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In the Wake of the Butterfly: James McNeill Whistler and His Circle in Venice Didactic Panel

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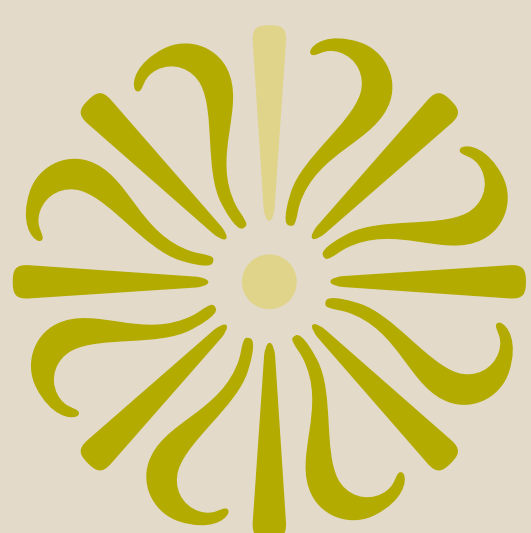
In the Wake of the Butterfly

JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER AND HIS CIRCLE IN VENICE

In 1880 the expatriate American printmaker James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) pioneered etchings that depicted a *Venezia minore* and captured what he called a “Venice of the Venetians.” These works emphasized small squares, back alleys, and isolated canals rather than popular tourist destinations, including San Marco, the Grand Canal, and the Rialto Bridge.

Whistler chose an economic style for such depictions, evoking rather than simply recording detailed contrasts of light, shadow, and architecture reflected on water. He rendered his scenes on site, drawing directly onto prepared copper plates without transposing his scenes. The resulting prints are, therefore, mirror images of the actual topography, since graphic works are reversed when printed. Traditionally, artists anticipated this inversion by flipping (laterally) their drawings on their plates, but Whistler – who had hoped his prints would be valued for their aesthetic merits rather than as souvenirs of Venice – very consciously shunned this practice.

His followers, including Otto Bacher (1856-1909), Mortimer Menpes (1855-1938), and Joseph Pennell (1860-1926), capitalized on Whistler’s approach to Venice; above all, his preference for local scenes and his reversal of topographic views. The subsequent generation, too, drew great inspiration from Whistler, as *Reflections & Undercurrents: Ernest Roth and Printmaking in Venice, 1900-1940* (currently on view at Fairfield University’s Thomas J. Walsh Art Gallery) makes clear.



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The generation of printmakers who followed in the wake of James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) revered his work, even as they pursued their own personal visions of Venice. Ernest David Roth (1879–1964) was one such artist. Numbering among 20th-century America’s finest etchers, Roth created works that range from important views of New York and Paris to exotic images of Istanbul and Segovia. The prints he made of Italy, however, are his most significant achievement; in particular the approximately 50 views of Venice he executed between 1905 (the year he arrived in the city) and 1941. In these etchings, Roth employed a supple line and rich tone that capture the essence of this magisterial city’s architecture in the clear light of the lagoon. These masterworks have never been the subject of an independent exhibition, catalogue, or book. Many have never been reproduced. *Reflections & Undercurrents* rectifies this anomalous situation by bringing together 35 of Roth’s most enduring views of “La Serenissima” (the most serene [Republic]) and relating these prints both to those artists who preceded him (the focus of the Bellarmine Museum of Art’s companion show, *In the Wake of the Butterfly: James McNeill Whistler and His Circle in Venice*) and to the works of his most important artistic contemporaries, including John Taylor Arms (1887-1953), Herman Armour Webster (1878-1970), Louis Conrad Rosenberg (1890-1983), Fabio Mauroner (1884-1948), and Emanuele Brugnoli (1859-1944).

Reflections & Undercurrents is a touring exhibition organized by the Trout Gallery, Dickinson College