
"THE
Gold Scab,"
Eruption
in
Filthy Lucre

Cover image: James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre (The Creditor)*, 1879, oil on canvas, 186.7 × 139.7 cm

Anyone who has seen film footage of Robert Scull and Robert Rauschenberg at the Sotheby Parke Barnet auction, New York 1973, will remember the part with the scuffle. Taxi tycoon Scull and his wife Ethel made over $2.2 million that day, selling off 50 works from their art collection, which included pieces by Andy Warhol, James Rosenquist, Willem de Kooning and Jasper Johns. Rasuchenberg's *Thaw* (1958), bought directly from the artist by Scull for $900, sold for $85,000. The scuffle part happens when Rauschenberg realizes this, and knows that he will see none of the profit. In front of the camera, the artist angrily shoves the collector, saying, "I've been working my ass off for you to make that profit." Scull replies coolly: "It works for you too, Bob. Now I hope you'll get even better prices." Art critic Barbara Rose later wrote about the auction in *New York Magazine* under the title "Profit Without Honor," describing it as the first time that capitalist profiteering had usurped the art world in such a ruthless and public way.

94 years earlier, Whistler painted his "forcible piece of weird decoration," *The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre (The Creditor)*. Lucre is an archaic British term for money, especially, according to my dictionary, "when regarded as sordid or distasteful or gained in a dishonorable way." The scaly, frill-shirted character the painting depicts is Whistler's ex-patron Frederic R. Leyland, who was by that time one of the artist's chief creditors. Hunched over the piano in readiness to pick out the eponymous, ghastly tune, the uncomfortable looking object Leyland uses as a stool is the White House, the artist's home in Chelsea, which — due to his money troubles — was to be snatched away imminently. Bags of Leyland's money nestle around the sheet music, and there is more of it underneath the piano, squirreled away in heaps. The artist, represented by a trademark butterfly in the top right-hand side of the picture, is about to sting Leyland in the neck.

Almost two meters tall, *The Gold Scab*, was originally intended for private display and intimate consternation, to be presented for viewing alongside two smaller works. One, *The Loves of the Lobsters: Arrangement in Rats*, prominently featured a lobster dressed in a shirt-frill, which was clearly meant to be Leyland. The other, *Mount Ararat*, depicted Noah's Ark on a hill. The boat was surrounded by small, crawling figures, all in frills. (Whistler once wrote in an angry letter to Leyland, "Whom the gods wish to make ridiculous, they furnish with a frill!") Of the three works, only *The Gold Scab* remains. The idea was that, upon entering Whistler's studio in the White House, his creditors would see themselves depicted in this mocking way, and the artist would have one last jab at them before they made an inventory of his possessions. It worked, to an extent — Leyland attempted to remove *The Gold Scab* from the house sale so that it would never be seen by the

public — but, despite his best efforts, *The Gold Scab* was sold. Whistler still lost his house.

According to etymological sources, by 1747, the term "artist" came to focus upon "one who practices the arts of design or visual arts" as a profession distinct from the work of a skilled artisan, musician or professor. A vague enough description in itself, Whistler further complicated the noun by exposing, and embellishing upon, the mechanics of art's display and production.

According to Whistler, his bankruptcy occurred because Leyland had not paid him for his work as an artist. In 1876, Leyland gave Whistler permission to make some basic aesthetic changes to a dining room in his new house, which had been designed by the architect Thomas Jeckyll. Jeckyll's designs were lavish, and included a thousand pounds' worth of aged leather previously owned by the Tudor Queen, Catherine of Aragon. Having recently bought Whistler's *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, Leyland decided that this painting should be the room's centerpiece. Whistler felt that the colors of Jeckyll's designs did not go at all with the *Princess*, and so went much further than the relatively minor alterations Leyland had agreed to, almost completely obliterating Jeckyll's work with an ornate scheme in blue and gold.

He told his biographers Elizabeth and Joseph Pennell, "Well, you know, I just painted on. I went on — without design or sketch — putting in every touch with such freedom." Feeling increasingly proud of his work as it continued, Whistler held a series of receptions at Leyland's home for friends and critics so they could admire the new masterpiece. Leyland was not invited to any of them.

The final result was *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*. Whistler was absolutely delighted with it, but Leyland was incensed. The final composition included a tableau of two fighting peacocks, representing the two men. One bird, which Whistler nicknamed the "poor" peacock, has Whistler's same plume of white hair as a head-feather; and the other has a silvery throat, once again representing Leyland's frilled shirt. The "rich" peacock, Leyland, stands amongst piles of money. Whistler demanded 2,000 guineas for his efforts.

Leyland refused. He did not pay Whistler in guineas — the customary way to pay an artist — at all, but DID agree to pay him a thousand pounds, the currency of the common tradesman. Whistler was livid. Throughout his career, he had argued that artists should not be subjugated to patrons' whims. His notion of an artist was a person who could freely experiment with subject and technique, not one who should be limited by the desires of those who wished to pay him, or by the taste of the general public. In other words, Whistler's ideas about the role and value of the artist remain thoroughly modern.

Whistler stated these ideas, most infamously, on two occasions. "Mr. Whistler's Ten O'Clock" was a nighttime lecture delivered to a

crowded hall in central London on 20 February, 1885. For over an hour, Whistler eloquently argued the case for non-representational painting, and against decorative art tamed by mainstream taste. And several years earlier, in 1877, having opened a libel case against prominent art critic and social reformer John Ruskin, Whistler stood up in court, essentially arguing the Duchampian maxim that the artist should be the one who decides what is art and what is not.

The impetus for the court case had been Ruskin's damning review of Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (1874), which he had seen on show at the Grosvenor Gallery. In his review, Ruskin accused Whistler of being an impostor, going on to say, "I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."

As scuffles go, the Whistler/Ruskin trial was a big one: well-attended by the public, and well-covered by the press. Whistler, on being asked by the Attorney General how much time it took to "knock off" a painting such as *Nocturne in Black and Gold*, responded: "Oh, I 'knock one off' possibly in a couple of days — one day to do the work, and another to finish it … ."

Attorney General: "The labor of two days is that for which you ask 200 guineas?"

Whistler: "No, I ask it for the knowledge I have gained in the work of a lifetime."

The public applauded. Whistler won his case, but was awarded only a farthing in damages. A farthing is equal to a quarter of an old penny. Bankruptcy loomed.

In 1890, Whistler wrote up the episode in his book *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies As Pleasingly Exemplified in Many Instances, Wherein the Serious Ones Of This Earth, Carefully Exasperated, Have Been Prettily Spurred On To Unseemliness And Indiscretion, While Overcome By An Undue Sense of Right*. Amongst other rememberings and misrememberings, the book reproduces negative press reviews, a public spat between Whistler and Oscar Wilde, plus numerous of his wranglings with thoughtless critics and moneyed patrons.

The Gentle Art of Making Enemies is evidence of a lifetime of scuffles. Whistler, in his patent black shoes, carefully coiffed hair, and hat perched at a jaunty angle, was doubtless one of the Serious Ones. The Exasperations ripple on.

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