

Artists v critics, round one

There are two histories of modern art, and two founders. The serious one begins in Paris in the mid-19th century, and its hero is Edouard Manet. But there is another, much less salubrious history of modern art, one that begins with a stand-up public row in which no one comes off well - and is perhaps more pertinent to the condition of art today.

This row took place in a courtroom in London in November 1878. Its hero, or antihero, is James Abbott McNeill Whistler. It was the second most infamous libel trial of the 19th century - and perhaps if Oscar Wilde had remembered its consequences, he might have stepped back from his own disaster. Whistler sued the great art critic John Ruskin, author of *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*, over a review that dismissed him as a fraud.

The plaintiff looked like Doc Holliday, with the slick, curly dark locks and long black coat of a dandified gunslinger of the old west. Dressed in this manner, Whistler, the American abroad, effortlessly dominates Fantin-Latour's group portrait of the Paris avant-garde in 1864, *Homage to Delacroix*. By comparison, the other artists and intellectuals look drab, among them Manet and Baudelaire. The painting tells us a lot about Whistler: that he was respected by his French contemporaries, but that he understood something about the culture of modernity that they never would. That it would be a culture of performance. How he performs, standing sideways, thin and bowed, his head dramatically turned to face us.

Whistler is one of those artists who are always being rediscovered, and good luck to the rediscoverers. He is endlessly reclaimable precisely because he is endlessly flawed, a brilliant yet somehow insubstantial painter, lacking inner structure, so fizzy with ideas you want to forgive him. This is harsh, but where that other late-19th-century American in Europe, John Singer Sargent, does deserve to be recognised as one of the greatest, unlikeliest modern painters, Whistler is always going to be, essentially, a character. His masterpiece is a party piece. *Arrangement in Grey and Black No 1* (1871) - Whistler's *Mother* - is a hilarious, incongruous, wicked conjunction of heady aestheticism and puritan severity.

What Whistler understood about modernism was its political value, its capacity to shock and mock. His portrait of his mother declares a generational war, decades before Lytton Strachey wrote *Eminent Victorians* and poked fun at the staid 19th-century elders. Whistler's collision of worlds is still with us. But Whistler was to succeed in distressing one of the most eminent Victorians of all.

John Ruskin was on the edge of mental collapse. You can see it coming in his fearsome, almost impossible-to-look-in-the-eye Self-Portrait, a watercolour of about 1875, in which his brow, like some monstrous geological formation, presses down on his shadowed left eye and his face seems about to twist out of shape under the tension. The sky behind him is yellow and sick. The art critic's strain was related to the refusal of his offer of marriage by, and in 1875 the death of, Rose La Touche, whom he had pursued since she was nine years old. Ruskin was also under stress as he was writing *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*, a digressive polemic on art and politics that he published serially from 1871 through to 1884.

It was in *Fors Clavigera* that Ruskin published his response to the art of Whistler. In 1877 he visited a contemporary art exhibition at the Grosvenor Galleries in London. It included works by Millais, Burne-Jones, Lord Leighton, Alma Tadema - and Whistler's gorgeous wisp of a near abstraction, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (1875). It is not that Ruskin disliked Whistler's luscious, diaphanous, sexy image of sparks cascading through the night air over the Thames during a firework display. It is that he failed, or refused, to recognise it as art.

There had been rows about modern art before. But none that are so uncannily familiar, none that speak our critical language in all its odd mixture of the extreme and the banal. It is easy for us to laugh, with the condescension of posterity, at the sexual hysteria of French journalists distressed by Manet's *Olympia* (1863). But Ruskin's denunciation of Whistler, in *Fors Clavigera* No 79, written in June 1877, is the template for a thousand denunciations to come: it is the definitive rejection of modern art as fraud, and every subsequent diatribe against beds, bricks or the lights going on and off reproduces it. "For Mr Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated

conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen, and heard, much of cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."

He never expected this. Ruskin's words are as precocious as Whistler's painting. In his theatrical, maybe not so profound way, Whistler was the first painter, in his Nocturnes, to declare modernism's affinity for the abstract - to declare it openly: Seurat's radically formal Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte would not be painted until 1884-8. Whistler was jumping the gun, demonstrating that an art was being born that the world never expected, an art that called into question every assumption about visual experience, about the relationship of truth and beauty.

Ruskin recognised his audacity. It is fundamentally wrong to think that any old conservative could have said exactly what Ruskin said. In fact, in its moment of horrified prophecy, that killer line - "never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face" - is one of the most visionary statements in the history of criticism. It is not that Ruskin failed to get modernism. It is that he absolutely got it. He saw that this was an art in defiance of all expectation, whose enemy was expectation, and that it would be both aggressive to the bourgeois public and dissociative of aesthetic order. It would be aleatory, chaotic, gestural. Ruskin, on the brink of madness, saw Joan Miro, Jackson Pollock and Asger Jorn standing there in the smoke of the fireworks.

Ruskin was not a conservative. *Modern Painters*, the five-volume defence of JMW Turner that he wrote between 1843 and 1860, is the least conventional book on art ever written, refusing any constraints of relevance - to explain why Turner is great, Ruskin writes about clouds, mountains and the sea - and refusing to take a single assumption about art at face value.

Whistler was in good company. In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin wishes someone would put most Dutch 17th-century paintings in a gallery and raze it to the ground; he has nothing but scorn for Claude; of Poussin he says that his "manner ... is said to be Greek - it may be so; this only I know, that it is heartless and profitless".

Ruskin loves movement, energy, complexity, as well as the truth to nature he holds up as art's mission; it is this dynamic vitality, a storm on canvas, that he sees in Turner, that he recognises as true in Turner, and that he convinces us in *Modern Painters* is somehow lacking in the clear, still blue skies of the Old Masters.

Modern Painters is truly modern. It is modernist. This is something we miss about it, not least because in recent years Ruskin - who was, after all, Proust's hero - has so often been hijacked by opponents of the new. What you take away from *Modern Painters* is a stressed and strained sense of life as oceanic tide, as whirlpool, as rock: a harsh strength and ecstatic recognition of form at its most strained.

Strained but not broken. That is where Ruskin's vision of modern art teeters on the edge and pulls back. He believes in order, in meaning, in moral form. And yet is this so incompatible with 20th-century abstract art? Jackson Pollock's *Full Fathom Five*, painted in 1947, is superficially similar to Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold*. There is the same aquatic quality, the bursts of light, the suspended meaning. And yet, the encounter reveals a beauty that would have satisfied Ruskin. There is that formidable arabesque energy, that sense of nature and self merged, a romanticism, a seriousness - but never a ponderousness - and an insistence on order in the vastness: an oceanic structure that is profoundly satisfying.

It was not modernity and tradition that faced each other in the courtroom in 1878, but two versions of modern art. We might almost say that Ruskin represented high modernism, and Whistler stood up as the first in a tradition of "low modernism" that runs through Duchamp and Dali to the present day.

Yet it was not philosophy but honour that drove Whistler to bring his lawsuit. It was Ruskin's caricature of him as a conman - profoundly unfair, because he was notoriously bad with money - that Whistler could not ignore. As for Ruskin, he suffered the mental breakdown he was long overdue in the spring of 1878. He was too ill to attend court when the case came to trial in November.

Whistler performed brilliantly. In a Victorian court of law, he nonchalantly explained his idea of abstract art: "Asked about the meaning of the word 'Nocturne'," reported the

Times, "Mr Whistler said that a picture was to him throughout a problem, which he attempted to solve ... 'An Arrangement' was an arrangement of light, form and colour."

He received applause when the defence asked him if he thought the two days' labour he spent on Nocturne worth the 200 guineas: "No", Whistler dramatically replied, "I ask it for the knowledge of a lifetime."

Both men were pulverised by the case. Whistler won, but the jury awarded him an insulting farthing in damages, and the judge refused costs. He was financially devastated. Ruskin, far from gloating, was appalled by what he saw as Whistler's moral victory. He resigned his professorship at Oxford because he felt his very right to be a critic had been denied by the British legal system.

In the end, the trial was not the great moment it might have been. Ruskin's defence in absentia of his strange, violent remark, so fascinating in its potential ambiguity, reduced his own position to cliché. One of his favourite Venetian paintings, Catena's portrait of the Doge Andrea Gritti, now in the National Gallery, wrongly attributed at that time to Titian, was brought into court as an example of a proper picture. Whistler tried to enrich the debate, explaining to his lawyers that his work was comparable to Turner and how Ruskin himself had defended Turner's abstract later work. They didn't understand.

The controversy settled nothing, as controversies tend to, but it launched modern art's ignoble second self, its charismatic Whistlerian alter ego, its populist Mr Hyde. Ever since 1878, the serious and introspective modern artist has been haunted by a nocturnal double who delights in art as ephemeral public performance, as blazing row, as incendiary glitz - as fireworks.

- The Whistler Centenary Exhibition is at the Hunterian art gallery, Glasgow (0141-330 5431), until Oct 4.