

Lyme Regis Museum
History of Lyme in Objects
14. c.1895 - Whistler's Doll
Accession Number LRM 1993/19-4

By Felicity Hebditch



The doll Whistler gave to Rose Rendall, 660mm long

Significance

Whistler (1834-1903) came on a painting holiday to Lyme's pretty coast in 1895. This doll was given to Rose Rendell who sat for him to paint her portrait.

Summary

James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) was a colourful character. Born in the USA, he spent some years as a child in St. Petersburg and as a young painter in Paris. He became a well known painter, lithographer and etcher. He came to Lyme for a couple of months in 1895 with his wife, partly for the sake of her health. He had a studio at the top of Broad Street, near the blacksmith's, and here he painted Samuel Govier, the blacksmith, and his daughter, the 'Dorsetshire Daisy'. He spotted Rose Rendell, then a child, who was terrified of him, and got her to sit for her portrait. Govier's and Rose's portraits were bought by the art gallery in Boston, USA but the Dorsetshire Daisy's has disappeared. He asked his sister-in-law to give Govier a watch, and a doll (from Paris) and box of chocolates to Rose. Rose's father was a well-to-do grocer and had been mayor. Rose married Mr. E.A.Herridge, who gave the doll and her photograph to the Museum.



Rose Rendall and some family members – Whistler gave her the doll

Detail

James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) was born in the USA, but moved to St. Petersburg in 1842 where his father was in charge of building a new Russian railway line. From the age of four he liked drawing and he did a drawing course here in 1845. He moved to Paris where he was influenced by the Impressionists. His model Jo Hifferman became his mistress; when he went to London in 1870, she came with him but when his strict mother came to live with him, 'I had to empty my house and purify it from cellar to eaves'. His portrait of his mother was bought by the French government and is now in the Quai d'Orsay. She was very respectable and was helpful with clients.

Whistler held his first one man show in 1874 when he decorated the gallery in keeping with the tones of his paintings. (At a later show, he painted the gallery white and yellow with yellow matting, yellow settees, yellow and white chairs, yellow vases with one yellow marguerite in each.)

Ruskin, the art critic, attacked him for 'flinging a pot of paint in the public's face'. He sued Ruskin but was awarded a farthing; the court case costs meant that he had to sell his house that the architect Godwin built for him.

Whistler's public sympathised with him and he soon came back into favour, moving in the same circles as Oscar Wilde - who is supposed to have based the Portrait of Dorian Gray on Whistler. In conversation Wilde said 'I wish I'd thought of that' to a remark; Whistler replied 'You will, Oscar' as Wilde was known for adopting other people's witticisms.

In 1888 he married his architect Godwin's widow. She was ill with cancer in 1895, which is why he came to Lyme, so that she could recover in the health-giving seaside and he could paint. They stayed at the Royal Lion Hotel. He had a studio at the top of Broad

Street, not far from the blacksmith's forge of Samuel Govier; he painted him, and he painted his daughter, naming this 'The Dorsetshire Daisy'. He spotted Rose Rendell from the window - her father was a high class grocer at London House, Broad Street, with 'Wine, ale, cider. Bacon, ham and cheese. Preserved goods. French and Italian goods. Deliveries.' 'I want to paint you', Whistler said; Rose was terrified; she thought he meant to cover her with paint. Whistler's two charming portraits, of Govier and Rose (the *Dorsetshire Daisy* has disappeared) were bought in 1896 by the Boston (USA) Museum of Fine Art. The British Museum has fourteen lithographs done in Lyme at the same time, including one of John Grove, the landlord of the Red Lion Hotel.



Whistler arranged for his wife's sister to give Govier a watch as 'A remembrance from J. McNeill Whistler'. The doll was bought in Paris for Rose's birthday; Rose's mother had died and the children were brought up by their father so this and the straw box of chocolates must have seemed a great treat.

The doll, made with moulded wax head and hair set in, has been well loved. Paris was well known as a centre for doll making, with beautifully made costume.

Rose married Mr. E.A.Herridge, who gave the doll and her photograph to the Museum.

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