

Hunting for Old Paper with James McNeill Whistler

James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) was very interested in effects. He was flamboyant and dressed like a dandy with a broad-brimmed hat, a cane, and a monocle. As a serious artist and printmaker, he knew that the paper, as well as the ink colors, could change the look and mood of a picture, and he liked to experiment.

Whistler was fairly consistent in his choices of paper for pastels, watercolors, and drawings. His pastels are most often on brown paper, making the chalk lines look bright and intense. For watercolors he used contemporary paper with a medium weight and texture and a very light color which could also be one of the colors in the painting. His drawings are usually on the smooth off-white paper of ordinary sketch books.

However, for prints, Whistler used a variety of papers. Like many artists then and now, he thought that old paper, especially old Dutch paper, was better quality and more beautiful than new paper. One of the purposes in surveying the extensive collection of Whistler prints in the Freer Gallery, was to see how many of them are on old paper and how Whistler identified a sheet of paper as "old."

Some of the characteristics of old paper are a somewhat uneven distribution of the fibers, dark stripes beside the chain lines, a watermark, creases, wear, and dirt. Dard Hunter uses the term "antique laid" to describe paper made by hand approximately before 1800, when the design of the paper mold caused the fibers to collect along the chain lines and look like dark stripes.¹ Many of the Whistler prints in the Freer Gallery have one or more of these characteristics of age.

Watermarks first appeared in paper around 1282 and are still appearing. It is not clear why they were first made, but eventually, they became the signatures of papermakers and symbols of quality or sheet size. Handmade paper was formed on twin molds. Early watermarks were pictorial and were sewn on the wire cloth of one mold. By the end of the 17th century initials or names were being sewn on the other mold.

In the Freer Gallery, watermarks in the Whistler print papers start with *Sketches on the Coast Survey Plate* (K.1), etched in 1854-5 when Whistler was twenty years old. Out of 464 prints examined so far, 193 are on paper with a watermark. About sixty-five watermarks have been found, roughly one-third names or initials and two-thirds pictorial symbols. The four most frequent watermarks are the arms of Amsterdam, the Fleur de Lis, the Pro Patria, and the Posthorn. They appear in many variations and seldom match because they were used freely by a number of paper mills over a long period of time.

The arms of Amsterdam is probably the only one that Whistler could have been sure was of Dutch origin. The Fleur de Lis began about 1285. It used to refer to the French coat of arms and was used by Dutch paper makers when the Low Countries were ruled by the House of Burgundy. In the 18th century Benjamin Franklin adopted it, putting his initials below. The Posthorn has been found on paper documents dating from the last part of the 14th century. Like the Fleur de Lis, it has many variations and was used by Dutch papermakers, among others. The Pro Patria or Maid of Holland watermark was used mostly by Dutch paper makers and became very popular beginning in the 17th century. It was also known as Britannia, especially if it was destined for the English market. Other well-known watermarks found in the Whistler print papers are the foolscap, the arms of London, and a crown with GR below. Otto Bacher, one of Whistler's "followers" in Venice in the late 1870's, observed that "Whistler printed many of his etchings on old Venetian paper....In order to procure this particular kind, he wandered among the old, musty, second-hand book-shops, buying all the old books that had a few blank pages which he cut out for his printing."² In the Freer collection, only one image of Venice (*The Dyer*, K219) is printed on paper with the Venetian watermark of three crescent moons known as Tre Luna.

The watermarks in the Whistler print papers indicate that Whistler did find quite a lot of paper made in the 18th

century or earlier and a good deal of it was Dutch. Paper making began in Holland in the 15th century, and production was very high by the early eighteenth century. A hundred and fifty years later, there seems to have been a lot of it still around when Whistler was hunting for it. Whistler also used contemporary papers with their watermarks clearly visible: Blauw, Van Gelder, and Van der Ley, (Dutch paper mills with long histories), Forge, Barry, Rives, PD, S. Wise & Co. 1825.

Besides watermarks and "antique" laid lines, Whistler saw other signs of quality and age in the papers he chose for printing: Creases and worm holes, discreetly placed and not too numerous, and dirt. One of Whistler's devoted followers, Mortimer Menpes, wrote that "'dirt'...[was] absent from Whistler's vocabulary,-- a word which was always translated into 'tone.'"³ Many of the Whistler prints in the Freer Gallery are "toned" with dirt. I wondered if Whistler printed *over* the dirt or if dirt had drifted gradually *over* his printing until I saw an etching of Elinor Leyland (K. 109, F09.114). Below the image, Charles Freer had written and erased two lines of text, leaving two clean horizontal stripes.

"Tone" can also mean color. In books about Whistler and Whistler's prints, there are many references to his love of old and Dutch paper and to the gold tone and rich mellow color of the paper. Most of the print papers in the Freer Gallery collection are shades of white. Only the Japanese papers look golden. However, in the Lucas Collection in the Baltimore Museum of Art, the twelve etchings of the *French Set* are printed on yellow India paper and mounted on large sheets of heavy white wove paper, another example of Whistler's interest in appearances. There are only a few prints on paper of other colors in the Freer collection; for example, *The Title to the French Set*, (K25) on blue paper and *San Biagio* (K197), an etching from the second Venice Set, on brown paper.

An unknown, old-fashioned handwriting in brown ink on a sheet of paper can have an exotic effect. Page numbers and lines of Latin or Flemish appear on some of the blank paper that Whistler collected. He must have liked them because he did not trim them and accommodated them by printing his images off center.

This study of the Whistler prints in the Freer Gallery has been very helpful with decisions about the conservation of the collection. In the early 1970's, when the problem of acidic paper seemed overwhelming, some of the Whistler prints were tested and found to have a pH below neutral. Two out of a series of five etchings of *The Wine Glass* (K27) were chosen for treatment. Each of the five prints is on a different type of paper, two newer and three older, and are a good example of Whistler's experiments with the effects of different papers and images. The two prints were chosen also because they were foxed or dirty. Washing reduced the foxing on the contemporary printing paper of one print but

hardly affected the grey surface dirt and lines of black grime in the older paper of the other print.

The current study has made it clear that both Whistler and Freer appreciated the relationship between image and support and particularly liked old and unique papers. The treatment for most of the prints has now changed to simply removing them from their old mats made in the 1920's, '30's, and '40's, taking off old hinges, and rehousing them in new matboard folders. It seems like a good way of preserving the structure of the object as well as the beauty of the print as Whistler and Freer saw it.

NOTES

1. Hunter, Dard. 1978. *Papermaking: The History and Technique of an Ancient Craft*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 121-3.
2. Bacher, Otto. 1908. *With Whistler in Venice*. New York: The Century Co. 122.
3. Menpes, Mortimer, 1904. *Whistler As I Knew Him*. London. 118.

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