

11-B The Peacock Room, 1876–1877

James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903)



11-B James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room, 1876–1877* (two views). Oil paint and gold leaf on canvas, leather, and wood, room dimensions: height 13 ft. 11 5/8 in., width 33 ft. 2 in., depth 19 ft. 9 1/2 in. (425.8 x 1010.9 x 608.3 cm.). Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1904.61.

The Art

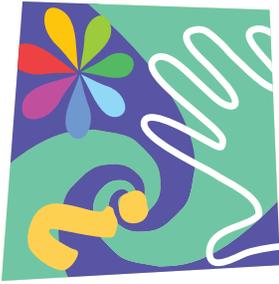
The Peacock Room shows the dining room of a rich British ship owner named Fredrick Richards Leyland. Leyland hired the artist, James McNeill Whistler, to decorate the room for him. The room is painted in oil paint and gold leaf on canvas, leather, and wood. The room has a lot of peacock blue and gold color in it. A large portrait called *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* is placed in the main part of the room. It hangs above the fireplace. The artist painted the portrait several years earlier when he fell in love with Chinese and Japanese art. Whistler painted a pair of golden peacocks on a big wall opposite *The Princess* painting. He copied the birds from pictures on Japanese vases. Whistler thought of the room he decorated as a three-dimensional painting that people could actually walk into through a door.

The Artist

Whistler was born in Massachusetts but went to Paris, France, to study art and then to London, England, to work. He never returned to the United States. Whistler was famous for his paintings of landscapes at night and for his portraits. Rather than focusing on nature and the world around him, like John James Audubon or Thomas Eakins, Whistler was inspired mostly from other works of art. For *The Peacock Room*, for example, he took inspiration from the bird-and-flower prints of the Japanese artist Hiroshige.

The Historical Perspective

Whistler lived when successful artists were supported by rich people who hired them to create works of art. Like Whistler, Leyland owned a large collection of blue-and-white porcelain. He wanted to have a special room that would provide a beautiful “frame” for each pot. The collection was displayed on fancy shelves in the dining room of his home in London. Halfway through the project, Whistler and Leyland had a fight over how much Whistler would be paid for his work. Whistler eventually settled for half the amount originally agreed to as long as Leyland agreed to let Whistler finish the room to his liking. Whistler’s creation includes a scene that made fun of Leyland for being cheap.



Conversations and Teaching Activities

Head Start Children ages 3 to 5

Encourage children to look carefully at this artwork. The central object is a large portrait of an elegantly dressed woman. Comment on the background, the patterns used, and the colors. Introduce new vocabulary and find books that relate to the image and content of the artwork.

Describing



- ✓ Use your "I Spy" telescope to look carefully at different parts of this room, including the central portrait, the walls, and the ceiling. Have children use as many descriptive words as they can to explain what they see.
- ✓ What do you see?
- ✓ What do you notice about the walls?
- ✓ Can you find the four gold peacocks in this room?
- ✓ Where do repeated shapes in this room form patterns?

Analyzing and Interpreting



Ask the following questions to stimulate thinking and discussion:

- This painting is titled *The Peacock Room*. Why do you think the artist picked that name?
- Do you think this is a picture of a real place? Why or why not?
- Why do you think the artist painted the ceiling and the walls in this room?
- Where else have you seen walls or ceilings decorated with fancy designs? Tell us about what you've seen.
- How does this picture make you feel? What do you see that makes you feel this way?
- Are there other things you would like to tell me about this picture?

Connecting and Extending

Introducing Vocabulary

| | |
|----------------|-----------|
| beauty | feather |
| ceiling | fireplace |
| decorate | peacock |
| different/same | portrait |
| elegant | princess |
| fancy | |



Books

Colorful Peacocks by Deborah Underwood (First Avenue Editions, 2006)
A delightful introduction to the peafowl family presents facts and color photographs in an easy-to-read format.

James McNeill Whistler (Getting to Know the World's Greatest Artists) by Mike Venezia (Children's Press, 2004)

The life and work of the American-born painter who spent much of his life abroad is described.

Books continued page 73

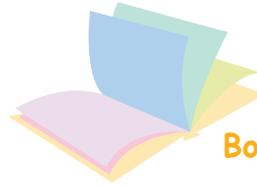


Connecting and Extending continued...

Related Family Literacy Experiences

Parents and children can

- ✓ visit the aviary at a local zoo and observe the actions and sounds a peacock makes. Watch how the different birds move and sound.
- ✓ listen to a recording of bird sounds that identifies the birds making the sounds. Go outside and listen. See if children can identify the birds making the sounds.
- ✓ study several kinds of birds if there is a bird sanctuary nearby.



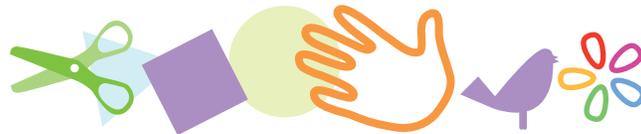
Books continued...

Living with Peacocks by David Moyle (iUniverse, 2006)

This little book provides insights into what it's like to actually live with one of the most spectacular animals on our planet—the peacock.

The Princess and the Peacocks or the Story of the Room by Linda Merrill and Sarah Ridley (Hyperion, 1993)

A princess in a portrait tells how the famous American painter, James McNeill Whistler, transformed a dreary room into the glorious Peacock Room.



Related Educational Experiences

- ✓ Draw children's attention to the part of the painting that depicts the bird. Does anyone recognize what kind of bird this is? If possible, have a picture of a peacock. Have children examine it and describe how it looks compared to the representation in Whistler's painting.
- ✓ Put descriptive word labels on a chart and place it near the artwork. Let children add words over time, either themselves or by telling the words to their teachers.
- ✓ Set up a mirror center in the dramatic play area.
- ✓ Divide a small group of children into pairs. Partners sit facing each other. Give them about 30 seconds to study each other, noting things like hair and eye color, kind of clothes worn, etc. Then have the children sit back-to-back and describe their partners.
- ✓ Make various graphs depicting hair and eye color of children in the class. Use pictures to indicate categories. Children record their own data on the graphs.

The ideas listed are just a few of the many activities that could be used to introduce or extend children's learning. Your knowledge of your children and families supports your ability to ensure positive learning experiences and outcomes for students. As an educator, you probably have ideas for books, songs, finger plays, and activities that you have thought of when introducing or extending children's learning related to the "*A Head Start on Picturing America*" artworks. We encourage you to confer with your colleagues, visit the local library or bookstore, and share your ideas with others.