

## Reinterpreting Asiatic Representation in the Pictorial Space of Whistler's Purple and Rose: *The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks*

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### Abstract

The presence of East Asian decorative art and objects were prevalent during the 19th and 20th century, and these exquisitely refined objects inspired many artists to include them in their paintings. Among the artists who sought them for aesthetic innovation and perfection through East Asian art during the Aesthetic Movement, James Abbot McNeill Whistler was one who felt the most influence of East Asian art, and most successfully demonstrated and incorporated them into his own paintings. The oil painting *Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks* is a representational piece that displays Whistler's taste and understanding towards East Asian art, through which the artist reveled in the joy of portraying pure aesthetic beauty, showing his enthusiasm for Oriental art. This paper approaches through a visual analysis of Whistler's painting, *The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks*, to explicate the entanglements of Japonisme elements and blue and white porcelains, as well as the fantasized image of East Asia and China and the commonly stereotyped femininity associated with these objects.

**Keywords:** Orientalism, Japonisme, Aesthetic Revolution, Asian art, gender

East Asian art's frequent appearance in 19th century Europe was initiated through the trade of commodities between the East and the West. Fascination and obsession over these Japonisme and Chinoiserie ornamental objects soon began a craze among the upper and middle class Europeans, especially artists who sought new aesthetic references, thus serving as a way for the West to visualize a fantasized image of the East, as well as an affirmation of their own status and aesthetic taste. The oil painting *Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks*<sup>1</sup> by James Abbot McNeill Whistler, an American painter based primarily in Britain, is one example of such aestheticism-centered paintings. This painting depicts a "Chinese woman"<sup>2</sup> painting a blue porcelain piece in an interior setting where the space is filled with an overwhelming amount of Oriental luxury commodities. Nevertheless, there is no Chinese figure present in the scene, nor are there any explicit indications of China. The term "Oriental" here was a racialized adjective first created in the West and used to describe East Asian objects as well as people, which was also often associated with an abstract and negative impression of East Asia. In this essay, I will continue to use this term to refer to objects from East Asia, more specifically Japan and China, possessed and understood by the West. Moreover, the term "Asiatic" in the essay title means "belonging or relating to Asia",<sup>3</sup> which I use to refer to the problematic and inaccurate Western understanding of Asia.

In examining this painting of "Oriental scenes", I argue that Whistler utilizes references from Japonisme and Chinoiserie not only to directly demonstrate the authenticity of his "aesthetic eye" in Oriental art, but also to artificially fabricate a sense of Chineseness which serves to further validate his own aesthetic taste. Yet the absence of an actual Chinese woman in his painting and the obscured distinction between art from Japan and China reveal both his disinterest of the historical reality and his pursuit in aesthetic perfection alone. Moreover, I speculate that, in juxtaposing the female model with the Oriental decorative objects, Whistler mutes her personhood, aligning her with the rest of the Oriental ornaments, thus alluding to the stigmatized femininity of Oriental art. In this research, I aim to approach these mainly through the use of visual analysis of the Oriental

scenes and representations in Whistler's *The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks*<sup>4</sup> to explicate the entanglements of Japonisme elements and blue and white porcelains, as well as the fantasized image of East Asia and China and the commonly stereotyped femininity associated with these objects.

To Whistler, paradoxically, the blue and white porcelains are at the same time utterly just material possessions yet also crucial to an aesthetic style of vision and demonstrating his own "aesthetic eye".<sup>5</sup> He proudly demonstrates his aesthetic tastes through his mass collection of blue and white porcelains, which is shown through his depiction of porcelains in *The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks*: distinctively, a large blue and white jar that is seemingly out of proportion immediately captures the viewer's attention. This jar is possibly made and sold by a Dutch manufacturer, since the pattern depicted on the jar resembles the Dutch Delft and is not a traditional Chinese porcelain jar made for export. Shifting one's eyes to the back of the pictorial space, a pair of blue and white sake bottle and cup is depicted on the shelf where another plate and jar are juxtaposed on the right. This pair of sake drinkware has been repeatedly depicted in many of Whistler's paintings, therefore indicating that this is one piece in Whistler's own Oriental collection which he might have believed to be essentially representative of his own aesthetic taste. Held in the "Chinese lady"'s hand is a Six-mark porcelain vessel from the Kangxi period in 17th century China. It is ornamented by elongated female figures which resemble the posture of the "Chinese lady". On the table covered with red tablecloth on the right-hand side is an upturned blue and white jar and some traditional Chinese calligraphy writing tools. These blue and white porcelain pieces are scattered all over the whole composition, deliberately positioned to invite the viewer's gaze. Yet each conspicuously captures the viewer's attention through Whistler's careful selection and depiction, presenting the viewer with a visual abundance which owes to the refined taste and the artistry of the painter.

Nevertheless, it is hardly recognizable whether these objects are from China or Japan. The black lacquered tray and the black fan decorated with a white heron motif placed on the yellow cabinet in the back are possibly Japanese, since, although also seen on some of the Chinese porcelains during the 18th century, heron was a common motif more frequently depicted in Japanese art, and the black lacquer was also a material frequently seen in Japan export commodities. Therefore, Whistler blurs the distinction between the two cultures through combining and mingling both Japanese and Chinese objects and elements in his painting of "Oriental scenes", creating non-specificity and ambiguity of the origins and contexts of these Oriental artifacts. Therefore, the representation of China is only implicitly indicated through his underlying reference to Japonisme. Whistler instead focused only on the aesthetic aspects of Oriental art, reflecting merely his own taste as well as concepts of art making.

The ambiguity of implication of China in Whistler's painting may be a result from the historical background which the artist intentionally chose to omit. The influence of East Asian art and artifacts has made their appearance during 17th and 18th centuries Europe, but it wasn't until early and mid-19th century did these objects become more familiar by a larger number of the European public. Both Japan and China had crucial influence on European imitative decorative art, and numerous European artists have included these Oriental objects in their paintings as well as private collections at home. Among these artists, collectors, and connoisseurs who amassed huge collections of these oriental objects, James Whistler was a representative figure. Whistler, alongside Dante Gabrielle Rossetti, Claude Monet, and a number of other Pre-Impressionist and Pre-Raphaelite artists, was not only collector of such objects, but also manipulated and incorporated them into his own works of art, representing and signifying his own status and aesthetic tastes. However, the explicit distinction between Japonisme and Chinoiserie as well as the reference to China were constantly absent in their works of art. Although hardly discernible, there were intrinsic differences in Japonisme and Chinoiserie art, and Japonisme referenced much from the arts of ancient China.

Nevertheless, the representation of China in Whistler's painting was only implied through the material presence of the blue and white porcelains and Japonisme objects, and its culture is completely alienated from the materiality of its decorative objects. I speculatively ascribe this to the insularity and political upheaval of China during the 19th century. While Japan imbued their art and commodities along with their culture through trade during the 19th century into the Western world where a search for new cultural and aesthetic exoticism was unfolding, China's influence in the West was relatively less prominent due to the self-isolationism of the Qing ministers. The Opium war was also another possible factor of this alienation of Chinese culture. The Western powers initially failed to gain unfettered access to Chinese markets through opium trades, nor did they succeed to possess full colonial power over the nation, yet the final result of the two opium wars was that China had to relinquish Hong Kong to British control, open treaty ports and grant rights to Europeans to resume trade. This thus potentially led to the overall negative and inferior perceptions of China. Therefore, this mixture of Japanese and Chinese objects in Whistler's painting illustrates the artist's overall admiration rather than specific assiduous study on them, and to him, these Oriental objects were merely material possessions that uphold one's aesthetic authenticity.

Furthermore, what is crucial in the painting is the intentional display of the collection, the “unified aesthetic sensibility”,<sup>6</sup> through which Whistler repeatedly demonstrates his aesthetic taste and attempts to seek validation for his authenticity in his Oriental collection. This finely portrayed image of a female model wearing an Oriental styled embroidered robe sitting in a room full of blue and white porcelains, black lacquerwares, and cabinets merging in a harmonious whole is carefully rendered with exquisite details, yet the setting of the scene seems to be too intentional. Although rendered with refinement, the cumulation of Oriental objects with different origins in the compact pictorial space seems to be visually overwhelming, creating a synthetic atmosphere of the painting and conveying a sense of fabrication. All of the objects, as well as the model, are carefully selected and positioned by Whistler to display a sense of “Orientalness”,<sup>7</sup> which I hypothetically suppose reveals his eagerness in seeking validation of his own taste. Therefore, this rearrangement of objects serves as a way for Whistler to fabricate a sense of “Orientalness” as well as Chineseness, demonstrating not only the artist’s obsessive admiration towards Oriental art, but also his authentic taste and potency in collecting Oriental items.

Absurdly, without the presence of an actual Chinese figure, the white female model, Joanne Hiffennan, depicted in this painting is referred to as a “Chinese woman” by William Rossetti in a review of Whistler’s painting, as well as art journals, and even the artist himself.<sup>8</sup> This red-haired Occidental woman with absolutely no features of Chinese resemblance is dressed in Oriental attire, theoretically portrayed as a Chinese woman. Rossetti wrote in his review of Whistler’s painting that the model obviously lacks the “proper almond-shape,”<sup>9</sup> which was theoretically the main distinction between Chinese and Europeans, and he indicated that there was “not even an attempt at the Chinese cast of countenance” by the artist. This ambiguous portrayal again obscures the direct reference to China and reveals Whistler’s apathy in the historical aspects of China and his focus on its aesthetics. Whistler thus merely constructs an abstract image of China as well as East Asia, generating a highly artificial sense of Chineseness, through which he again demonstrates his “aesthetic eye” and his capability in incorporating Oriental aesthetics into his works. Hiffennan ornamented as a Chinese lady assimilating as another part of the whole decorative art thus also serves as a means for Whistler in fabricating a convincing and cogent image of China.

Subsequently, the artificiality of the Oriental scene and the fabricated Chineseness are also embodied in the way Whistler renders Oriental costumes and ornaments. Hiffennan’s hair is decorated with a dark purple, almost black, *kanzashi*, which is a type of hair ornament often used in traditional Japanese hair style. The *kanzashi* starts from the upper part of Hiffennan’s hair and drapes over her shoulders and the front of the mandarin robe, then continues to extend onto the floor, creating a sinuous line. This depiction of the hair ornament signifies an imitative allusion to the black hair of Asian women, which is unseen on the red-haired model. Whistler purposefully portrayed this peculiar image to construct the imagined identity of a real Chinese woman while she is one that is the absent referent, applying to his painting more authenticity of Chineseness. Moreover, Hiffennan’s Asian attire is also composed of a Japanese kimono layered underneath a Chinese mandarin robe. Different from Monet’s *La Japonaise*<sup>10</sup> where a woman is depicted wearing a kimono in a way that resembles the Japanese figures loosely wear kimonos in *ukiyo-e* prints, Whistler, rather, chose to render the costume in a way that combines both Japanese style kimono and mandarin robe, deliberately grouping the two together to create hybridity and ambiguity that transcend the two separate cultures. Whistler dressed the model in a way that was atypical in East Asia to intentionally blur the distinction between the two cultures, again demonstrating his disinterest towards the historical facts. Through doing so, Whistler also established the palpably artificial and imitative way of assembling different types of costumes to further fabricate the Chineseness that is based on his own understanding and perceptions of the East.

Zooming out to observe more holistically at the painting, although occupying the most space in the center of the composition, the female model seems to be perfectly assimilated into the surroundings. This juxtaposition between the model and the decorative objects implicitly alludes to the objectification of the female subject. Hiffennan is portrayed “comfortably seated in a refined interior filled with exotic objects d’art and engaged in nothing more taxing than the enjoyment of beauty.”<sup>11</sup> Passively leaning on the chair, Hiffennan displays mere inanimation, forming as “part of the inanimate decor.”<sup>12</sup> In aligning the model with Oriental decorative accessories, Whistler turned her subjectness into objectness, placing her among all the other Oriental objects as desired by collectors and inviting gaze, thus further illustrating her motionless ornament and muting her personhood. Moreover, Hiffennan’s facial features are intentionally obscured by the artist and are depicted with no distinguishable sharp outlines. Whistler renders the model’s figuration through her anonymity, through which, I surmise that, he constitutes a “peculiar form of corporeality and synthetic personhood,”<sup>13</sup> attempting to generalize her into one of the decorative objects and diminishes her subjectness to sheer materiality.

The parallelism of the female model and the Oriental decorative objects is further visualized by the correspondence between the posture of the model and the elongated figures adorning the blue and white porcelain held in Hiffennan’s hands, the contextual meaning of the traditional costumes, as well as the corporeality of both the human subject and the Oriental objects. This, I suggest, thus obliquely associates and

alludes to the stigmatized femininity of the Oriental art proclaimed by the West. The inanity of the female model denotes the stereotyped vulnerability of women, and the six-marks porcelain vessel held in her hand that serves as a counterpart is thus also involuntarily associated with femininity. Moreover, the “idea of kimono as a garment to wear in a very relaxed occasion in a house”<sup>14</sup> connotes the domesticity of women, the Oriental decorative pieces that are aligned with her are thereby also linked to the concept of domesticity. Therefore, a negative analogy is made between the materiality of the porcelains and the corporeality of the female subject, alluding to the problematic and stigmatized femininity of both.

To conclude, in depicting an Oriental decorative scene, Whistler demonstrates his endeavors to render Oriental beauty that he discovered in Chinese and Japanese art and objects which was previously unknown in Western life. An ambiguity between the representation of China and Japan was created, revealing both the artist’s disinterest of the historical reality and his pursuit in aesthetic perfection alone. The absence of an actual Chinese woman in his painting further connotes the obscurity of an explicit image of China. Just as Cheng states in her book, “we are reminded of China’s abstracted visual implications despite its material presence.”<sup>15</sup> Here Whistler portrays a China that is artificially fabricated by him, which ultimately serves to further validate his own aesthetic taste and demonstrate the authenticity of his “aesthetic eye” in Oriental art. Moreover, in juxtaposing the female model with the Oriental decorative objects, Whistler mutes her personhood, aligning her with the rest of the Oriental ornaments, thus alluding to the stigmatized femininity of Oriental art.

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<sup>1</sup> Whistler, James Abbott McNeill, (1864). “Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks,” Philadelphia Museum of Art.

<sup>2</sup> A term used by William Rossetti in his review of Whistler’s painting to refer to the white female model in the painting.

<sup>3</sup> Urban Dictionary.

<sup>4</sup> Whistler, “Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks”.

<sup>5</sup> Calloway, Stephen, Lynn Federle Orr, and Whittaker Esmé, (2011). *The Cult of Beauty: The Victorian Avant-Garde 1860-1900*. London: V & A Publishing.

<sup>6</sup> Calloway, 116.

<sup>7</sup> A term I utilize in this essay as a noun form of “Oriental”.

<sup>8</sup> Chang, Elizabeth, (2020). “Plate.” Essay. In *Britain’s Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 71–110. Stanford University Press, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Chang, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Monet, Claude, (1876). “La Japonaise (Camille Monet in Japanese Costume),” Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

<sup>11</sup> Merrill, (2003). *After Whistler: The Artist and His Influence on American Painting*, New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 102.

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<sup>12</sup> Cheng, 201.

<sup>13</sup> Cheng, Anne Anlin, (2021). "Preface: A Feminist Theory of the Yellow Woman." Essay. In *Ornamentalism*, ix-xiii, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Ono, 62.

<sup>15</sup> Cheng, 267.

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