cecilia Drinker Stantonstall, 1989.21.

Outside artistic circles, too, the painting seems to have functioned as a national icon very soon after its purchase. Whistler's portrait of his mother was among the pictures that were most often reproduced in the press, and as early as the 1900s, one can find evidence of its familiarity in popular culture. Although the rather dark picture did not always translate well on the printed page, Whistler's Mother regularly appeared in magazine illustrations, typically on Mother's Day, when readers were encouraged to buy reproductions of the painting as gifts for their own mothers.[38] Before 1920, the portrait was so popular that the J. Walter Thompson advertising company published it as an example of the "universal emotional appeal" of images in advertisement. The sentimental attachment to Whistler's Mother served business but also national goals, as it later fueled the patriotic rhetoric of World War I posters.

The popularity of the work increased even more when the director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Alfred Barr organized a tour for the painting across the country from 1932 to 1934. After a few months as one of the key pieces in an exhibition of American art at MoMA, the painting traveled to eighteen cities and was seen by over two million people, breaking attendance records in many institutions. As the press release from MoMA underlined, "No painting, and very few living personalities, have ever received such nation-wide ovation."[39] Press releases stressed the unprecedented efforts made to keep this treasure safe: "armed guards, a heavy rail, and a hidden alarm which sets off a loud gong if the picture is moved the fraction of an inch," as well as a high-tech night surveillance system complete with photoelectric cells.[40] Reviewers showed they were aware of the painting's complicated history with the United States: the *New York Times* printed an article triumphantly titled "'Whistler's Mother' Comes Home Again; Once Rejected Here, the Portrait, Now a Symbol, Returns to Us on Loan."[41] The occasion was marked by a strong emphasis on the national pride attached to the painting, but also by its assimilation into popular

5
Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Portrait of the Artist's Mother*, 1897. Oil on canvas, 29¼ × 39½ in. (74.3 × 100.3 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art. Partial gift of Dr. Rae Alexander-Minter and purchased with the W. P. Wilstach Fund, the George W. Elkins Fund, the Edward and Althea Budd Fund, and with funds contributed by The Dietrich Foundation, 1993, EW1993-61-1.





culture: for instance, Cole Porter's song "You're the Top" listed "Whistler's mama" as one of the wonders of the world his lover could be compared to, along with Camembert, Mona Lisa, and Mickey Mouse.[42] As the tour was nearing its end, the painting made a last stop in "Whistler's native state, Massachusetts," Boston having the "privilege of showing it on Mother's Day."[43] This focus on motherhood blended with national politics as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's mother was invited to preside over the final ceremonies before the portrait sailed back to France.[44]

The 1930s tour was such a landmark in exhibition history that in 2015 it was repeated on a smaller scale, with the painting visiting two museums: the Norton Simon in California and the Clark Art Institute in Massachusetts. The exhibition organizers displayed the same bravado as their predecessors: the press release on the Clark Art Institute's website announced, "Independence Day brings an American icon to the Clark Art Institute with the arrival of *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1 (Portrait of the Artist's Mother)* (1871) by James McNeill Whistler."[45] Mimicking MoMA's words from more than seventy years ago, the *Boston Globe* found it appropriate that the painting would "return" to Massachusetts, "the state in which Whistler was born."[46] Briefly reclaiming the painting as a national emblem thus permitted commentators to reintroduce Whistler, this lifelong exile, into the American cultural landscape.

The 1932–1934 tour, however, was marred by a controversy that pitted cultural readings associating the painting with the theme of Americanness and motherhood against more strictly aesthetic considerations. That year, the portrait was adapted into a national postage stamp printed on the occasion of Mother's Day (fig. 6). The designer of the stamp altered the artwork's original composition, letting the old woman's glance fall on a bunch of flowers decorating the lower-left angle of the stamp, the new image suggesting contemplation rather than meditation. On the upper-left background, illuminated as though through a high window in the style of Dutch painting, the original *Black Lion Warf* etching had disappeared, making room for words picked by Franklin Delano Roosevelt himself: "In memory and in honor of the mothers of America."[47] With these small alterations, *Arrangement in Grey and Back* was completely recast into an image calling to simple familial and national feelings and meant to elicit collective adhesion at a moment of national crisis. Yet some voiced concern for the integrity of the portrait: the American Artists Professional League protested these changes and called them a

"mutilation" and a "serious transgression of professional ethics."[48] Barr, willing to offer suggestions from an "impartial art institution," explained in an official letter to Postmaster General James A. Farley how much Whistler took aesthetic matters to heart, and that "if he were alive today he would have been enraged by the adulteration of his design."[49] Barr advocated a spare design he saw as more faithful to the identity of Whistler's painting, and which, incidentally, also aligned with his own formalist reading of the artist as a precursor of modernism who bore comparison with twentieth-century artists such as to Piet Mondrian. Barr's protests and suggestions were not, however, taken into account and the stamp remained the same: the painting's more popular reading effaced the expert view of artists and curators from elitist institutions.

This controversy is symptomatic of the ambiguities inherent to the reception of the painting. From the early twentieth-century onward, the reception of Whistler's portrait of his mother often involved overlooking some of Whistler's most important aesthetic commitments. Bringing Whistler and his mother back into American culture proved a complicated, contradictory process. First, the painting's iconic status in the United States seems to have overshadowed the reality of its career, in which apart from the 1932–1934 episode, the painting did not physically circulate. If, for instance, the press release of the Norton Simon Museum in February 2015 acknowledged Whistler's portrait of his mother as "the single most recognizable image in the history of American painting," it also admitted that "the fact that *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* resides not in the United States but in France may come as a surprise," a detail repeatedly underlined by wide-audience articles discussing the painting.[50]

6
United States postage stamp, 1934. Collection of the author.

Inversely, the painting remains relatively unknown to French audiences, who often are only familiar with the portrait's apparition—and, ironically, its defacement—in the 1997 comedy *Bean*. The traffic statistics of the popular online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* show that the English article on the painting, entitled "*Whistler's Mother*," was visited over 104,000 times in 2015, while the very short article in French, "*Arrangement en gris et noir no 1*," counts just under 4,000 visits during the same time period.[51] Even considering the respective sizes of Internet audiences in each country, this remains a significant difference. The disparity in these results certainly originates in the difference in titles, but this variation can itself be understood as a reflection of the unequal popularity of the work, which, while referenced under its original title in French, has acquired a more familiar moniker in American culture. As a journalist from the *Los Angeles Times* conceded, most of her readers "might know the painting by its more famous unofficial name: 'Whistler's Mother,'"[52] and, tellingly, the vast majority of references made to *Arrangement in Grey and Black* in the mainstream media are followed by a similar elucidation.

The intriguing double title of the painting reflects the divergence between Whistler's artistic statements and the reception the artwork received. The "arrangement" elaborated by Whistler was, from the first time he exhibited the painting, a source of confusion among the public, and the point it made still escapes most of the painting's viewers. *Arrangement in Grey and Black* is the first example of Whistler's use of the word in his titles. This unusual choice drew the curiosity of lawyers, reporters, and their audiences during Whistler's lawsuit against Ruskin. The debates, centered on Whistler's unusual art for art's sake aesthetics and his attachment to a decorative formalism inspired by Japanese art, elicited both laughter and perplexity. The public found it difficult to understand Whistler's claims that art was simply a matter of decoration and suggestiveness, which he clearly set apart from real-life considerations and preoccupations.

Whistler was asked to justify his use of nondescriptive titles such as "harmonies," "symphonies," and "arrangements." About one of his portraits, one jury member asked Whistler, "Why do you call Mr. Irving 'an arrangement in black'?" Upon which one of Whistler's defenders specified: "It is the *picture* and not Mr. Irving that is the arrangement."[53] Whistler then explained what he meant by the term: "an arrangement of line and form and color" where all that mattered was the harmonious ensemble that resulted from the careful selection of the artist, not the painting's subject matter or what it could possibly

represent. In 1878, in a highly sarcastic letter to the journal *The World*, Whistler asked: "Why should not I call my works 'symphonies,' 'arrangements,' 'harmonies,' and 'nocturnes'? I know that many good people think my nomenclature funny and myself 'eccentric.'" But this, in Whistler's view, came from a deep misunderstanding of what art should be. Whistler denounced the constant need of his audiences to associate the artwork with preoccupations that did not belong to the realm of art: "The vast majority of English folk cannot and will not consider a picture as a picture, apart from any story which it may be supposed to tell." On the contrary, Whistler reaffirmed the autonomy of the work of art, convinced that "art should be independent of all clap-trap—should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like."[54] In *Ten O'Clock*, Whistler denied that his work could be the reflection of any time and place, claiming that "there never was an artistic period. There never was an Art-loving nation," and that "the master stands in no relation to the moment at which he occurs," being in "no more the product of civilisation than is the scientific truth asserted dependent upon the wisdom of a period."[55] Whistler even specifically addressed the case of *Arrangement in Grey and Black*: "Take the picture of my mother, exhibited at the Royal Academy as an 'Arrangement in Grey and Black.' Now that is what it is. To me it is interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public to care about the identity of the portrait?"[56]

However vocal Whistler was in the assertion of these principles, the critics, writers, and journalists writing on *Arrangement in Grey and Black* have ignored them time and again. Since the painting's acquisition by the French government, commentators have repeatedly transgressed Whistler's interdictions, persistently conferring values such as "love, patriotism, and the like" to the portrait. A few years after Whistler's death, the critic John Van Dyke (1856–1932), who, ironically, also wrote a book entitled *Art for Art's Sake* (1893),[57] openly rejected Whistler's claim for national neutrality, asserting that "quite apart from *Ten O'Clock* and other painter extravagances, art is still believed to be in some way an expression of a time, a place, and a people."[58] From very early on, most of Whistler's American contemporaries bluntly rejected his commitment to art for art's sake principles, considering it as nothing else than another of his eccentricities. "The Whistlerian theory of art is not new," commented a critic in 1889, "nor do we believe it necessary for him to set it forth in this country." The

journalist added, with magnanimous pragmatism: "We are willing to judge him by his pictures, without discussing his theories."[59] This is precisely what commentators did with *Arrangement in Grey and Black*, using the portrait as the key example that would allow them to dismiss Whistler's aesthetics as "quite unsound philosophy."[60] The consistency of Whistler's purely decorative ideals had already been questioned by Algernon Swinburne (1837–1909) in his response to the artist's *Ten O'Clock*: "It would be quite useless for Mr. Whistler to protest . . . that he never meant to put . . . intense pathos of significance and tender depth of expression into the portrait of his own venerable mother. The scandalous fact remains, that he has done so; and in so doing has explicitly violated and implicitly abjured the creed and the canons, the counsels and the catechism of Japan."[61] Swinburne's interpretation of Whistler's art fueled a bitter dispute that ended the long friendship between the two artists.[62] Whistler publicly denounced this abusive reading of *Arrangement in Grey and Black* as "an apostasy," outraged to see that the poet "also misunderstands, and is capable of saying so, with vehemence and repetition," "in the face of a ribald world."[63]

Despite Whistler's protests, American commentators rushed to follow Swinburne, insisting that Whistler was "as it were in spite of himself, a most able interpreter of human emotion,"[64] and that he had "infringed [his theories] flagrantly by expressing, in his portrait of his mother a tenderly filial piety which transcends the facts of an arrangement in black and gray."[65] Journalists and critics typically read the portrait as a testimony of filial affection and interpreted this alleged sentimentality as the one link between the artist and his native country. In the eyes of Seymour Eaton (1859–1916), who later contributed to sentimentalizing Theodore Roosevelt's image with his *Roosevelt Bears* (1905–1908) series, Whistler's portrait of his mother was "a work of impressive simplicity, sincerity, sympathy and subtilty, which of itself instantly and forever disposes of the theory of art for art's sake."[66] Even today, the agreement is that *Arrangement in Grey and Black* betrays the artist's inability to maintain his work in a strictly decorative, nonreferential sphere: "Whistler's dream, in line with his burgeoning view of himself as a dandy, was to elevate a quivering hothouse aestheticism over psychology, history, politics, and virtually all else. His mother's presence somehow harnessed this unrealistic reverie, pulling it back toward the grit and the grip of specific truth."[67]

Thus even though Whistler "denied a thousand times our right to interest ourselves in his mother's personality"[68] and thoroughly rejected anecdotal readings of his work, the sitter's identity and her

intimate connection to Whistler became the focus of a widespread fascination once the painting entered the Luxembourg collections. Reviewing the painting after it was first shown in New York in 1881, a critic from the *New-York Daily Tribune*, in fact, found it lacking in personality and called it "dull" and "empty": "The head of the subject, for instance, surely ought, in a professional portrait, to stand for something. But it is the least significant point. It is flat, it is lifeless, it is destitute of all modelling, and the eye keeps running away from it to the well painted etching or engraving in its narrow black frame and white mat that hangs on the wall."[69] Compare this review with Hartmann's lyrical description of the painting two decades later:

> *Whistler attempted in his "Mother" to give us the whole atmosphere that surrounds a personality. . . . The artist does not merely represent his old mother. He endowed the old woman, sitting pensively in a grey interior, with one of the noblest and mightiest emotions the human soul is capable of—the reverence and calm we feel in the presence of our own aging mother. And with this large and mighty feeling, in which all discords of mannerisms are dissolved, and, by the tonic values of two ordinary dull colours he succeeded in writing an epic, a symphonia domestica, of superb breadth and beauty—a symbol of the mother of all ages and all lands, slowly aging as she sits pensively amidst the monotonous colours of modern life.*[70]

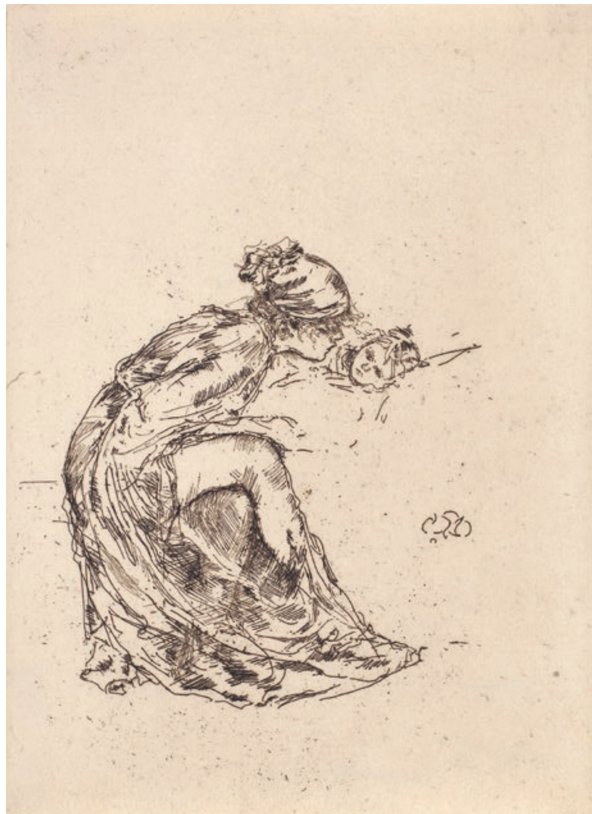
The consecration of Whistler's work explains this dramatic change of perception: whereas the first critic was only commenting on *Arrangement in Grey and Black* as a portrait and, in this reading, as a sophisticated but confounding combination of forms, lines, and tonalities, Hartmann, like many of his fellow Americans at the time, desired to inscribe the painting into a larger narrative that would allow him to claim the painter's success as a national achievement. The subject matter of the painting proved central to this reinterpretation on two counts: First, the theme of motherhood helped reattach Whistler to his native country and to compensate for both the artist's and the painting's residence abroad. Second, it also inscribed his work within a larger body of values that were particularly significant in turn-of-the-century America, where artistic representations of women predominantly idealized them as emblems of purity and motherhood.[71]

The painting's real title sank into oblivion as "Whistler's Mother" became synonymous with domesticity and maternal feeling. The visual reinterpretations of the painting illustrate this shift. Beaux's *Les derniers jours d'enfance* (see fig. 4) imitated the structure of Whistler's portrait, but injected sentimentality and even nostalgia into the composition. The wording of the title—in French, probably as a means to situate Beaux as a cosmopolitan painter circulating in the same prestigious artistic environment as Whistler—also accounted for the young mother's wistful look. Whereas Anna McNeill Whistler's absorption remained hermetic to viewers, here Beaux suggested a narration that extends beyond the borders of the canvas and that appeals to an almost universal sentiment. Greaves's *Whistler and His Mother* (see fig. 2) gave its viewers a glimpse of the artist's studio as a domestic interior. The vase of flowers in the 1934 stamp design (see fig. 6), while recalling Whistler's *japonisme*, also helped complement the rather stark furnishings of the room as it appeared in *Arrangement in Grey and Black*. Today, viewers facing the canvas for the first time often find it larger than they expected, that is, "on a scale to match its domestic subject."[72] This indicates that their perception of the painting belongs to a popular imagery of motherhood dominated by a sense of intimacy and modesty, while, on the contrary, the ambitious size of the canvas rather suggests that Whistler meant to showcase his artistic abilities and bolster his position in the professional and public spheres.

The details of Whistler's relation to his mother form an important part of the discussions surrounding the painting, as though commentators, like visual artists paying homage to the work, felt the need to reinforce the private, anecdotal dimension its severe design represses. Jonathan Weinberg has commented on what he sees as "the central paradox of Whistler's picture: its ability to raise sentimental associations of motherhood and to negate them."[73] The major part of his chapter on *Arrangement in Grey and Black* explores Whistler's relationship with his mother using psychoanalytical models. I would like to approach the issue from a different perspective, considering that if sentiment needs to be taken into account here, its public expression—and the manipulations this involved—is more pertinent to the work's circulation than the reality of Whistler's and his mother's intimate lives. There is no doubt that Whistler nourished tender feelings for his mother: he shared her house for years, wrote her frequently when he was away from her, and, after her death in January 1881, started using her last name in his signature. Yet the artist, who

fathered a child outside of wedlock after an infidelity to his mistress, could hardly be seen as fitting Victorian standards of respectability and family values.[74]

As with his national identity, Whistler sometimes instrumentalized his connection to his mother when it could be profitable for his career and status. His attitude was, for instance, rather ambivalent when the question of selling *Arrangement in Grey and Black* came up. Although he had offered it for sale in the United States and elsewhere, in 1884 he protested vehemently against the idea, telling an exhibition organizer that "certainly I should never dream of disposing of it."[75] Beyond filial attachment, Whistler's rejection of the offer might have reflected his disapproval of the price proposed, or of the buyer's identity. The painting's acquisition by a prestigious public collection must have been a good compromise for the painter, granting him artistic recognition and at the same time avoiding the appearance of an indelicate, frankly monetary transaction. When learning about the purchase of *Arrangement in Grey and Black*, for instance, Whistler's



7
James McNeill Whistler, *Cameo No. 1 (Mother and Child)*, 1891–1895. Etching on paper, 6⅞ × 5 in. (17.5 × 12.7 cm). Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1906.108.

friend Thomas Lamont allegedly expressed surprise at his having painted his mother's portrait, or even at his having a mother at all. Whistler replied, with his characteristic effrontery: "Yes indeed I have a mother, and a very pretty bit of color she is, I can tell you."[76] If Lamont was trying to give the conversation a personal turn, the artist's slightly irreverent playfulness deflated his expectations, instead reasserting that the image Whistler wanted to convey was not that of domesticity and motherhood but a purely formal, aesthetic conception.

Around 1891–1895, the artist returned to images of motherhood in at least five etchings (fig. 7).[77] Depicting a young mother in bed with her toddler, these display far more sentimentality than the 1871 portrait of elderly Anna McNeill Whistler. Whistler's engagement with maternal tenderness in these pictures might reveal a wistful memory of his own mother, or simply the softened outlook of an aged man. But the fact that the artist created these works at the time he was monitoring the acquisition of *Arrangement in Grey and Black* by the French government might also indicate the artist was willing to exploit the theme and to cater to his patrons' interest in a more emotional approach. Additionally, whereas up until the publication of *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* in 1890, Whistler reacted violently against the interference of personal and anecdotal elements in the interpretation of his work, after *Arrangement in Grey and Black* was purchased by France, he did not protest the innumerable sentimentalizing interpretations of the American press. From the moment he painted the portrait until after its purchase, then, Whistler adopted an ambivalent, fluctuating attitude, oscillating between the strict rejection of "claptrap" anecdotal and narrative readings and a tacit acceptance that the public could and should "care about the identity of the portrait."

Anna McNeill Whistler also drew a lot of attention because of the contrast between her personality and that of her son, a contrast that proved central in the shift of perception surrounding the painting. Anna McNeill Whistler was notorious for her piety: she did not receive guests on Sundays, nor did she allow anyone to open any other book than the Bible in her house on that day. She even invested her son's art with her own spirituality. In a letter to her sister, she described the creation of the painting in quite religious terms: to her, "it was a Mother's unceasing prayer while being the painter's model gave the expression which makes the attractive charm."[78] Commenting on Anna McNeill Whistler's portrait in a posthumous account of Whistler's life and art, Christian Brinton subsumed the painter's aesthetics to moral ideals and qualities:

It was not through gifts wholly esthetic that Whistler was able to conceive the "Mother" and the "Carlyle," but also by grace of qualities distinctly intellectual and moral. In all matters he was essentially a purist. . . . Art was his religion, and for his artistic creed he was ready to make any sacrifice. You cannot gaze at these two canvases without feeling that they represent the sovereign force of pure mentality as well as finely attuned sensibilities. The abstract reasoning of his engineer-mathematician father and the exalted piety of his mother were curiously blended in Whistler's making. The "Mother," seated in that subdued room, fixed intently upon the world invisible, seems the incarnation of Puritanism.[79]

Anna McNeill Whistler's piety is called upon, here, to moderate the stark formalism of the painting, while the hermetic art beliefs of Whistler are turned into a more familiar kind of invisible world. In Brinton's eyes, Whistler's personal genealogy, the anecdotal dimension of not only his but his parents' lives, is expressed on the canvas, understood as a perfect balance between the gendered qualities of mental abstraction and sentiment. Through this reconstructed personal history, Whistler could be considered a true American, despite the eccentricities of his cosmopolitan life.

In the words of another of Whistler's biographers, Whistler was a puritan and an American malgré lui:

The Puritan element which is to be found in every American achievement, whether in war, in art, or in literature, though often deeply hidden, is conspicuous in Whistler's work, though he himself would probably have been the first to deny it; and it is this element of sobriety, of steadfastness, of undeviating adherence to convictions and ideals that constitutes the firm foundation of his art, of his many brilliant and beautiful superstructures of fancy.

Only a Puritan at heart could have exhibited as he did in everything he touched those infinitely precious qualities of reserve, of delicacy, of refinement, which are the conspicuous characteristics of his work.[80]

Recasting *Arrangement in Grey and Black* as "Whistler's Mother," commentators transformed the artist's elitist aesthetics into an

expression of puritanical values, which they considered part of Whistler's "artistic nationality" and "temperament."[81] Whistler's search for pure art was reinterpreted as a form of puritanism he had inherited from his mother and that aligned him with American cultural values. Critics praised the sobriety of the interior and of the sitter's outfit, imbuing the restricted tonalities of Whistler's arrangement with a religious feeling the artist probably did not want to confer to his work. Whistler's own formulation of art in quasi-religious terms might have, in part, misled his commentators. If he called art "a goddess of dainty thought" in *Ten O'Clock*, however, he certainly did not mean to give his art the accepted moral or religious sense many of his viewers expected to see in it. He complained, on the contrary, that too often "humanity takes the place of Art" and that "beauty is confounded with virtue."[82]

Whistler's religion of art was a ritual meant to distinguish him from the rest of his contemporaries, but his provocative avant-garde art beliefs, rewritten as "reserve," "delicacy," and "refinement," were made more palatable to American audiences. Van Dyke, in a 1904 article featured in the *Ladies Home Journal*, tried to make intelligible the reasons why there was "all this talk about Whistler" after the painter's death. Unsurprisingly, the example he gave the longest consideration was the portrait of the artist's mother, probably because he estimated his readers would be more sensitive to its theme. Trying to explain Whistler's aesthetics, Van Dyke reinterpreted the painting's sobriety as a mark of simplicity and straightforwardness. Separating the two parts of the title, Van Dyke struggled to reconcile its two facets: "As narration it is the portrait of his mother; as decoration it is an 'Arrangement in Black and Gray,'" painstakingly adding, "that is to say, black and gray are the predominant notes. The dress is black and white, the floor and wall gray, the curtain and floor-board black." After celebrating the painting as "the most human and personal document [Whistler] ever produced" with respect to its subject matter, Van Dyke reinvested the other dimension of the painting, its strikingly spare formalism, with a moral value: "Nothing could be simpler than such a scheme of color. And this, perhaps the most celebrated picture by the painter, is characteristic of all his work in its simplicity, its directness, its infallible good taste." Ultimately, Van Dyke used the painting as the final absolution of the artist's excesses, dissolving his apparent pretentiousness into a simple truth: "There is no pose about it, though he has been called the grand poseur; no affectation in it, though he was counted a bundle of pretense; no trickery in it, though he was written

down the prince of mountebanks. Where in all art have you seen so unpretentious a picture? That figure in a plain black gown, seated in a straight-backed chair, with the feet on a stool, with only a wall, a curtain and a picture in for a background, is almost bare in its simplicity."[83]

Van Dyke's remarks hint at one possible explanation for the prodigious reversal in the reception of the painting. The "emptiness" of this abstract composition, once a reproach, was later exploited by commentators who could conveniently project their own interpretation onto it. They could thus contrast their perception and the apparently hermetic surface of the canvas, claiming they had only transcribed a "deeply hidden" truth. The very abstraction and open-endedness of the painting allowed for commentators to project onto it a variety of readings that contradicted Whistler's expressed views on art. Indeed, in the end, it may be precisely because it resisted interpretation so much that the painting's meanings could be asserted with so much confidence by its commentators. Van Dyke, for instance, felt no hesitation: "It is quite impossible to miss the painter's point of view—quite impossible to misunderstand this picture. It is the portrait of a noble mother by a loving son."[84]

Arrangement in Grey and Black stands as the ultimate paradox: a popular icon created by one of the most elitist painters of its time, it was made American by entering a French institution; a manifesto of art for art's sake, it has been read as the epitome of sentimentality, as a moral statement, and as a confession of patriotic attachment. Whistler's mother, turned into a familiar character of American imagination, the stern elderly puritan, has thus helped to symbolically repatriate "erratic Jimmy" in spite of himself. Wilde once prophetically told Whistler: "Be warned in time, James; and remain, as I do, incomprehensible. To be great is to be misunderstood."[85] This advice, compared to the circulation of Whistler's painting, resonates as one last irony. If, to quote Brunet's introductory essay, there can be "no representation without circulation," the case of Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black*'s endless recycling begs a further question: Can there be a circulation without misrepresentation?

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