

WHISTLER AS AN ETCHER

WHISTLER was the greatest etcher and the most accomplished lithographer who ever lived. But to say so—to praise enthusiastically—is only to decry. To state things truly is only to overstate. For this is not the way of the critic who analyses and dissects, who records and distorts, and who makes a great momentary notoriety for himself and has no real effect upon the one criticized. It is of him the Master said, “Je n'en vois pas la nécessité.”

I know it will be objected at once that Whistler did not produce such plates as the Hundred Guilder, the Three Trees, the Descent from the Cross, the Christ before Pilate. He did not, and the reason is simple. It is not the fashion nowadays to do so, and more than this, there is no reason why he should. When Rembrandt lived it was the fashion to illustrate biblical subjects, and he did so extraordinarily well. It was also the fashion to evolve classical compositions, and he did this amazingly. I probably should not say the fashion, but the tradition, a more appropriate word that expresses much better what I mean. Whistler was the faithful follower of some traditions, but not of others. He saw no necessity for doing large plates for the benefit of the collector, or of putting on his plates, whether large or small, Londoners performing Miracle Plays. For him, nature, the nature that was all about him, was beautiful enough, interesting enough, suggestive enough—finer far than any faked-up composition. On the other hand, if some of the scriptural prints are esteemed as Rembrandt's greatest by collectors—they are his most important in size—they appeal less to artists, for they were really pot-boilers, though magnificent. Whether Whistler could have used his etching needle for the same ends I have no means of knowing; I only know that he did not, that he never made a pot-boiler—a composition if you like—and that he protested against the large plate, “the huge plate is an offence.” He may, therefore, be best compared with Rembrandt for his treatment of just those subjects which both artists etched because they loved to etch.

I am not a cataloguer: the clerk who sets down facts and figures wrongly in a book, so that another clerk may come along and make a still larger book by correcting the first clerk's mistakes and filling up his omissions, just as they do in the City, from which he mostly

11/27/01.62079513 .1003397x

escapes; nor do I wish to pose as an historian of art. I do not pretend to know the order in which Rembrandt etched his plates, though with half an hour's cramming—and I have the materials round me—I could get these facts up. It is more interesting to compare, when comparison is possible, and to prove, as I stated at the beginning, that Whistler is the greatest etcher who ever lived. I have not compared him with Hollar, with Callot, or with Méryon, for they were not etchers as Rembrandt and Whistler were. But look at Rembrandt's prints made, I do not know whether with Amsterdam or Zaandam in the background, and then at Whistler's of the same subjects. Rembrandt drew and bit and printed these little plates as no one had up to his time. But Whistler is as much in advance of Rembrandt as that great artist was of his predecessors. In these little distant views of absolutely the same subject Whistler has triumphed. It is not necessary to explain how: you have only to see the prints to know it. Or take Rembrandt's Mill, his studies of old houses, and then turn to Whistler's Dutch series, or the Thames set, or the Venetian prints, if you can find them—only no museum has a complete collection—it becomes evident at once who was the greater artist. The older master is conservative and mannered; the modern master, respecting all the great art of the past, is gracious, and sensitive, and perfectly free. Some of Rembrandt's beggars are marvellous. But what of Whistler's tramps, the *Soupe à Trois Sous*, or the *Mère Gérard*, or fifty others? And when one comes to think of it, there are, as for instance in those dark alleyways of the Venetian set, or the Kitchen of the French series, passages of luminous shadow which Rembrandt never approached in the *Burgomaster Six* or in any similar subject. Compare the construction of the Mill of Rembrandt with the construction of the warehouses in the *Black Lion Wharf*, or the *Unsafe Tenement*, and it will soon be seen who was the greater craftsman. And so it goes all the way through.

And Whistler added a new scientific method to the art of etching, that of painting on the copper plate with the needle. Who before had ever shown the richness which a copper is capable of yielding without mechanical work, without stupid cross-hatching? Nobody. And yet he never transgressed a single one of the laws which the other great etchers and he himself had laid down. And this is where the marvel of it comes in. The whole of Whistler's art was a growth and a definite development, but it was, from the first, perfect in its own way. There are in the French set, prints, like the night scene in the Alsatian village, called *Street at Saverne*, which are as good as any that ever came after. And if looked at carefully—I confess I never saw this until Whistler showed it to me once, in a rage because I had not seen his intention—the same arrangement of lines, the same seeking for the same effects, will be found there as in the Venetian plates. Later, his work became simpler, and in his yet unpublished Parisian series of little shops, scenes on the *Boulevards* and in the *Gardens*, he carries on the same idea of painting with exquisite line. One of the most interesting, I think, of all his

coppers is the Adam and Eve Tavern, in which the earlier manner is being broken away from and his final method is taking its place; both the styles harmonizing perfectly. I know little, and can say less, of the states of his plates,—and I believe he himself knew little more about them,—how many were printed, whether they exist or not, or what has become of the coppers. All I do know is that in the case of the Thames set, long after Whistler or Delâtre—I am not sure which—had pulled a certain number of proofs, long after the plates had been steeled and regularly published, about 1871, and later still, after a Bond Street dealer had been selling them in endless numbers to artists for a few shillings each, the idea was suggested to another dealer that he should purchase the copper plates, remove the steel facing, and, if they were in condition, print as many as the plates would stand, or if they were not, destroy the plates and sell them, for even Whistler's destroyed coppers have a value. The experiment was tried, and extraordinarily fine proofs were obtained. I believe collectors resented this very much, but artists rejoiced, and the world is the richer by a number of splendid examples of the master.

It is scarcely necessary to refer in detail to the different series, beginning with the French set, then the Thames, the two Venetian; really the only ones that have been published. Yet there are also the plates done in Holland, which I think have never all been publicly seen in England or America. A few were exhibited in the second International in London, in 1899, where were also shown most of the prints of the *Naval Review*, 1887. There is also a Belgian set, but I do not think it, either, has been shown often. Then there is the series made in the French provinces, and, finally, a number were done in Paris and the suburbs in 1892 and 1893. But all his life Whistler was working on copper, and no man living, at the present time, has any idea how many etchings he made. All his work is alike perfect. It has only been produced under different circumstances, and is an attempt to render different effects or situations. Therefore the methods vary, but the results are always the same—great. The greatest, the most perfect, as a whole, that any etcher has ever accomplished.

JOSEPH PENNELL.

NEW YORK, October, 1904.