

Simply Charlotte Mason presents

Whistler



Picture Study Portfolios
by Emily Kiser

Breathe a sigh of relief—you, the teacher, don't have to know about art in order to teach picture study!

With Picture Study Portfolios you have everything you need to help your family enjoy and appreciate beautiful art. Just 15 minutes once a week and the simple guidance in this book will influence and enrich your children more than you can imagine.

In this book you will find

- A living biography to help your child form a relation with the artist
- Step-by-step instructions for doing picture study with the pictures in this portfolio
- Helpful Leading Thoughts that will add to your understanding of each picture
- Extra recommended books for learning more about the artist

"We cannot measure the influence that one or another artist has upon the child's sense of beauty, upon his power of seeing, as in a picture, the common sight of life; he is enriched more than we know in having really looked at even a single picture."—Charlotte Mason

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James Abbot McNeill Whistler
(1834–1903)

by Emily Kiser

To be used with the Picture Study Portfolio: Whistler
published by Simply Charlotte Mason

Whistler
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Picture Study

Why do we do Picture Study?

A Charlotte Mason education is full of variety. Parents spread a feast before their children, giving them endless opportunity to taste, savor, enjoy, discover, and appreciate many different kinds of intellectual food, otherwise known as ideas. Nature study, music, and art are just as important in this balanced feast as math, reading, and science. Picture study doesn't take much time, just fifteen minutes or so each week, but its benefits are far reaching: "We cannot measure the influence that one or another artist has upon the child's sense of beauty, upon his power of seeing, as in a picture, the common sights of life; he is enriched more than we know in having really looked at even a single picture" (*Home Education*, p. 309).

Charlotte Mason says that it rests with parents and no others to provide an *intellectual culture* by which she means, "not so much the getting of knowledge, nor even getting the power to learn, but the cultivation of the power *to appreciate, to enjoy, whatever is just, true, and beautiful in thought and expression*" (*Formation of Character*, p. 212, emphasis mine).

Through conscientious study of the great masters of art, children take delight in the "just, true, and beautiful" expression that these artists have given us. Charlotte Mason went so far as to tell us that God "whispers in the ear" of the great artists and we owe it to Him to study their works and read their messages rightly (*Ourselves*, Part 2, p. 102). This ability to appreciate and read a painting rightly is a skill to be developed over time, one that develops naturally as we, the teachers, expose our children to great works of art. "As in a worthy book we leave the author to tell his own tale, so do we trust a picture to tell its tale through the medium the artist gave it" (*Towards A Philosophy of Education*, p. 216).

How do we do Picture Study?

“But the reader will say, ‘A young child cannot appreciate art; it is only the colour and sentiment of a picture that reach him. . . .’ But, as a matter of fact, the minds of children and of their elders alike accommodate themselves to what is put in their way; and if children appreciate the vulgar and sentimental in art, it is because that is the manner of art to which they become habituated” (*Home Education*, pp. 307, 308).

Art appreciation is an integral part of the abundant feast that parents should spread before their children. Just as we weed the “twaddle” out of our bookshelves, and replace it with high quality literature, we should be feeding our children’s intellects with high quality art, not “vulgar, sentimental” illustrations that are common in children’s books. Our children are born persons who appreciate *real* art, from a very young age.

“We recognise that the power of appreciating art and of producing to some extent an interpretation of what one sees is as universal as intelligence, imagination, nay, speech, the power of producing words. But there must be knowledge and, in the first place, *not the technical knowledge of how to produce*, but some reverent knowledge of what has been produced; that is, ***children should learn pictures, line by line, group by group, by reading, not books, but pictures themselves***” (*Towards a Philosophy of Education*, p. 214, emphasis mine).

The first step in doing picture study is supplying your children with good art. Charlotte Mason believed that art appreciation, in the form of picture study, should be included in a student’s lessons from the age of six onwards. Each term the student studies six or so works by a single artist. It is not important to study artists in chronological order, and we do not give young children teaching on art history periods; rather, they will assimilate this information as their history reading progresses, and their knowledge of art increases. Breathe a sigh of relief—you, the teacher, don’t have to know about art in order to teach picture study! “[T]he first and most important thing is to know the pictures themselves” (*Towards a Philosophy of Education*, p. 216). It can be helpful to choose artists to study who painted during, or pictured scenes from, the history period you are studying, although this is not necessary. More important, make sure that the styles of the artists studied during the year are different from one another to avoid confusion for your children.

When we begin to study a new artist Charlotte Mason suggested that we read a short story of that artist’s life. Then we let the children study one picture, silently taking

it all in, noticing every detail until they know it and see it in their mind's eye. This type of study will furnish them with a portable gallery hung in their mind that they will carry with them throughout their lives. They will have made connections with hundreds of great works of art over the course of their school studies, and will know these works intimately.

After studying the picture, the reproduction is turned over or hidden from sight, and a six- to nine-year-old then describes what he saw with all the details he took in, maybe drawing a few lines to show where various objects were located—all from memory. An older child adds to this narration a description of the lines of composition, light and shade, and the style of this artist, as he is able. (All of this knowledge comes through the simple study of pictures in this manner, week after week, short after short lesson.) High school students may render in mono-chrome (all one color), and from memory, as many details of the picture as they can remember. Don't have your children attempt to reproduce the picture exactly; Charlotte Mason said this lessens a child's reverence for the artwork (*Towards a Philosophy of Education*, p. 216).

When the narrations, oral or drawn, are complete, a discussion about the picture may occur. Teachers should keep in mind that they are not the dispensers of knowledge, but should tell the name of the piece and ask the child's response to it. Did you like this painting? What did this picture make you think of? Did it remind you of anything you've read about? These simple questions further a child's interaction with the piece, helping him connect the new painting to his previous knowledge. Many works of art have subjects from literature, mythology, the Bible; your children will recall the stories that they have read or will remember the picture when they do read about the subjects portrayed.

All of these things occur in one short lesson each week. Fifteen or twenty minutes once a week is not hard to fit in, even though your school schedule may seem full. The change in type of lesson, the enjoyment afforded by looking at great art, and the relations your students will make are just some of the rewards you will discover by including picture study in your home school.

How to use a Picture Study Portfolio

1. Read the story.

At the start of the term, read the story of the artist included in this portfolio. It may take one or two lessons to complete the reading, but keep the lessons short—fifteen to twenty minutes maximum. Make sure students narrate the reading, either orally or in written form according to their ability.

2. Select a picture

After this introduction to the new artist for the term, select one picture to study per lesson. Charlotte Mason recommended six different pictures. This allows students to become familiar with the style of the artist, after even just six pictures they will recognize paintings they have not seen before as the work of an artist they have studied. We have included more than six pictures so that you may choose which you would like to study. There is no particular order to the pictures; it isn't necessary to study some over others. The choice is yours; select pictures that appeal to you and your children. Spread the individual works out over the term, or introduce one painting each week for six weeks and then allow the students quiet time over the remaining weeks to look over the pictures at their leisure.

3. Do a picture study.

During the picture study lesson follow these steps:

- Ask the children to tell you about the picture you looked at last time. If this is the first picture study of the term, ask them to tell you a little about the artist's life, where he was from, or something else they remember about him.

- Before they look at the picture, you may want to tell them how large the actual work is, comparing it to some object they are familiar with. Do not tell them the title yet.
- Have the children look at the picture silently for 3–5 minutes, looking closely at all the details in the painting until they can see it in their mind’s eye. Have them check to make sure they can see the whole picture with their eyes closed.
- Next, ask the student(s) to narrate the picture, telling as much as they can about the painting. If you are doing picture study with more than one child, start with one and stop him after he has narrated some of the picture, then have the next child add to his sibling’s narration. Older students may do a drawing of the piece from memory if they are able.

4. Have a Picture Talk.

Last, have a “Picture Talk.” Now tell the children the title of the work. Does this shed any light on what they thought was happening in the picture? What do they think of this picture? Do they like it? How does it make them feel? Can they tell what time of day it is? This is not a time to quiz the student(s) on what they may have missed; it is a time for them to engage and contemplate the picture further. Charlotte Mason tells us that questions about what they think never bore the students, but quizzing them does! If there is a story behind the picture, you may want to look that up and read it if there is time. But keep the lesson short!

5. Display the picture in your home.

Put the picture of the week on display somewhere in your home where everyone can see it.

That’s all there is to it. Enjoy this course of your educational feast. Your family will be blessed by having “a couple of hundred pictures by great masters hanging permanently in the halls of [your] imagination” (*Towards a Philosophy of Education*, p. 43).

The Story of James Abbot McNeill Whistler

by Emily Kiser

When James Abbot Whistler was born in a small mill town in Massachusetts, America was a busy, young nation, building industries and spreading out into the unconquered wilderness. James was the firstborn son of a civil engineer father and a deeply religious mother. His family picked up and moved several times within New England during the early years of his life, but when he was nine, they undertook an enormous journey to a far distant country. Russia was bigger and much older than America but was trying to catch up to the progress the younger country was making in industry. They needed a railroad engineer to connect St. Petersburg with Moscow, and James' father was the man for the job.

I'm sure his family couldn't have foreseen that this transient, international life would define the young boy who became an artist, but he was a restless soul throughout his entire life, never staying put for long periods of time, always seeking something new or better fortune elsewhere.

Life in Russia was comfortable for the Whistler family. Mr. Whistler had an important position that enabled him to provide a stable yet exciting life for his children. The family was often introduced to important people in the court of the Czar and those great men that gather around nobility. It became obvious to his family that James had a talent for drawing and when he was 11 he began his art education, first from private tutors then at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts. A well-known Scottish artist, Sir William Allan, saw the boy's work and was so moved he remarked to James' mother, "Your little boy has uncommon genius, but do not urge him beyond his inclination." It is doubtful that the artist could ever be moved "beyond his inclination," however. Once he was set in a belief or philosophy about art, there was no changing his mind.

This idyllic life in Russia came to an end when Mr. Whistler died unexpectedly. James was not yet 15 years old when he became the man of the family. The family relocated back to Mrs. Whistler's hometown in New England where they could live frugally. Pressure was upon James to enter into a profitable career. His mother desired him to become a minister, but that did not suit the intelligent but undisciplined and often irreverent young man. So it was decided the boy must become a soldier, and off he went to West Point where some of his ancestors had gone. The family reputation seemed to be enough to gain his admission since his near-sightedness and poor health would normally have barred him from enrollment.

West Point was then under the command of Robert E. Lee, the superintendent, and it is intriguing to consider how the world may have been different if Whistler had graduated from the Military Academy and become an officer in the United States Army. The American Civil War was looming on the horizon of history, a mere six years hence. Fortunately for the world of Art, Whistler was a poor student. Lazy about everything that didn't capture his attention,—everything, it seemed, except for art,—Whistler made a pitiful attempt at his studies and could not submit himself to those in authority at the school. After three years, he was not allowed to continue.

Despite dismissal from the prestigious institution, fortune seemed to smile upon the young man, who procured a job drawing maps of the United States' coastline. One would think his artistic inclination would be glad for a chance to earn a living producing drawings and engravings, but alas, the same irreverent nature that made James ill-suited for the clergy or the army crippled him as a cartographer as well. Bored with the tasks before him, Whistler took to ornamenting his maps with drawings of sea-monsters!

His professional life as a map-maker lasted only two months. However, the young artist knew himself better than he knew how to fit into society. Art was his one abiding passion, and Art for Art's Sake must be his motto in life. Taking what little money he had, he decided to move to Paris, the center of the art world at the time. And so, nearly penniless but ever-confident, Whistler arrived in France in 1855.

To succeed as an artist in the latter half of the nineteenth century was to walk a thin line between the convention of public taste and daring exploration into the never-before-done. It was a time when Art was changing. The acceptance of what was labelled "good" art was broadening. Yet an artist couldn't move too abruptly or quickly if he wanted to keep money in his pocket from the sale of his work.

For Further Reading

If you are interested in reading more about James McNeill Whistler, check your library for the following resources:

James McNeill Whistler (Getting to Know the Great Artists of the World), Mike Venezia (Children's Press, 2004)

This series is well-loved by younger readers.

Art in the New Land, Charlie May Simon (E.P. Dutton, 1967)

Chapter biographies of several famous artists describe the artist's life; middle readers on up.

Living Biographies of Great Painters, Henry Thomas (Garden City, 1940)

Several biographies in one book, including a section on Whistler; for middle school on up.

Whistler Picture Study

Choose **six** of the following pictures to study with your students; select those you like best, or that your students will enjoy the most. There is **no order to the following pages**, though the first few pictures are generally the artist's best known works; the extra pictures are included to give you options when choosing pieces to study.

In each lesson, use the "Leading Thoughts" to lead your students in a Picture Talk *after* they have studied the piece and given their narrations. You may choose to talk about or ask any, all, or none of the questions and comments. These are included to provide any helpful information that you and your students may not be familiar with, and to draw your attention to significant points of the work of art. Remember not to lecture your students; ask them what *they* think of the painting. After even a short time you will be amazed at the number, and quality, of relations your students will have formed with great artists and their works!





***Arrangement in Grey and White, No. 1
(Portrait of the Artist's Mother)***

1871, oil on canvas, 56.8" x 63.9"
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Present this picture as described on pages 9 and 10.

Leading Thoughts

This painting is often, mistakenly, called “Whistler’s Mother,” and while it is a portrait of his mother, Whistler seemed more concerned with the placement and balance of objects as one of his “artistic arrangements.” In fact, he didn’t set out to paint a picture of his mother at all. The model who was to sit for him did not show up and so he turned to the person on hand—his mother, who shared his home.

Mrs. Whistler was a very proper, devout woman very different in temperament from her volatile son, but they were devoted to one another. Whistler usually painted his portraits very slowly, over many, many sittings, so it was an act of love that she consented to be his model. The artist reciprocated by allowing her to remain seated instead of his planned standing pose.

This is Whistler’s most iconic painting and is one of the most recognizable American paintings ever produced. It was not well-received at the time of completion, being far too plain for public taste, but towards the end of his life it had become popular.