



Whistler and His Mother: An Unexpected Relationship: Secrets of an American Masterpiece

Sarah Walden

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James McNeill Whistler painted his mother on impulse, when she came to London to escape the American Civil War, forcing him to evict his mistress from his house. It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between Whistler's outrageously flamboyant life in London—where he famously befriended Oscar Wilde and Dante Gabriel Rossetti—and the subdued, touchingly melancholic depiction of his Puritan mother he entitled “Arrangement in Grey and Black.” This portrait has become one of the world's best-known paintings and an American icon, yet we know remarkably little about it.

While restoring the painting for the Louvre, Sarah Walden became intrigued by the extraordinary and complex history of the painting, which had never been fully explored. From French, British, and American sources, Walden uncovers the intersections between Whistler's flawed genius, his struggle for recognition, his troubled relationship with his mother and mistresses, and the unprecedented historical response to his greatest work. Walden's findings read like a detective story, and her controversial and progressive views on art restoration combine with biography and criticism to create a gripping narrative that skillfully weaves history and aesthetics into a seamless tapestry.

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