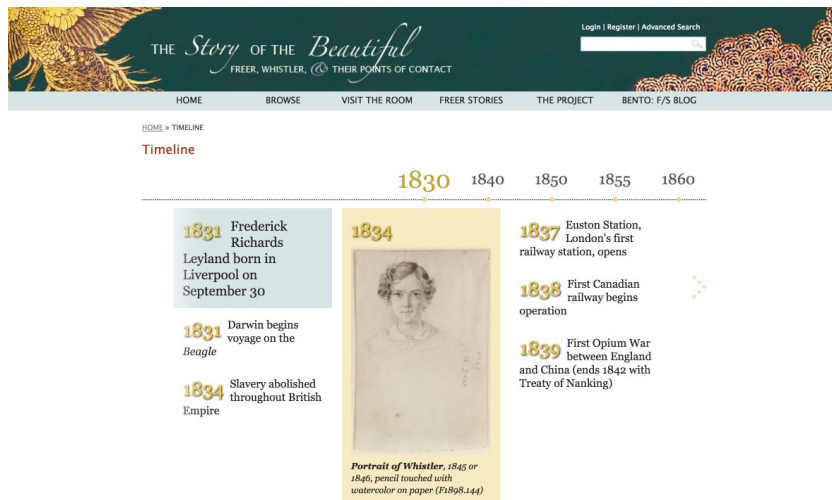


The Story of the Beautiful: Freer, Whistler, & Their Points of Contact

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In terms of scientific accuracy, the online exhibition *The Story of the Beautiful: Freer, Whistler, & Their Points of Contact* indeed measures up the reputation and status of all three of the institutions that contributed to the project (Smithsonian's Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, and Wayne State University's Library System). This easy-to-navigate site with its

coherent structure and thorough texts fulfils numerous possible needs of art professionals and at the same time offers comprehensive information to anyone who wishes to experience the Peacock Room, its story, and the visions of Beauty it suggests. The proclaimed main goal of this digital resource is to function as both a digital archive and a virtual environment that prompts its users to perceive the many interactions between the room, its objects, the places, and the faces associated with it. By providing detailed object records and using means like virtual tours of the room, the site's creators seem to have attained this goal.

The site is engaging in its structure, and navigation can even be said to be amusing, as in the "World Tours," for example. Further, one cannot help but mention the eye-catching "Timeline." This beautifully illustrated part of the site is also a great synthesis of very carefully chosen historical, biographical, and artistic pieces of information. In the cases of the most important objects, the immaculately documented texts that accompany the photos are indeed comprehensive; they contain marvellous and in-depth references to aesthetic matters: why was the item bought by the collectors, where it was put in room, and according to which aesthetic ideals. In terms of emphasis, however, if the target is the demonstration of both Whistler's and Freer's notions of the Beautiful (and the understanding that "the story of the Beautiful" is of course constantly retold), then the user should first of all be presented with the comments that

are relative to this aspect. The “archaeological tracking” of the items is of secondary importance when the purpose is the contextualization of how these items were used as examples of Beauty. It seems possible that a significant number of site visitors will only have a vague idea about this latter argument.

The matter of interactivity comes last but not least. Visitors have the opportunity to express their opinion in numerous places, for example on the item pages. But why not trying something less “traditional,” such as giving users the ability to digitally “recreate” the Peacock Room according to their own beliefs regarding the Beautiful? This may sound like quite a bold suggestion, but after all, it would be nothing but a modern way to tell and retell the “story of the Beautiful”.

Baluster vase, from a five-piece garniture (F1980.190-.194)

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Overall, the excellence of this digital resource is undisputable. What remains in question is how immersive it is -- not compared to the average digital exhibition, but to the aspirations of the site’s own creators.