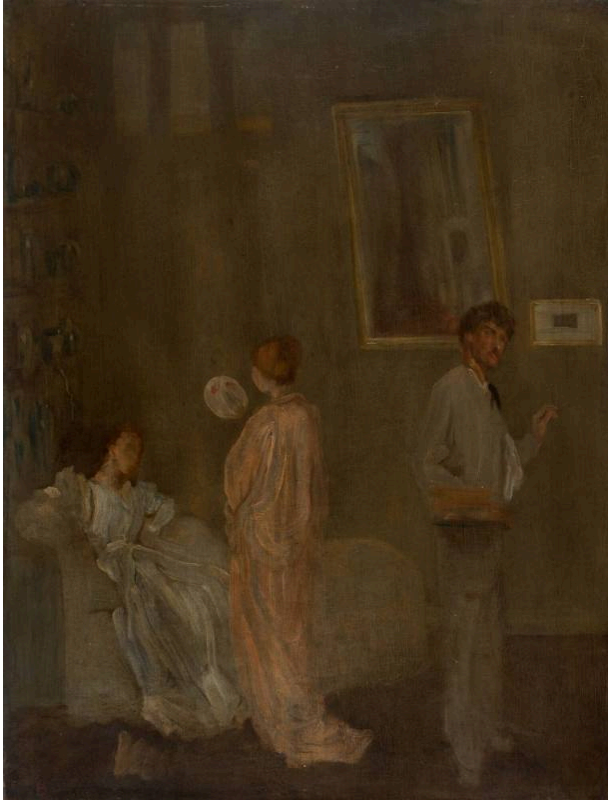


# Basic Detail Report

---



## The Artist's Studio

### Date

1865

### Primary Maker

James Abbott McNeill Whistler

### Medium

Oil on millboard

### Dimensions

62.2 x 46.3 cm

### Description

In this delicate self-portrait, James McNeill Whistler depicts his Irish mistress Joanna Hiffernan (ca. 1843 – after 1903), seated on a chaise longue and another standing figure whom the artist referred to as ‘La Japonaise’. Jo Hiffernan became Whistler’s model and

mistress in the early 1860s and remained so for at least five years, posing for some of his most famous pictures, etchings and drawings. She was described as “Irish, Roman Catholic...a woman of next to no education, but of keen intelligence, who, before she had ceased to sit to Whistler, knew more about painting than most painters, had become well read, and had great charm of manner”. She first posed to Whistler in Paris in 1861, for the monumental work *Symphony in white, No.1: The White Girl*, 1862 (National Gallery of Art, Washington) a painting that was the subject of intense critical derision at the Salon des Refusés in 1863 along with Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*. Hiffernan’s dress in *The Artist’s Studio* is similar to the one she wears in *Symphony in White*. Whistler was proud of her looks, in particular, her magnificent red tresses. Whistler’s family, however, had mixed feelings about Hiffernan and when Whistler’s mother came over from America, he had to find a place of retreat for his lover. His mother begged Whistler to use a bequest from his aunt to settle Hiffernan in independent respectability and she certainly was not received by family or patrons, who believed that anyone who modelled in the nude, and who was unmarried, was a prostitute. She was, however, accepted in artistic circles and it was through Whistler that she met Gustave Courbet who also painted her and completed four versions of a work he called “Jo, La Belle Irlandaise” (1865/66). She also posed for Courbet’s erotic painting ‘*Le Sommeil*’. She possessed a fiery but effervescent personality and when Whistler and she parted, it was without bitterness. Whistler earned a significant portion of his income through portrait commissions and he maintained an elegant studio where his sitters could pose. This setting is evoked in this work but not in a literal manner. Although one cannot see the canvas on which the artist is working, in the background is a framed mirror and an etching hanging on the wall beside it and on the left is his collection of blue and white porcelain. The

Japanese costume, fan and graceful posture of the standing woman attest to Whistler's interest in Asian art; this model converses with Hiffernan who sits in a casual pose. In this work, Whistler subtly displays his creative concerns and comments on his self-image as an artist who is inspired by muses of his own choosing. There is a sense of immediacy and spontaneity to this intimate scene in the thin, gestural application of paint. Originally, he intended to make a monumental, ten-foot high painting that would, in size and subject, refer to Diego Velázquez's famous studio scene, *Las Meninas* (1656; Madrid, Museo del Prado), the Spanish artist's controversial exploration of artistic identity, but never realised his ambition. Whistler appears less confident in this painting than in many other self-portraits and seems to define himself less by his likeness than by the objects of beauty with which he has surrounded himself. Although he seems to hold a brush and palette in his hands, but one cannot see what he is painting; it is almost as if it is the viewer he has taken as his subject, as he peers straight out of the canvas as if at a sitter.