

WHISTLER'S PEACOCK ROOM

The Peacock Room was once the dining room in the London home of Frederick R. Leyland, a wealthy shipowner from Liverpool, England. It was originally designed by a gifted interior architect named Thomas Jeckyll. To display Leyland's prized collection of Chinese porcelain to best advantage, Jeckyll constructed a lattice of intricately carved shelving and hung antique gilded leather on the walls. A painting by James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) called *La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine*—or *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (see fig. 2)—occupied a place of honor above the fireplace.

Jeckyll had nearly completed his commission when he consulted Whistler—who was then working on decorations for the entrance hall of Leyland's house—about the color to paint the dining room shutters and doors. Concerned that the red roses on the leather hangings clashed with the colors in *The Princess*, Whistler volunteered to retouch the walls with traces of yellow. Leyland permitted Whistler to make that minor alteration and also to adorn the wainscoting and cornice with a “wave pattern” derived from the design on the leaded glass of the pantry door. Assuming the decoration of the room to be virtually complete, Leyland went back to his business in Liverpool.

In his patron's absence, Whistler was inspired to make bolder revisions. He covered the ceiling with Dutch metal, or imitation gold leaf, over which he painted a lush pattern of peacock feathers. He then gilded Jeckyll's walnut shelving and embellished the wooden shutters with four magnificently plumed peacocks.

Whistler wrote to Leyland that the dining room was “really alive with beauty—brilliant and gorgeous while at the same time delicate and refined to the last degree,” boasting that the changes he had made were past imagining. “I assure you,” he said, “you can have no more idea of the ensemble in its perfection gathered from what you last saw on the walls than you could have of a complete opera judging from a third finger exercise!” He urged Leyland not to return to London yet, since he did not want the room to be seen before every detail was perfect.

Yet Whistler entertained visitors and amused the press in the lavishly decorated room, never thinking to ask permission of the owner of the house. His audacious behavior, coupled with a dispute over payment for the project, provoked a bitter quarrel between the painter and his patron. Leyland would not consent to pay the two thousand guineas that Whistler wanted: “I do not think you should have involved me in such a large expenditure without previously telling me of it,” he wrote to the artist. Eventually Leyland agreed to half that amount, but he further insulted Whistler by writing his check in pounds, the currency of trade, when payment to artists and professionals was customarily made in guineas. A pound is worth twenty shillings and a guinea twenty-one, so the already offensive sum was also smaller than expected.

Perhaps in retaliation, Whistler took the liberty of coating Leyland's valuable leather with Prussian-blue paint and depicting a pair of peacocks aggressively confronting each other on the wall opposite *The Princess* (see fig. 3). He used two shades of gold for the design and highlighted telling details in silver. Scattered at the feet of the angry bird are the coins (silver shillings) that Leyland refused to pay; the silver feathers on the peacock's throat allude to the ruffled shirts that Leyland always wore. The poor and affronted peacock has a silver crest feather that resembles the lock of white hair that curled above Whistler's forehead. To make sure that Leyland understood his point, Whistler called the mural of the fighting peacocks “Art and Money; or, The Story of the Room.” He obtained a blue rug to complete the scheme and titled the room *Harmony in Blue and Gold*. After concluding his work in March 1877, the artist never saw the Peacock Room again.

Despite the controversy surrounding its creation, Leyland kept his dining room as Whistler had left it and continued filling the shelves with porcelain until his death in 1892. Twelve years later the Peacock Room was removed from the Leyland house and exhibited in



a London art gallery. Having recently acquired *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919), who later founded the Freer Gallery of Art, purchased the Peacock Room in 1904. The room was taken apart once again and reinstalled in a new addition to Freer's house in Detroit, where it was used for the display of his own collection of ceramics. Freer recognized the importance of the Peacock Room in understanding Whistler's style, and he also believed it to exemplify the spirit of universal beauty that informed his philosophy of collecting and united his holdings of Asian and American art.

After Freer's death in 1919, the Peacock Room was transported to Washington, D.C. and installed in the new Freer Gallery of Art. By then, having been dismantled, moved, and reassembled three times, the room's physical structure had become highly

Fig. 1 *Portrait of Whistler*, 1897, by Paul César Helleu (French, 1859–1927). Drypoint, 33.6 x 25.3 cm. Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1897.103



Fig. 2 Right, *La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine*, 1863–64, by James McNeill Whistler (American, 1834–1903). Oil on canvas, 199.9 x 116.1 cm. Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1903.91



Fig. 3 Southwest corner of *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, 1876–77, by James McNeill Whistler (American, 1834–1903). Oil paint and metal leaf on leather, canvas, and wood, 4.2 x 10 x 6 m. Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.61

unstable. Between 1947 and 1950 two Boston restorers, John and Richard Finlayson, carried out an extensive renovation: they remounted the wall hangings with wax on a new plywood framework, repaired the damaged ceiling, restored the cracked and buckled leather, and retouched or repainted many surfaces of the room. The Finlaysons seemed to have concentrated their efforts on the

painted panels and disregarded the surrounding framework of wainscoting, even though Whistler himself had lavished attention on every inch of the decoration. Largely as a result of their selective restoration, the artist's subtle harmonies fell sadly out of tune.

Fortunately, Whistler's intricate patterns of color design were successfully retrieved during a recent conservation project. Using cleaning systems designed specifically for the task, a team of conservators gradually removed an accumulation of darkened varnish, dirt, and overpaint, leaving the original surfaces of the room untouched. The wooden wainscoting was revealed to be not murky brown but greenish gold. And the dark, lusterless ceiling became vibrant with feather patterns spun across a shimmering,

golden ground. Once the conservation was complete, the dominant inspiration for the color scheme became clearly apparent: the coppery golds and brilliant blues and greens of Whistler's decoration resemble the iridescent markings of peacock feathers.

As a further step toward restoring harmony to the Peacock Room, the Freer Gallery has collected examples of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain similar to those for which the room was designed. Frederick Leyland's collection consisted of Qing-dynasty pieces, primarily from the Kangxi period (1662–1722), in a range of shapes and sizes, as suggested by the variety of spaces formed by Jeckyll's elaborate walnut framework. Cobalt-blue peacock feathers—which were almost invisible before conservation—appear on the walls behind the shelves, echoing the blue patterns on the bright white pots; the gilded spindles of the shelves frame each piece as a separate work of art. As a result, Whistler's *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room* is once again what the artist intended, a whimsical land of porcelain ruled by the princess in the painting. ●

Linda Merrill

SUGGESTED READING

Curry, David Park. *James McNeill Whistler at the Freer Gallery of Art*. New York: W. W. Norton and Freer Gallery of Art, 1984. See especially "Artist and Architect."

Lawton, Thomas, and Linda Merrill. *Freer: A Legacy of Art*. Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, 1993. See especially chapter 7, "Composing the Collection."

Merrill, Linda. *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography*. Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art in association with Yale University Press, 1998.

Merrill, Linda, and Sarah Ridley. *The Princess and the Peacocks; or, The Story of the Room*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children in association with the Freer Gallery of Art, 1993.

Conservation of the Peacock Room was made possible by a major grant from the Getty Grant Program and additional support from the James Smithson Society and the Mars Foundation.

Cover

Detail of the central shutters on the east side of *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, 1876–77, by James McNeill Whistler (American, 1834–1903). Oil paint and metal leaf on leather, canvas, and wood, 4.2 x 10 x 6 m. Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.61

