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Suzanne Singletary *James McNeill Whistler and France: A Dialogue in Paint, Poetry, and Music* London and New

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James McNeill Whistler's first artistic affiliations were French: the "Société des Trois" he formed with Henri Jean Fantin-Latour and Alphonse Legros in 1858; Edgar Degas's invitation to participate in the Impressionists' first exhibition; and his close friendship with French poet, Stéphane Mallarmé, whom Whistler called "my second self" (140). Perhaps most tellingly of all, Whistler was furious when the French government displayed his *Arrangement in Grey and Black: The Artist's Mother* (1871) as a "foreign" work. Today, it hangs in the Musée d'Orsay alongside the work of Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, and Degas, but Suzanne Singletary's fascinating study is the first to dig deeply into the subsoil and range of Whistler's relationships with France. Going beyond the historical circumstances of his training at Charles Gleyre's atelier, dalliance with Gustave Courbet's "realism," and return to Paris in the 1890s, her book seeks the philosophies, ideals, and practices that aligned his work not only with art but also with literature and music in France. Singletary's central thesis is that "artistic mutuality and dialogic interchange" defined the French avant-garde (178), in the same way as the poet Charles Baudelaire proposed sensory and psychic *correspondances*. Through his contacts with Baudelaire, Courbet, Manet, Degas, Monet, and Mallarmé as well as his influence on Georges Seurat, Whistler played a "revolutionary role" in "shaping modernity" itself (11). This reading significantly enriches the narrative provided by Geneviève Lacambre's "Whistler and France" in Richard Dormant and Margaret F. MacDonald's *James McNeill Whistler* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1994) and Isabelle Enaud-Lechien's *Whistler et la France* (Paris: Herscher, 1995), while offering a wider chronological range than Melissa Berry's *The Société des Trois in the Nineteenth Century: The Translocal Artistic Union of Whistler, Fantin-Latour, and Legros*, also published by Routledge (2018).

Singletary develops her argument through chapters devoted to Whistler and each one of the above artists or writers (with Whistler, Monet, and Mallarmé considered as a trio). It is a little surprising that she does not explore Whistler's friendship with the aesthete Robert de Montesquiou in any detail or reference Edgar Munhall's and Joy Newton's important work on this friendship, but she brings in numerous illuminating comparisons with Eugène Delacroix, Théophile Gautier, Edgar Allan Poe, Honoré de Balzac, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and the French response to Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal. Baudelaire's concept of art as a transcendental transformation of reality and, as such, profoundly "musical," is nonetheless her touchstone. If her methodology of "intellectual history" (10) deliberately breaks with the predominantly formal analyses that dominated twentieth-century Whistler scholarship, her focus on France also counters the narrative of British origins in *Turner, Whistler, Monet* (Katherine A. Lochnan, ed., London: Tate Publishing, 2004). And while she cites Theodore Reff's investigation of Whistler's and Degas's shared interest in Dutch seventeenth-century art, she offers a thought-provoking counter to his view of the French

artist as having the “greater psychological penetration” in *Degas: The Artist’s Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1987, 27).

This “interpretative approach” (3) firmly establishes Whistler at the heart of a richly symbolic, even metaphysical, understanding of reality, and extends the recent reappraisal of Whistler and/or his influence through the online correspondence, etchings, and paintings catalogues of MacDonald and her colleagues (<https://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/>, <http://etchings.arts.gla.ac.uk/>, <https://www.whistlerpaintings.gla.ac.uk/>), and studies such as Grischka Petri’s *Arrangement in Business* (Hildesheim, Zurich, New York: Georg Olms Verlag AG, 2011), and Anna Greutzner-Robins’s *A Fragile Modernism* (New Haven: Yale, 2008), although Singletary does not explicitly relate her work to this trend. Instead, her analysis of Whistler’s images as “texts” and his “dialogue” with French artists and writers as a “creative process” (10, 2) extends to individual artworks the kind of in-depth reading that modern literary scholars such as Rosemary Lloyd and Nicolae Babuts have given to poems by Baudelaire and Mallarmé. One of her most compelling conclusions is that Whistler wove a Baudelairean apprehension of music as profoundly spatial into the visual substance of his art—its compositional structures and angles of view. But she also shows how Whistler makes the viewer *look* musically: slowly, repeatedly, to decode the calligraphic ciphers that stand for human forms in his later works and the forms of boats and architecture veiled by fog and mist in his *Nocturnes*. This mode of looking is necessarily sequential, just as hearing music is an experience in time; the act of viewing Whistler’s works, as much as their names (“Harmonies,” “Symphonies,” “Arrangements”), thus creates their celebrated “musical” character. Singletary concludes that Whistler’s doctrine of “‘Art for Art’s sake’ . . . did not connote lack of meaning, but instead was generative of new levels and sources of meaning implicit in the self-reflexivity and viscosity of [his] . . . images” (18).

Nowhere is Singletary’s emphasis on the viewer’s role in producing meaning more revealing, perhaps, than when comparing Whistler’s *At the Piano* (1858–59) with Degas’s *Bellelli Family* portrait (1859–60) in her chapter on the two artists. Whistler’s picture, she argues, involves an extraordinary but deeply symbolic bending of perspective: the music room portrayed swells forward to “subsume artist and viewer within a virtual room where the boundary between subject and object, between real and illusion, is blurred” (114). This enigmatic space, conjuring a visual harmony of form and color even as Whistler’s half sister Deborah Haden plays the piano within it, joins the listening and looking of the viewer with that of the child in the picture, Deborah’s daughter Annie, to create “a literal and figurative projection of the artist’s imagination and an embodiment of interiority” (114)—a core Baudelairean theme (though Baudelaire’s association of childhood with genius might usefully have been noted here). With its piano that belonged to Whistler’s late father—a Vermeer-type “object portrait” that reminds us of Degas’s and Whistler’s debt to Théophile Thoré-Burger’s recent rediscovery of the Dutch artist—the painting thus forms the masculine partner to Whistler’s *Portrait of the Artist’s Mother*. If this psychological interpretation challenges Reff’s interpretation of *At the Piano* as merely “sentimental, decorous” (*Degas: The Artist’s Mind*, 27), and therefore inferior to Degas’s investigation of familial tensions in *The Bellelli Family*, it also throws down a gauntlet to feminist views that the domestic interior, often painted by women, was not a “cutting-edge” subject in modernism (104).

As a key work that brings painting as “text” into dialogue with music, *At the Piano* lies thematically at the center of Singletary’s book, building on her discussion in earlier chapters of paintings by Courbet and Manet that portray musical performance. At the same time, with its child in white, it develops themes of memory and imagination that Singletary identifies as lying at the heart of the “women in white” images that both Manet and Whistler produced in the 1850s and 1860s, and she corrects Lacambre’s chronology to show that Whistler’s treatment of the theme preceded Manet’s. In turn, *At the Piano*’s fusion of subject and object provides a bridge to the chapter on Monet, Mallarmé, and Whistler, with its insightful discussion of “white space”—the blank of the page—in Mallarmé’s “musico-poetics” (136). Singletary sees the dialogue Mallarmé’s poetry invites between writer and reader as the counterpart to the emphasis on “harmony” as synthesis in Whistler’s “Ten O’Clock Lecture” that Mallarmé translated in 1888 after Monet introduced him to Whistler.

Luce Abélès has noted the closeness of Whistler’s contacts in the 1890s with Monet and Mallarmé (*Turner, Whistler, Monet*, 163–68), but Singletary brings to light a more complex and subtle “dialogue.” Monet’s pursuit of *enveloppe* in his late serial paintings (the air between the eye and the object) is thus seen as cognate with Mallarmé’s *effet* (“paint not the thing but the effect that the thing produces,” 135), and, in turn, with Whistler’s “immersive” exhibition spaces and *Nocturnes* where “images meld into an enveloping atmosphere” to form “an extended meditation upon night” (146). This provides a vital further stage in Singletary’s argument that Whistler’s connections with France were central to his “modernist” involvement of the viewer in the making of meaning.

The final chapter, delightfully entitled “Seurat’s Butterfly,” takes its *point de départ* from Seurat’s inclusion of butterflies in his *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884–86)—a borrowing of Whistler’s personal emblem that, as she notes, Paul Smith has discussed. Again, however, Singletary pushes out the boat a good way further, proposing that the dancing girl in Seurat’s picture echoes Whistler’s *Harmony in Yellow and Gold: The Gold Girl—Connie Gilchrist* (ca. 1876–77), and that, although at first sight “odd soulmates,” the two artists actually shared a common Baudelairean goal of quest for the “timeless in the ephemeral,” because “Whistlerian thought and art permeated the French Symbolist milieu of the 1880s in which Seurat participated” (172). Although it would have been good to hear more about this milieu, which included de Montesquiou, this argument strengthens the now accepted view that Whistler himself was ultimately a Symbolist. More controversially, Singletary also suggests that the political anarchism of Seurat’s circle was inherently in tune with Whistler’s defense of artistic freedom, however different iconographically. If art historians have been reluctant until recently to read Whistler’s art as having “meaning,” such “interpretations” are now surely justified by Singletary’s impressive reconstruction of the intimate links between avant-garde art, literature, and music in nineteenth-century France.

Unlike some other Routledge titles, *Whistler and France* benefits from an excellent range of color illustrations. However, it is unfortunately marred by poor proofing: Baudelaire’s anthology is sometimes called *Les Fleur* [sic] *du Mal* (e.g., 98, n. 78); Griselda Pollock’s name appears as “Pollack”; Olympia’s “shawl” is a “shaw”; etc. (101, nn. 128, 130, 126). It is very much to be hoped that a second edition will be issued with these defects remedied as *Whistler and Nature* is an important contribution to Whistler studies that also enriches understanding of some of the leading names of nineteenth-century modernism.

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