

When in Photoshop, proceed with caution

by Joan Altabe



Back in '98 when the advertising crowd put Whistler's mother to work urging seniors to get on the Internet was when I began to worry.

The celebrated portrait by James Abbott McNeill Whistler was being used to boost computer literacy for retirees. There was Mrs. Whistler sitting as she usually does, staring straight ahead of her. But a personal computer was photo-shopped onto the painting to give the impression that the computer screen was the object of her attention.

At around the same time, newspaper readers saw the same Whistler portrait pop up in the cartoon strip *Zits*. Jeremy was dressed in Mrs. Whistler's clothes – his spit curl dangling from her lace headwear – and posed in the same way.

Augggghhhhh!

Not that this was the first time that fine art had been put to a commercial use. Time magazine once ran Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* with a "Breathe Right" strip across the subject's nose.

The French also have used *Mona Lisa* to summon people to give blood. ("I, too, am priceless. Give blood today.") Even in its Italian birthplace, the painting has been used to sell

hairpins.

Then there are the Merchants of Vincent, the ones who put out a Christmas card showing Van Gogh wearing a Santa hat. If that didn't ill-treat the artist enough, a rubber ear wrapped in plastic came with the card.

And who can forget the Vincent Fine Wines and Gourmet Society's 1990 Vincent Extra Brut Cava – so named "to honor our famous compatriot, grandiose impressionist and true lover of the spiritual liquid"?

No wonder the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company felt free to mount an advertising campaign portraying the cartoon character Snoopy napping without a care atop his doghouse with Van Gogh's painting *Starry Night* in the background. Imagine using a suicide's vision to sell life insurance. When I saw *Starry Night* used to sell the idea of serenity and stability, all I could think of was the wildly agitated Vincent shooting himself in a field and dragging back to his room to die.

Another bad use of a painting: Some years ago, a Florida frame and print shop sold a print that was a dead ringer for a painting by early 20th-century great Edward Hopper – down to the title, *Nighthawks*.

Arrangement in Gray and Black,
James McNeill Whistler. 1871



The print showed four isolated figures avoiding each others' eyes in an all-night diner. But far from anonymous, as Hopper had envisioned them, the faces were those of James Dean, Elvis Presley, Humphrey Bogart and Marilyn Monroe. This, when the whole point of Hopper's pictures is the disquieting namelessness of big-city life – the very antithesis of celebrity.

Using Whistler's picture of his mother in a computer ad isn't stupid like that. Actually, it was quite clever. But Whistler would have hated it. Big on art for art's sake, the artist wrote, "Art should be independent of all clap-trap — should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear . . . That is why I insist on calling my works 'arrangements' and 'harmonies.'" That is why he called the painting of his mother *Arrangement in Gray and Black*. As he said, "That is what it is," an arrangement – a precursor of abstract art if I ever saw one.

Whistler even talked like an abstract painter: "If a man who paints only the tree or flower or other surface he sees before him were an artist, the king of artists would be the photographer. It is for the artist to do something beyond this:

in portrait painting to put on canvas,

something more than the face the model wears for that one day . . . to treat a flower as his key, not his model."

Whistler was so adamant that his pictures be seen as arrangements, he sued art critic John Ruskin for damages for libel when the critic mocked the idea: "I have seen and heard much of cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb (a fool) ask two hundred guineas (Whistler's asking price) for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."

The trial is said to have ruined the artist. The jury awarded him damages of an insulting one farthing.

Using the picture of his elderly mother to persuade other elders to use computers is like that – an insult to Whistler and all those who admire his work. Like me.

How about you? If anybody out there is using Photoshop, could you make sure that you're not bastardizing someone else's work with it?

Puh-leeze! 🖋️