

WHISTLER AND W.M. ROSSETTI:
“ALWAYS ON THE EASIEST & PLEASANTEST TERMS”

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On 19 July 1903, two days after Whistler's death, William Michael Rossetti wrote in his diary:¹ “I much regret to see in the paper the death of Whistler. I was highly intimate with him between about 1862 & 1872; & spite of his rather volcanic temperament, he & I were always on the easiest & pleasantest terms.” Biographers of Whistler from the Pennells to Stanley Weintraub, G.H. Fleming, and Anderson and Koval will usually quote from one or two of Rossetti's reviews of Whistler, dutifully note his resignation from the Burlington Fine Arts Club to protest Whistler's expulsion, and attempt to explain Rossetti's obtuse appearance on Whistler's behalf at the Whistler v. Ruskin trial; justice, however, has never been done to the quality and consistency of Rossetti's advocacy of Whistler's work or his long-standing tolerance and affection for the man. The earliest reference to Whistler in Rossetti's correspondence, in a letter of 14 May 1860 to William Bell Scott, enthusiastically notes his first appearance as a painter at the Royal Academy. “A Yankee named Whistler,” he writes, exhibits *At the Piano* (Young 24), “a rough but magnificent piece of Reynoldsish-French colour” (*Letters* 111). Rossetti met Whistler either sometime before or shortly after October 1862, when he became the third subtenant along with Swinburne and Meredith of his brother's Cheyne Walk house, which was close by Whistler's lodgings in Queen's Road, Chelsea. Of his subtenancy of the house, where he generally spent three days a week, Rossetti later wrote that “few planes of my life are more satisfactory in my reminiscence than that which covers the years from the close of 1862 to the beginning of 1869” (*Reminiscences* 1:272). Significantly, Rossetti begins “The Cheyne Walk Circle of Friends” chapter of his *Reminiscences* with a five page account of Whistler – substantially longer than his account of any other member of the circle – in which he pointedly praises his “easy good-fellowship,” his “touchy sense of honour,” “the copiousness or piquancy of his *bons mots*,” and his artistic integrity: “I have met few men whose temperament and interests were so essentially those of an artist – and an artist convinced in thinking and heedful in planning. If he had not been a wit and a ‘character,’ as well as an artist, the public would perhaps have been more readily persuaded of this” (2:316-20).

Rossetti's correspondence and diaries for 1862-1872 amply confirm his claim

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