Age and Aesthetics in James Abbott McNeill Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* (1871)

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When one begins looking for them in the visual culture of the nineteenth century, aging and aged bodies crop up in a variety of media, styles, and contexts: in drawings, paintings, and sculptures; in popular history paintings and more obscure aesthetic experiments; in artists' biographies and critics' writings. However, the discipline of art history has yet to engage with the master identity that is old age, and practitioners of age studies have yet to truly utilize visual primary sources. This article breaks new scholarly ground by interrogating the relationship between old age and the visual in one of the most famous and best-loved representations of an elderly person in nineteenth-century painting: James Abbott McNeill Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* (1871). The sitter for Whistler's painting was his then sixty-seven-year-old mother, Anna McNeill Whistler. In this article, I propose that it was Anna's aged body that caused or, rather, enabled Whistler to have an artistic revelation that was to define his approach to the visual and aesthetics, and propel him to notorious fame.

In 1999, the art historian Linnea S. Dietrich described the subject of age in the visual arts as "uncharted territory" (185). Over twenty years later whilst the scholarship published on this complex subject does remain somewhat limited, it is steadily expanding, with relevant publications also produced by researchers who are not practicing art historians but do work in the interdisciplinary field

of aging studies. Michelle Meagher has observed that scholars who engage in researching age and art "tend to take one of two routes. The first is to consider the way in which age affects the artist, and the other is to consider what art can tell us about ageing in its historical and cultural contexts" (85). The first route results in research that engages with the idea of "old-age style" or "late style," a concept which Kenneth Clark discussed in detail in "The Artist Grows Old" (1972) (see also Cohen-Shalev; Galenson; Sohm).[1] The second route produces studies that examine visual representations of older people in order to learn more about the sociocultural attitudes towards, and roles played by, the elderly in specific historical contexts (see Covey; Hepworth; Janssen; Kauppinen and McKee). For example, in *Old Women and Art in the Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior* (2015), Erin J. Campbell employs portraits of older women in Renaissance Italy to evidence her argument that, contrary to widespread assumptions, these women were influential members of both their own families and the larger community.

Despite their differing research goals, the scholars referenced thus far can be understood as united by their belief that age is a factor which requires consideration when examining the visual arts. I do believe that there is something that age—whether of sitter, artist, viewer, or, indeed, art object itself—always does to art. However, I also believe that the two identified research routes do not fully realize the scholarly value of analyzing age and/in art due to the fact that neither route encourages sustained close looking.[2] As things stand, scholars tend to interpret art that has something to do with age through sentimental biography rather than in ways that emphasize technical practice; in short, not enough time is spent closely examining the visual elements of artworks that interrelate with age. Works of art are not uncomplicated, accurate "windows" into human societies or individuals' lives: they must be recognized as objects, as constructions, the physical aspects of

[1] For interested readers, Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon have published a thought-provoking essay that challenges what they perceive to be the innate ageism of the idea of "late style"; they argue that it leads to damagingly broad generalizations about older artists and their works.

[2] For a recent essay that discusses the operations involved in close looking and reflects on what it can contribute to the humanities, see Rose.

which can themselves provide insights into a society or an individual's perception of aging and the aged.[3] I do not dispute that visual works of art can inform sociohistorical studies of age; rather, I want to draw attention to the need for artworks featuring elderly bodies—as well as those created by older bodies—to be recognized as physical objects, and for scholars to recognize that age does something at a fundamental level to the appearances of these objects.[4]

Just as the discipline of art history needed to engage with gender studies in the late twentieth century in order to recognize the distorting effects of a previously unacknowledged masculinist bias on art historical interpretation (Nochlin; Parker and Pollock), so too must the discipline engage with aging studies if it is to recognize that age can have an impact on not just interpretations but also creative techniques and aesthetics. Likewise, aging studies researchers must be more thorough in their engagement with visual sources if they are to employ them successfully as persuasive evidence. In short, sustained close looking at the creative processes behind—and finished appearances of—visual objects that interrelate with age has the potential to benefit both art history and aging studies.

This article seeks to demonstrate the interdisciplinary scholarly value of close visual analysis by considering the coming together of old age and the visual arts in one of the most famous and best-loved representations of an older person in nineteenth-century painting: James Abbott McNeill Whistler's (1834-1903) *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* (1871) (fig. 1).[5] I am interested in the creative provocations of an older female form and the ways in which shifting the focus to formal aspects might offer alternative

[3] Sabine Kampmann encapsulates this position with her observation that "It is fundamentally important, in analyzing images of aging in pictorial representations, to move away from an approach that takes such images to be merely 'illustrations' of social developments; instead, their visual autonomy and specific mediality need to be considered." (279).

[4] For a thorough defence of the idea that works of art are tangible evidence which can improve understanding of individuals and societies, see Prown, and Rabb and Brown.

[5] Today, the painting is widely known by its colloquial name, *Whistler's Mother*. It is also referred to as *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother*. I shall be referring to the painting using the title that it was originally exhibited under at the 104th Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 1872.

perspectives on a highly familiar nineteenth-century painting. Undertaking a thorough visual analysis of this painting will illustrate how close looking can reveal nuances that occur in technical practices and aesthetics when art intersects with age. I shall attend closely to the color scheme and Whistler's handling of paint, proposing that it was his sitter's aged, thin skin that prompted the artist to develop his earlier series of experiments with paint consistency and application. I shall also demonstrate how the process of examining these nuances can in turn inform sociocultural studies of aging and gender in the nineteenth century.[6] Specifically, close looking will be used to test the idea that *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* does not ultimately give its audience—be they nineteenth- or twenty-first-century viewers—what they desire from an artistic representation of an older woman. I argue that this outcome occurred due to Whistler creatively engaging with old age for reasons other than sentiment.

Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother

Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother is painted on a large horizontal canvas, measuring 144.3 centimetres high and 162.4 centimetres across. It is restrained in its near monochromatic coloring and controlled composition. This composition features an older woman with gray hair seated in profile to left. She is dressed nearly all in black and wears a white muslin bonnet with lappets that drape down over her shoulders. She is sitting on a wooden chair with her feet slightly elevated by a footstool and her hands hold a white handkerchief in her lap. A gold ring is visible on one of the fingers of her left hand. On the wall behind her is a framed picture, with the edge of another larger framed picture appearing on the far right of the canvas. On the far left of the canvas, a dark piece of fabric covered with a delicate silver-gray and yellow pattern hangs down to touch a plainer carpet laid across part of the floor.

[6] For a broader discussion of old age in the nineteenth century encompassing legal, medical, pseudo-medical, and fictional perspectives, see Boehm, Farkas, and Zwierlein; Chase; Godfrey; Heath; Mangum.

Figure 1. James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother, 1871, oil on canvas, 144.3 × 162.4 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, RF 699.
Image source: Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

The work is not an abstraction. In addition to the canvas presenting a visually legible setting and figure, Whistler's original full title informs a viewer who this figure is—his mother, Anna Matilda (née McNeill) Whistler (1804-1881). *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* is thus a paradox: it is simultaneously one of the most famous works that Whistler exhibited as an autonomous "arrangement" of colors and one of the most famous images of an artist's mother in existence. Whistler's claims for the autonomy of art are well-rehearsed: his famous declaration that "Art should be independent of all clap-trap—should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye" and his accusation that "The vast majority of English folk cannot and will not consider a picture as a picture, apart from any story which it may be supposed to tell"

(*The Gentle Art* 126-27) are frequently quoted in accounts of Aestheticism ("art for art's sake") in the visual arts. Yet, as Aileen Tsui has pointed out, Whistler's engagement with irony in his creative practices "is often not fully explored" (444). In the case of *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*, although the canvas was the artist's first explicitly self-styled "arrangement," it featured in both its visual content and its title a type of person (an elderly mother) and a genre of painting (portraiture) that inherently encourage viewers to seek out sentimental readings.

I want to interrogate the irony of these creative decisions and consider what happens when a work of art that was purportedly designed for the sole purpose of presenting a beautiful arrangement of colors and shapes also features a motif predisposed to provoking emotional reactions. Does the presence of an older maternal figure on this canvas irreversibly damage Whistler's pursuit of "art for art's sake" and the invalidation of narratives? Or, alternatively, is it possible to understand the presence of an aged body sitting before him in his studio as prompting Whistler to advance an ongoing series of experiments he had been undertaking with the medium of paint?

Despite the artist's repeatedly stated formalist intentions, it certainly is easy to read significance into the fact that the painted older woman is based on Whistler's mother and that Whistler acknowledges her presence on the canvas with the wording of his title. Since the painting was first exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1872, the majority of viewers who have seen and scholars who have written about it have done just this, taking the view that Whistler's painted and named mother is a representational cue which, if studied closely, will reveal either the artist's love for or dislike of Anna Whistler. For instance, Jonathan Weinberg's highly psychologized approach to studying *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* leads him to reach the conclusion that the painting is "an adoring son's homage to his mother" (xv), whilst Frank Anderson Trapp contrastingly identifies "the artist's own remove from the subject of his canvas … Far from a sentimental eulogy, Mrs. Whistler's portrait seems more a document of detached reconciliation—or at least a coming to terms" (207). The picture itself can sustain either of these

interpretations, and no doubt many more.[7] Everything depends on which aspects of the composition are selected for particular attention and the kind of contextual information that is brought to bear. However, perhaps surprisingly, one aspect of the painting that has yet to receive thorough attention is the advanced age of the sitter; when Anna Whistler's age has been acknowledged, it is merely in order to further sentimentalize the canvas. For example, in *Whistler's Mother: An American Icon* (2003) Margaret F. MacDonald suggests that *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* may have been created as "Whistler, deeply concerned for [his then sick mother], wishe[d] to record [her] appearance before it was too late" (31).

This emphasis on sentiment as a creative motivator recalls Barbara Coller's declaration in an exhibition catalogue published in 1987 that "An artist's portrait of his or her mother is a uniquely personal statement, one which may even rival a self-portrait in emotional significance" (7). In the same publication as Coller, John E. Gedo suggested that "Although every portrayal of an artist's mother implies something about the relationship between them, some works are explicitly focused on the qualities of this dyadic interaction" (18). It is not the purpose of this article to dwell upon deciphering Whistler's relationship with his mother as it may or may not be legible in *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*. Rather, my focus is on attending to how the artist's creative decisions and the work's final appearance were affected by the sitter's elderly appearance. Regardless of whether the subject matter of his mother did or did not matter to Whistler, the interpretation proposed here is that her aged features bled into and affected his artistic techniques and visual style in subtle ways that I shall presently attend to.

This particular intersection of art and old age occurred by chance. Anna Whistler was an impromptu stand-in for a model who failed to arrive for a sitting for another painting. In 1871, Anna was living with Whistler at 2 Lindsey Row in Chelsea. She turned sixty-seven years old during the three months that

[7] Hélène Valance has written a fascinating article that examines how *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* has been received by American audiences from the nineteenth century through to the present day; she draws attention to the fact that this audience has had to edit and, in some instances, even literally recreate the canvas in order to make it match their expectations.

it took Whistler to complete *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*.[8] Evidence that Anna's contemporaries perceived her as being "old" can be found over a decade before 1871; when Anna visited England in 1860, Benjamin Moran, the then Secretary at the American Embassy, described her as "a pleasant old lady" (693). Anna's austere mourning garb undoubtedly contributes to perceptions of her age and marital status. The black and white attire that Anna is shown wearing in *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* is a variation of what she wore every day since her husband George Washington Whistler (1800-1849) had passed away. In nineteenth-century Europe and America widows, were expected to wear distinctively styled mourning outfits for up to four years after their husbands had died, although a widow could choose to wear such attire for the rest of her life (Taylor 120-63). Anna made the latter choice, wearing modest black dresses and her white widow's coif until she too passed away.

Anna's seated pose means that her predominately black mourning outfit dominates the color scheme and composition of *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*, creating a kind of void in the lower right section of the canvas. It has been speculated that Whistler found inspiration for this monumental, seated pose from sources as diverse as a statue of Agrippina in the Capitoline Museums in Rome, Antonio Canova's sculpture of Napoleon Bonaparte's mother at Chatsworth (1808), Frans Hals's *The Regentesses of the Old Men's Almshouse Haarlem* (1664),and Rembrandt van Rijn's *The Artist's Mother Seated, in an Oriental Headdress* (1631) (Young et al. 61). It is interesting to note that, regardless of whether any of these works of art actually did inspire Whistler, he evidently had little choice when painting Anna but to show her in some kind of seated pose. From the account of the painting's creation that Anna gave in a letter in November 1871 to her sister Catherine "Kate" Jane Palmer (1812-1877), it seems that Whistler had intended to paint his mother standing but that Anna was unable to hold the pose long enough for this to occur:

[8] *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* was painted between August and October 1871—Anna's birthday was on 27 September.

> I was not as well then as I am now, but never depress Jemie [James] by complaints, so I stood bravely, two or three days whenever he was in the mood for studying me. his pictures are studies & I so interested stood as a statue! but realized it to be too great an effort so my dear patient Artist (for he is greatly patient as he is never wearying in his perseverance[)] concluding to paint me sitting perfectly at my ease.[9]

Here, then, is a rather overt instance of the physical realities of old age affecting the final appearance of a work of art. The older sitter was too frail to fulfil what appears to have been the artist's original desire to depict her standing and so the compositional arrangement had to be adapted.

"YES INDEED I HAVE A MOTHER, AND A VERY PRETTY BIT OF COLOR SHE IS …"[10]

Turning attention from these sentimental readings of the painting and accounts of its creation to focus on the finer visual details of the canvas reveals the complex and subtle ways in which old age affected the finished appearance of *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*. I shall now attend in particular detail to both the color scheme and Whistler's handling of paint; I propose that the artist was provoked to develop the techniques that made the work look the way it does in response to Anna's aged body, with significant stimulus being given by her aged, thin, white skin.

Whistler never contemplated giving up the representation of figures and objects in his work. However, he certainly was more vociferous than any of his peers in declaring his antipathy to granting subject matter significance. In his famous 1878 interview in *The World*, Whistler claimed that *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* was a successful expression of his

[9] No trace of this painting of Anna standing survives, leading scholars to presume that it must have been completely rubbed out. However, there does exist an etching of Anna, standing, nearly full face, which might have been done at this time—to see an image of this etching, visit https://asia.si.edu/object/F1903.252/.

[10] This quote is taken from a conversation Whistler had with his friend Thomas Armstrong (1832-1911): after Armstrong had expressed surprise at Whistler having a mother at all, let alone his having painted her portrait, the artist reportedly replied: "Yes indeed I have a mother, and a very pretty bit of color she is, I can tell you." See Lamont (193).

aesthetic credo that art should appeal directly to the eye without having to rely on ideas and emotions; those who attempted to provide it with a narrative context failed to see its significance. The artist placed particular emphasis on his claim that the painting has no subject in the conventional sense:

> As music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and the subject-matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of colour … Art should be independent of all clap-trap—should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like. All these have no kind of concern with it; and that is why I insist on calling my works "arrangements" and "harmonies." Take the picture of my mother, exhibited at the Royal Academy as an "Arrangement in Grey and Black." Now that is what it is. To me it is interesting as a picture of my mother; but what can or ought the public to care about the identity of the portrait? (reprinted in Whistler, *The Gentle Art* 127-28)

Yet, despite the statement in the first line of this quotation, in *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*, the subject matter has everything to do with the harmony of color and the overall visual impact of the canvas. It is the sitter, the elderly sitter with her gray hair, her white widow's coif, her black mourning outfit, and her inconsistent, thin, white skin, who has brought these colors into the work's composition in the first place. As such, her relevance to the visual harmony of the canvas cannot be denied as wholly as Whistler did in various dialogues through his life. Whether he did so to be provocative or contrary—as was often the case—is unclear.

Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother certainly matches the description provided by the first half of its title: the canvas is dominated by large sections of grays and black, in which traces of warm and cool inflexion only reveal themselves with very close examination. This limitation of hue, almost to a monochrome, emphasizes the simplification of forms. Anna's aforementioned mourning dress is presented as an almost impenetrable section of black paint, the effect being that the better part of her bodily frame is rendered indecipherable at the same time as a kind of visual void is created in the lower right section of the canvas. If one looks very closely, the slightest

indication of the sitter's sleeved arms and creases in the skirt are just visible, made apparent only by minute changes in pigment and the direction of Whistler's brushes and scraping motions. The ends of the skirt section of the dress hang rather stiffly down from the chair and the footstool, forming two sides of a kind of malformed triangular shape. Exactly where this engulfing black form ends cannot be seen as, rather uncannily, the ends of the dress continue to extend beyond the boundaries of the canvas. If the viewer steps far enough back from the large canvas to see the composition in its entirety, it can be imagined that the two angled lines of the skirt meet nearly in the center of the composition, if not actually on it.

Figure 2. Detail of Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother

The most conspicuous chromatic variation in the composition is reserved for the face and hands, which visually jump to life by contrast to the draining black of the painted dress (fig. 2). The pale hands stand out amidst the sea of flat black that surrounds them. Yet, simultaneously, they are also partially subsumed by the white lace of the handkerchief that they are shown holding, as well as by Anna's sleeves. The face is therefore the brightest, most detailed feature present in the composition. This simple anomaly of an aging human face—soft and blood-flushed—exists in the midst of Whistler's fastidious arrangement of rectilinear edges in different degrees of softness and hardness. An earth red powerfully articulates the front of the face, and soft curves made using multiple short sweeps of varying shades of pink can be discerned working down from the hairline to culminate in the darker shadowed jowls present below Anna's jaw line.[11] The face's bright three-dimensionality is subsequently somewhat jarring in contrast to the engulfing black and flat grays that dominate the rest of the canvas. Its softer, warmer features stand out from expanses of monochrome paint that are otherwise only punctuated by delicate patterns and subtle shifts in tone.

That these expanses of paint are thinly layered is highly significant to considerations of how old age as subject matter affected the final appearance of *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*. I propose that Anna's presence as Whistler's sitter not only influenced the artist's color scheme; it also affected how the artist applied his paint. Here, it must be noted that, despite the wealth of literature published on the artist, surprisingly little is known about Whistler's studio practice. There do exist some focused projects on specific subjects, such as Whistler's use of canvas textures and conservation methods, as well as his interest in Horace Lecoq de Boisbaudran's method of memory drawing (Chu; Hackney; Townsend). However, although *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* has been recognized as signalling an important change in Whistler's artistic style, the creative techniques that resulted in its appearance have received little attention.

[11] Readers interested in how class and race might have affected nineteenth-century thinking about, and responses to, representations (both written and visual) of aging skin should read Pamela K. Gilbert's recent publication, *Victorian Skin: Surface, Self, History* (2019).

In 1985, the conservator Sarah Walden was commissioned by the Louvre to restore *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*. Following this project, she published a book entitled *Whistler and His Mother: An Unexpected Relationship* (2003). In it, Walden expresses her surprise that "almost everything about Whistler's 'Mother' is a mystery. The extraordinary fact is that next to nothing is known for sure about one of the world's most familiar images … The methods and materials [Whistler] used are obscure" (10). She goes on to ask, "Why was so little known [about Whistler's creation process] with any certainty?", and acknowledges that, rather frustratingly, "All accounts left by his students and contemporaries are second hand; no one except Anna Whistler herself was present" in the studio during the months that it took Whistler to complete the painting (12). Unfortunately—and in spite of her vocation as a painting restorer—Walden follows tradition and spends more of her publication considering potential sentimental narratives that can be gleaned from the painting rather than attending to its formal aspects. She also attributes the unusual creative techniques, used in the latter months of 1871, to a desire for instant gratification on Whistler's part.

As Walden's text and the literature referenced in the first section of this article demonstrate, the thinness of the paint in *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* is an aspect consistently overlooked by viewers and scholars who desire to pursue a narrative of some kind, be it one about maternal love or hatred. It is easy to see why so many people have focused on seeking out meanings for the figure of the elderly mother; Whistler denigrated English narrative painting in his speeches and writings but he never fully severed himself from it in his visual works of art. With *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*, the artist enacted an ironic operation of strewing the canvas with narrative cues only to insist that painting itself—the pure color of resurgent grays and black—prevails over narrative function and the relevance of the sitter.

Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother is a work in which painterly values took precedent over narrative content but, simultaneously, a work in which the very subject matter allowed the creator to advance his

aesthetic credo. This is not just "the Mother"—she is "the elderly Mother being painted." The canvas presents a very overt studio setting, identified as Whistler's own studio, a gray-walled room that was situated up on the second floor at the very back of 2 Lindsey Row (Lacambre in Dorment and MacDonald 141). The framed work on the back wall, an etching Whistler produced in 1859 and entitled *Black Lion Wharf*, further "proves" that this is Whistler's studio. The process of sitting for the act of painting is thus brought to the forefront. The old mother is a motif but not a registered motif here. She is there, relevant, but should not be psychologized or romanticized as extremely as she has been in much past literature. *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* must be looked at as a painting, a constructed object, and not as an icon or a snapshot of "reality." If sustained attention is given to how this painting is constructed, why it is constructed the way that it is, and why viewers have responded to these creative decisions in the ways that they have, then understanding about both Whistler's creative drive and technical practices, and nineteenth-century and modern viewers' thoughts on, desires for, and fears about age will advance.

La Mère Gérard (1858–1859) and Whistler's Ongoing Experiments with Paint

Before I expand on the idea that it was Whistler's elderly sitter that caused *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* to be a revelatory work in the ongoing evolution of his creative techniques and thus his overall visual style, it is important to acknowledge that this canvas was not the first instance of Whistler painting an older woman. Between 1858 and 1859 Whistler had created a number of etchings and two paintings of an elderly Parisian flower seller, called Mère Gérard (figs. 3 and 4).[12] This first painting is a half-length portrait, whereas the second painting is a full-length one, albeit far less detailed. Although she is evidently a poor woman of lower social standing than Anna Whistler, Mère Gérard is also depicted wearing a white bonnet with lappets and a dark dress. However, whilst the two versions of *La Mère*

[12] The earlier of these two paintings—Figure 3—was to be the first work that Whistler exhibited in a public gallery.

Gérard also have dark, limited color palettes and center on the single figure of an older woman, they ultimately differ greatly in finished appearance to *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*: in both of these earlier, somewhat Rembrandtesque paintings, the aged skin of Mère Gérard is evoked with very thickly applied paint, with impasto used to emphasize the appearance of wrinkles. By contrast, the entirety of *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* was painted using thin, diluted paint, with the finished work proving striking in its bareness.

Figure 4. James Abbott McNeill Whistler, La Mère Gérard, 1858–1859, oil on board, 30.5 x 14.3 cm, Colby College Museum of Art, The Lunder Collection, 2013.295

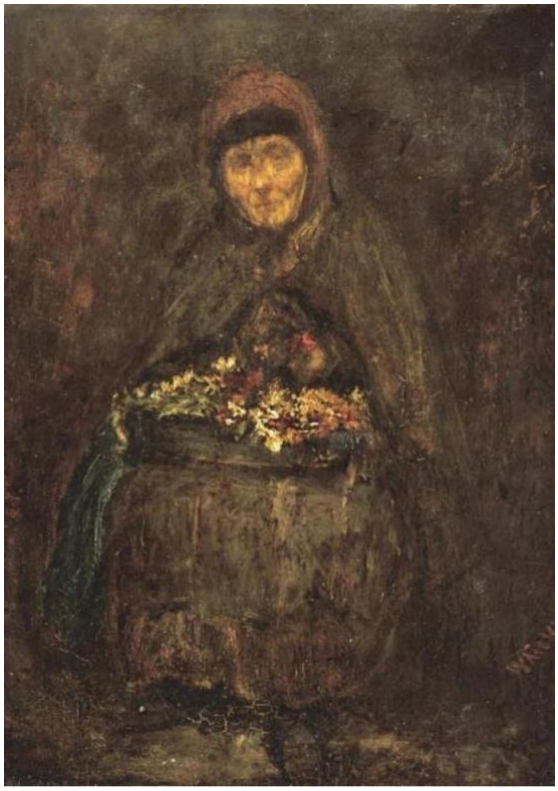

Figure 3. James Abbott McNeill Whistler, La Mère Gérard, 1858–1859, oil on wood, 24.1 x 17.8 cm, Washington County Museum of Arts, A2683 91.59

So, if old age did not cause Whistler to have a creative revelation regarding his technical practices in the 1850s, what evidence is there for it subsequently doing so in the 1870s? When examining Whistler's *oeuvre*, it is difficult to be certain of the exact point in time at which the artist began trialling diluting and

rubbing down his oils, since he often returned at a later date to work further on particular pictures; however, a thorough survey of his *oeuvre*—such as that provided by the University of Glasgow's excellent online project— renders it apparent that Whistler did not begin experimenting with paint application in earnest until towards the end of the 1860s (see also Hackney 188; Stoner 107).[13] Written primary sources show that Whistler was experiencing a creative crisis towards the latter end of the 1860s. In a letter to Henri Fantin-Latour (1836-1904) in September 1867, Whistler declared:

> I am weighed down with impossible work! … I have several pictures in my head and they only come out with difficulty—for I must tell you that I am much more exacting and demanding now than the time when I threw everything down pell mell on the canvas … Courbet! and his influence was odious! … That damned Realism made an immediate appeal to my vanity as a painter! … Where could you have found an apostle more ready to accept this theory, so appealing to him! … What? All he had to do was to open his eyes and paint what was there in front of him! … I feel there's much further to go! much more beautiful things to do … my God! colour—it's really a vice! certainly it can be and has the right to be one of the most beautiful virtues—if directed by a strong hand—well guided by its master drawing—colour is then a splendid bride with a spouse worthy of her—her lover but also her master,—the most magnificent mistress possible!—and the result is to be seen in all the beautiful things produced by their union!

Whistler identifies his inability to fulfil his (at this point in time) relatively newly formed aesthetic credo of "art for art's sake" as resulting from his struggle to master color and the application of paint. Despite Whistler's obstinate claims in the same letter to Fantin-Latour that he was "not complaining … about the influence of [Gustave Courbet's] painting on mine—there was none, and you will not find it in my canvases," many of Whistler's oil paintings dating from the 1850s and 1860s undoubtedly do show the influences of Courbet (1819-1877) and the French realist school.

[13] To access the University of Glasgow's ongoing Whistler project, see https://www.whistlerpaintings.gla.ac.uk/.

I must emphasize that I am not attempting to claim that it was "just" old age that affected Whistler's technical practices moving into the 1870s; looking at Whistler's painted *oeuvre* as a whole makes it apparent that the artist's technical practices followed a number of stages of development throughout his career. Prior to the 1870s, he did have a tendency to apply paint thickly and with heavy impasto overall, but there certainly are also important examples of Whistler beginning to experiment with paint consistency and application before he created *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* between August and October 1871. For example, in August 1871, Whistler produced *Nocturne: Blue and Silver—Chelsea*, the first of what was to become a series of thirty-two "Nocturne" paintings, works that depicted landscapes as they appeared in twilight or in the absence of direct light.[14] Each of these "Nocturnes" was painted with extremely diluted and subsequently very fluid oil paints; Whistler would go on to refer to these paints as his "sauces" (Mayer and Myers 161; Stoner 107). Acknowledging *Nocturne: Blue and Silver—Chelsea* makes it apparent that *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* was part of a wider series of experiments that Whistler was undertaking with paint consistency and application. However, *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* remains highly significant to considerations of Whistler's creative career as a whole as it was the first full-length portrait that the artist created using his experimental new way of mixing and applying paint.

Like his first "Nocturne," *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* is painted using thin, diluted paint on a coarse, unprimed canvas.[15] The result is a work that is striking in its bareness. A variety of techniques were evidently used to reach this degree of arresting starkness, from Whistler diluting his paint, to his scraping and wiping away of pigment to reveal the canvas. Whistler's development of these techniques whilst working on *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* has been compared to that

[14] To see an image of *Nocturne: Blue and Silver—Chelsea*, visit https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/whistler-nocturne-blue-and-silver-chelsea-t01571.

[15] A number of other experimental canvases dating from the months leading up to 1871 also feature Whistler experimenting with the consistency and application of his "sauce." See the University of Glasgow's website for a thorough timeline of Whistler's creative output.

of *Velázquez* and even Frans Hals (Dorment and MacDonald 140). Close up, the delicacy of the paint becomes extremely apparent; it becomes clear that Whistler used very thin oil paints, heavily diluted with turpentine, to create semi-translucent, watercolor-like tinted washes. All across the surface, the coarse weave of the unprimed canvas surface is visible.

I suggest that Whistler was inspired to both dilute his paint like this and then scrape away more of it than he had ever done before due to the elderly woman who sat before him in his studio in 1871. Thin skin is a common feature of older adults and is most noticeable in the face, arms, and hands. Human skin is made up of many layers and the middle layer is called the dermis. It contributes ninety percent of the skin's thickness. The thick, fibrous tissue of the dermis is made of collagen and elastin. The dermis provides strength, flexibility, and elasticity to the skin. Thin skin is the result of the thinning of the dermis. As the human body ages, it produces less collagen (Lavker, Zheng, and Dong). Collagen is the building block of skin that helps prevent wrinkles, sagging, and moisture loss. As the dermis produces less collagen, the skin is less able to repair itself, resulting in thin skin. A person with thin skin may find that they are able to see the veins, tendons, bones, and capillaries under the skin of their hands and arms.

A close analysis of Anna's painted sixty-seven-year-old face and hands in *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* reveals suggestions of what lay underneath her thin, aged skin; as mentioned before, her visible left cheek is notably flushed, and across it, on her chin, her jaw line, and also on her hands, there are extremely delicate, slight brushstrokes that provide suggestions of light blue and gray veins (see fig. 2). I suggest that Whistler carried this observation of the semi-translucency of Anna's skin over to how he then mixed his paints and applied them to the rest of the composition.

Anna Whistler wrote to Kate that, as she sat for her son in November 1871, she heard him:

> ejaculate "no! I can't get it right! it is impossible to do it is as it ought to be done perfectly!" I silently lifted my heart, that it might be as the net cast down in the Lake at the Lords [sic] will! as I observed him trying again, and oh my grateful rejoicing in spirits as suddenly my

> dear Son would exclaim "Oh Mother it is mastered, it is beautiful![”]
> & he would kiss me for it.

The exclamation "it is mastered, it is beautiful" could perhaps be understood as the artist declaring that he had, in his mind, finally mastered the medium of oil paint in a way that would allow him to realize his credo of "art for art's sake," even in works of art that featured sitters. Inspired by the thinness of his mother's skin as she sat before him, Whistler had scraped away more paint than he had ever tried doing before. The result was that, finally, the medium of paint appeared to his eye as delicate as he had desired it to be since he broke away from the French realist school. The paint could stand on its own as a source of formal interest, as a beautiful form.

Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother potentially contributes to the metamorphosis of Whistler's constant scraping down from a method of effacement into an intentional technique of rubbing thinned-down paint into a single-skin effect over prominent canvas texture. This distinctive surface is highly visible in *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*. The somewhat overworked surface is a palimpsest that records multiple changes to the image, evocative of the multiple changes that human skin experiences as it ages. I suggest that, whilst Whistler had been experimenting with his handling of the medium of paint prior to August 1871, it was the experience of once again painting an older sitter that crystallized the artist's ongoing attempts to realize his dream of the aesthetics he believed could be achieved with thin paint application.

Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother can subsequently be read as Whistler revelling in his new creative methods. He shows off his new mastery of thin paint films across the entire canvas: the ethereal gray backdrop; Anna's skin, as well as her lace lappets, sleeves, and handkerchief; the seemingly weightless patterned curtain; the threadbare carpet. Even the footstool, a device meant to ground, has taken on a sense of weightlessness: it is no longer an object, but rather a colored form, meant only to be admired. The work almost seems to vibrate as the viewer's eye is continuously torn between noticing identifiable objects and recognizing paint for what it is: paint. The illusion is

repeatedly made and shattered. The thin paint both creates legible items and distracts the viewer with its own material presence.

Conclusion

Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother represents a significant point in Whistler's exploration of the possibilities and limitations of paint; this article has proposed that it was the presence of an elderly sitter which made this particular creative endeavor a success, but not in the sentimental way that has dominated past readings. Whilst Whistler was already experimenting with his creative techniques prior to producing *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother*, I have suggested that close looking enables a new understanding of Anna Whistler's aged body as causing the artist to experience a particularly noteworthy creative revelation. Looking at Whistler's *oeuvre* as a whole makes it apparent that *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* was a catalyst that triggered a flurried period of production, characterized by the thin "sauces" and intense rubbing down to be found in the following full-length portraits and "Nocturnes" of the 1870s and 1880s, and resulting in a richer language in paint handling in his later works.

As the published literature to date demonstrates, many viewers standing in front of the monumental yet sparse *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* want to or, perhaps, are primed to seek out a sentimental narrative to explain the work's unusual appearance. Understandably, they latch onto the colossal elderly female figure who dominates the canvas. Throughout this article, I have shown that I do agree that Anna was significant to *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* but not as an individual. Rather than carrying forward the narrative that it was her personality and relationship with her son that inspired Whistler in the work's creation, I have constructed a new reading that suggests that it was Anna's own formal aspects—her gray hair, dark mourning clothes, and mature, thin, white skin—that inspired the formal aspects of the canvas.

This example suggests that age can have a distinct impact on creative techniques and practices and, subsequently, the finished appearances of visual

works of art; moving forward, I believe it essential that age joins gender, sexuality, class, and race as a key category of art historical analysis. With regards to the expanding field of aging studies, I hope to have convincingly demonstrated that close visual analysis of artworks that interrelate with age can provide productive insights into a society and/or an individual's perception of and responses to the topic of aging and the aged themselves.

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