

At the Piano

by James Abbot McNeil Whistler

Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on canvas
- Date: 1859
- Size: 67 x 90.5 cm
- Location: Taft museum, Cincinnati, Ohio
- Period:
- Style: Impressionism
- Genre:
- The woman at the piano is Whistler's half-sister Deborah, and the girl is her daughter, Annie.
- The subjects of this painting are wearing traditional mourning clothes. (White was considered an appropriate mourning dress for a Victorian child).

Artist Facts

- Whistler was born in 1834 in Massachusetts, Died July 1903 in England
- When Whistler was 9, his family moved to St Petersburg, Russia so his father could help design a railroad line to Moscow.
- Whistler's family moved to Connecticut after his father's death.
- Whistler enrolled in West Point, a prestigious military school.
- He was dismissed from the school due to a "deficiency in chemistry"
- He resolved to become an artist and moved to Europe.
- Whistler had a flamboyant personality and was known for being witty and loving controversy.
- He lived a lavish lifestyle and was often in debt
- In 1869, Whistler began signing his paintings in a butterfly pattern composed of his initials. Around 1880 he added a stinger to the butterfly to represent the feisty side of his personality along with the gentle, sensitive side.
- Whistler believed there was much similarity between art and music and often called his paintings "arrangements" "nocturnes" or "harmonies"
- Whistler was living in Europe during the Civil War, but sided with the south.

Key Principle of Design to Teach

- **Balance**, often referred to as visual weight, describes the relationships between different elements of a work of art in terms of their size and location. The balance of an artwork can be used to help create a visual harmony or tension within the piece. In art "nothing" can balance "something." Balance is achieved by arranging art elements in the artwork so that no one part overpowers, or seems heavier than, any other part. Symmetry and asymmetry are part of balance. Symmetry is the relationship of one or more groups of elements so that they are identical from side to side. Asymmetry is a part of balance where the elements are evenly weighted visually, but they are not the same.

Possible Questions and Suggestions to Teach Balance

- Notice the paintings in the background. How do they help balance the piece?
- What about the girl's white dress? How does this balance her mother's dark dress?
- What about the objects on the floor? How do they contribute to the balance?
- Notice the shape of the piano? Does it help to balance the piece?
- If the artist were to remove any of these objects would the painting still be balanced?
- Cover half of the artwork. Describe what balance means. Uncover the other half. Does this painting seem balanced?

Keywords

- Balance, Texture, Line

Other Possible Questions

- Where do you see light in this painting? Can you see light on the dish on the left? How do you think the artist does this?
- Where do you see contrast in this painting?
- How would you describe the mood of this painting? Happy, playful, sad, peaceful?
- What colors do you see in this painting? Would you say they are mostly primary, secondary or neutral?
- Look at the face of the daughter. Does her face seem blurred?
- What is the woman doing in this painting? The girl?
- Does the woman seem sad? Why or why not?
- What different textures do you see in this painting? Notice the frames in the background, the girl's dress, the piano, the dish on the left.
- Why do you think the woman is dressed this way? (Traditional mourning clothes).
- Do you think there is one focal point in this artwork or are there two? Can you focus on both at the same time?
- What lines do you see in this painting? Would you say they are mostly horizontal or vertical?