

The Frick Collection: Detail Report



Arrangement in Black and Gold: Comte Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac

James McNeill Whistler (American, 1834–1903)

Date 1891–92

Medium Oil on canvas

Dimensions 82 1/8 × 36 1/8 in. (208.6 × 91.8 cm)

Credit Line Henry Clay Frick Bequest

Accession Number 1914.1.131

Currently On View

First Floor, Room 15, Oval Room

Commentary This portrait of Comte Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac (1855–1921), a prominent figure in the social, artistic, and intellectual circles of Paris, is the most modern painting in The Frick Collection, as well as one of the last large canvases Whistler finished. Though the artist and his subject had known one another since 1885, it was not until the spring of 1891 that work was begun on the portrait in Whistler's London studio. After countless posing sessions, it was completed the following summer in a studio Whistler was renting in Paris. It languished there for another two years, before being exhibited at the Salon of the Champ-de-Mars in 1894, where it provoked a flood of critical reviews, mostly enthusiastic. The painting's extreme simplicity and somber palette recall the full-length portraits of Velázquez and anticipate certain minimalist tendencies of twentieth-century abstraction, yet its mediumistic character — many contemporaries described it as being like an apparition — relates it to symbolist currents of the 1890s. Whistler's desire to capture the soul of Montesquiou is suggested by his final words to the exhausted model: "Look at me for an instant longer, and you will look forever!" The

garment shown hanging over the count's left arm was a chinchilla cape belonging to his beloved cousin and muse, Comtesse Élisabeth Greffulhe. Today, Montesquiou is probably best remembered as one of the models for the personage of the Baron de Charlus in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Source: *Art in The Frick Collection: Paintings, Sculpture, Decorative Arts*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996. This painting was the subject of a 1995–1996 exhibition at The Frick Collection, entitled *Whistler and Montesquiou: The Butterfly and the Bat*.

Collection History Comte Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac. Sold by him to R.A. Canfield in 1902. Knoedler. Frick, 1914. Source: *Paintings in The Frick Collection: American, British, Dutch, Flemish and German. Volume I*. New York: The Frick Collection, 1968.