

Visual Arts

Whistler's 'Peacock Room' reinterpreted at the V&A

The installation by Darren Waterston is, like the original, an 'overbearing exercise in decadence'



'Filthy Lucre', Darren Waterston's installation, a recreation of Whistler's 'Peacock Room' © Amber Gray

Lucy Watson JANUARY 24 2020

Opening this weekend at London's [Victoria and Albert Museum](#) is a new installation: a reinterpreted, restaged 19th-century room. It is, according to its 21st-century creator Darren Waterston, "grotesque".

"Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room" was one of the few forays into three dimensions by [James Abbott McNeill Whistler](#), the American painter best-known for his austere 1871 portrait of his mother.

Completed in 1877, the original was a dining room in a Kensington house, covered in vivid jade and gold *chinoiserie* murals and commissioned for the home of Frederick Richards Leyland, a shipping magnate, to display his collection of Asian ceramics. The room was completed by Whistler while his patron was abroad. On his return, Leyland hated it.

Two years later, Whistler fell into debt, including to Leyland, and was forced to auction his home and studio in Chelsea. There for inspection by the creditors was a painting called "The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre (The Creditor)" — in which Leyland was caricatured dressed as a peacock, surrounded by bags of money and sitting atop Whistler's house.

As a final withering statement, the painting was placed in the gilt frame that had been designed for the Peacock Room.



'The Gold Scab: Eruption in Filthy Lucre (The Creditor)' by James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1879)

The original interior is in Washington DC's Freer Gallery of Art, but the V&A has brought a version to Kensington, moments from the Prince's Gate apartment for which it was designed. Waterston's immersive installation takes its name from that bitter portrait of 1879 and shows the room in a state of decay.

Waterston, a US artist, primarily a painter, created "Filthy Lucre" — this time with Whistler's deliberate misspelling corrected — when he was commissioned to create a painted room for the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

He was drawn to Whistler's work, with its "issues around art and money and patronage", he says, "as it felt very much that it was descriptive of the contemporary art world that I have to navigate".



Whistler's 'Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room' (1877) was made for a Victorian shipping magnate, who hated it. It is now in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington DC © Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

The room, just like the original, is an overbearing exercise in decadence. Ornate glass pendants and hand-carved panelling complement rich greens and blues, delicate murals and an excess of gilt. But look closely and, unlike the original, everything is a little off — a floral fireguard has slug-eaten leaves, the shelving supports have snapped and gold paint drips from the walls.

"Filthy Lucre" travelled to the Smithsonian in 2015 to be shown alongside the original where James Robinson, a V&A curator, spotted it. It was one of the first projects he proposed when he joined the museum.

"Waterston's work evokes not only the gilded age of interior design but the biting wit and fragmented relationships of the protagonists," he says. "The Peacock Room has returned to South Kensington with a vengeance."

The V&A — "one of the most formative institutions of my entire life" — is the work's natural home, says Waterston. He describes how it required a team of 15 artisans, including glass-blowers, ceramicists and ironmongers working over eight months, calling it a "monstrous collision" between disciplines and departments.

“It’s been brilliant to have so many different parts of the museum activated by one contemporary work of art,” he says. “It is very symphonic”.

The installation includes a soundscape — muffled gossiping voices accompanied by a cello — by New York-based rock band BETTY, and background history on the original room. Waterston hopes that it will make visitors uneasy. “It has a dangerous feel to it”, he says. “It’s the volatility of the piece and the decadence of the space that I hope evokes a response.”

From May, “Filthy Lucre” will move to the Hunterian museum in Glasgow. But, says Waterston, “the strength of the piece has never been quite so potent as where it’s located now.”

Darren Waterston’s ‘Filthy Lucre: Whistler’s Peacock Room Reimagined’ at the V&A January 25-May 3; vam.ac.uk