Fresh Impressions

Whistler's quest to find a unique Venice.

By Patti Verbanas

John Singer Sargent's "Campo dei Frari, Venice" (above, left), 1880, watercolor over pencil with gouache on paper. Whistler's etching "The Piazzetta" (above, right), 1880.

When The Fine Art Society in London commissioned James McNeill Whistler to produce a set of 12 etchings in Venice over a three-month period in 1879, it couldn't have come at a better time. Financially devastated from his notorious libel suit against art critic John Ruskin and labeled persona non grata by most of London's elite after a very public altercation with his patron Frederick R. Leyland, Whistler needed to resuscitate his career—and fast. So, as his worldly possessions were being sold to pay his debts, the artist set off for Venice, and when he left 14 months later, both the city and a new generation of young artists were never quite the same.

At the time of Whistler's arrival, Venice was far from uncharted artistic territory. The city's ubiquitous canals and monuments had been popular subjects for painters and printmakers for two centuries, with the likes of Canaletto and J.M.W. Turner depicting its architectural attributes for Grand Tourists and armchair travelers alike. In a word, Venice had been *done*, which proved a challenge for Whistler, who abhorred being thought of as part of the crowd. He had to determine what he could do to put his unique stamp on the city's vistas that would reinstate his star status in London. And much to the annoyance of The Fine Art Society, such creativity could not be had in a mere three months; Whistler's stay lasted almost a year longer than expected and cost nearly three times the budgeted amount.

Whistler's decision to extend his stay was a serendipitous one, however. Had he left when originally planned, he would never have befriended American painter Frank Duveneck and his students, who were spending that summer in Venice. The ensuing relationship between Whistler and the "Duveneck Boys," as they were called, was marvelously symbiotic: He fed their imaginations and creativity; they fed his insatiable ego. And the impression Whistler left with these students—and with other young artists, such as John Singer Sargent—is evident in their iconoclastic images of such a well-portrayed city.

During this centennial year of Whistler's death, the exhibition "Whistler and His Circle in Venice" reunites the master with the Duveneck Boys and other

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artists influenced by his work: Sargent, Duveneck, Otto Bacher, Mortimer Menpes, Robert Blum, Joseph Pennell, John Marin and Alfred Stieglitz. The extensive show of more than 120 works—etchings, pastels and watercolors primarily, with a small collection of oil paintings—is on view through May 5 in two Washington, D.C., venues: The Corcoran Gallery of Art and Freer Gallery of Art, which owns one of the two greatest Whistler collections in the world. It can be seen at The Grolier Club in New York City from September 17 to November 22. "The show illustrates how widespread Whistler's influence was on how other artists saw Venice and how that shapes our vision today," says Eric Denker, curator of prints and drawings at the Corcoran, who organized the show.

Whistler's "The Old Marble Palace," 1880, chalk and pastel on brown paper.

As Whistler sought his muse in Venice's anonymous structures and vistas, the first subjects he eschewed were tourist icons, such as the Piazza San Marco and the Palazzo Ducale. In his quest for new vantage points, he meandered through back alleys, perched on isolated bridges and watched average Venetians attend to their daily business of bead-stringing, fish-selling, even begging. But before he could begin his series, one of the coldest winters in Venetian history set in. "I am an invalid and a prisoner," he wrote to The Fine Art Society. After recounting such tribulations as "standing in the snow with a plate in my hand and an icicle on the end of my nose," he told them he needed more time and money to complete the commission. "Beautiful work," he insisted, "cannot be finished in bodily agony."

Despite the discomfort the winter

brought, it did register a natural light that inspired Whistler's artistic sensibilities. Temporarily setting aside his copper etching plate, the shivering artist braved the daylight hours outside, memorizing the light and sketching in charcoal outlines of courtyards, canals and bridges on coarse brown paper to which he would later add details in his studio. In his compositions, Whistler started in the center of the page with the motif, expanded it out from the middle, but stopped short of the sheet's edge, feeling no need to continue to the margins simply to fill the space, Denker explains. While Whistler didn't invent elements in his works, he selectively chose the key elements, "suggestive details" that defined his subjects. "His predilection for finishing only the important aspects of the design, while leaving the marginal and other areas incomplete, was central to the avant-garde nature of his art," Denker says.

Frank Duveneck's "Riva Degli Schiavoni, #1," 1880, etching and drypoint.

In his etchings, Whistler continued to thumb his nose at any notion that his art could be considered merely tourist souvenirs. His were not images one could buy as postcards. Drawing his subjects directly onto the prepared etching plate, he allowed the normal reversal of the printing process to render the scene in mirror image. And, since the subjects Whistler selected were obscure, most viewers would never even realize that the vignette was in fact reversed. In Whistler's Venice, ornate columns fade away, adjacent grandiose palaces do not exist and scaffolding is highlighted, not ignored. The ordinary is celebrated. In his print "The Doorway," for example, the entrance to a chair factory appears to be right on the Grand Canal, but in reality the door sits above a sliver of water—only a few gondolas wide—wedged between buildings.

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Whistler's 1880 etching "The Doorway."

"The view is across a canal of indeterminate width, and Whistler gives no indication of the size or structure of the remainder of the buildings," Denker notes. "Instead, he focuses upon the inherent geometric shapes of the openings in the facades and the decorative patterns."

Many of the young artists who saw such works appreciated Whistler's fresh approach to his subject matter; for example, Sargent similarly portrayed everyday Venetian subjects, and Pennell and Marin, among others, also chose not to reverse their etched images. However, Whistler's "centralized composition based on the vignette and his lighter handling of the etching needle that left broad areas of the plate untouched was not immediately understood by many younger printmakers; Pennell and Bacher are two of the exceptions," Denker says.

Decades after Whistler left Venice, his biographers Joseph and Elizabeth Pennell would write that the work produced during those 14 months is better known than any he ever did; in fact, these 50-plus etchings and approximately 100 pastels re-established his flagging artistic reputation and marked a turning point in his career. And though he rose to the challenge of discovering a more intimate, personal Venice, in the end, even the city's simple charms proved to be an overwhelming wellspring of inspiration for the artist. "There is work for more than a lifetime in it and a delight in it all," he wrote to his friend and artist Matthew Robinson Elden. "Indeed that is the danger of the place—You are perfectly bewildered with the entanglement of beautiful things!" □