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Whistler's *Woman in White*: Joanna Hiffernan

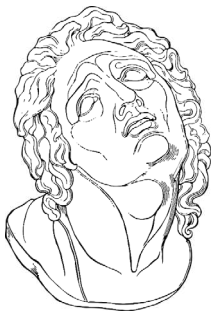
Gerry Fässler

Royal Academy of the Arts, London

Curated by Ann Dumas, curator, Royal Academy of the Arts, Charles Brock, associate curator of American and British paintings at the National Gallery of Art, and Dr. Margaret MacDonald

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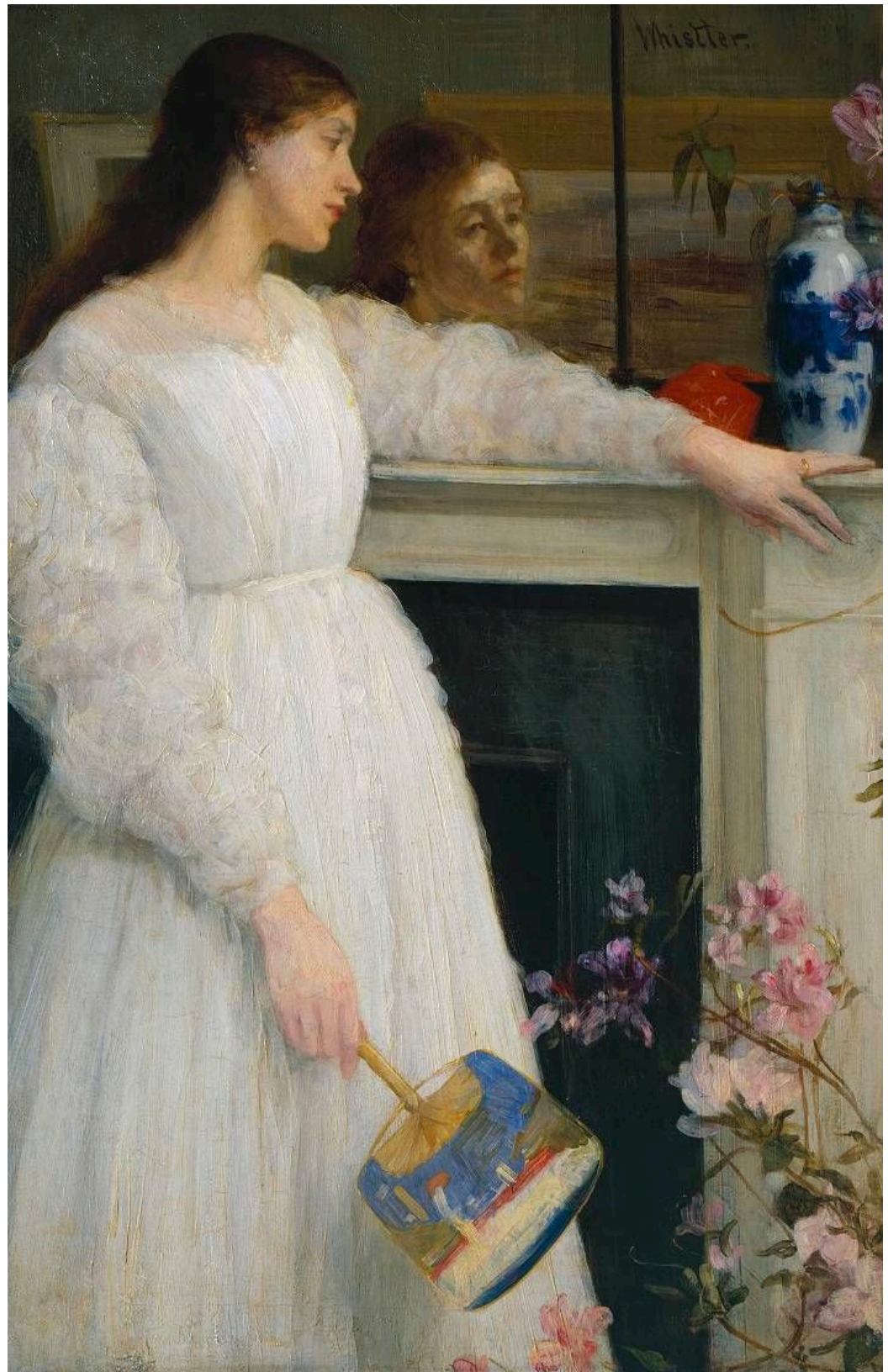
Refused at the 1862 exhibition of the Royal Academy, James McNeill Whistler's *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* is now the centrepiece of its very own exhibition at the institution that would not show it 160 years ago. Joanna Hiffernan, the portrait's subject, as well as Whistler himself, had not been surprised that the painting was refused at the Royal Academy.¹ The subject matter seemed too precarious, simultaneously suggesting and subverting virginity and, of course, the relationship between the unmarried couple was another point of contention. In 1861 the two had moved into a studio on the Boulevard Pigalle in Paris to paint the portrait and had a very close relationship before, during and after that period. Despite never marrying, Hiffernan was for long periods Whistler's legal heir, and they continuously lived together in Paris and in London until the mid 1870s.² As it was made in France, the painting was originally called *Femme Blanche*, but when it was exhibited in London at the Berner's Street Gallery, the title was changed to *The Woman in White*. This caused much interest among the London public because of the assumed relation to the popular novel by Wilkie Collins with the same title. This enthusiasm for the portrait quickly turned to disappointment upon the discovery that the painting did not depict the novel's eponymous character. Reviews were largely unimpressed, frequently referring to the unfortunately chosen title.³ Frustrated by the London reception, the following year, Whistler submitted the painting to the Salon in Paris, where it was, once again, refused. Luckily however, 1863 saw the first instalment of the Salon des Refusés, where the *Dame blanche*, as it was called at that exhibition, was accepted. It became one of the great successes of the exhibition and was, in contrast to the London reception, discussed favourably in the press. One review by Paul Mantz calling the painting a "symphonie du blanc" possibly inspired Whistler to change the title, which had been such a nuisance, to *Symphony in White*.⁴ The success of the painting in Paris prompted Whistler to establish a series of *Symphonies in White*. There are two more, both depicting Hiffernan. The second *Symphony in White, The Little White Girl*, was created in 1864 in Chelsea. It was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1865.⁵ The third *Symphony*, which was finished in 1867, is a double portrait of Hiffernan and the professional model Emilie Eyre Jones and was exhibited at the Royal Academy the same year.⁶

The layout of the exhibition suggests an emphasis on the three central works, the *Symphonies in White*, and extends into a variety of directions, exploring different avenues of interest.⁷ Whistler and Hiffernan are examined both as a couple and as individuals, with concern shown to their lives and activities in relation to the three paintings. There are several works that showcase Whistler's artistic activities around that time, including print illustrations and works concerning the influence of Japanese art on the artist. On Hiffernan there are several other portraits by Whistler as well as three by Gustave Courbet, who had

Figure 1. James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, oil on canvas, 1861—1863, 1872, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Figure 2. James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl*, oil on canvas, 1864, Tate, London. Photo © Tate



spent a holiday with Whistler and Hiffernan on the French coast in 1865.⁸ In addition to the close examination of the model and the artist, there is also an effort to explore the subject matter of the woman robed in white. Works predating the *Symphonies* like Rosetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domine!* or Watts' *Lady Dalrymple* are presented as prototypes for Whistler's *Women in White* paintings. These works predating the *Symphonies* are complemented by the last section of the exhibition, with a selection of works that were inspired by Whistler like Millais' *Somnambulist* or Klimt's *Hermine Gallia*.

The title of the exhibition, *Whistler's Woman in White: Joanna Hiffernan*, suggests that it is focusing primarily on Hiffernan and her contribution to Whistler's works. In this, it conceptually follows in the footsteps of the seminal *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters* exhibition



Figure 3. James McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 3*, oil on canvas, 1865–1867, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham. © The Henry Barber Trust, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham.

at the National Portrait Gallery in 2019, which put a spotlight on the women artists as well as models of the Pre-Raphaelite circle.⁹ Certainly, the role of Hiffernan is emphasised throughout the exhibition as well as the catalogue. However, as explained above, the nature of the exhibition itself does not necessarily centre on Hiffernan, but rather focuses on the three portraits of her. This approach allows the exhibition to remain concise in exploring the works in question in detail without being constrained by a thematic focus. Essentially, the modest scope allows ample exploration of details, whereas an exhibition with a broad theme would be impeded by such minutiae. While the focus on Hiffernan's role in the creation of the *Symphonies in White* was the impetus of the exhibition, the shift to the works as the gravitational centre makes an exploration of the model more legitimate. It entirely circumvents the apparent imbalance of relevance between the artist and the model for the artwork, an issue that was pervasive in the *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters* exhibition.¹⁰ Indeed, that exhibition was stunted by the reality that it was focusing on women, who, like Hiffernan, had no creative output themselves, so the show had to rely on works by men. The focus on the paintings, as opposed to Hiffernan herself, allowed a more relaxed and free exploration of her contribution to Whistler's oeuvre, without demoting Whistler's own work. Indeed, it suggests that both Whistler and Hiffernan are equal progenitors of the *Symphonies in White*. Feldman and Salter put it as follows in the introduction of the catalogue: "This book and the exhibition are the first to fully acknowledge the role Hiffernan played in Whistler's career and the first to consider their creations as collaborations," thus presenting the reader with a nuanced picture of the joint effort that the three *Symphonies in White* truly are.¹¹

References

- 1 Margaret F. MacDonald, "Whistler and the Woman in White," in *The Woman in White: Joanna Hiffernan and James McNeill Whistler*, ed. Margaret F. MacDonald (New Haven: Yale University Press), 13.
- 2 Margaret F. MacDonald, "Joanna Hiffernan and James Whistler, An Artistic Partnership," in *The Woman in White*, 27, 30.
- 3 "Fine Art Gossip," *Athenaeum*, No. 1809, June 28, 1862, 859.
- 4 Grischka Petri, "The 'Symphonies in White' Display, Sale, and Reproduction," in *The Woman in White*, 168.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 170.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 7 Although not exhaustive. The curators point out that in favour of issues of gender, they have omitted issues of race, nationality and the American Civil War, which are all pertinent to the works in question. Margaret F. MacDonald, Ann Dumas and Charles Brock. "Preface," in *The Woman in White*, 8–9.
- 8 MacDonald, "Joanna Hiffernan," 24–25.
- 9 The curators explicitly cite the *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters* exhibition as one of their main inspirations. MacDonald, Dumas, Brock, "Preface," 8.
- 10 I do acknowledge that the inclusion of the models in the *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters* exhibition was an inspired one. Nevertheless, it brought with it a few problems that remained open questions.
- 11 Kaywin Feldman and Rebecca Salter. "Foreword," in *The Woman in White*, 7.