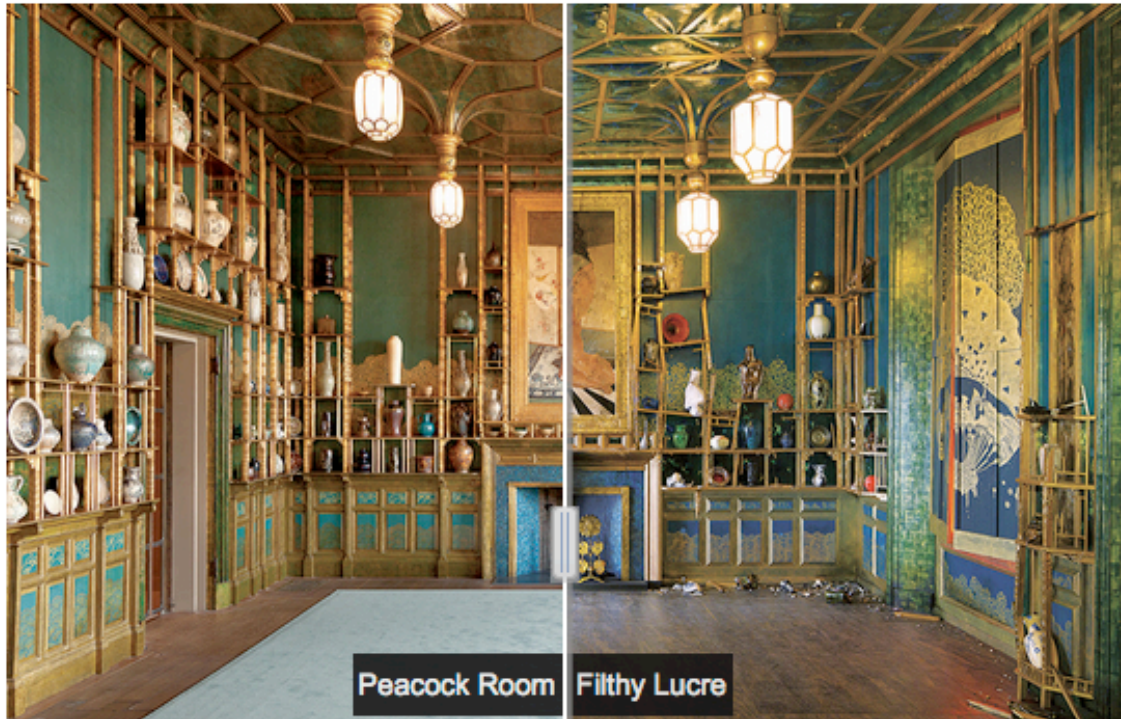


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'Filthy Lucre': Artist Darren Waterston's Double Vision

This month, a full-size commentary on James McNeill Whistler's iconic Peacock Room goes on display at the Freer and Sackler Galleries in Washington, D.C.



Waterston's 'Filthy Lucre,' installed at MASS MoCA, is only slightly smaller than Whistler's Peacock Room (left).

By Jessica Dawson
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WHEN ARTIST DARREN WATERSTON dreamed up *Filthy Lucre*, his extravagant room-size riff on James McNeill Whistler's iconic Peacock Room, he never imagined that his creation would one day go head-to-head with its celebrated muse.

"Initially there were a few people who were like, 'Oh, my God, this is a sacrilege,'" says Waterston, 49, of *Peacock Room REMIX: Darren Waterston's Filthy Lucre*, which will position his modern-day creation alongside the Gilded Age jewel of Washington, D.C.'s Freer and Sackler Galleries when it opens there on May 16. "It's such a revered room and such a destination," he says.

Originally commissioned by the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, *Filthy Lucre* is the monstrous alter ego of the sumptuous dining room Whistler designed for British shipping magnate Frederick Richards Leyland. The so-called Peacock Room—a grand three-dimensional artwork comprising painting, architecture and the patron's Chinese porcelain collection—marked a radical move away from the canvases with which Whistler made his name.

Where Whistler produced unabashed luxury, Waterston has made melancholic decay: In his version, paintings molder, pigments puddle and shelves splinter. *Filthy Lucre* took Waterston and a team of ceramicists, gilders and glassmakers eight months to complete. Its elegant chaos embodies the feud between Whistler and Leyland over the room's cost, a clash that called into question creativity's value—tensions that echo in today's heated art market.

“The more I read about the history of the Peacock Room, the more I thought, This is the contemporary art world,” says Waterston, a California native. “Billions of dollars are exchanged annually at auctions and art fairs, a feeding frenzy for objects. This amplified commodification was also going on in Whistler's time.” “The piece talks about complicated relationships between art and money, and artists and their patrons,” says Susan Cross, the MASS MoCA curator who began shepherding *Filthy Lucre* in 2012. “It's an homage but also a critique.”

Over the course of a 10-year friendship, Leyland and Whistler grew close, but in 1876, when the artist was asked to recommend paint colors for a new dining room, Whistler overstepped his bounds. While Leyland was traveling, Whistler reworked almost every surface with blue, green and teal pigments accented by gold. Upon Leyland's return, Whistler presented his patron with a bill for 2,000 guineas for the unsolicited work (the equivalent of about \$2 million today).

The ensuing battle played out in the press, cementing the room as a *succès de scandale* and contributing to Whistler's eventual bankruptcy. “They were two very big egos,” Waterston says. “By all accounts, Whistler wasn't a very nice person.”

According to scholar Lee Glazer, the Freer curator in charge of the Peacock Room, Whistler “understood that art was a form of social capital and that the artist should be the one who assigns value. He thought that you really could put a price on beauty.”