

ART

by Jean Charlot



Repercussions to the acquisition by the Academy of Arts of a major Whistler are still being felt.

First, there was the unavoidable rejoicing. It took the form of a black-and-white ball. Besides giving participants a good time, it made fine copy for our social columnists.

Would Whistler have understood the gallant intent of this festivity? I doubt it. No one saw the world in terms less black and white than this American master of nuances.

Black and gray, gray on gray, granted. Black and white must have been far from his mind when he painted — admittedly in a subdued range of colors — the portrait en pied of Lady Meux.

However, the artist undoubtedly would have approved of the second event, also staged in his honor: the scholarly presentation of his graphic work, mostly etchings and lithographs.

Prints owned by the Academy are shown side by side with others, loaned by the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts.

For local artists and art students, the show, held in the print rooms of the Academy, offers a welcome opportunity to deepen their knowledge of a rare artist.

Our current esthetic climate is less than propitious to the cult of Whistler. After perusing his prints, some among our painters may well find Whistler not entirely to their taste.

Chance is that the master, could he in turn look at their art, would wholeheartedly reciprocate.

Explosiveness is an essential ingredient of contemporary art. In a group show — such as the Academy Annual — each artist is expected to attract attention by a twist, or a trick, or a kind of visual sommersault — something that will unmistakably detach his work from its neighbors.

By contrast, the rooms where Whistler's prints are displayed shatter us, as we enter, by their visual silence. Not one among the prints exerts itself in a bid for our attention.

Whistler's art is as quiet as his reputation was explosive. The artist willed it so.

Far from flaunting his art for all to see, he jealously protected it from the untrained eyes of the philistines, which meant, for Whistler, practically everybody.

To better guard his art, he created for himself a public

image that was loud and threatening. Using his wit as a bludgeon, he sallied forth to bloody the noses of those he considered the enemies of Art.

In so doing, he managed unwittingly to give these unknowns immortality. Their names fill the scathing footnotes of his bitter pamphlet, "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies."

As is well known, Whistler's signature was the butterfly. And it flies through the pages of this book, armed with scorpion tails for a sting.

Among his contemporaries, Whistler was known as somewhat of a mountebank. Many agreed with Ruskin's conservative view, aired before a court of law in a famous process. Whistler, said he, "was a coxcomb flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."

Ruskin's statement must be understood in its historical context. In the 1870's, to fling a pot of paint at a canvas and call it art was unthinkable. To act thus was to deserve the cap crested with a cock's comb, badge, of fools.

Not any more. Jackson Pollock has changed our mind on that matter.

A strong case could be made for Whistler as a proph-

et of abstract art. His insistence that pictures should be no more story-telling than music truly was a milestone on the path to abstraction.

Whistler in Hawaii constitutes, in an odd sort of way, a sort of homecoming. I refer to Hawaii's position in regard to East and West.

In the 1860's, in Paris, Whistler had been befriended by those who came to be known as Impressionists. Together, they discovered Oriental art.

It mattered little if the objects of art contacted were of museum caliber. In those early days, more often than not, they were not.

Bric-a-brac made for export or a Hiroshige woodcut were, alike, marvelous relief from the constrictions of academies.

Soon after, the French artists and the American parted ways.

Throughout his long life, Monet perfected his vision in hot communion with the sun.

Whistler's Oriental cult led him instead to paint nocturnes, pictures of the night that were, understandably, dark.

In the 1890's, when Whistler returned from London to Paris, his close ties with the painters were not renewed.

Monet's raw colors made violence to Whistler's sense of the exquisite. Whistler's somber palette seemed a denial of all that the Impressionists had fought for.

Instead, poets like Mallarmé, writers like Proust, thronged about Whistler. This made him uneasy as he considered his art untainted by literature.

The French Impressionists multiplied masterpieces, minting in their maturity the discoveries of their youth.

Whistler searched to the end.

The earliest print in the show is also the only one done in the United States.

After a stint as a cadet at West Point, the young artist spent a year as a map engraver in the Coast and Geodetic Survey, in Washington, D.C.

The map is a map, perforce factual. In the margins the budding artist, his home work done, doodled as fancy



1858 PRINT—"En Plein Soleil" is in the James Whistler collection of the Honolulu Academy of Arts.

dictated. There are a few comical heads and, contrasting with them, a romantic figure, a goateed man in an Arab burnoose, reminiscent of Delacroix.

All other prints in the show are the work of Whistler as an expatriate, equally at ease — or equally ill at ease — in Paris, Venice or London.

Here again Whistler and Whistler's image remain at odds.

Whistler the sophisticate refused to eat an omelette unless the dish was of a mauve complementary to the yellow of the eggs.

Whistler the artist loitered along the unsavory shores of the Thames, its wharfs and warehouses, and etched the

derelict buildings and their equally derelict dweller.

One feels a tie with another contemporary American, Walt Whitman, in this discovery of beauty where, before America was, one only saw ugliness.

Japanese woodcuts are reflected in etchings such as "Old Battersea Bridge".

To most of his contemporaries, Whistler's lithographs seemed hardly to deserve the name of sketches. Yet, slight though they are, those of the "Tanagra" series are an anguished attempt to reinstate Greece at the core of an art swamped by Oriental finesse.

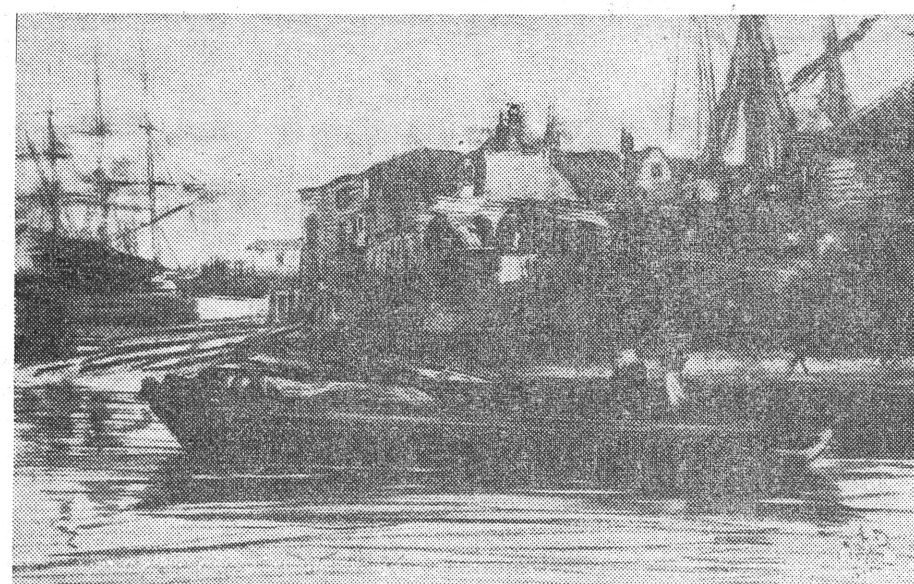
It is this refusal to let go of either East or West that brings Whistler's esthetic close to our Hawaiian attitudes.

Were it not for its wording, redolent of another century, we could make ours Whistler's words, that conclude his famed "Ten O'Clock" talk:

"The story of the beautiful is already complete — hewn in the marbles of the Parthenon — and brodered, with the birds, upon the fan of Hokusai — at the foot of Fujiyama."



1879 PRINT—"Old Battersea Bridge" by Whistler, a print loaned to the Honolulu Academy of Arts by the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts.



1878 PRINT—"Limehouse," by James Whistler, is another print on loan to the Honolulu Academy of Arts from the Achenbach Foundation.