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*'One of the most marvelously perfect things that has been
produced': James McNeill Whistler's Search for Venus*



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Introduction

In the 1850s and early 1860s British mainstream art, characterised by an emphasis on anecdotal narrative, was stirred by the medievalism and realism of the Pre-Raphaelites. Subsequently in the latter half of the 1860s a renewed interest in the Greek classical tradition and its artefacts, especially sculpture, inspired many avant-garde artists. This was not a revival defined by historicism, but a resurgence partially characterised and determined by the aestheticism of writers such as Algernon Charles Swinburne, particularly—following the production of *Poems and Ballads* in 1866 and his biography on William Blake of 1868—the emphasis on beauty as the primary value within the ideology of art for art’s sake.¹ It was within this framework and from roughly 1865 to 1870 that James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) produced some of his most interesting works. Through his meeting with fellow artist Albert Moore in 1865, Whistler had become captivated by classical Greek sculpture. Tentative attempts to work with Pheidias drapery and classical statuary are visible in Whistler’s work of this time, albeit coupled with his personal and incessant search for a form of beauty unrestricted by historical boundaries. This essay will single out one aspect of Whistler’s engagement with the classics, a staple of all academic classical art: Venus.

Whilst the latter half of the 1860s was a time of transformation for avant-garde Victorian painting on the whole, it was also a time of reinvention and re-education for Whistler personally. A worshipper of all things beautiful, Whistler’s interest in the subject of Venus makes aesthetic sense; after all, what is more beautiful than beauty itself? The goddess of beauty provides an artist with an opportunity to explore the aesthetics of beauty, sexuality, desire, and the potential physical embodiment of the abstract notion of beauty. However, I believe that Whistler’s conception of Venus was defined by his close association with Moore and his anxieties over his own artistic dexterity at this time. In this essay I shall closely analyse Whistler’s conception of Venus in relation to his artistic concerns of the 1860s, employing three oil works of this period as my central case studies: *Venus* (Fig. 1; c. 1868), *Venus Rising from the Sea* (Fig. 2; 1868/1873), and *Tanagra* (Fig. 3; 1869-1870).² This essay will also address the question of why Whistler moved so resolutely away from the depiction of Venus after 1870 and consider why the goddess made a reappearance in the 1890s in the medium of pastel and chalk in *Venus* (Fig. 4; 1898) and *Venus Astarte* (Fig. 5; 1888/1890). Whistler’s attitude towards mythology was extremely loose and I assert that it is essential to consider his idea of Venus in light of his pursuit of artistic beauty as well as his admiration of Moore, their friendship having been generalised in existing larger analyses of Whistler’s oeuvre.³ After all, writing to his patron Frederick Leyland in 1869, Whistler proclaimed Moore’s *A Venus* (Fig. 6; 1869) “one of the most marvelously [sic] perfect things that has been produced”, that year’s “most beautiful work in the Academy”, “faultless” in its entirety.⁴ Such lavish praise from such a capricious artist as Whistler requires closer analysis.

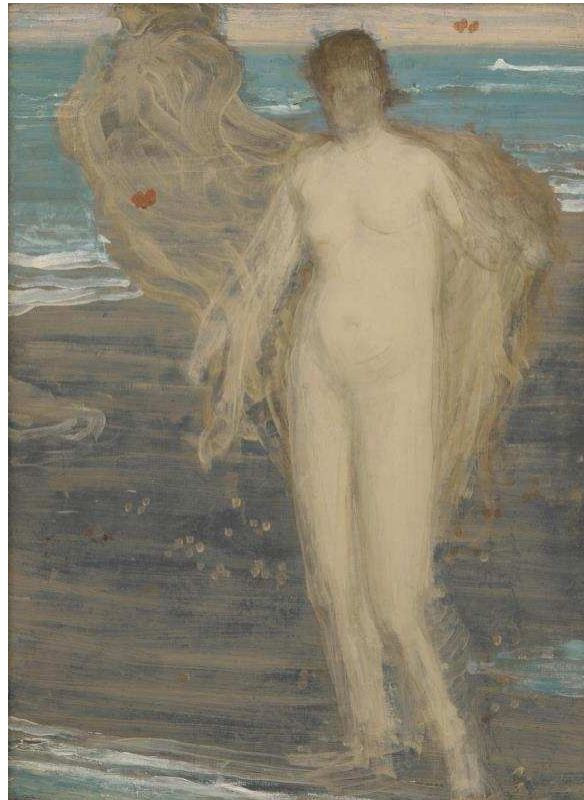


Figure 1. James McNeill Whistler, *Venus*, 1868, oil on millboard, 61.9 x 45.6 cm, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Image courtesy of Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1903.175a-b.

Pursuing Venus

Despite his outward façade of witticisms and provocation, Whistler was having difficulty defining and formulating his own artistic style in the 1860s. Whistler had moved to London in 1859, in the hopes of achieving fame in the halls of the Royal Academy of Arts. Despite earlier notice and scattered enthusiasm around *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1862-1862) and his etchings, responses to his art had become lukewarm by the time of *Symphony in White, No. 3* (1867).⁵ Sidney Colvin, a Pre-Raphaelite critic supportive of Whistler and a staunch admirer of progressive artists such as Moore, saw “perfect mastery” in Whistler’s use of colour but also a “neglect of form”, an “apparently slurring method”, and even a “contempt for executive finish”.⁶ Whistler had not been trained as thoroughly as other academic artists submitting to the Royal Academy in these years, and he felt his lack of training was reflected in the critical response, acknowledging in an 1867 letter to his close friend and fellow artist Henri Fantin-Latour that he wanted to improve beyond “the time when I threw everything down pell mell on the canvas”.⁷ In the same letter Whistler let loose a tirade on how he wished he had never been influenced by the figure of Courbet nor “this damned Realism”, and, rather, that he had studied under Ingres, in particular because of his qualities as a draughtsman and colourist.⁸ This aversion to Realism had its roots in Whistler’s meeting with Moore of 1865, which exposed him to the latter’s meticulous preparatory methods, making himself “painfully aware of his defects – drawing, for instance”.⁹ It was partially through his muted reception by Victorian critics and partially his meeting with Moore and the latter’s artistic style that Whistler began to reconsider his own stylistic and subject choices. Hence, in addition to his earlier fascination with Japanese art, Whistler became interested in those subjects and stylistic choices that Moore

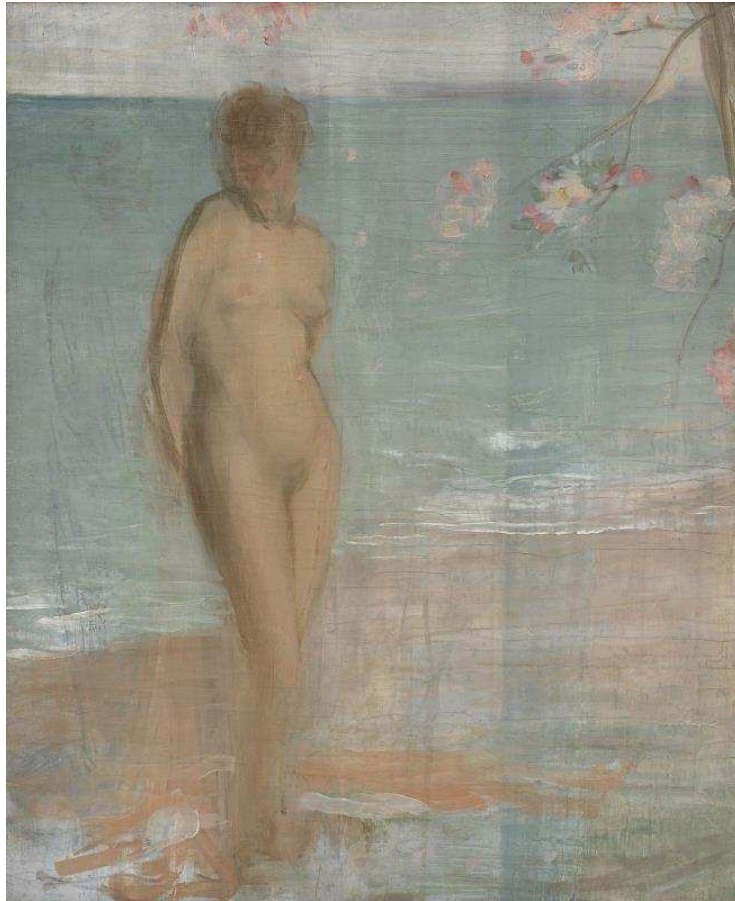


Figure 2. James McNeill Whistler, *Venus Rising from the Sea*, 1868/1873, oil on canvas, 59.8 x 49.1 cm, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Image courtesy of Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.174a-b.

employed, drawn from the art of classical Greece.¹⁰ Moore's own interest in ancient Greece, also coinciding with a fascination with Japanese art, was fuelled by the resurgence of interest in the classics by other artists working in London after the display of the Elgin Marbles in the 1860s.¹¹

On the other hand, there could have been an influence from a patron that drove Whistler in the direction of Venus. Frederick Leyland, the Liverpool shipping magnate who avidly collected work from contemporary avant-garde artists such as D.G. Rossetti and Moore as well as Renaissance masterpieces by Botticelli and Bellini, became one of Whistler's earliest important patrons.¹² Of interest here is Leyland's love for the painted female nude which Whistler surely knew about. In 1868, for his patron's newest commission, Whistler suggested a group of three girls clad in clinging drapery, transparent enough to be near-nudes, done as a continuation of *Symphony in White, No. 3*. This commission evolved into a series of decorative schemes labelled the *Six Projects* by Whistler's biographers the Pennells, a series begun around 1868 which consists of five groupings of women in Pheidian drapery as well as a single figure of Venus. The titles define each painting's association with colour, except for the *Venus* (Fig. 1), which is, moreover, the only single-figure painting in the series. As they were left unfinished, there has been much speculation by scholars on the nature of the *Six Projects* and their purpose.¹³ Linda Merrill has tantalisingly suggested that the series was at one point titled the 'Venus Set', though there is no evidence for this and it seems unlikely.¹⁴ Seeing the *Venus* as part of this series reflects Whistler's attempts to experiment with classical subject matter but, more importantly, the works resemble the style of Albert Moore. The artist similarity in terms of the drapery, the choice of accessories – ranging from parasol to blossom – and the

MARTE STINIS

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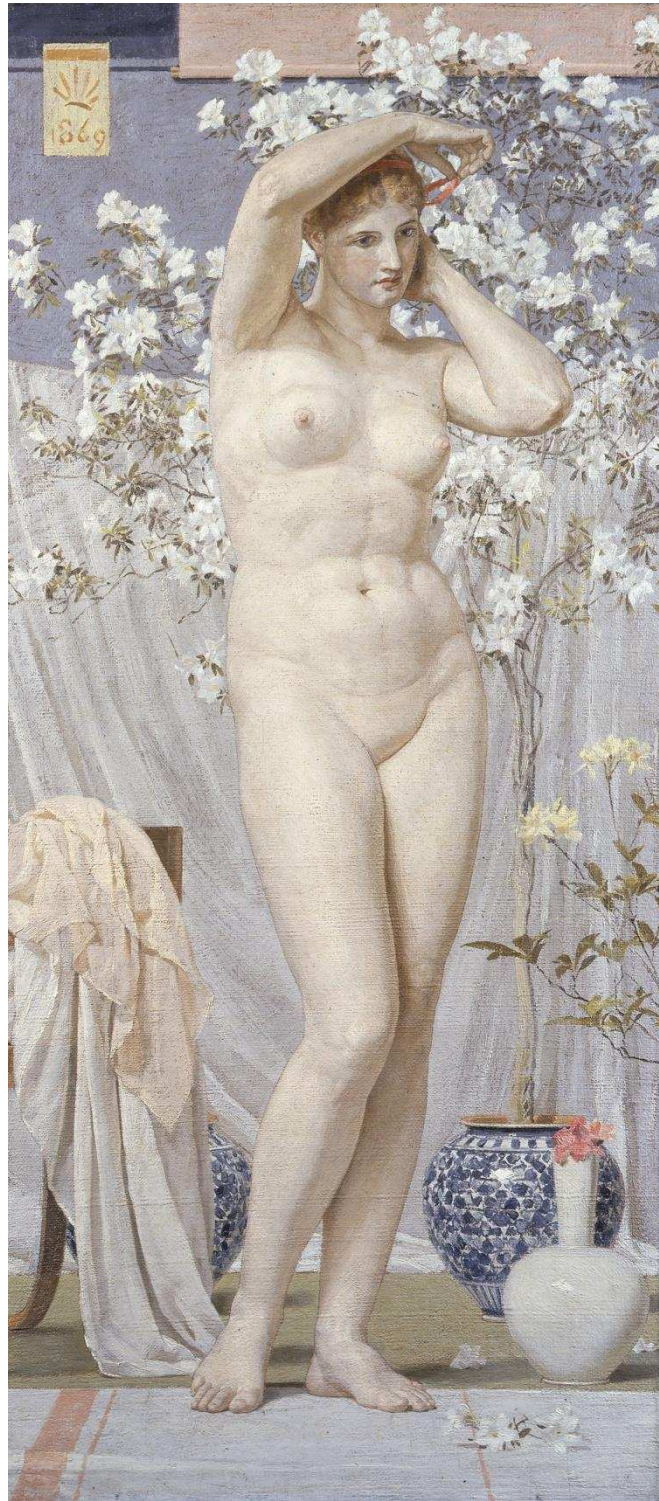


Figure 3. Albert Moore, *A Venus*, 1869, oil on canvas, 160 x 76.2 cm, York Art Gallery. Image courtesy of York Museums Trust (York Art Gallery).

positioning of the bodies all instantly recall Moore. This artistic similarity indicates Whistler's admiration for Moore's artistic style and speaks of an affinity between the two artists in terms of artistic principles. Moreover, it reflects Whistler's interest in the movement of Pheidias-style drapery as Moore employed it and such an artistic similarity, or imitation, indicates admiration and recognition. The pose of the *Venus* in figure 1 has another precedent in that the figure directly mimics that of the Venus de Milo. Indeed, this classical statue appears in Whistler's writings in later years, yet there is an element of ambiguity to the depiction to the extent that, without the aid of the title, it might not have recalled a Venus at all.¹⁵ As mentioned above, Whistler's attitude towards mythology was immensely lax and he was more interested in other aspects of the work, such as the colouring, the drapery, and the body language, prioritising formal over narrative elements. Perhaps, for Whistler, at this stage, the association of water and the sea with Venus proved sufficient.

Whistler has painted *Venus* in broad brushstrokes, placing her close to the forefront with the drapery spilling out beyond her, blowing in the wind and framing her limbs. This movement in the cloth and the paint give the impression of her having just landed on the shore, arriving on the sand in all her beauty, attended by a scattering of red butterflies. Her ephemerality and intangibility are compelling; the brushstrokes that so wonderfully suggest the blowing wind also make her seem indefinite, even fragile, about to be whisked away from the viewer's sight as quickly as she has appeared. This is exacerbated by the absence of facial expression; rough brushstrokes mark the suggestion of a nose and frame the face in brown locks, but the goddess remains unknown and unknowable to us. She lacks the strong tactility of marble that the Venus de Milo has, yet she also lacks the human quality that a discernible face lends to painted flesh. Despite the freshness of the colours and the whipping movement generated in the drapery, this work was clearly meant as a study for a future canvas. Unfortunately, few of Whistler's studies have survived from this period due to his habit of throwing away what did not please him or scraping off paint to redo a work. Whistler had only produced his first large-scale canvas in 1859, *At the Piano* (1858-1859), and consistently since this work has he been criticised of lacking attention to detail.¹⁶ Sometimes, the criticism was related directly to the conception of the human body: "Given a woman, and Mr Whistler will produce that which is the most *bizarre* of bipeds, he will disdain to draw any limbs or features, and exhibit a strange indifference as to how, or why, they are put together".¹⁷ Having trouble with this aspect of art, it is no surprise that Whistler would draw inspiration from Moore, who was obsessive with his attention to detail. Indeed, Whistler copied Moore's preparatory style of making multiple sketches, particularly with reference to the female form: "on one of the walls hang a number of pastel studies in nude and partially draped female figures".¹⁸

It is evident there was a taste for the classical in the 1860s and it is possible Whistler arrived at the subject of Venus through Moore's interest in ancient Greece as well as Leyland's interest in the female nude. Whistler shared a studio with Frederick Jameson, an architect, in 1868 which was located at 62 Great Russell Street, opposite from the British Museum. At this time, Moore lived nearby, in Fitzroy Street, and the two met frequently, visiting the British Museum together to sketch from the Elgin Marbles and other ancient sculpture.¹⁹ This would have been a good exercise for Whistler, who was often criticised for his rendering of the human form.²⁰ One critic went so far as to call the figure in Whistler's *The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks* (1864) "hideous, absurdly ill drawn", and "a worse specimen of humanity than could be found on the oldest piece of china existence".²¹ Simultaneously, the figure of Venus would have been an attractive subject for Whistler as the goddess is the embodiment of physical beauty. Eager to make a name for himself, he would have witnessed the increased interest in the classics and decided to experiment with them himself. Did Whistler associate Venus with the classical academic training he had never had, and if so, did he hope the subject would appeal to collectors and patrons? Despite Whistler's later insistence on the value of colour and form over subject matter, his painting was representational and he was particular in choosing a Venus for the *Six Projects* rather than another grouping of anonymous women in drapery. Could he have done this to please Leyland? Or was it an experiment to paint the nude female body with fewer reservations? After all, as Alison Smith has demonstrated, looking to the classics



Figure 4. James McNeill Whistler, *Venus*, also known as *Standing Nude (Venus)*, 1869, crayon and chalk on paper, 119.4 x 61.4 cm, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Image courtesy of Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, D.C.: Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.66

was a method for Victorian artists to circumvent the Victorian moral codes around nudity; if the female nude was a goddess, then the nudity could be somewhat excused.²² That this moral framework was firmly in place is demonstrated by the title Moore chose to give a painting he exhibited in 1869: *A Venus* (Fig. 6). Moore specifically painted a nude in the guise of a Venus, though left the painting empty of a narrative, labelling it as simply *a Venus* in an attempt to subvert the traditions in place at the Academy. Nonetheless, it seems most likely that Whistler was attempting a Venus because of Moore's interest in the classics and because of the practice it offered for drawing the human body. Indeed, during the 1860s Whistler was having his model pose alongside a skeleton and "a bust of the Venus de Milo at hand".²³ The importance of the Venus de Milo for Moore was acknowledged by a critic writing in 1891 that Moore's faces were "the low-browed, broad tempered, sweetly gentle and tenderly grave faces that the nameless sculptor knew and loved and handed down to us through the Aphrodite found at Milo".²⁴ Whistler then used his new-found practice with drawing the human form as well as the drawing of Pheidias drapery and applied it in the *Six Projects*. By 1868, when Swinburne published his review of the 1868 Royal Academy Exhibition in conjunction with W.M. Rossetti, he included a section on Whistler's *Projects*, of which three had been

started at the time of writing. Swinburne described the existing works as having “excellent beauty of form”, and the prose the poet used is evocative of Whistler’s budding liaisons with art for art’s sake and the importance for this doctrine of form and colour over narrative. Within this framework, that the woman in *Venus* is also the goddess pales in importance in comparison to the beauty of line and the “melody of ineffable colour”.²⁵ Swinburne was recognising that subject matter was of lesser importance to Whistler in the then-extant three of the *Six Projects* and, by extension, the later *Venus*.

In 1869, as mentioned above, Moore exhibited *A Venus* at the Royal Academy, which opened their annual exhibition on April 30. On May 6, Whistler wrote to his mother that he was working on a drawing, referring to one of the only two cartoons Whistler ever made, or at least have survived. This cartoon was called *Venus* (Fig. 7; 1869) and later that same year Whistler wrote to Thomas Winans, a patron, that he was sending him a photograph of the cartoon, proclaiming his intention to execute it as a finished painting.²⁶ This never materialised. However, as a cartoon, it is highly indicative of Whistler’s interests and, even more so, of his artistic debt to Moore. That Moore’s *A Venus* provided Whistler with fresh creative inspiration is illustrated in a letter by Anna Whistler, in which she wrote that her son was “in his Studio, so intent upon perfecting his drawings”.²⁷

The nude Venus in Whistler’s cartoon leans on her left side, her right foot just touching the ground. The body leans in the same manner as Moore’s Venus, which is in the opposite direction of the statue they are both clearly modelled on, the Venus de Milo. It is most likely the case that Moore copied the proportions from an engraving and not the physical statue, on which the positioning was reversed, and it is plausible Whistler did the same if not looking directly at Moore’s work.²⁸ Either way, the visual similarities between Moore and Whistler are striking. The differences are in certain stylistic choices. Whereas Moore’s Venus holds up her arms to attend her hair, Whistler’s Venus crosses her torso to hold up a swath of drapery, creating a sinuous movement suggesting that she is in the process of turning around to face the viewer. Indeed, her gaze strikes us directly. Nonetheless, the figure remains very statuesque, created of idealised proportions that tell of Whistler’s classicist interests at the time, as well as of Moore’s influence in constructing the visual body type. Moore’s influence is, moreover, visible in Whistler’s first instance of using his iconic butterfly signature, albeit trapped in a cartouche and in a highly classical vein, linear and almost rigid (see lower-right corner, figure 7). It is a direct imitation, in a personal cast, of Moore’s own signature, the anthemion, a Greek stylistic device, that he adopted in 1866 (see also top-left corner of figure 6, *A Venus*).²⁹ The similarity between Moore’s anthemion and Whistler’s butterfly was marked instantly by critics: “the queer little labels with bloody hands upon them which Mr. A. Moore and Mr. Whistler and *their* followers love to stick into the corners of their pictures like a postage stamp”.³⁰ It was another step in Whistler’s increasingly public admiration of Moore.

A Mutual Obsession

Whistler is best known nowadays as the artist of the Nocturnes and the full-length portraits, an artist thoroughly of modern life. At the time of 1869, however, Whistler’s comment about Moore’s *A Venus* being “one of the most marvelously perfect things” demonstrates Whistler’s classicist affiliations. Considering both works alongside each other, I argue that Whistler’s cartoon was a direct response to Moore’s *A Venus*, both out of admiration and out of shared artistic interests. Indeed, Whistler’s artistic project continued to align with Moore’s until 1870. Considering Whistler’s effusive praise of *A Venus* and his start on the cartoon so shortly after the 1869 exhibition, as well as the similarity in signature, he was openly interested in Moore’s artistic ideas and keen to include them in his own work, seeing the latter’s work as emblematic of artistic beauty. The *Tanagra* (Fig. 3) is the oil sketch that followed up the *Venus* cartoon. It embodies Whistler’s statement that his cartoon would be “clad in thin drapery” and finished with “a lot of flowers and very light bright colours”.³¹ There is a profusion of flowers in the background, accompanied by fans, flowers in a pot, and excessive drapery; elements that the work shares with *A Venus*.



Figure 5. James McNeill Whistler, *Tanagra*, also known as *Sketch of a Figure with Flowers and Japanese Fans*, 1867-1870, oil on canvas, 31 x 7.5 cm, Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College, Lynchburg, Virginia, United States of America. Image courtesy of The Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College, Lynchburg, Virginia.

Since Moore's *The Marble Seat* (1865), Whistler had been experimenting with drapery and the classicising look of *Tanagra* does not only have a debt to Moore, but also to Whistler's obsession with portraying beauty, borrowing features from the classical language to do so. In terms of visual language, *Tanagra* is clearly a continuation of the earlier cartoon, yet it does not depict a Venus nor even carry 'Venus' in its title. There is another source for this depiction, contained in the collection of Tanagra statuettes the British Museum owned and Whistler admired, small Greek terracotta figurines mostly of women clad in drapery. One of Whistler's most important patrons, the Ionides family, also owned a collection of these. Indeed, Whistler owned a photographic catalogue of their collection. Malcolm Bell describes these figurines as "drapery studies", hence making them ideal for artists looking for an emphasis on form and colour over anecdotal content, and for artists practising the folds and pleats in drapery.³² Despite the later addition of the title 'Tanagra', Whistler was evidently aware of such figurines, which could have played a role in his interpretation and use of drapery. Most importantly, however, Whistler's slippery handling of the identity of Venus arguably points to his interest in the female form in general, for which a Venus represented merely one exploratory avenue. Whistler's disregard for historical accuracy corroborates his mingling of the classical Venus with other representations of women in drapery. Rather than act on a specific desire to follow a mythological precept, Whistler used the practice of drawing a Venus as a way

to perfect his drawing skills in general. After all, his pursuit of beauty transcended historical, mythological, and geographical boundaries. Thus, arguably, he used Venus because of her associations with academic training and the classical female nude and, afterwards, he became confident enough to move on. Are the arrangements in form and colour, then, more important than the identity of Venus?

Whistler was incredibly fickle. If a subject failed to keep his interest, he would abandon it immediately.³³ A friend of Whistler commented that not only was he fickle, but also could be a perfectionist, and that he “frequently spoilt his work by trying to take it beyond a certain point and then, as a rule, destroyed it ruthlessly”.³⁴ Nonetheless, there is a certain beauty in the unfinished nature of some of his works. Of these, *Venus Rising from the Sea* (Fig. 2), another continuation to the *Six Projects-Venus* (Fig. 1), is a significant example, as Whistler kept retouching it over several decades. Eventually the work was left as is visible today, and Charles Lang Freer, avid collector of Whistler’s work, admired it in its unfinished state.³⁵ The painting is Venus in action, as she is born, in the tradition of how Botticelli and Cabanel represented her. There are a few sketches for this painting in which Whistler considered painting the figure tying up her hair to visually elongate her body. On the canvas, however, her arms are behind her back and her chin is dipped forward, conveying a sense of bashfulness and passivity despite the action implied in the title. The work does not carry the same force as figure 1, where she arrived in a billowing of drapery and wind. Here, Whistler has placed the figure just off-centre and to the left of the composition, and lines are still visible where Whistler considered placing her even further to the left.³⁶ A branch of blossoms enters the scene on the right, angling down diagonally so the flowers frame the body and head of Venus. Considering her myth, this would be appropriate as a symbol of the flowering of fertility, love, and birth. However, here the blossoms are a more poignant signifier of Whistler’s interest in Japanese art, further emphasised by the abrupt cutting off of the tree at the edge of the composition, as well as the short foreground and broad, sweeping forms. Again, as in figure 1, the face is indistinguishable. Is this by happenstance, or did Whistler ultimately leave it deliberately unfinished? I am inclined towards the latter, since beauty in incompleteness is a recurrent theme in Whistler’s work. Whistler did hang the *Six Projects*, in their unfinished state, in his own house.³⁷ Over and over again, the artist has been criticised as leaving works incomplete, despite his insistence that they were finished.³⁸ However, Whistler, paradoxical as always, also insisted that a “picture is finished when all trace of the means used to bring about the end has disappeared”.³⁹ A Victorian critic might want to see the removal of all brushstrokes and a greater attention to detail for a picture to be considered finished. The absence of a facial expression in both *Venus* and *Venus Rising from the Sea* tend to indicate, however, that they were steps in the direction of completed pieces, as is suggested by the addition of a face in the *Tanagra*. Yet the absence of it lends itself well to a suggestion of “poetical moments”.⁴⁰

It was not until 1870 that Whistler started feeling anxious about the obvious similarities his and Moore’s work had taken on. Whistler, admiring Moore more than any other living artist, was nonetheless, consciously or otherwise, incorporating this admiration into his artwork on the basis of such shared aesthetic interests. Curiously, in 1870 Whistler moved away from the drapery studies and classicist topics that had occupied him since 1865—indeed, since meeting Moore. What happened in 1870 that Whistler felt the need to alter his style? Or, more pressingly, to what extent were his works of the period 1865-1870 then based on Moore’s stylistic choices? Whistler wrote to Moore in 1870 that “it struck me dimly”, that “perhaps—and with great hesitation—that one of my sketches of girls on the sea shore, was in motive not unlike your yellow one—of course I don’t [sic] mean in scheme of colour but in general sentiment of movement and in the place of the sea—sky and shore &c”.⁴¹ Whistler was referring to Moore’s *Seagulls* in relation to his own *Symphony in Blue and Pink*, one of the *Six Projects*. William Eden Nesfield, architect and mutual friend, was called in to mediate:

I strongly feel that you have seen & felt Moores [sic] spécialité in his female figures, method of clothing them & use of coloured muslin also his hard study of Greek work—Then Moore has thoroughly appreciated & felt your mastery of painting in a light key—I have such a sincere admiration for you both [...] In

answer to your question 'could each paint the two figures without harming each in the opinion of those who do not understand you both' I am quite certain you both may—The effect & treatment are so very wide apart, that there can be no danger from the vulgar fact of there being, sea & sky, & a young woman walking on the foreground.⁴²

Nesfield succinctly summarises here the specific influences Moore and Whistler had on each other. Looking at the works Whistler created after meeting Moore, there is an emphasis on drapery, the female figure, and, indeed, "Greek work". Whistler's choice of words betrays his anxiety and discomfort. He was worried about his reputation as an artist, which led him to alter his choice of subject matter and style in 1870, as Elizabeth Prettejohn has indicated.⁴³ Despite an initial muted response, Whistler did find considerable more success with his first Nocturne in 1871 and then the start of his full-length portraits with *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1*, distancing himself from the classicism of his earlier work. After meeting Moore in 1865, Whistler became acquainted with the classical world and drew inspiration from its visual vocabulary as well as from Moore's careful balancing of colour and line.⁴⁴ As Linda Merrill has pointed out, Whistler shared Moore's perfectionism at this time yet his works had an unfinished look to them and he would come to the conclusion that a finished piece could look like "a happily contrived and expressive sketch".⁴⁵ This idea of the sketch fits in well with the unfinished aesthetic of Whistler's Venuses, which are expressive and clearly incomplete. Can they be complete in their incompleteness?

Despite Whistler's increased output after 1870 of unclassical themes, the figure of Venus continued to haunt him. The artist's letters of the 1890s testify to his desire to retry the depiction of female mythological figures, which he considered, mostly, beyond his ability. Writing to William Heinemann, the publisher, in 1898, Whistler declared:

Indeed the beautiful condition of work is at last quite laughable—I don't know any other word for it! I mean I sit in the studio and could almost laugh at the extraordinary progress I am making and the lovely things I am inventing!—I have now in the studio a Phryne—a Danae—an Eve—an Odalisque—and a Bathsheba—that carried out ou[gh]t to bring in two or three thousand apiece!⁴⁶

It is compelling that Whistler refers inadvertently, yet again, to his acute awareness of his difficulties with drawing figures, to which he now refers as "progress", especially with regards to monetary value. The Pennells have identified a woman who modelled for Whistler in the 1890s as so absolutely captivating him as she was "but another expression of the beauty that haunted Whistler, the beauty that was the inspiration of the *Harmonies in White* and the *Six Projects*". They continue that "at last, the knowledge was coming to him, he [Whistler] said again and again".⁴⁷ Usually, Whistler created these mythological figures in pastel on brown paper, creating small works that had a luminous beauty all their own. Two pastels stand out, a *Venus Astarte* (Fig. 5) and *Venus* (Fig. 4), both softly radiant. The *Venus Astarte*, the Syrian version of the goddess Venus, depicts a woman in front of a draped sheet, herself lifting gauzy blue drapery to reveal her body and face. Leaning into the contrapposto stance, she mimics the Venus de Milo in her statuesque figure. The *Venus* is fascinating for its likeness to Whistler's earlier attempts. The suggestion of her body and the draperies in this pastel are exquisite as she stands on a shoreline akin to both *Venus* and *Venus Rising from the Sea*. One arm is raised to hold her drapery, while the other hangs downwards, aligning with her gaze as she turns away from the viewer. The drapery is thin and gauzy, revealing and concealing, fluttering gracefully with the wind. There is more suggestion to her face, yet still, she remains indistinguishable. We might associate this with Whistler's habit of often starting projects and never finishing them, yet I am inclined to agree with the Pennells when they write that Whistler's pastels of the 1890s "have the exquisiteness of Tanagra figurines and are as complete".⁴⁸

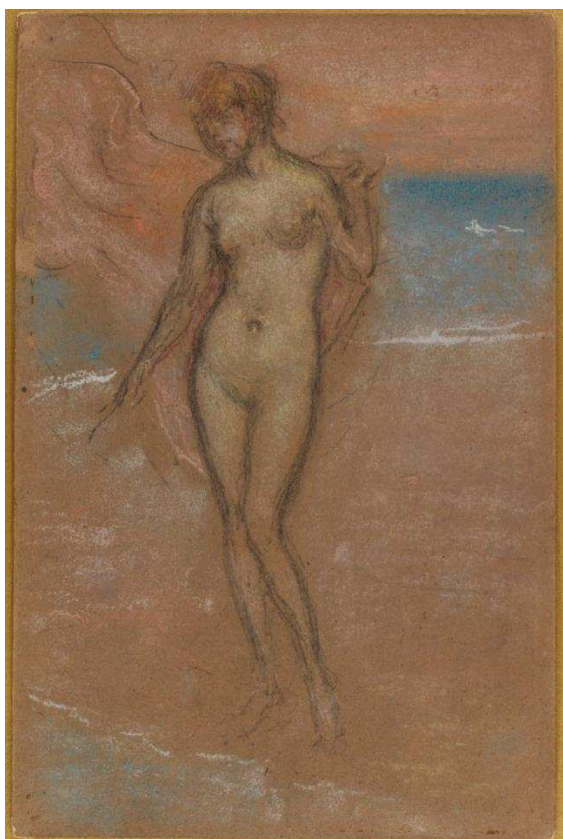


Figure 6 (left). James McNeill Whistler, *Venus*, 1898, chalk and pastel on paper, 27.7 x 18.1 cm, The Hunterian, University of Glasgow. Image © The Hunterian, University of Glasgow.



Figure 7 (right). James McNeill Whistler, *Venus Astarte*, 1888/1890, chalk and pastel on paper, 27.5 x 18.4 cm, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Image courtesy of Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.65a-c.

There are numerous sources confirming that Whistler was working on another prominent Venus at this time. This was “a Venus coming across the sands from the sea, roses springing in those bitter fields where her feet have stepped, whose enchanting beauty and incompleteness I explain to myself by such reasons. For an hour the modern slipped this century, breathed, an excited visitor, the air of Titian’s time, saw a Venus more lovely”.⁴⁹ This notion of beauty in its incompleteness is especially intriguing and highly relevant to Whistler’s aesthetic, a topic Lene Østermark-Johansen has addressed in relation to Walter Pater’s writing and Whistler’s painting.⁵⁰ She links Pater and Whistler through their use of *non finito*, or what Pater calls “in reality perfect finish” as a way “of etherealising pure form, of reliving its stiff realism and communicating to it breath, pulsation, the effect of life”.⁵¹ While Moore provided Whistler with classical subject matter in the 1860s, in the late 1880s and 1890s he revisits the mythological figures and the drapery in a more conscious effort to improve his skills. Whistler’s works have always had an aura of suggestiveness and incompleteness, an aesthetic that recurs in these final works on Venus and serves to make them peculiarly his own.

Conclusion

The sculptor Auguste Rodin confirmed the clear influence of classical sculpture has had on Whistler, commenting, on the opening of the Whistler exhibition at the New Gallery in 1903, that “has it occurred

to you [...] how Whistler was influenced by sculpture? His nudes have the firmness of marble. He studied much from the antique, and went to that ancient source of beauty and grace, Greek sculpture".⁵² While this is undeniable, it needs to be stressed that it was Moore who opened up the classical world to Whistler in the first place. And, just like Moore, Whistler's Venus was not a classicist rehashing of the Venus de Milo, but rather fluid, alive, suggestive in pose and movement. The *Venus Astarte* lifts her drapery up to reveal herself, and the *Venus* (Fig. 3) is sinuous, serpentine, leaning with the wind and her draperies. Yet her blurred edges and the unfinished nature of the work allow for more aesthetic contemplation of the artwork, beyond its representation of the mythological goddess. Whistler forces us to contemplate his image for longer, letting our gaze meander over its edges, its contours, its forms and colours. As the Venuses in the 1860s were exercises in artistic style, begun to improve drawing, the Venuses in the 1890s become part of Whistler's interpretation of the human figure in pastel, unfinished yet ethereal in appearance. Ultimately, Moore taught Whistler to look at the classics, and the artist took the theme of Venus and incorporated it into his own aesthetic.

¹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*, London: John Camden Hotten, 1866; and Swinburne, *William Blake: A Critical Essay*, London: John Camden Hotten, 1868.

² The dates on these works are contested since – with all three – it is not fully clear when Whistler started and stopped work on the paintings. For example, *Venus Rising from the Sea* was touched up many times up to the 1890s, and we can only approximate the starting date of *Venus*, which has been deemed to be 1868 as it is part of the *Six Projects*. See the catalogue entry on Whistler's *Venus*, Margaret F. MacDonald and Petri Grischa, *James McNeill Whistler: The Paintings, A Catalogue Raisonné*, University of Glasgow, 2014, online website at <https://www.whistlerpaintings.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/searchdisplay/?mid=y082>, accessed 21/07/2019. *Tanagra* is a continuation of an 1869 cartoon Whistler made though some sources cite it to have begun as early as 1867. See Linda Merrill, *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, 101. The title of *Tanagra* has also changed over time; it is now known, in its current collection, as *Sketch of Figure with Flowers and Japanese Fans*. I will use the commonly known title *Tanagra* in my essay to avoid confusion, as this is the one used most in scholarly texts. Andrew McLaren Young suggested the title in 1960, after a similar sketch that Whistler had titled *Tanagra*; see Andrew McLaren Young, *James McNeill Whistler*, London: Arts Council Gallery, and New York: Knoedler Gallery, 1960, cat. no. 22, 47-48.

³ Whistler's attempts to paint the subject matter of a Venus are chronicled in larger compendiums, but often underrated in comparison to Whistler's later, more famous and more successful artistic works such as the Nocturnes. Overall, the influence Moore had on Whistler needs to be further researched, as it is more substantial than is currently recognised in the scholarship. For a good overview of the mutual influence with regards to art for art's sake, see Maria Teresa Benedetti, "Whistler, Moore, e l'art for art's sake", *Paragone* 32, 275 (May 1981): 21-39. Allen Staley has provided a comprehensive overview of Whistler's output in the 1860s, including the *Venus* of the *Six Projects*, though his study is limited to this decade. See Allen Staley, *The New Paintings of the 1860s: Between the Pre-Raphaelites and the Aesthetic Movement*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, esp. chapter 6 on "James McNeill Whistler", pp. 151-182. David Park Curry discusses Whistler's experiments with Venus in relation to the collection of Charles Lang Freer and only discusses the *Venus* (Figure 1) and *Venus Rising from the Sea* (Figure 2) within this context. See David Park Curry, *Whistler at the Freer Gallery of Art*, New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1984, esp. 29, 107-111, 244. Nicholas Burry Smale considered the Venus within the medium of pastel and lithograph; see Nicholas Burry Smale, "Venus Transformed: Lithographs and Pastels of the 1890s", chapter 4 in *The Whistler Review: Studies on James McNeill Whistler and Nineteenth-Century Art*, edited by Nigel Thorp, 27-36. Vol. II, Centre for Whistler Studies, University of Glasgow, 1999. It is discussed by Elizabeth Prettejohn, Richard Dormont and Margaret F. MacDonald, and Robin Spencer, though not as detailed and within the scope of Whistler's classical interests and friendship with Moore. See Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, esp. chapter 6 on "James McNeill Whistler", pp. 163-200. Richard Dormont and Margaret F. MacDonald, *James McNeill Whistler*, exh. cat., London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1994, 93. Robin Spencer, *James McNeill Whistler*, London: Tate, 2003, esp. 17-19. Prettejohn does discuss the importance of classical sculpture in relation to both Moore and Whistler's practices. See

Prettejohn, *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture: Greek Sculpture and Modern Art from Winckelmann to Picasso*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012, esp. 73-74, 90-91. Robyn Asleson discusses the relation between Moore and Whistler from the former's perspective. See Robyn Asleson, *Albert Moore*, London: Phaidon Press, 2000, 88-92.

⁴ James McNeill Whistler to Frederick Richards Leyland, May/June 1869, Library of Congress PWC 6B/24. Margaret F. MacDonald, Patricia de Montfort, and Nigel Thorp, eds., *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, 1855-1903*, online edition, University of Glasgow, accessed 15/04/2019. I have kept Whistler's original spelling when referring to the letter directly.

⁵ Daniel E. Sutherland, *Whistler: A Life for Art's Sake*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014, 108.

⁶ Sidney Colvin, "English Painters and Painting in 1867", *Fortnightly Review* 2, 10 (October 1867): 464-476, 473-474.

⁷ Whistler to Henri Fantin-Latour, September 1867, PWC 1/33/25. *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler*, accessed 05/05/2019.

⁸ *Ibid.*, accessed 05/05/2019.

⁹ Cited in E.R. and J. Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, London: William Heinemann, 1911, 14. These were the words of Frederick Jameson, with whom Whistler worked in the same studio for seven months in 1868.

¹⁰ For more on Whistler's interest in Japanese art, see John Sandberg, "'Japonisme' and Whistler", *The Burlington Magazine* 106, 740 (1964): 500-505+507.

¹¹ See Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, esp. 133-154.

¹² For more on some of the works Leyland collected, see this contemporary summary of his art collection; "The Late Mr. Leyland's House", *British Architect* (January 15, 1892): 55.

¹³ See Arabella Teniswood-Harvey, "Music in Colour: Whistler's *Six Projects* and Schubert's *Moments Musicaux*, Op. 94", *The British Art Journal* 15, 1 (2014): 27-34; Merrill, *The Peacock Room*, 96; Dormont and MacDonald, *James McNeill Whistler*, 92-94.

¹⁴ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*, 96.

¹⁵ "[The artist] produces that wonderful thing called the masterpiece [...] and the Gods stand by and marvel, and perceive how far away from beautiful is the Venus of Melos than was their own Eve." James McNeill Whistler, *Ten O'Clock Lecture*, Portland, Maine: Thomas Bird Mosher, 1916 reprint, original publication 1885, 25.

¹⁶ See "The Royal Academy Exhibition", *The London Review* 4, 97 (May 10, 1862): 437-439, 439; F.T. Palgrave, "English Pictures in 1865", *Fortnightly Review* 1 (August 1, 1865): 661-674, 663; Philip Gilbert Hamerton, "The Reaction from Pre-Raphaelitism", *The Fine Arts Quarterly Review* 2 (May 1864): 255-263, 261; "Pictures of the Year", *Saturday Review* 23, 605 (June 1, 1867): 690-691, 691.

¹⁷ "Royal Academy", *The Athenaeum* no. 1958 (May 6, 1865): 626-628, 628 (italics in original).

¹⁸ Cited in the Pennells, *The Life of Whistler*, 233. These are the words of Malcolm C. Salaman, *Court and Society Review* (July 1, 1886).

¹⁹ Asleson, *Albert Moore*, 96-98; Sutherland, *A Life for Art's Sake*, 111.

²⁰ See "Royal Academy", *The Athenaeum* no. 1958 (May 6, 1865): 626-628, 628; "The Royal Academy Exhibition", *Saturday Review* 19, 501 (June 3, 1865): 665-667, 665.

²¹ "Art", *The Reader* 3, 75 (June 4, 1864): 724-725, 724.

²² Alison Smith, ed., *Exposed: The Victorian Nude*, exh. cat., London: Tate, 2001, 86-87.

²³ Thomas Way, *Memories of Whistler*, 27; cited in Merrill, *The Peacock Room*, 99.

²⁴ Harold Frederic, "A Painter of Beautiful Dreams", *Scribner's Magazine* 10 (December 1891): 722.

²⁵ Algernon Charles Swinburne and William Michael Rossetti, *Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition, 1868*, London: John Camden Hotten, 1868, 44.

²⁶ Whistler to Thomas Winans, September/November 1869, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Autograph Letters, Box II; NYMA 87 – AO MS6 – MS10, *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler*, accessed 08/05/2019.

²⁷ Anna Matilda Whistler to Harriet and James H. Gamble, 6 May 1869, Glasgow University Library W536, *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler*, accessed 08/05/2019.

²⁸ Suzanne Singletary, *James McNeill Whistler and France: A Dialogue in Paint, Poetry, and Music*, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, 58-59.

²⁹ The first time Moore signed a work with his anthemion was *Apricots* of 1866, in the Guildhall Art Gallery, London.

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- ³⁰ Tom Taylor, “The Royal Academy Exhibition [First Article], *The Times* (April 30, 1872): 12 (italics in original).
- ³¹ Whistler to Winans, September/November 1869, *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler*, accessed 08/05/2019.
- ³² Malcolm Bell, III, “Tanagras and the Idea of Type”, *Harvard University Art Museums Bulletin* 1, 3 Greek Terracottas of the Hellenistic World: The Coroplast’s Art (Spring 1993): 39-53, 40.
- ³³ Pennells, *The Life of Whistler*, 104.
- ³⁴ Arthur Jeromy Eddy, *Recollections and Impressions of James McNeill Whistler*, New York: Benjamin Blom, 1972 reprint, original publication 1904, 194.
- ³⁵ There is a photograph taken by Alvin Langdon Coburn, in the collection of the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., representing Freer gazing at *Venus Rising from the Sea* and admiring it alongside Islamic earthenware. See a reproduction in Kathleen Pyne, “Portrait of a Collector as an Agnostic: Charles Lang Freer and Connoisseurship”, *The Art Bulletin* 78, 1 (March 1996): 75-97, 96.
- ³⁶ In fact, this is a reused canvas. Clear lines are visible, cutting through the middle of the composition, of an ocean view that Whistler considered making first but then mostly scraped off. See Curry, *Whistler at the Freer Gallery of Art*, 111.
- ³⁷ W. Graham Robertson, *Time Was: The Reminiscences of W. Graham Robertson*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1931, 192.
- ³⁸ It was a topic of critical debate around many of Whistler’s earlier works, such as *The Thames in Ice* (1860), *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1861-1862), *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl* (1864). It came up again during the trial of Whistler v. Ruskin in 1878; see Linda Merrill, *A Pot of Paint: Aesthetics on Trial in Whistler v. Ruskin*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992, 153, 179-180.
- ³⁹ James McNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, New York: Frederick Stokes & Brothers, 1890, 46.
- ⁴⁰ Palgrave, “English Pictures in 1865”, 662-663.
- ⁴¹ Whistler to Albert Moore, 12/19 September 1870, MS Whistler M436, *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler*, accessed 06/05/2019.
- ⁴² William Eden Nesfield to Whistler, 19 September 1870, MS Whistler N20, *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler*, accessed 06/05/2019.
- ⁴³ Prettejohn, *Art for Art’s Sake*, 169.
- ⁴⁴ Benedetti, “Whistler, Moore, e l’art for art’s sake”, 23.
- ⁴⁵ Merrill, *The Peacock Room*, 103; Alfred Lys Baldry, *Albert Moore: His Life and Works*, London: George Bell & Sons, 1897, 77.
- ⁴⁶ Whistler to William Heinemann, 31 January 1898, PWC 10/849-50/1, *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler*, accessed 06/05/2019.
- ⁴⁷ Pennells, *The Life of Whistler*, 357.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ “Venus of the Belvedere”, *Saturday Review* 88, 2280 (July 8, 1889): 43-44, 43. See also D.C. MacColl, “A Debt: What England Should Do for Whistler—and Itself. D.C. MacColl in the Saturday Review”, *New York Tribune* (August 7, 1903): 10.
- ⁵⁰ Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016 reprint, original publication 2011, 180.
- ⁵¹ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, London: Macmillan, 1873, 56.
- ⁵² “Rodin on Whistler”, *Pall Mall Gazette* (February 3, 1903): 10.