

James Abbott McNeill WHISTLER (Lowell 1834 - London 1903)

Hastings
Watercolour.

Numbered 9432 in pencil on the verso.

136 x 225 mm. (5 3/8 x 8 7/8 in.)

Whistler had only rarely worked in watercolour before 1880, when he returned to London from Venice. From then onwards, however, he painted numerous small-scale and highly atmospheric landscape watercolours – usually measuring approximately five by eight inches or six by twelve inches – of views along the Thames, the Kent coast, the Channel Islands and Cornwall, as well as Holland. Indeed, watercolour was the medium with which he may have been said to have reinvented himself as an artist. As one early writer has noted, 'Whistler's water-colours are as perfect in their way as the pastels. The artist has never strained his medium, has never tried to get the same results as if using pigment. Very often his drawings in water-colour are not much more than notes, with the result that they are always surprisingly spontaneous and fresh in appearance, and that his delicate and transparent washes of captivating colour are always a delight.' Some two hundred watercolours by Whistler are known, of which the largest collections are today in the Freer Gallery of Art (Smithsonian Institution) in Washington, D.C. and the Hunterian Art Gallery in Glasgow.

Around 150 small watercolours by Whistler can be dated to the decade of the 1880s, as well as numerous small oils, pastels and prints. The artist preferred not to exhibit these intimate works at the Royal Academy, where they would have been overwhelmed by the surrounding paintings. Instead, he showed them at small, independent galleries, where he took personal charge of the hanging, wall colours, decoration and lighting, as well as the design of the invitations and even the uniforms worn by the gallery attendants. Furthermore, the works were hung with a large amount of space between them, unlike the traditional crowded picture hang of the Victorian exhibition hall. As he had with his paintings, Whistler also designed the gilt frames for his watercolours, which he chose to frame without mounts, thereby according them the status of oil paintings. As he wrote in 1873, 'my frames I have designed as carefully as my pictures – and thus they form as important a part as any of the rest of the work.'

The artist first showed his watercolours in public at an exhibition of small-scale works, entitled"Notes" – "Harmonies" – "Nocturnes", at the Dowdeswell Gallery in London in 1884. The exhibition included thirty-eight oil paintings, three pastels and twenty-six watercolours. Two years later a second "Notes" – "Harmonies" – "Nocturnes" show at the same Bond Street gallery was dominated by watercolours,

which numbered forty-eight in total, alongside twelve paintings, eight pastels and seven drawings. A third exhibition of such works, with the same title, was held at the Wunderlich gallery in New York in 1889. As an anonymous reviewer of the 1886 exhibition noted, 'Mr. Whistler would confer a real boon on artists if, in his next lecture, especially addressed to them, he would reveal how he obtains the marvellous transparency of colour which he can throw at times into his sea and air. Is it the result of happy accident, or of profound study?'

This small, fresh watercolour depicts the cliffs above the coastal town of Hastings, in East Sussex. In the summer of 1875, Whistler's brother William had persuaded their elderly mother, for reasons of her health, to leave the artist's home and studio in Lindsey Row in Chelsea, where she had been living, and move to the Sussex coast. Aged seventy and prone to bouts of severe bronchitis aggravated by London's smoky air, Anna McNeill Whistler 'took a suite of rooms at 43 St. Mary's Terrace, high on a hill above the seaside town of Hastings, on England's southern coast. By September, she was strong enough to stroll along the hillside…At night, she could see the lights of the town from the bow window of her sitting room, although she most enjoyed watching, as her artist son would have done, the "moonlight shining on the sea beyond".'

This watercolour view of Hastings may be dated to the end of 1880 or the early part of 1881. As the Whistler scholar Margaret MacDonald has described the present sheet, 'The assurance of the watercolour technique suggests that this drawing dates from after Whistler's return from Venice in November 1880. The colours are lovely: the slopes are a warm sage-green with the distant town light red with bluish-grey slate roofs. Some buildings were touched with white. The sea is darker, tinged with brown.'

Anna Whistler died suddenly in Hastings in January 1881, and Whistler and his brother William were unable to get to Hastings in time to see her before she passed away. '[William's] medical practice forced him to return to London almost immediately, so Nellie [William's wife and the artist's sister-in-law] came to help with preparations for the funeral. Whistler tried to divert himself by painting small (nine by five inches) watercolors of the town, the cliffs, the beach, the fishing boats. He walked with Nellie along the windswept cliffs. Decades later, she recalled him being worn down by grief and "remorse", but if he wept, she did not see it…The funeral over, his mother interred at Hastings, Whistler hastened back to the world he knew best, a world free of sentiment...'

Two related watercolour of Hastings, of similar dimensions and date, are today part of the Lunder Collection of works by Whistler in the Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Maine. These are a view of Fishing Boats at Hastings, which was sold together with the present sheet at auction in London in 1911, and a vertical composition of Hastings from the Cliffs, which was also included in the 1911 sale. Margaret MacDonald has noted of the present sheet and the view of Hastings from the Cliffs at Colby College that 'Both…are remarkable for their spontaneity and sense of space, and are painted on the same paper, probably wove, which has a neat diamond grain.'

As another scholar writes of the related watercolour of Hastings from the Cliffs, in terms equally applicable to the present sheet, '[it] recalls the vaporous surfaces of the oil Nocturnes and anticipates the freer, more fluid handling of the exhibition watercolors…that were shortly to come. It is notable for its decorative composition, intense color, and palpable weather – the result of layered, dripping, and spreading washes and shimmering highlights from exposed areas of white paper.' And, as MacDonald adds of Whistler's work of the first half of the 1880s, 'The accomplished elegance of his…watercolours - of Hastings…show his increasing sophistication.'

Perhaps because of their association with his mother's death, Whistler does not seem to have chosen any of the Hastings watercolours for inclusion in the three "Notes" – "Harmonies" – "Nocturnes" exhibitions that he organized in galleries in London and New York between 1884 and 1889. They remained in his studio for the rest of his life, and were only offered for sale after the artist's death in 1903. The three known watercolour views of Hastings share much of the same later provenance, and all were formerly in the collections of the solicitor George Healing (1871-1953) and the industrialist Sir Hugh E. C. Beaver (1890-1967).

Exhibitions

New York, M. Knoedler & Company, Inc., Notes, Harmonies & Nocturnes: Small Works by James McNeill Whistler, 1984, no.78; New York, Adelson Galleries, American Works on Paper 1880-1930, 2009, no.39.

Literature:

A. E. Gallatin, Whistler's Pastels and Other Modern Profiles, New York, 1911, unpaginated, illustrated; Margaret F. MacDonald, 'James McNeill Whistler: 1934-1984 Anniversary Portrait. Notes, Harmonies, Nocturnes', in New York, M. Knoedler & Company, Notes, Harmonies & Nocturnes: Small Works by James McNeill Whistler, exhibition catalogue, 1984, p.18; Margaret F. MacDonald, James McNeil Whistler. Drawings, Pastels and Watercolors: A Catalogue Raisonné, New Haven and London, 1995, pp.312-313, no.830; Lisa Bush Hankin and Pamela A. Ivinski, ed., American Works on Paper 1880-1930, exhibition catalogue, New York, 2009, p.42, no.39 (entry by Lisa Bush Hankin).

Artist description:

Born in Lowell, Massachusetts, James McNeill Whistler lived between the ages of nine and fourteen in Russia, where his father worked as a civil engineer on the railroad linking St. Petersburg and Moscow, and while there took lessons in drawing at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg. He also made a number of visits to London, where he studied the collection of Rembrandt prints belonging to his brother-in-law, the surgeon, etcher and collector Francis Seymour Haden, and attended lectures at the Royal Academy. In 1851 Whistler entered the United States Military Academy at West Point, where he excelled in drawing classes, but was discharged in 1854 for deficiency in chemistry. The following year he went to Paris, where in the summer of 1856 he entered the studio of Charles Gleyre and befriended the artists Henri Martin and Edward Poynter. In 1858 he met Henri Fantin-Latour and Alphonse Legros, and produced a series of etchings known as the 'French Set' which were printed in Paris and London. Whistler's painting At the Piano, rejected by the Salon of 1859, was exhibited at the studio of the artist François Bonvin, where it was praised by the Realist painter Gustave Courbet.

By 1859 Whistler had settled in London, where he enjoyed the support of Haden and his literary and artistic circle, and began working as an illustrator for the magazine Once a Week, while at the same time producing a series of etchings of riverside views in London known as the 'Thames Set'. He continued to travel frequently between London and Paris, and in the early 1860s met and became friendly with Edgar Degas and Edouard Manet. In 1879, following the ruinous libel trial against John Ruskin and having been declared bankrupt, Whistler escaped to Venice. There he produced numerous superb etchings and pastels that are among his finest works, many of which were exhibited at the Fine Art Society in London in December 1880. From 1881 Whistler largely abandoned the large-scale urban landscapes and studio works of the 1860s and 1870s in favour of much smaller, rapidly executed works in oil, watercolour and pastel which he often referred to as 'notes'.

Elected to the Society of British Artists in 1884, he became its president two years later. In 1890 his portrait of Thomas Carlyle was acquired by the Corporation of Glasgow, becoming the first painting by the artist to enter a public collection. The following year the now-iconic Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Artist's Mother was purchased by the Musée de Luxembourg in Paris, eventually entering the collection of the Louvre. In the same year, a large retrospective exhibition of Whistler's work was mounted at the Goupil Gallery in London, with great success.