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Asian Aesthetics in America

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Contents

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Cover

ARTICLES

[Editor's Introduction: Asian Aesthetics and America: Problems and Promises](#)

Vimalin Rujivacharakul

[Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Translation: A Conversation about James McNeill Whistler's Peacock Room](#)

Lee Glazer and Stacey Pierson

[Eco-Aesthetics as an Organizing Principle in Global Material Culture: The Example of Green Woodworking](#)

Edward S. Cooke Jr.

[Two Photo Essays on Art and Cultural Exchange](#)

Michael Leja and Partha Mitter

BOOK REVIEWS

[Anita Mannur. *Intimate Eating: Racialized Spaces and Radical Futures*](#)

By Rumya S. Putcha

[Elizabeth Way, ed. *Black Designers in American Fashion*](#)

By Theo Tyson

[Psyche A. Williams-Forson. *Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America*](#)

By M. Maxine Morgan

[Mike Owen Benediktsson. *In the Midst of Things: The Social Lives of Objects in the Public Spaces of New York City*](#)

By Gretchen Von Koenig

Gascia Ouzounian. *Stereophonica: Sound and Space in Science, Technology, and the Arts*
By Hannah M. Grantham

Books Received

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Cover

Cover art: James McNeill Whistler, *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, 1876-1877. South wall with 21st-century porcelains in a Kangxi style. Oil paint and gold leaf on canvas, leather, mosaic tile, glass, and wood; H. 166", W. 241-1/2", L. 404". Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Acc. F1904.61, Gift of Charles Lang Freer.

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Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Translation

A Conversation about James McNeill Whistler's Peacock Room

Lee Glazer and Stacey Pierson

Lee Glazer is senior curator at the Academy Art Museum, Easton, Maryland. Stacey Pierson is professor of the history of Chinese ceramics, Department of History of Art and Archaeology, University of London.

The authors discuss Chinese ceramics and James McNeill Whistler's Peacock Room as a case study in cultural translation and cosmopolitan aestheticism. The article, derived from a talk given by the authors at a conference on the global impact of Asian aesthetics on American art held at Winterthur in 2018, includes additional contextual information and background about those individuals and interpretive communities that informed the Peacock Room's creation and institutional afterlife.

As part of a conference on the global impact of Asian aesthetics on American art at Winterthur in 2018, Lee Glazer, former curator of American Art at the Freer-Sackler and Stacey Pierson, former curator of the Percival David Collection of Chinese ceramics in London, discussed James McNeill Whistler's Peacock Room (figs. [1](#) and [2](#)) as a case study in cultural translation and cosmopolitan aestheticism. The following is derived from this conversation with the addition of contextual information and background.



Fig. 1. James McNeill Whistler, *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, 1876–77. South wall with twenty-first-century porcelains in a Kangxi style. Oil paint and gold leaf on canvas, leather, mosaic tile, glass, and wood; H. 166", W. 241½", L. 404". Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Acc. F1904.61, Gift of Charles Lang Freer.



Fig. 2. North wall of the *Peacock Room* with Charles Lang Freer's ceramics. Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Acc. F1904.61, Gift of Charles Lang Freer.

About the Peacock Room

The Peacock Room's renowned interior decoration by American expatriate artist James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) has a complicated history. Originally, it was a dining room in the London mansion of Liverpool shipping magnate Frederick Richards Leyland (1831–92). He hired architect Thomas Jeckyll (1827–81) to redesign the room to display an extensive collection of blue-and-white Kangxi porcelain and a painting by Whistler, *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*. As Jeckyll completed his work, Leyland asked Whistler to suggest a color scheme for some of the room's woodwork. Inspired by a multiplicity of sources—the delicate patterns and vivid colors of the ceramics on display, the gold of Japanese lacquer, and the plumage of the peacock, to name just a few—Whistler ignored the request for “color suggestions” and entirely redecorated the room between 1876 and 1877 as a “harmony in blue and gold.” Leyland, who was out of town during much of the work, expressed dismay at the extravagance of Whistler's interventions and refused to pay the artist his full fee. Painter and patron were soon locked in a bitter, prolonged, highly public quarrel. After completing the project, Whistler never saw the Peacock Room again. Leyland, his disapproval of Whistler notwithstanding, dined beneath Whistler's painted princess, surrounded by more than 300 blue-and-white pots, until his death in 1892. At that time, Leyland's collections were dispersed at auction, and his house, including the Peacock Room, was sold to a new owner, Blanche Watney (1836–1915).

When Watney realized the room could be taken apart and reassembled, she put it up for sale in 1904. Detroit industrialist Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919), a noted collector of Asian art as well as America's foremost collector of Whistler's work, purchased the Peacock Room, shipped it across the Atlantic Ocean, and reassembled it in a specially built annex to his home on Detroit's Ferry Avenue. Unlike Leyland, Freer regarded the room as a total work of art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, albeit one that he completed by filling its shelves with his own collection of Asian ceramics ([fig. 3](#)). Because he did not care for the blue-and-white porcelain that had inspired both Jeckyll and Whistler, Freer installed the Peacock Room with wares from Asia and the Near East featuring complex, monochromatic surfaces and subdued glazes in shades of golden-brown, green, grey, and turquoise. He transformed the Peacock Room into a type of aesthetic laboratory where he rehearsed his concept of universal formal correspondences that achieved its ultimate expression in the Freer Gallery of Art, which opened to the public in 1923. After Freer's death in 1919, the Peacock Room was transported to the Freer Gallery in Washington, DC—the first art museum on the National Mall—and was fittingly installed in the museum's southeast corner, at the intersection of galleries of Chinese and American art.

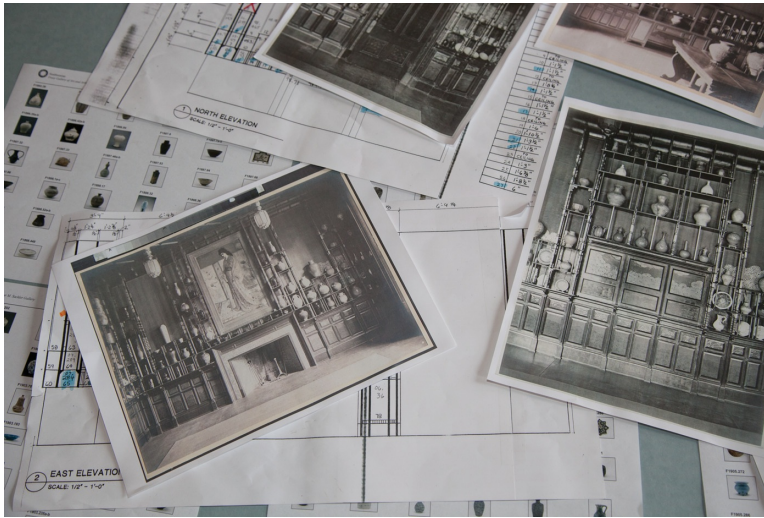


Fig. 3. Elevations of the Peacock Room with exhibition checklists and archival photographs by George F. Swain, 1908. Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution. Photography by John Tsantes.

James McNeill Whistler, who filled his London studio with a wide range of East Asian textiles, Edo period woodblock prints, and Kangxi era porcelains, was more closely associated with China and Japan than virtually any other nineteenth-century Western artist ([fig. 4](#)). An 1877 studio visit with Whistler prompted a writer for *Punch* magazine to muse, “Am I here, or in Japan—or China—Chelsea China?”¹ By incorporating what Elizabeth Hope Chang terms the “familiar exotic[ism]” of East Asian art into his lived spaces and his pictorial syntax, Whistler asserted both his own originality and his central place in a new, cosmopolitan history of art that he called a “story of the beautiful,” an evolving but always “already complete” narrative that continuously absorbs and synthesizes extreme temporal, cultural, and material differences.² Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in the Peacock Room, the Kensington dining room-cum-porcelain cabinet that Whistler famously transformed into a three-dimensional painting, *Harmony in Blue and Gold*. In the conversation that follows, we consider the Peacock Room as an exemplar of cosmopolitanism and cultural translation. As such, we have kept in mind Lydia Liu’s caveat that articulations of difference (“Asian aesthetics”) in the service of universality (“the story of the beautiful”) “must be treated with caution.”³ Following Craig Calhoun in our effort to avoid “the logic of universal equivalence,” our observations foreground the “privileged specificity” of those individuals and interpretive communities that informed the Peacock Room’s creation and institutional afterlife.⁴



Fig. 4. Whistler's Residence at 96 Cheyne Walk, London, ca. 1900. Joseph and Elizabeth Robins Pennell Collection of Whistleriana, LC-USZ62-36950, LOT 12421, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.

Beginning with a series of costume pictures in the 1860s and culminating with *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, Whistler translated a diverse array of pictorial and decorative motifs and actual objects into a new system of aesthetic relationships that ignored specific histories of material production or cultural interchange in favor of cosmopolitan commonalities and correspondences. Of course, Whistler's so-called Asian aesthetic was itself the product of a particular context, a Victorian British art world where Japanese and Chinese objects were popular, easily acquired, relatively affordable, and, despite their widespread circulation, little understood. We explore that context and Whistler's place within it through the framework of the Peacock Room, considering its early history as a dining room in Victorian London and then examining its subsequent recontextualizations: as an aesthetic laboratory in the Detroit home of Gilded Age industrialist and museum founder Charles Lang Freer and, finally, as an artistic object in the Freer Gallery of Art that has been on permanent display since 1923.

Located on the National Mall, the Freer and its sister collection, the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, which opened in 1987, comprise a single museum: two distinct collections located in two buildings that are physically connected by a subterranean gallery and administered by a single staff. Recently rebranded as the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, the Freer-Sackler is well known to scholars, but the idiosyncratic nature of the collections—pan-Asian plus Gilded Age American art, including the world's most comprehensive collection of the work of the expatriate Whistler—has always been something of an enigma to the general public. Many visitors may not be aware that museum founder, Charles Lang Freer, came to Asian art through Whistler and a handful of his American followers. Nevertheless, the Peacock Room is reputedly the most popular object on view and is probably among the most recognized of the

museum's many treasures. It was designated an icon of American art by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2007, something that is problematic, since its origins are in Victorian-era London.

As the museum's curator of American art from 2007 to 2018, Glazer oversaw the room for many years. It was both a privilege and a problem: how do you deal with something that has iconic status, that is an object of both fascination and puzzlement to visitors, and that Whistler regarded as an inviolable masterpiece? Of course, he had no notion that his work would travel across the Atlantic Ocean, ending up in two distinct venues in the United States and housing very different arrays of ceramics than those the artist had responded to when he decorated the room between 1876 and 1877. During her time at the museum, Glazer tried to tackle the problem of the Peacock Room by considering its many stories and contexts, expanding its history beyond the Victorian Aesthetic movement. Her first move was to reinstall the room in 2011, recreating its appearance in Detroit in 1908 to highlight its place in Charles Lang Freer's multicultural collection and its ultimate location in a public museum of Asian and American art.

The Peacock Room is an iconic object, but it has had a difficult interpretive position in art history because of its sequence of moves and museum installation. It is also a reflection of an artist whose work is often described as embodying an Asian aesthetic, a concept that we want to explore in this case study. In this particular context, what does it mean when someone asserts an object reflects an Asian aesthetic?

An Asian Aesthetic?

One thing that struck Pierson, having done research on the context in which Whistler was operating as an artist and painter, is that neither he nor his patron appeared to have had much interest in the cultures of Asia or their histories. They had interests in Asian patterns, objects, and sometimes even music, but these were not a reflection of an Asian cultural aesthetic. It was an affinity for Asian design elements rather than Asian culture. That is why we use the term "translation" for our discussion, because the room reflects a *material* translation. Translation as a concept is always subjective and always temporal, but that term is a better way of describing how Whistler appropriated pattern, design, and ideas from Asian objects that he encountered—as a collector as well as an artist—and that he used in selective ways to create a new visual language in his artwork.

Whistler created the Peacock Room for his first important patron, the shipping magnate Frederick Richards Leyland, who ultimately failed to appreciate the room's decorative exuberance or its increased cost. Finding the room excessive and the artist insufferably arrogant, Leyland refused to pay Whistler his full fee, and a permanent falling out between the two men ensued. The painter and patron, who had begun as aesthetic allies, ended as sworn enemies, and the trajectory of their failed friendship became emblematic of the necessary but often corrupting relationship between art, money, and creative and social ambition. This is the story of the room that has continuously attracted the most attention from critics, scholars, and the public, and it has nothing to do with cross-cultural interchange.⁵ Indeed, that story has

had such a hold on the popular imagination that commentators often fail to mention that even before Whistler began his work, the room had been created as a showcase for Chinese porcelain and a suitable setting for a painting by the artist that had been produced nearly a decade before but was prophetically titled *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*.

As Pierson noted in her conversation with Glazer, Whistler's interest in translating the images and patterns depicted on the surfaces of Kangxi blue-and-white porcelain arose first and foremost from his enthusiasm for the wares as an artist, and, importantly, an artist in search of an original signature style. That was a quest that began for him in the early 1860s, after he had left Paris for London and was struggling to extricate himself from the influence of Gustav Courbet. He began to buy Chinese and Japanese porcelain and used the wares to decorate his residence in Cheyne Walk. His mother, who was living with him at the time, noted that the pots attracted painters and poets to her son's "artistic abode." According to Mrs. Whistler, members of the Rossetti family of authors and artists, the writer Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909), and others delighted in handling the porcelains; her son "consider[ed] the paintings upon their surfaces the finest specimens of art."⁶

In addition to appreciating these wares for their decorative value, Whistler began to incorporate them into a sequence of studio pictures in which Western models, costumed in Japanese or Chinese robes, are set in interiors filled with Asian objects from Whistler's own collection. Amid the profusion, blue-and-white porcelain, far more familiar to Whistler's contemporaries than the still-novel designs of Japanese woodblock prints, assumed an important role in announcing Whistler's new pictorial language and artistic identity.

Let's consider *The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks* ([fig. 5](#)), which shows a woman seeming to be painting on an already glazed and fired pot. Some readers might be familiar with porcelains like those Whistler and his friends collected. They were mostly made in the later seventeenth century, the Kangxi period, though we cannot specifically identify the wares that Whistler depicted in the painting because they are idealized or somewhat abstracted. Students looking to do research projects identifying the porcelain in Whistler's paintings often contact Pierson for help, a difficult task as Whistler rarely made specific representations of actual objects. He was taking designs from various objects that he collected and used as decorative elements in his home. This observation is a key part of Whistler's approach to the translation of these material elements into his artwork: not only can we see this habit in his images of porcelain, but also in the costumes that the models wear, which often combine Chinese and Japanese textiles and postures. In the *Caprice in Purple and Gold: The Golden Screen* ([fig. 6](#)), the model wears a Chinese robe, but those who are familiar with Japanese art may recognize the prints that are strewn on the floor and also in the model's hand, as part of Utagawa Hiroshige's (1797–1858) *Views of the Sixty-odd Provinces* (Rokujūyoshū Meisho Zue) ([fig. 7](#)). What we have here is a kind of conflation of borrowings and cultural references from China and Japan.



Fig. 5. James McNeill Whistler, *Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks*, 1864. Oil on canvas; H. 36¾", W. 24½". Philadelphia Museum of Art, Acc. 1112, John G. Johnson Collection, 1917.



Fig. 6. James McNeill Whistler, *Caprice in Purple and Gold: The Golden Screen*, 1864. Oil on wood panel; H. 19¾", W. 26½". Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Acc. F1904.75a, Gift of Charles Lang Freer.



Fig. 7. Utagawa Hiroshige, *Kawachi Hirakata Otokoyama* (Mt. Otokoat Hirakata, Kawachi), from the series *Rokujū yo shū meisho zue* (Illustrated guide to famous places in the sixty-odd provinces), 1853. Woodblock print on paper; H. 121316", W. 81116". British Museum, Acc. 1902,0212,0.397.66, © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Whistler's approach to these objects was typical of the Victorian era. With the domestic interior at the center of new approaches to design and representation, people posited a connection between good taste, good design, and the collecting of objects. Kangxi porcelains were readily available, and Whistler was a collector of them in a very particular way, but he also was working during a time when it was very common to surround yourself in your own interior with objects such as East Asian textiles, Edo period woodblock prints, and Kangxi era porcelains.⁷

The Social Environment

Beyond the domestic interior, there is another important contextual element to the story of the Peacock Room, and that is the social environment in which Whistler operated. The art market in Britain at this time was made up of four components that were interrelated: dealers, collectors, artists, and the places where they gathered to share their objects and their ideas about art. One of these gathering places was the Burlington Fine Arts Club, which was founded in 1866 in London.⁸ Whistler was one of many artists who were early members of the club, but due to his personality issues he was eventually kicked out. Apart from Whistler, many artists continued to be members for most of their careers. The Burlington Fine Arts

Club restricted dealers from joining, but the club's membership covered a wide range of British society. Of note was Owen Jones (1809–74), the great designer and design historian who disseminated patterns from a wide range of Asian materials via his writing. Some of the Chinese patterns from his *Grammar of Ornament* were incorporated into the design of the Peacock Room by the architect Thomas Jeckyll.⁹

The London artworld also included people like the dealer Murray Marks.¹⁰ He was the person who ties together many of the artists and collectors, among them Leyland, Jeckyll, and Whistler. Marks supplied artists and collectors alike with ceramics, both Chinese and Japanese. For example, Marks worked with the Rossettis, Leyland, Whistler, and a number of other collectors, including a surgeon named Henry Thompson (1820–94). Whistler illustrated Thompson's collection in a deluxe catalogue commissioned by Marks (figs. 8 and 9). Unlike those seen in Whistler's paintings, the ceramics in these drawings are quite accurate representations of actual objects.



Fig. 8. James McNeill Whistler, Charles Meunier, and Henry Thompson, *A Catalogue of Blue and White Nankin Porcelain Forming the Collection of Sir Henry Thompson*, 1878, London. Ink on paper bound between boards covered with calfskin, goatskin, porcelain, silver, gold, and patterned silk; H. 10¼", W. 8 1/16". The Walters Art Museum, Acc. 92.1090, acquired by Henry Walter, 1902.



Fig. 9. James McNeill Whistler, *Still Life* (illustration for Plate XVIII in *A Catalogue of Blue and White Nankin Porcelain Forming the Collection of Sir Henry Thompson*), 1878, London. Ink and watercolor wash on cream wove paper; H. 8¾", W. 7116". Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Acc. F1898.415, Gift of Charles Lang Freer.

Murray Marks also invented, or, in a sense, reinvented, the taste for this material, and he is the one to whom we can really attribute the development of what was widely parodied as Chinamania. But why? Marks himself was Dutch, like so many of the prominent figures who were called “Oriental” art dealers at that time. He acquired most of his material in the Netherlands where, in the 1860s, Chinese porcelain, particularly the blue and white, was not very expensive. He was able to bring that material to London and, essentially, create a new desire for it. One of the most popular types of porcelain, which belonged to a number of people who were actors in this story, was the one portrayed on Murray Marks’ trade card ([fig. 10](#)). Called a ginger jar, the Victorians knew the pattern as a hawthorn design, because dealers at that time did not recognize its decoration as a flowering plum. These types of jars were avidly collected by Whistler, the Rossettis, and Louis Huth (1821–1905), a collector and erstwhile patron of Whistler’s.¹¹ Like them, Leyland was a client of Marks, and Marks helped recommend people like Whistler and Thomas Jeckyll to Leyland for the decoration of his home. And Leyland, as we have noted, also owned Whistler’s *Princess from the Land of Porcelain* ([fig. 11](#)), which is a key to the history of the Peacock Room.



Fig. 10. Trade card for London art dealer Murray Marks, ca. 1875.



Fig. 11. James McNeill Whistler, *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (*La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine*), 1863–65. Oil on canvas; H. 79516", W. 451116". Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Acc. F1903.91a-b, Gift of Charles Lang Freer.

So, to encapsulate these ideas: Whistler is often presented as an isolate, an eccentric, but he was really operating in a mutually reinforcing interpretive community where the boundaries between selling objects, collecting them, representing them, and advertising them overlapped and were very much a part of a

class- and consumer-conscious Victorian art world. At the same time, it is also the worth underscoring the point made earlier that Whistler's interest in porcelain and in other East Asian objects coincided with his desire for artistic reinvention in the mid-1860s. Porcelain was "other," in both a cultural and material sense, *and* it had a strong identification with interior design; those qualities helped to focus Whistler's attention and facilitated his retreat to the studio. As Linda Merrill reminds us, it was in Whistler's "Ten O'Clock lecture" of 1885, delivered to distance himself from both the moralism and commercialism of the Aesthetic movement, that he declared that the primal work of art was not a painting but a pot.¹² He thus retroactively positioned his porcelain-inspired paintings and their apotheosis in the Peacock Room as the foundation of his aesthetic metamorphosis.

To emphasize the statement made earlier about Whistler's approach to "translation": he never traveled to Asia. He had no interest in knowing anything about its past or present cultures or histories. The decorative vessels, about which he knew next to nothing beyond what he could see, became for him representations of the type of ideal beauty that he was trying to represent in his own artwork. Whistler bought his porcelains on the secondary market. These were objects that had been circulating for a long time in the West. They were already at several removes from their point of origin. We can problematize this through the lens of postcolonial theory, but for Whistler the porcelains really seemed to have no meaning other than the purpose that they served for him and his art. That, at least, was how he treated them. They were forms without content, signs awaiting a new narrative, a narrative he would impose but that, as we've said, was situated in a particular interpretive community that arose in Chelsea and South Kensington in the 1860s and 1870s.

The Porcelains and Rooms for Porcelain

In the 1860s and 1870s, beyond the art market, porcelains in general, and Kangxi blue and whites in particular, were part of the fabric of British life. They appeared in middle-class homes, displayed, generally, in the dining room. They were, in a sense, very mundane domestic objects, so we need to remove that notion of exoticism from their interpretation in Whistler's work. You can see exactly what Whistler learned from the porcelain, in design terms, in *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (fig. 11), which became part of the Peacock Room. In *The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks* (fig. 5), he names the picture and its subject after the marks that you could see on many Chinese porcelains, but he was also borrowing the way that women were depicted on these types of porcelains, and those, in turn, are borrowing from the way women are depicted in a very particular genre of Chinese painting, which was translated and transferred to porcelain (so-called *meiren tu* beautiful woman pictures). In China, very fine paintings picturing beautiful ladies often were painted for the court and then translated onto more ordinary materials like porcelain that were more widely circulated (fig. 12). So, Whistler was actually encountering design motifs that originally came from imperial Chinese painting, were

“translated” through into the medium of porcelain, removing their imperial connections, and commodified by international trade; and this became very popular in Britain.



Fig. 12. *Courtesans with Fan and Flute*, Qing dynasty, seventeenth-eighteenth century, China. Ink and color on silk; H. 61½", W. 34½". Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Acc. F1916.107, Gift of Charles Lang Freer.

Glazer, in her conversation with Pierson, noted in the *Princess from the Land of Porcelain* we have a typical commingling of Chinese and Japanese elements, but for Whistler it was most assuredly a “Chinese” picture. The model is dressed, not in a correct way, but, nevertheless, in a Japanese costume; she stands before a Japanese folding screen. But he called the painting *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, and the porcelain of the title would have connoted China to the Victorians. That association would have been reinforced by the vase in the background, and also by the sinuous pose of the figure, which may recall Japanese *ukiyo-e* genre art. Whistler would have known about these figures through woodblock prints, but many people would have identified them more readily as one of the “lanky ladies” that decorate Chinese vases ([fig. 13](#)). Interestingly, the painting was not meant as a site-specific work. Whistler painted it in 1864 as an exhibition piece, and showed it in London, Paris, and Brighton before Frederick Leyland ultimately purchased it in 1872. We know very little about the interior Leyland first installed it in, a house in Queen’s Gate. It was when Leyland moved to 49 Prince’s Gate that the *Princess* began to live up to her name, when Leyland displayed the picture in the dining room that he intended to fill with more than 300 pieces of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain.



Fig. 13. Baluster vase (one of three in a five-piece garniture), Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign, 1662–1722, China. Porcelain with cobalt pigment under clear colorless glaze; H. 171516", W. 6¾". Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Acc. F1980.192a–c, Gift of Myron S. Falk Jr. and his sisters, Mrs. Mildred F. Loew and Mrs. Eleanor F. Lenzner.

One of Leyland's ambitions was to raise his social position by transforming his house into a palace of art. He hired a host of artists and decorators and designers to create lavish interiors. He bought antique furniture, Old Masters and Pre-Raphaelite paintings, and more works by Whistler. With his porcelain collection and Whistler's *Princess* as the impetus, Leyland hired Thomas Jeckyll to redesign and redecorate the dining room. Jeckyll, known for his embrace of an Anglo-Asian grammar of ornament, devised an eclectic scheme consisting of an elaborately honeycombed ceiling with Jacobean ribbing and pierced metal pendant lamps, and walls covered with patterned gilded leather. He designed a scaffold of carved shelving, its openings tailored to the standard sizes and shapes of Kangxi porcelain. Over a blue-tiled fireplace flanked by gilded sunflower andirons, was the *Princess*, literally ensconced in a land of porcelain ([fig. 14](#)). The setting riffed on both the European notion of a Chinese garden pavilion and on the *porzellanzimmer*, the seventeenth-century architectural prototype developed when the European aristocracy first began to collect Chinese porcelain.



Fig. 14. Thomas Jeckyll's decoration of the dining room at 49 Prince's Gate, London, as it may have appeared in 1876. Illustration by Tennessee Dixon for *The Princess and the Peacocks; or, the Story of the Room* by Linda Merrill and Sarah Ridley (New York: Hyperion, 1993), fig. 5.1, 190.

There was a reason why Leyland and those who were advising him felt he should have a porcelain room. It was a standard way for a gentleman to assert his place in society, particularly someone who was a businessman and trying to achieve greater social status by virtue of wealth. He needed to have a porcelain room, and it was Murray Marks who told Leyland that, for the same reason, he needed to have a porcelain collection. Jeckyll's design reflected that long history of porcelain rooms and Chinese pavilions, which were popular signifiers of social status; but were the porcelains more than just decoration or objects along the wall? Were they performing the same function as the paintings in the room?

The Paintings

Glazer suggested in the 2018 conversation that by the time Whistler was done with the room, the porcelains had become part of a totalizing painterly composition. But what decorative or aesthetic function was the porcelain performing at this pre-Whistler moment in the room's history? Glazer believes that Whistler felt that the porcelain and the other decorative elements, particularly the leather wall hangings, were not consonant *enough* with his painting, that somehow the objects were too assertive and too present: it was too much of a porcelain cabinet and not enough of a showcase of *his* painting. And Whistler got his chance to rectify that when Leyland invited him to make some recommendations to Jeckyll about what color to paint the doors and woodwork of the nearly finished room. Whistler, with the

approval of patron and architect, applied squares of Dutch metal to the doors and dado panels, allowing them to partially oxidize and shimmer with iridescence. Next, he painted, tentatively at first, a blue-and-gold pattern, inspired by Jeckyll's wave pattern on the leaded-glass pantry door but also evocative of peacock plumage. He painted it first on the double cornice, and then later throughout the room. These initial, modest modifications to Jeckyll's scheme were well received, and everybody seemed to think the room was done. But Jeckyll, who suffered from frail health, had to stop working. Leyland and his family, meanwhile, left London. Alone and unsupervised, Whistler's imagination took flight. He proceeded to undertake a radical redecoration of the room, gilding the shelves and, making them function more like picture frames, pictorializing the pots. He literally covered every surface with elaborate patterns derived from peacock plumage (figs. 15–17). The sources of the peacock patterns are multiple: he was looking at Byzantine mosaics, Japanese prints, Japanese paintings, textiles, published illustrations of polychrome Japanese ceramics, even scientific discourse, in which avian colors were part of a growing corpus of literature around sexual selection in the animal kingdom. He also likened the room to the inside of a Japanese lacquer box, and, to that end, he painted the inside of the shutters with monumental gilded peacocks (fig. 17). Jeckyll had emphasized the easterly prospect of the room, which overlooked a private park. Whistler, however, emphasized the enclosed, nocturnal aspect of a dining room. The peacocks would only come out when the shutters were closed and the gas lights and candles were lit. Ultimately, what Whistler ended up doing is effacing Jeckyll's version of the room, transforming it from a porcelain cabinet into a total work of art, and he signified this transformation by giving it a musical title, *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, as if it were one of his paintings.



Fig. 15. Detail of the Peacock Room ceiling. Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Acc. F1904.61, Gift of Charles Lang Freer.



Fig. 16. Detail of the Peacock Room shelving on the north wall. Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Acc. F1904.61, Gift of Charles Lang Freer.



Fig. 17. Detail of the Peacock Room shutters on the east wall. Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Acc. F1904.61, Gift of Charles Lang Freer.

As Pierson noted in the talk with Glazer, in the case of the Peacock Room, we can legitimately use the German notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total work of art”), because Whistler was not just decorating the room but also controlling the experience of being in it. He was also working with it as if it were a three-dimensional painting using various materials. It would be interesting to know how much of the Peacock Room is reflective of what Whistler would have consciously considered an Asian aesthetic. In Pierson’s view, it was not that specific, because he appeared to have borrowed from so many different influences. What then happened to the experience of this work of art when the room was no longer at 49 Prince’s Gate?

After Prince's Gate

Because of Whistler's successful efforts to publicize his work and because of the very public argument it provoked with Leyland, the Peacock Room quickly became an object of fascination in the London artworld. Despite his professed aversion, Leyland would let people come into the room and tour it. As previously mentioned, after Leyland's death, all of his artwork was sold at auction, including his porcelain. The room was denuded of the *Princess* and the Chinese porcelain. The new owner of the house at Prince's Gate, Blanche Watney, was not a collector, and she never really liked the Peacock Room. When she realized that Whistler's decorations and Jeckyll's architectural elements were removable, she decided to offer the room for sale. The sale in 1904, the year after Whistler's death, occurred when the market values for his work were soaring. The Peacock Room was exhibited at the Obach & Co. gallery, where Freer ultimately purchased it.

Freer was already well known as a collector of Japanese and Chinese art and as America's foremost collector of Whistler's work. Even so, convincing him to buy the Peacock Room took some effort. Freer seems to have thought it was a little bit of an embarrassment, burdened by anecdotes unflattering to the artist that he admired above all others. Also, one of the gaps in Freer's collecting was Chinese porcelain: he didn't like its slick surfaces and strong colors. Glazer suggested that he saw it in some ways as a relic of a now-old-fashioned Chinamania, and maybe, on account of its long history on the European market, not even as authentically "Asian" as the ceramics he acquired from Japanese dealers in Boston and New York. His interest in the room was due to Whistler, not to its ever-fainter connection to Asian aesthetics. Freer eventually bought the room out of a sense of duty to Whistler, keeping the room intact to preserve the artist's legacy. Once moved across the Atlantic Ocean, he had it reassembled in a specially build annex to his home in Detroit. There, it no longer functioned as a dining room, yet it was not an art object either. It remained an empty space for a number of years while Freer tried to figure out what to do with it. This was the period when Freer began to plan the transfer of his collection of Asian and American works of art to the Smithsonian. That bequest was formalized in 1906, and Freer decided, two years later (and four years after purchasing the room), to use the Peacock Room as a space to stage and curate his own ceramics collection.

Freer's ceramics collection was pan-Asian, and he eventually chose more than 250 pots to fill the room (figs. [2](#), [4](#), [16](#), [19](#)). The collection was from Syria, Iran, Iraq, Japan, China, and Korea, and ranged in date from ancient times up to the early twentieth century ([fig. 18](#)). Using archival photographs, Glazer oversaw the 2011 reinstallation of the room in this guise, making it possible to accurately view how the room would have appeared at a particular moment in 1908 ([fig. 19](#)). The effect is very different from the Victorian iteration, even though the room became once more a showcase for Asian ceramics. The wares for the most part are monochromes. They were made in many different places and times, with iridescent

glazes and complicated surface textures in shades of turquoise, jade green, and golden brown that harmonized with the tertiary tones of Whistler's blue-and-gold painted decorations.



Fig. 18. Freer Gallery of Art staff preparing to install the exhibition *The Peacock Room Comes to America*, 2011. Photo by John Tstantes.



Fig. 19. The Peacock Room, south wall, with Freer's ceramics. Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Acc. F1904.61, Gift of Charles Lang Freer.

What was revelatory to Glazer about this iteration of the room, which had been known only through black-and-white photographs and never been experienced in color after Freer's time, was that the reinstallation made clear that Freer was not using the room as open storage for his vast collection. He was being intentional and selective, treating the room in what Glazer would characterize as an aesthetic laboratory, experimenting with various chromatic arrangements, often seeming to treat the pots as strokes of color on a three-dimensional canvas (figs. [2](#), [16](#), and [19](#)).

Pierson observed that while Freer was repurposing the room he was still using it as display space for ceramics. How, then, did Freer conceive of this room as part of his Whistler collection? Since Freer also collected bronzes, for example, why not install bronzes in the room? What was it about the ceramics in the room that seemed so essential to it?

Freer's Reinstallation of the Room

Glazer's explanation to the question of why ceramics remained central to the room even after Freer purchased it is that Jeckyll designed the room and its shelf openings to display porcelains, although some of Freer's ceramics do not fit as neatly into the shelves as Leyland's blue-and-white pots did. Freer did exhibit other works of art in the room, but not in the context of the shelves. The orientation of the room to those in Leyland's house had changed; in Freer's time, the leaded-glass door that originally led to the butler's pantry now led to a fireproof safe that contained objects in Freer's collection. The Peacock Room had become a gallery. Freer reportedly delighted in bringing out one or two nonceramic pieces from his collection to share with friends and collectors in the room. He would put them on an Italian baroque library table, purchased in Detroit, that occupied the center of the room. There are photographs showing some rather complex early Chinese bronzes situated on the furniture in the room, though, again, not on the shelves. Another of the other things that Freer did in the room was stage an exhibition of his third-century biblical manuscripts, which was restaged in the Freer Gallery shortly after the 2011 reinstallation. Much to Glazer's surprise, the Freer biblical manuscripts worked well in the space and were not at all discordant or distracting; they seemed to be part of the whole. Although the room seemed such an expression of Whistler's artistic sensibility, in which the blue-and-white porcelain was a key element, it has been surprisingly amenable to other forms of display. That observation gets at the question of how Freer saw the room: Did he view it as an extension of his Whistler collection or as an embodiment of a particularly Asian aesthetic?

Freer certainly saw Whistler as a link uniting "East" and "West," but he was not operating as a scholarly collector interested in taxonomies and chronologies. Instead, Freer was a subjective collector who saw all the objects he acquired as serving a kind of *decorative* function. The works of art were not interesting to Freer as individual objects only, but in the ways in which they could be seen as forming a transcultural, ahistorical "story of the beautiful." Freer himself did not invoke the Whistlerian phrasing that concludes Whistler's 1885 "Ten O'Clock lecture" verbatim, but it is nevertheless the most apt way to understand Freer's approach. Whistler's full statement in the 1885 lecture collapses the temporal, cultural, and material differences between classical Greek architecture and the decorative imagery on a Japanese fan devised by the greatest of the Edo period artists: "The story of the beautiful is already complete—hewn in the marbles of the Parthenon—and brodered, with the birds, upon the fan of Hokusai—at the foot of Fusi-yama." For Whistler, the Peacock Room was a demonstration of his self-proclaimed

status as one of the chosen “who,” as he said, “shall continue what has gone before.”¹³ In his role as curator of his own collection, Freer claimed a similar privilege for himself. Shortly after installing the Peacock Room with his Asian ceramics, he posed for a series of portraits by Alvin Langdon Coburn that include disparate objects from his collection. The one where he is comparing the complicated glazes of a Raqqa pot to a Whistler nude is among the most iconic (fig. 20). The museum reproduces the image often because it so accurately captures Freer’s notion of himself as a seer of harmonious formal correspondences. But, after the collection, including the Peacock Room and its ceramics, was moved to Washington, DC, Freer’s cosmopolitan aestheticism became less self-evident.

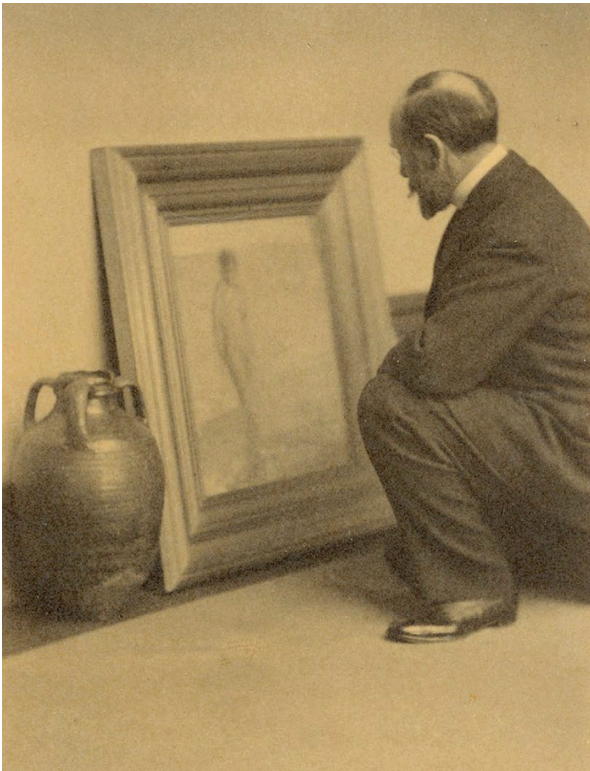


Fig. 20. Charles Lang Freer comparing Whistler’s *Venus Rising from the Sea* (Freer Gallery of Art, Acc. F1903.174) to an Islamic glazed ceramic pot (Freer Gallery of Art, F1905.61), 1909. Photograph by Alvin Langdon Coburn. Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Peacock Room in the Museum

And that brings us back to one of the points made earlier. Now that this room is housed in a very particular institution, it becomes problematic again, but in a quite different way. What is the issue with the Peacock Room being displayed in an Asian art museum and how is that problem being addressed today?

One of the problems with the transfer of the room to the museum was not anticipated by Freer, even though he took a very active role in the design and organization of the building. Freer worked with

Charles Platt, the architect, stipulating that the Peacock Room would be located at the southeast corner of the museum, a mini-palazzo organized around an interior courtyard. The whole south side of the museum comprised galleries devoted to Whistler's art, and those on the east side were for the arts of China. So, in Freer's scheme, the Peacock Room became the literal intersection of the art of Whistler and the art of China, a meeting point of East and West through a common language of beauty. That idea went a little awry when Freer was convinced, several months before his death, to add a codicil to his will allowing for the future acquisition of Asian objects to the collection but retaining the restriction on additions of American works of art. The result was that within a few years his American collection began to seem like a biographical relic.

From its opening in 1923, the museum has been overseen by scholars of Asian art or history. The first curator, John Lodge, oversaw its displays in a scholarly and connoisseurial way, so that galleries were organized by cultural geography, chronology, and so forth. This approach superseded the display of ceramics in the Peacock Room, and so for many years the room had a half-hearted smattering of Japanese, Chinese, and sometimes American Pewabic pottery on the shelves. But the room was not presented as a decorated space that needed to be filled with ceramics of some kind. It was not until the arrival of curators David Park Curry and Linda Merrill, the latter trained as a scholar of Whistler and Victorian aestheticism, that an argument was made for understanding the room according to Whistler's aesthetic vision.

In the early 1990s, Merrill worked very closely with a team of conservators, including Joyce Hill Stoner, to bring the room back to its original blue-and-gold splendor. Restored to its Whistlerian color harmonies, the room seemed to cry out for the blue-and-white porcelains that had originally been there. Merrill, Louise Cort, and Jan Stuart acquired about eighty-two Kangxi pots. Although they were not able to recreate the original massed effect of the Victorian iteration, their installation gave a visual impression of what the room might have looked like during Whistler's time. That iteration of the room endured for nearly twenty years, from 1993 until 2011. When Glazer joined the curatorial staff in 2007, she found the presentation had become problematic within the institutional framework of the museum: it did not say much about the history of the room in the context of Freer's biography or the museum's origins as a monument to cosmopolitanism. For this reason Glazer undertook the 2011 reinstallation.

The open question for current and future curators—and the problem, unanticipated by Freer, of transferring the Peacock Room from London to Michigan to Washington DC—is how to continue to communicate to visitors of the museum that the room should not be treated as a static icon, that it has had a dynamic history and many lives. It only achieved stasis when it came into the museum. How do we keep reactivating the Peacock Room and presenting multiple narratives in ways that are meaningful to visitors while considering the problematics of cosmopolitanism and cultural translation?

¹“The Studios,” *Punch, or the London Charivari* 72 (March 17, 1877): 109.

²Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Britain's Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 6.

³Lydia H. Liu, "Introduction," in *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations*, ed. Lydia Liu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 1.

⁴Craig Calhoun, "Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Social Imaginary," *Daedalus* 137 (Summer 2008): 111, 106.

⁵The definitive history, including an account of the room's reception through the early twentieth century, is Linda Merrill, *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁶Anna McNeill Whistler to James H. Gamble, February 10, 1864, in *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, 1855–1903*, ed. Margaret F. MacDonald, Patricia de Montfort, and Nigel Thorp; including *The Correspondence of Anna McNeill Whistler, 1855–1880*, ed. Georgia Toutziari, University of Glasgow, GUW 11983, online at <http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence>.

⁷Stacey Pierson, *Collectors, Collections, and Museums: The Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain, 1560–1960* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 66–68.

⁸Stacey Pierson, *Private Collecting, Exhibitions, and the Shaping of Art History in London: The Burlington Fine Arts Club* (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2017).

⁹Owen Jones, *Grammar of Ornament* (London: Day and Son, Lithographers to the Queen, Gate Street, Lincoln's Inn Fields, 1856).

¹⁰See George Charles Williamson, *Murray Marks and His Friends: A Tribute of Regard* (London: J. Lane, 1919), and Clive Wainwright, "'A gatherer and disposer of other men's stuffe': Murray Marks, Connoisseur and Curiosity Dealer," *Journal of the History of Collections* 14, no. 1 (May 2002): 161–76.

¹¹See, for instance, Pierson, *Private Collecting*, 79.

¹²Merrill, *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography*, 43.

¹³*Mr. Whistler's "Ten O'Clock"* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1888), 29.