

The image shows the interior of the Peacock Room, a room designed by James Watson Godey in 1876. The walls are covered in a vibrant, patterned wallpaper featuring large, stylized peacocks in shades of blue, green, and gold. The room is furnished with a tall, slender bamboo cabinet in the center, which holds several pieces of Chinese porcelain, including a blue and white vase and a white vase. The ceiling is painted to resemble a sky with clouds, and the floor is made of dark wood. The overall atmosphere is one of a rich, ornate, and historically significant interior space.

# Exploring the Peacock Room

Freer|Sackler Educator Resource

FREER|SACKLER



Smithsonian





## About *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*

**The Peacock Room, an opulent dining room** painted by James McNeill Whistler in 1876 and 1877, is the most renowned work of art in the Freer Gallery of Art. The story of the room is equally famous.

The Peacock Room was originally the dining room in the London home of Frederick Richards Leyland (1831–1892), a wealthy shipowner from Liverpool, England, who was Whistler's leading patron. The architect Thomas Jeckyll (1827–1881) designed the room, constructing an intricate lattice of shelving to contain Leyland's collection of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain, mostly from the Kangxi era (1662–1722) of the Qing dynasty. Antique Dutch gilt leather hung on the walls. Whistler's painting *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* was given the place of honor above the fireplace.

Jeckyll had nearly completed his decorative scheme when he became ill and had to abandon the project. Whistler, who was decorating the entrance hall, volunteered to finish Jeckyll's work. Concerned that the red roses painted on the leather wall hangings clashed with the colors in his painting of the *Princess*, Whistler suggested retouching the leather with yellow paint. Leyland agreed to that minor change. He also authorized Whistler to add a "wave pattern" based on the design of the leaded-glass door, and then he went to Liverpool for several weeks. During Leyland's absence, Whistler grew bolder with his revisions. He covered the ceiling with imitation gold leaf and a pattern of peacock feathers. Also, he gilded the spindle shelving and painted magnificent peacocks on the inside panels of the shutters.

As word of this transformation spread, Whistler began entertaining visitors and inviting newspaper reporters to Leyland's home. The painter and his patron argued over this behavior as well as payment for the redecoration. Whistler next coated the leather walls with Prussian blue paint and added a pair of fighting peacocks on the vacant wall opposite the *Princess*. Whistler called this mural *Art and Money; or, the Story of the Room*. The angry bird on the right has silver throat feathers that refer to the white ruffled shirts Leyland frequently wore. The quieter peacock on the left has a silver crest



feather resembling the lock of white hair above the artist's forehead. Whistler came to think of the dining room as a three-dimensional painting. He signed the work with his butterfly emblem and gave the entire room the title *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*.

Although Whistler and Leyland never spoke again, Leyland did not change the Peacock Room. It remained intact and fully furnished with Chinese porcelain until Leyland died in 1892. Twelve years later American collector Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919), a friend of the now-deceased artist, purchased the room, dismantled it, and moved it by ship and train to his house in Detroit, Michigan. There he used the room to display more than 250 ceramics he had collected throughout Asia. After Freer's death in 1919, the Peacock Room was reinstalled in the Freer Gallery of Art, and it is now part of the museum's permanent collection.

**DETAILS, PANORAMA ABOVE, COVER, AND INTERIOR POSTER**

**HARMONY IN BLUE AND GOLD: THE PEACOCK ROOM**

James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)

1876–77

Oil paint and gold leaf on canvas, leather,  
mosaic tile, and wood

Gift of Charles Lang Freer

Freer Gallery of Art F1904.61

**RIGHT**

Frederick Leyland's dining room in London in 1892. Chinese porcelain fills the shelves, and Whistler's *Princess* painting hangs over the fireplace.



## About *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*

In the mid-1860s, Whistler began a series of costume pictures with European models posed in Asian dress. Chinese and Japanese objects from Whistler's own collections of porcelain, lacquer, fans, and painted screens completed the settings. In *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, Christina Spartali, an English woman of Greek descent, wears a Japanese kimono. Her graceful pose recalls both the elongated figures on Chinese blue-and-white porcelain and the graceful courtesans in Japanese woodblock prints. Victorian viewers would have immediately identified China as “the land of porcelain” in the title.

Frederick Leyland, Whistler's first important patron, bought this painting around 1872. He later hung it above the mantelpiece in his dining room in London, which was filled with his extensive collection of blue-and-white porcelain displayed on specially designed shelves. Whistler suggested some changes to the color scheme of the room that would, he told Leyland, better harmonize with the palette of this painting. The result was *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, which Whistler completed in 1877.



***THE PRINCESS FROM THE LAND OF PORCELAIN***  
***(LA PRINCESSE DU PAYS DE LA PORCELAINÉ)***

James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)

1863–65

Oil on canvas

79 5/16 × 45 11/16 in.

Frame designed and decorated by the artist

Gift of Charles Lang Freer

Freer Gallery of Art F1903.91



## About the Artist

**James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)**, an American by birth, left the United States at the age of twenty-one to become an artist, and he never returned. He studied art in Paris and joined the French avant-garde art movement. He later moved to London, where he always lived in sight of the Thames River.

During the 1860s, Whistler found inspiration in the composition and subject matter of Japanese prints and the delicate designs on Chinese porcelains. To Whistler, objects imported from Asia possessed a beauty far removed from industrial London.

By the 1870s, he was transforming scenes of contemporary life, especially along the riverbank, into tranquil views of the city, veiled in mood and atmosphere. He gave his works musical titles, such as *Nocturne* and *Symphony*. Whistler's butterfly monogram served as a signature on many of his paintings and some of the frames he designed. Today his paintings, including *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1*, better known as *Whistler's Mother* (1871, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), are considered among the most innovative and original artworks of the nineteenth century.



Thomas R. Way, *Portrait of Whistler*, 1879

## About the Collector

**Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919)**, founder of the Freer Gallery of Art, was a Detroit businessman who began collecting American art in the 1880s. On his first trip to London in 1890, he met the American painter James McNeill Whistler, and they became lifelong friends. Whistler's work was strongly influenced by Japanese prints and Chinese ceramics, and he encouraged Freer not only to expand his collections to include Asian art but also to travel to Asia. Freer took his advice, making four extended trips throughout Asia and amassing a now-famous collection of American and Asian art, including the world's most extensive collection of works by Whistler.



Charles Lang Freer, ca. 1880

For more information about Freer and the Freer Gallery of Art see:

*Educators: Introducing the Freer Gallery of Art* at <https://www.pinterest.com/freersackler/educators-introducing-the-freer-gallery-of-art/>

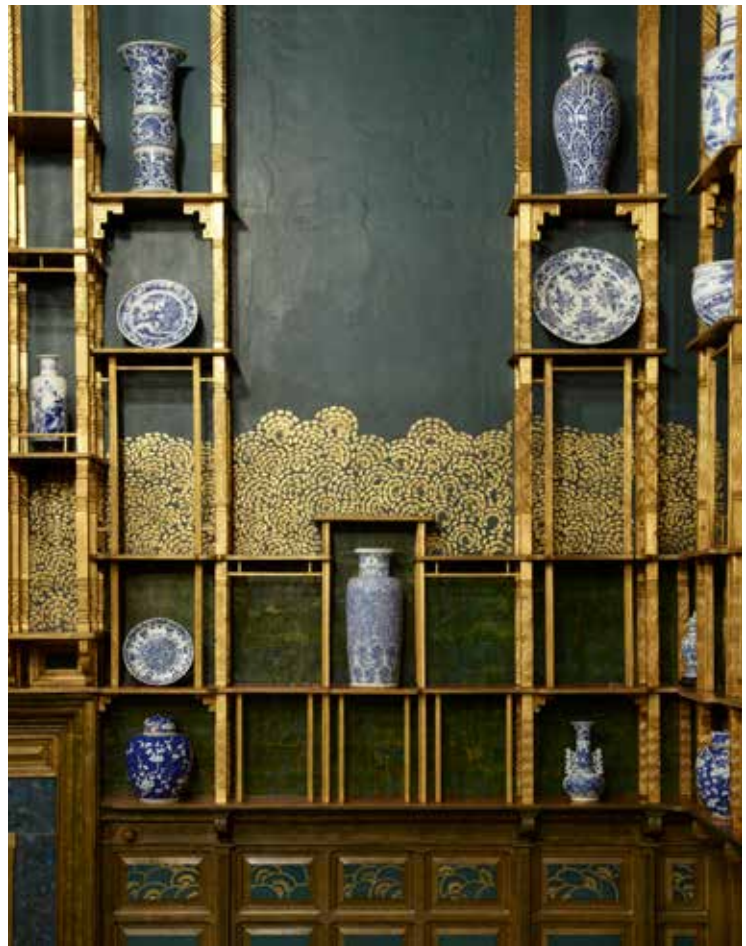
## Chinamania and the Peacock Room

The last half of the nineteenth century forever transformed Europe and the United States. Unprecedented economic expansion, a manufacturing boom, and a dramatic rise in technological innovations and inventions, among other factors, powered economic growth. This era was about more than invention, machinery, and technology. The already large economic gap between the rich and poor widened to include debates about money and the things it can buy.

Connoisseurs and consumers during the Victorian and Gilded Ages of the nineteenth century vied to acquire and display Chinese blue-and-white export wares. The English magazine *Punch* invented the term “Chinamania” to describe the obsession with Chinese porcelain that spread through London in the 1870s and 1880s. A new generation of artists and collectors “rediscovered” imported wares from Asia and in their enthusiasm sparked a craze. One leading figure was James McNeill Whistler, for whom porcelain was a source of serious aesthetic inspiration.

For some shoppers, however, Chinese ceramics signified status and good taste. Frederick Leyland, the first owner of the Peacock Room, followed the Chinamania craze and assembled an exceptional collection of Chinese blue-and-white plates, vases, and display pieces from the Kangxi period (1662–1722). He displayed them on every shelf in his dining room. This was significant because the dining room was the power center of the home. Leyland entertained friends and family as well as investors and business associates there.

By the time Charles Lang Freer purchased the empty Peacock Room in 1904, the Chinamania fad had passed. Freer reassembled the room in his Detroit mansion and filled it with his own collection of Asian ceramics with textured surfaces and subtly toned glazes of green, brown, and turquoise.



Blue-and-white porcelain was displayed in the Peacock Room of the Freer Gallery from 1993 to 2011.

# Guiding Questions

Use one of the following thinking routines with an overall image of the Peacock Room, *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, or the Peacock Room mural *Art and Money; or, the Story of the Room*. These routines are from the Harvard Project Zero Artful Thinking program.

## Think/Puzzle/Explore

What do you **think** you know about this artwork?  
 What questions or **puzzles** do you have?  
 What does the artwork make you want to **explore**?

“This routine helps students connect to prior knowledge, to stimulate curiosity, and to lay the groundwork for independent inquiry.”

## Looking: Ten Times Two

1. Look at the artwork quietly for at least thirty seconds. Let your eyes wander.
2. List ten words or phrases about any aspect of the artwork.
3. Repeat steps 1 and 2. Look at the artwork again and try to list **ten more** words or phrases to your list.

“This routine helps students slow down and make careful observations about an object, image, or artwork. It asks students to think about words or phrases to describe the work and encourages students to push beyond first glance or obvious description.”

## Parts/Purposes/Complexities

What are the parts of this artwork?  
 (What are its pieces or components?)  
 Why do you think the artwork was created?  
 (What is its purpose? What does it do?)  
 What are some of the relationships between this artwork’s part(s) and purpose(s)?

“This routine helps students build a multidimensional mental model of a topic by identifying different aspects of the topic and considering various ways in which the topic is complex. It can be used with many different things—with objects (sea shells, microscopes, buildings), topics (fractions, grammar, electricity, democracy), and works of art.”

# Additional Resources

We invite teachers of all levels to adapt this resource. Use the poster to spark classroom discussion or inspire student assignments in a variety of disciplines, including art, social studies, world history, language arts, and music.

## Related Artworks

To study other works by Whistler in the museum’s permanent collection, use Open F|S, our online search tool, and search by the artist’s name, medium, etc.

## Google Art Project: A Brief History of the Peacock Room

Use this Google Art Project online resource to examine various aspects of the Peacock Room in detail.

### Story of the Beautiful

Enter digital recreations of the Peacock Room at two historical moments (Victorian London and America in the Gilded Age) and learn more about the diverse Asian ceramics on its shelves. Browse the collections and use the interactive timeline and map to discover chronological and geographical connections of cultural interchange.

### The Peacock Room Comes to America

#### App available for iPhone or iPad

Curate your own installation by selecting ceramics to display on the Peacock Room sideboard, and then create a postcard of your design.

### Whistler's Neighborhood: Impressions of a Changing London

Use this online resource to learn more about Whistler's Chelsea neighborhood in London, where he lived from 1863 until his death. An interactive map allows students to see historic views and a gallery of images with Whistler's artworks and archival photographs provides further context.

### Educators: The Peacock Room Pinterest Board

Explore the Peacock Room and its history with images compiled by the Education Department at the Freer|Sackler. Trace the changes as the Peacock Room travels from London, to Detroit, and finally to Washington, DC. Pin selected images to share resources and information, curate content, organize ideas for classroom projects, and collaborate with others.

### Betrayal in Blue: The Story of the World-Famous Peacock Room

The Splendid Table, July 6, 2017

Listen to this nine-minute radio interview, along with related text and images, with Lee Glazer, curator of American art at the Freer|Sackler, and Splendid Table managing producer Sally Swift

as they tour one of the world's most famous dining rooms, the Peacock Room.

### Peacock Room REMIX

Learn about this Freer|Sackler past exhibition that featured *Filthy Lucre*, an immersive installation by painter Darren Waterston, that reimagines James McNeill Whistler's famed Peacock Room—an icon of American art—as a decadent ruin collapsing under the weight of its own creative excess.

### Peacock Room REMIX: Darren Waterston's Filthy Lucre—Voices

Delve into the relationship between painter and patron by exploring the correspondence between Whistler and Leyland in this video created for the *Peacock Room REMIX* exhibition.

### Peacock Room Archival Sources

Dig into the past by using archival sources from the Freer|Sackler Archives related to the Peacock Room, such as Freer's original receipt of purchase from a London art dealer and photographs of the room in London and Detroit.



# Learning Standards

## NCHS

**World History Era 6, Standard 1.** How the rise of corporations, heavy industry, and mechanized farming transformed the American people

**World History Era 7, Standard 1.** How Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism, urbanization, and political corruption

**World History Era 7, Standard 6.** Major global trends from 1750 to 1914

**World History Era 8, Standard 1.** Reform, revolution, and social change in the world economy of the early century

## NCSS

**D2.His.3.6-8.** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.

**D2.His.3.9-12.** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

**D2.His.13.3-5.** Use information about a historical source, including the maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose to judge the extent to which the source is useful for studying a particular topic.

**D2.His.13.6-8.** Evaluate the relevancy and utility of a historical source based on information such as maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

## NAEA

**Anchor Standard #7.** Perceive and analyze artistic work.

**Anchor Standard #8.** Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

**Anchor Standard #11.** Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

## Common Core

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7** Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

## Global Standards for the Arts

**Investigate the World:** *Students investigate the world beyond their immediate environment.*

Analyze, integrate, and synthesize insights to envision and create an artistic expression of globally significant themes and submit this expression for critique.

**Recognize Perspectives:** *Students recognize their own and others' perspectives.*

Explain how cultural interaction influences the development of artistic products, ideas, concepts, knowledge, and aesthetics.

**Communicate Ideas:** *Students communicate their ideas effectively with diverse audiences using art.*

Examine how diverse audiences may interpret and react to artistic expressions differently.

Appreciate a variety of artistic expressions and use artistic repertoires, forms, or media to communicate with diverse audiences around the world.

Reflect on how the arts impact understanding and collaboration in an interdependent world.



# Freer|Sackler

Smithsonian Institution

## Address

1050 Independence Ave SW  
Washington, DC 20013-7012

## Hours

10 am to 5:30 pm daily  
Closed December 25  
Admission is FREE to the museum, exhibitions,  
tours, and public programs

## Reserved Tours for Schools

To reserve a tour, please schedule at least four  
weeks in advance. Go to [asia.si.edu/visit/  
schooltours.asp](https://asia.si.edu/visit/schooltours.asp).

## Self-Guided Groups

If your group of ten or more plans to visit the  
museum on your own, please let us know by  
registering at least one week in advance. Go to  
[asia.si.edu/visit/self-guided.asp](https://asia.si.edu/visit/self-guided.asp). Space in the  
galleries is limited, and advance registration for  
groups helps us to avoid crowding.

## General Information

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