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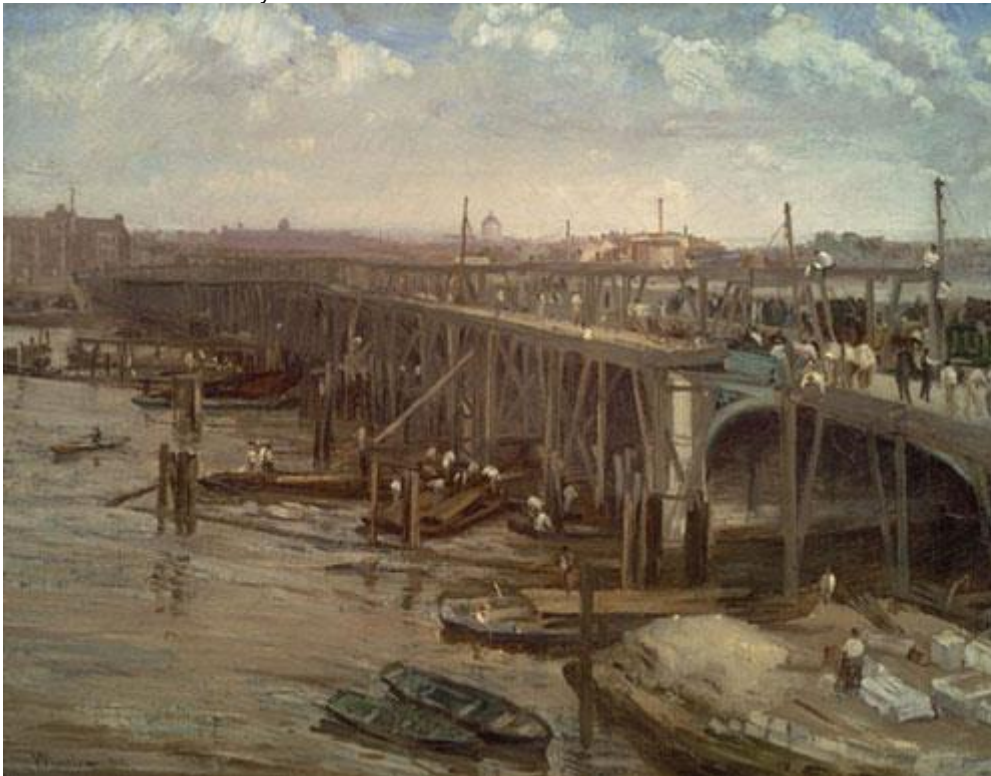
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## ‘Bumpy’ canvas reveals hidden portrait of Whistler’s mistress

The cash-strapped artist probably painted over his lover’s picture to fulfill an early commission

By Julia Halperin. Web only

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Whistler's *The Last of Old Westminster*, 1862, hides a portrait, probably of the artist's mistress Joanna Hiffernan, the subject in *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*(right)

Scholars have discovered a previously unknown portrait by James McNeill Whistler hidden beneath a painting of bridge over the River Thames of 1862. The subject is thought to be Whistler's young mistress and model Jo Hiffernan, who lived with the artist in London for five years. Prior to the discovery, experts believed Whistler created only around six portraits of Hiffernan, including the well-known *Symphony in White, No. 1: the White Girl*, 1862, at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Curators made the discovery late last year, as they were hanging the first major exhibition devoted to Whistler's early work, "An American in London: Whistler and the Thames", at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in south London. "Whenever a picture comes in for a show, the conservators look over it with a magnifying glass," says the curator Margaret MacDonald. They noticed bumps on the surface of *The Last of Old Westminster*, 1862, so MacDonald asked for an X-ray. What she found was "staggering"—an entirely different composition, flipped sideways, of a young woman reading. "I immediately said, 'It is Joanna. It is Joanna Hiffernan.'"

The revelation led to more questions: why would Whistler have painted over a portrait of his lover? "Based on census information, we know he hadn't fallen out with Jo at that point—they were still living together. You would have thought that was a very important work, and psychologically, it is quite difficult to cover up a portrait," MacDonald says. "It's possible that he didn't really like it, but it looks too good for that."

Instead, it is likely that Whistler, fresh out of art school and starved for cash, simply did not have another large canvas available when he received the commission for *The Last of Old Westminster*, which was among his first paid assignments. He had no other choice but to paint over the portrait.

It would not be the first time Whistler made such a sacrifice. Scholars have long known that another port scene from the same year, *Brown and Silver: Old Battersea Bridge*, 1862, has a self-portrait underneath. An x-ray is due to be exhibited alongside that painting when "An American in London" opens this weekend at the Freer-Sackler Museum in Washington, DC (3 May-17 August). Still, such a dramatic alteration was rare for Whistler. "A major change like this [to a composition] is really radical," MacDonald says.

MacDonald's research is due to appear in a new catalogue raisonné of Whistler's work that she hopes to publish online. "There is so much new information," she says. But there is still more work to be done. Although the date and composition convinced MacDonald that the portrait is of Hiffernan, only trace colour analysis will offer irrefutable proof. Hiffernan, who was 19 at the time the portrait was painted, had red hair.

Meanwhile, MacDonald is hungry to examine more paintings by Whistler for hidden compositions. She has her eyes on "bumpy pictures" at the National Gallery in London and the Art Institute of Chicago, among others. "Whistler's pictures haven't been X-rayed consistently and the techniques for checking something underneath have gotten so much more sophisticated. There could definitely be others," she says.