For renowned artist James McNeill Whistler, watercolor was the medium through which he reinvented himself in the 1880s and painted his way into posterity. Museum founder Charles Lang Freer amassed the world’s largest collection of watercolors by the artist and included them in his bequest to the Smithsonian in 1906. Freer’s collection comprises more than fifty examples—seascapes, nocturnes, street scenes, and interiors—of Whistler’s watercolors. Due to Freer’s will, these works are not permitted to leave the museum, and the fragile watercolors have rarely been displayed. *Whistler in Watercolor* introduces museum visitors to the artist’s vast creative output, including prints, drawings, and oil paintings, and provides wide access to a rarely seen segment of his work. Recent research by museum curators, scientists, and conservators shines new light on Whistler’s materials, techniques, and artistic genius, as seen in this first major exhibition of his watercolors since the 1930s.

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**The Ocean Wave**  
James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)  
1883–84  
Watercolor on paper  
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer Gallery of Art, F1906.54

**Blue and Silver–Choppy Channel**  
James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)  
ca. 1893–97  
Watercolor on paper mounted to board  
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer Gallery of Art, F1899.24
**St. Ives: Cornwall**
James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)
1883–84
Watercolor on paper
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer Gallery of Art, F1905.117

**Southend-Sunset**
James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)
1882–84
Watercolor on paper
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer Gallery of Art, F1905.119

**Southend Pier**
James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)
1882–84
Watercolor on paper
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer Gallery of Art, F1904.82

**Milly Finch**
James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)
1883–84
Watercolor on paper
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer Gallery of Art, F1907.170
Violet and Amber—Tea
James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)
1882–84
Watercolor on paper
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer Gallery of Art, F1902.162

Pink Note—The Novelette
James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)
1883–84
Watercolor on paper
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer Gallery of Art, F1902.158

Chelsea Children
James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)
cia. 1897
Watercolor on paper
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer Gallery of Art, F1902.116

Green and Silver—Beaulieu, Touraine
James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)
1888
Watercolor on linen mounted on board
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer Gallery of Art, F1899.25
This reflected infrared (IR) image reveals Whistler reworked Milly Finch's skirt. It was originally spread across the sofa. He overpainted the skirt to create a slimmer profile and to maintain focus on Milly's face and fan.
Peacock Room in Blue and White

On view starting May 18, 2019, Freer Gallery of Art

The Peacock Room in Blue and White once again fills the room’s shelves with Chinese porcelains. This installation returns the Peacock Room to its appearance in the 1870s, when it was the dining room of Frederick Leyland, a shipping magnate in London. Caught up in the Chinamania craze that swept England during Queen Victoria’s reign, Leyland was an avid collector of Kangxi blue-and-white ceramics.

When Leyland allowed artist James McNeill Whistler to add touches of color to his dining room, the artist responded to the sinuous patterns and brilliant colors of the Chinese porcelains on the shelves. Whistler painted over the room in a flurry of blue and gold. The peacock motifs and the intricate designs of their plumage created a tonal counterpoint to the bolder patterns and colors of the porcelains. The current installation allows visitors to experience the room in much the same way Whistler originally envisioned it.

Porcelain pieces from the Freer Gallery’s permanent collection, similar to what Leyland owned, adorn the shelves of the east and north walls of the Peacock Room. Newly commissioned blue-and-white ceramics in the Kangxi style line the west and south walls. These porcelains are not reproductions of historical blue-and-white ware. Instead, they reflect the continuity of a 1,500-year-old tradition of making and decorating porcelain in Jingdezhen, China. Porcelain production during the Kangxi period (1662–1722) greatly expanded China’s export trade with Europe, sparking the East-West exchange that endures to this day.

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The shelves of the Peacock Room with blue-and-white Chinese porcelain