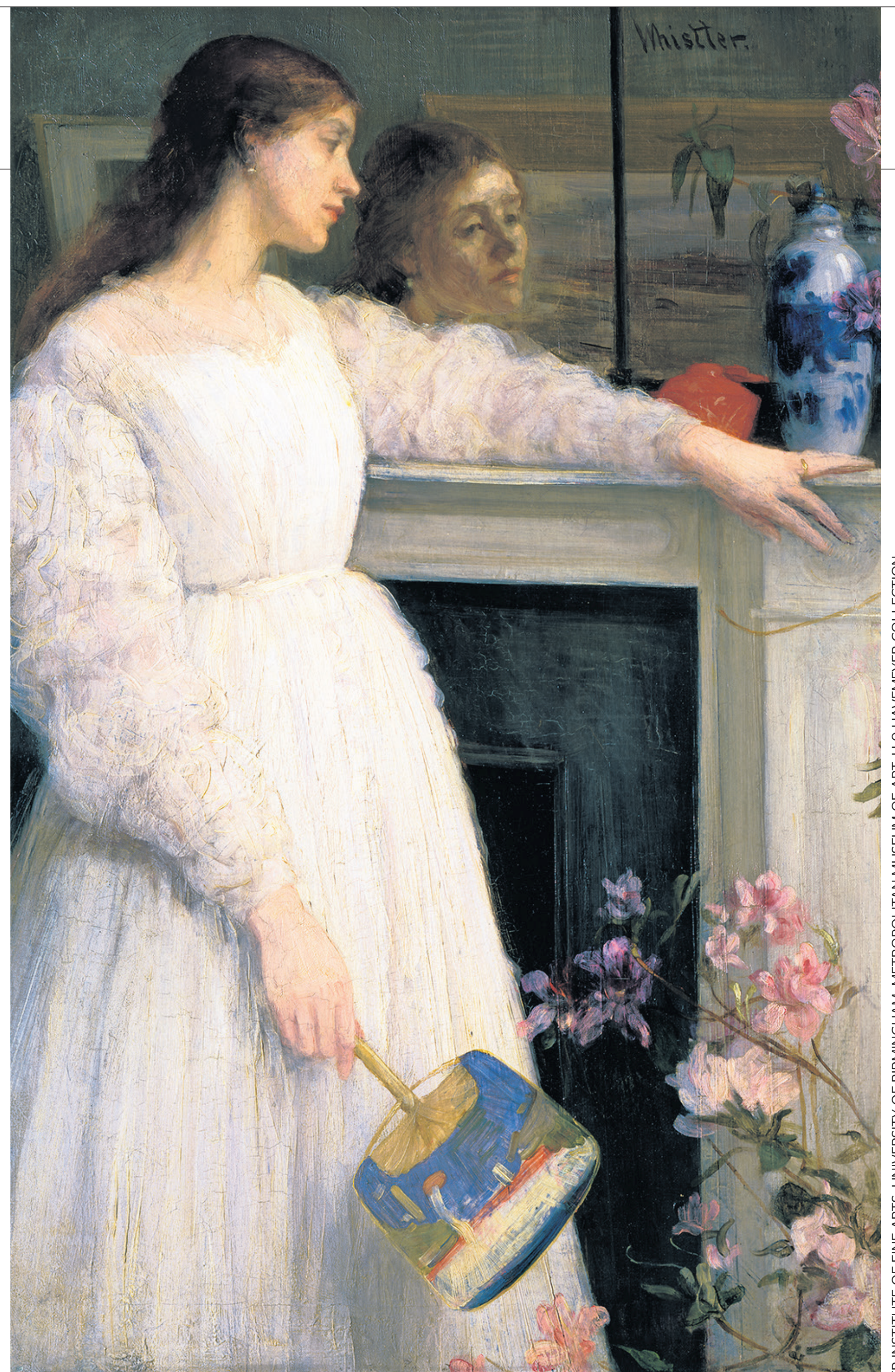

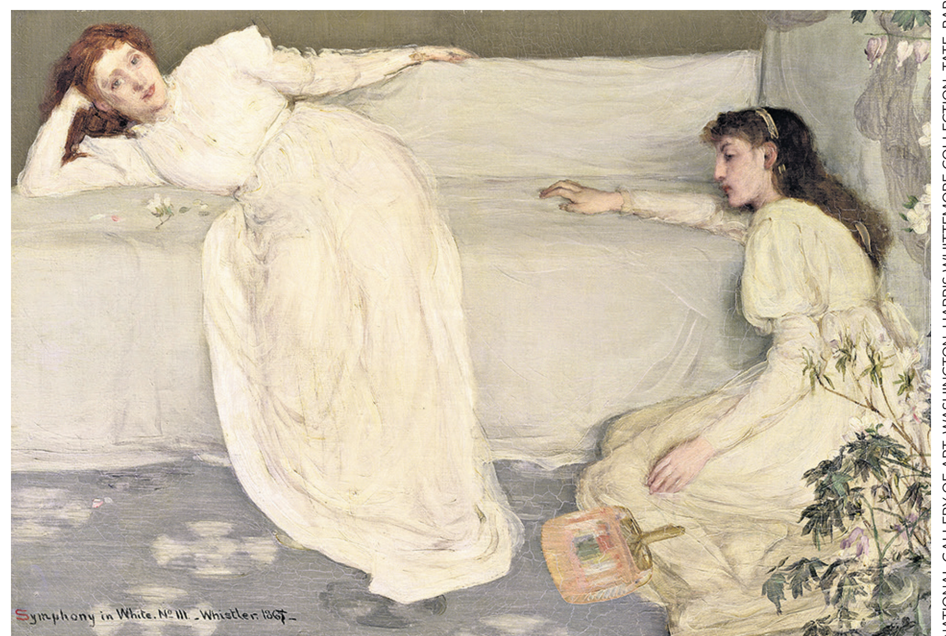

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, HARRIS WHITTEMORE COLLECTION; TATE; BARBER INSTITUTE OF FINE ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM; METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, H O HAVEMEYER COLLECTION

Meet Whistler's other woman

Before the painter immortalised his mother, a mystery redhead stole his heart – and turbocharged his art

By Lucy DAVIES

There is no better introduction to Victorian bohemia – its artists, print-sellers, con men and vagabonds – than a visit to Rathbone Place. This narrow brick street, just north of Soho, was where London artists went to buy their paints and brushes, from Winsor & Newton, Rowney and Co, or "Fuller's Temple of Fancy".

It's also where, in 1860, the 26-year-old James Abbott (later McNeill) Whistler met Joanna Hiffernan, a 21-year-old Irish model with flaming hair and grey-green eyes, who lived in a house on the

Exhibitions

'Jo played the clown to amuse us': Gustave Courbet's *Jo, La Belle Irlandaise* (1865–66)

Shades of pale: clockwise from far left on facing page, Joanna Hiffernan in James McNeill Whistler's *Symphony in White No1* (1862), *No2* (1864) and *No3* (1865-67)

street. Within months, she had become Whistler's principal model, his mistress – and much more besides.

A new exhibition at the Royal Academy makes the case that, rather than simply being the American-born artist's muse, she actively collaborated with him on almost every major work of his early career. She helped manage his studio, was granted power of attorney over his affairs, the authority to draw and sign cheques and, before her death at 44, was named Whistler's sole heir. She even took in his illegitimate child – the outcome of a brief, devastating infidelity in 1870.

Whistler's Woman in White: Joanna Hiffernan, jointly organised with the National Gallery of Art in Washington, is the latest in a slew of exhibitions to grant artists' models centre stage. The National Portrait Gallery's 2019 *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters*, for instance, brought to life women such as Fanny Cornforth, whose ambivalent position in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's household matched Hiffernan's in Whistler's.

It turns out that the two women were friends, but Hiffernan is a far more blurry figure. The curators – in the UK, Ann Dumas, and in Washington, Margaret F MacDonald, the world authority on Whistler – have had to piece her together from fragments of correspondence and census records. What they have found reveals her to be resourceful, confident and witty; profoundly more interesting than anyone had realised.

At the exhibition's core are three paintings produced between 1860 and 1867, now known as *Symphony in White No1*; *Symphony in White No2: The Little White Girl*; and *Symphony in White No3*. Crucial to Whistler's arc, they are also the paintings in which Hiffernan is most recognisable – though once you know her, she is everywhere, not least in *Wapping* (1860-64), Whistler's magnificent ode to the working river.

But who was Hiffernan? Baptised in Limerick in 1839, she and her father, mother and two sisters came to London in 1843, part of the wave of poor Irish fleeing the famines of that decade. Refugees filled London's cramped slums, and Marylebone, where the Hiffernans settled, had one of the highest mortality rates in the city. Their youngest daughter, Catherine, died of "marasmus" – malnutrition.

Whistler's arrival in 1859 – on a boat from Paris, where he had been studying – was rather different. Moving in with his half-sister and her husband in middle-class Sloane Street, he wrote excitedly to the artist Henri Fantin Latour in Paris that England was ripe for the plucking: "Come and see how you can earn much more here in one month… than you would in a year!"

Of course, he had to make his name first, and there were only two options: to exhibit a major painting at the Royal Academy, or at the Paris Salon. Whichever he chose, he needed to pull something significant out of the bag – both were bun fights, so crammed with crinolines and tobacco smoke that you were hard-pressed to see a picture at all.

This is where Hiffernan came in. Whistler required something fresh, and she inspired, perhaps even suggested, it. He began the portrait, "a girl in a beautiful white cambric dress, standing against a window which filters the light through a transparent white muslin curtain", as he called *Symphony in White No1*, in the winter of 1861. The dress was chosen as a technical challenge – a study in shades of white.

> Her portrait upset the RA's 'duffers... stupid painters [who] don't understand it at all'

Whistler was delighted with the result, but the Academy was not. Years later, he said the rejection had made him feel "positively sick". "It's hard to understand today why it alienated so many people," says Dumas. "But white on white was very radical; its monumental scale was usually reserved for grand portraits of important people, and this was an unknown model, almost in a housecoat. Victorian audiences were used to paintings with a narrative or moralising message. There's no hint of a story here." Hiffernan was upset, too. She told the dealer George Aloysius Lucas that the Academy selection committee were "old duffers", adding: "Some stupid painters don't understand it at all."

Next, Whistler tried the Paris Salon, and again the painting was dismissed. He was in luck, though: so many other artists complained of rejection in 1863 that Napoleon III ordered an official "Salon des Refusés". Along with Manet's now infamous *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, Whistler's *La Dame Blanche* was the star attraction. Zola even put it in his novel *L'Oeuvre*.

Returning to London, Whistler resumed work on *Wapping*. He had started it when he and Hiffernan were living in rooms in Greenwich, where, to reassure the landlord, she was "Anna Whistler". (They never actually married.) By the time the painting was finished, they had moved to middle-class Lindsey Row, Chelsea, still dogged by the demands of respectability: when Whistler's mother came to visit, he told a friend he had to "Find a '*buen retiro*' for Jo" to retreat to.

Symphony in White No2 fared much better than *No1*. Exhibited at the Academy in 1865, it depicted Hiffernan leaning on the mantelpiece at Lindsey Row, and inspired the poet Algernon Swinburne to write "Before the Mirror", imagining Hiffernan's reaction to her reflection. The fan she is holding displays Whistler's growing interest in the art of Asia. Rossetti was a fellow collector, and lent Whistler a "Chinese blue and white rug" for *Symphony in White No3*, in which Hiffernan posed with model Emelie Jones. Walter Sickert commented that the expression of Hiffernan's eyes "has preserved for us a hint of the young man's admiration".

Between *Symphony No2* and *No3*, Whistler and Hiffernan joined the French realist Gustave Courbet in Trouville, where dips in the icy sea, along with suppers of fried cutlets and buttered prawns, inspired them to a frenzy of painting. Years later, Courbet reminisced to Whistler: "Do you remember Trouville and Jo who played the clown to amuse us. In the evening she sang Irish songs so well because she had the spirit and distinction of art." Courbet's own portrait of Hiffernan is also on show at the Royal Academy. He never parted with it, though many tried to buy it.

Hiffernan's vitality masked the chest ailment that would eventually kill her. By the time she died, she and Whistler were no longer living together, though she was still caring for his son, Charles, a responsibility that passed to her sister Agnes. The set-up seems to have suited everyone (Charles wrote movingly of "Auntie Jo"), and Whistler and Agnes stayed friends until his death in 1903. She attended his funeral, where the collector Charles Lang Freer was shocked enough to think her Hiffernan's ghost, come to be by Whistler's side.

Whistler's Woman in White is at the Royal Academy, London W1 from Feb 26 to May 22; royalacademy.org.uk

Simon Heffer

Hinterland

'One of Our Aircraft Is Missing' is pure propaganda and among the greatest British war films ever made

Every British film made between 1939 and about 1950 was, fundamentally, propaganda. Until 1945, they were aimed at keeping up the morale of a public that from day to day was having to carry on despite being blitzed, bereaved and forced to endure rationing and dislocation during a period of total war. After 1945, British cinema sought to provide escapism from the post-war realities of austerity, displacement and yet more rationing.

A jewel of the period, aimed very much at buoying the spirits of people when the war was still going badly for Britain, is Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's 1942 masterpiece *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing*, made with the approval of the Ministry of Information. It took its title from ministry reports to the BBC about raids on Germany, which would chill the hearts of listeners with husbands, sons and brothers in Bomber Command. The film was designed to reassure such families that even if their plane didn't make it back, its crew might. Given that 55,573 of Bomber Command's 125,000 men never came home, offering hope was a tall order, but the film reinforced its credibility by avoiding wild unrealism, and the kind of jingoism that would have rendered it comical.

B for Bertie – the aircraft that goes missing – is a Wellington with a crew of six, played by such stalwart character actors of the period as Hugh Williams, Godfrey Tearle, Hugh Burden and Bernard Miles, alongside newcomer Emrys Jones and Eric Portman, one of the box office greats of the 1940s. Having dropped its load on Stuttgart, the plane develops engine trouble. The crew bail out near the Dutch coast; on the ground, five of the six reunite and seek help from the local people. (They spot the sixth, in peacetime a professional footballer, a few days later, playing for a Dutch village team).

The film's other propaganda purpose is overtly to profess fellow feeling for the Dutch and to thank them for the help they gave to Allied airmen, at huge personal risk. They have their quislings, of course – one, played as grotesquely as possible by Robert Helpmann, comes to a sticky end at the hands of his German friends – but otherwise they are depicted as relentlessly brave and defiant. At a time when it still could not be guaranteed that Britain would avoid invasion, the film created a template for how it was hoped the British would behave in such a predicament.

With the help of a Dutch woman (played coolly by Googie Withers), who poses as a collaborator in order to work more effectively with the resistance, the men eventually board a boat heading towards England, and are picked up in the North Sea. One is wounded, but recovers, so the film has a happy ending of the sort that was all too rare in real life. As propaganda, it ticks every box. The British characters are courageous, modest, incapable of panic and constantly cracking jokes. The Dutch are a model of what allies should be. And the Germans are used to depict a stereotype that lasted in film for decades afterwards: cruel, vicious, menacing and rather thick. It was exactly what the public needed in 1942.

Clearly, Powell – who directed the film (Pressburger as usual wrote the screenplay) – could not use Dutch locations. He filmed, instead, around King's Lynn in Norfolk, capitalising on the Flemish-style architecture of that east coast port, and Boston in Lincolnshire, with the flat fenland doing a marvellous impersonation of Holland. Ronald Neame's highly atmospheric cinematography is a cut above most films of the era and he received an Oscar nomination for the special effects, notably the reconstruction of the bombing of Stuttgart, shot in a studio at Hammersmith. The photography is all the more important in this film because, apart from when a Nazi officer interrupts a church service, it has no music. Powell, keen for the film to be as "naturalistic" as possible, wanted the sounds the audience hears to be those the airmen would have heard.

> The film's Germans are vicious and rather thick. Just what the public needed in 1942

One of Our Aircraft Is Missing is one of our greatest war films. Luckily, there is a Blu-ray edition in which it looks marvellous, and comes with rather fine extras. In times such as this, it is good to be reminded what a decent people we really are.