THE PEACOCK ROOM

PAINTED FOR MR. F. R. LEYLAND BY JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER, REMOVED IN ITS ENTIRETY FROM THE LATE OWNER'S RESIDENCE & EXHIBITED AT MESSRS. OBACH'S GALLERIES AT 168 NEW BOND STREET, LONDON, W. · · ·

JUNE 1904.

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FREDERICK RICHARD LEYLAND was in several ways a remarkable man. His fame survives to-day as a splendid and successful patron of the Fine Arts, at a period when patrons of the fine arts were rare. But there is reason to believe that had his life been prolonged he might have enjoyed the distinction of being perhaps the richest man in the world. Those who were acquainted with him in business have credited him, not only with the shrewdness and energy by which a man lifts his fortune above that of his fellows, but also with that much rarer largeness of mind which can grasp and direct the industries of a continent as easily as those of a single town or province.

Mr. Leyland's taste in matters of art itself argues some such greatness. He lived in days when our national instinct was to keep fine works of art as ancestral treasures, and not to sell them at the first profitable opportunity. Partly no doubt for this reason, partly by his pluck and wisdom in taking advice from the brilliant artists with whom he associated, Mr. Leyland, instead of collecting the portraits of other men's grandfathers, restricted himself to fine works of Old Masters, such as Botticelli, Crivelli and Filippo Lippi, whose merits were then acknowledged by few. To this distinguished assemblage he added a wonderful selection of works by living men. Millais was represented by the "Eve of St. Agnes"; Burne Jones by "The Mirror of Venus," "Merlin and Vivien," "The Seasons," "Night and Morning," "Phyllis and Demophoon," "The Wine of Circe," and "Cupid and Psyche"; Ford Madox Brown by three pictures, including the "Chaucer at King Edward's Court"; W. L Windus by three pictures including "Burd Helen." There were also paintings by Watts, Legros and Albert Moore. The great feature of the collection however, was the series of works by Rossetti. Twenty-six drawings by him of various sizes, and twelve paintings were included in the great sale of May 1892. The paintings included the "Proserpina," "Mnemosyne," "Veronica Veronese" "La Pia," "Dis Manibus," "The Salutation of Beatrice," "The Blessed Damozel," "Lady Lilith," "Monna Rosa," "The Loving Cup," and "Love's Greeting." Only by such a catalogue is it possible to estimate the character of this house at Prince's Gate, in which the famous Peacock Room was executed.

It is difficult, after the lapse of nearly thirty years to collect all the details of decorative work done in a private house by a private person. Tradition, however, seems to make the history of the Peacock Room somewhat as follows :—Mr. Leyland had fitted into his house the staircase taken from Northumberland house when the later was pulled down, and Whistler had painted for him the panels of the dado on the wall of his stairs. Mr. Leyland had also bought Whistler's "La Princesse du Pays de Porcelaine" and had placed it in the recess over the mantelpiece of his dining room. A large part of the house had been decorated by Norman Shaw, with the assistance of a brother architect Jeckyll, and Mr. Murray Marks The dining room had been entirely designed by Jeckyll, including the lamps. The sideboard, however, seems to have been designed by Whistler. Jeckyll had erected walls and a ceiling of wood, which he had decorated with elaborate shelving for the display of Mr. Leyland's Oriental china. This shelving was carried out in walnut wood and the panels were fitted with brown Spanish leather decorated with small flowers. This leather alone is said to have cost £1,000.

Whistler found that this leather did not harmonize well with his picture, either because it was too dark in tone, or, because the red flowers were too prominent, and seems to have, with Mr. Leyland's consent, tried to lighten it here and there with touches of yellow. These alterations were not sufficient and the scheme of decoration as we now see it was put in hand —apparently in Mr. Leyland's absence from home. That the scheme was one that Whistler had long contemplated seems more than doubtful. Rumour speaks of an offer made previously to Mr. Alexander and declined by him on account of the expense. More probably the idea came to Whistler gradually, as a result of the experiments he had made in harmonizing his picture with Jeckyll's decoration.

Much gossip has gathered round the painting, and but few definite facts about it can be ascertained. These all go to prove that although the character of the work was determined by the original design of the room, the actual painting was done entirely by Whistler, helped by an assistant who presumably did the gilding of the flat spaces and the lacquering of the woodwork Accounts are given of the speed with which they worked, how the gold got into their hair and covered their faces, and how Whistler worked now on a scaffolding, now in a hammock slung from the roof, and sometimes using a brush fastened to the end of a fishing rod. The use of all these methods is easily explained. For painting the upper part of the walls a scaffolding would be necessary ; a hammock would give a pleasant alternative position for painting the ceiling ; while the employment of a very long brush-handle has the practice of Gainsborough

to recommend it, and would be useful in passages, where breadth of effect was needed more than nicety of touch. The actual work is said to have occupied hardly more than six months during the years 1876 to 1877—a wonderfully short time for so elaborate a task.

As already mentioned, the origin of the whole scheme, "La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine," painted twelve years earlier, was set in the panel above the mantel piece, in the place now occupied by a mirror. After Mr. Leyland's death, the picture was taken down and was sold at his sale for four hundred and twenty guineas. An amusing instance of Whistler's scrupulous care in securing unity of effect has recently been discovered in the form of an account for an Oriental carpet supplied to Mr. Leyland in the summer of 1876. This carpet had a red border which was ruthlessly cut off, in order that it might not reduce, by contrast, the touches of red in the picture.

We are apt to regard the seventies as a period which, if not unproductive of fine works of art, was in its general temper positively hostile to them. It is usual, of course, for one generation to build tombs for the prophets killed by its fathers, and for that reason we are naturally complacent about the mistakes of our ancestors. We can also flatter ourselves that we have become more tolerant than they. The appearance of any novel phenomenon in the art world is no longer greeted with active persecution. Even violent personal abuse has ceased to be the language of all critics of any standing. We seem, indeed, often to go to the opposite extreme and, in our efforts to be tolerant, to applaud the immature and the mediocre.

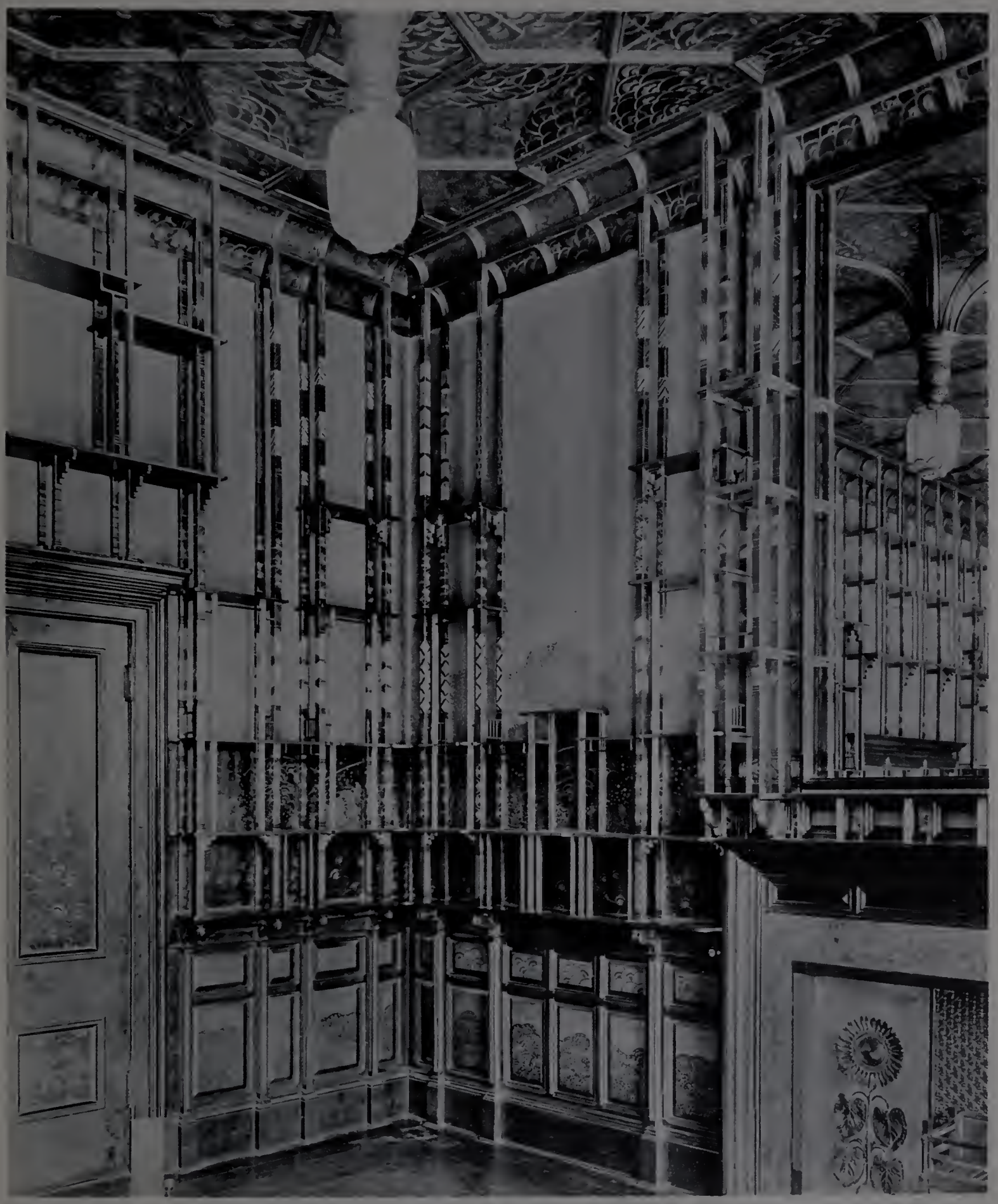
In practice, however, are we after all really so much better than our fathers in our patronage of the Arts? We certainly applaud and admire, and perhaps, entertain artists; but our interest is generally too languid to go much further than verbal politeness. Even the squabbles and enmities of the past, trying and troublesome though they must have been, were at least an evidence of genuine, if not always well directed enthusiasm. That spirit we seem to have lost entirely, and our increased tolerance is but a poor substitute. If we read again the artistic annals of twenty-five years ago, they seem to be the annals of another race, with strong likes and dislikes: of men who had convictions and were prepared to stand by them and pay liberally for them.

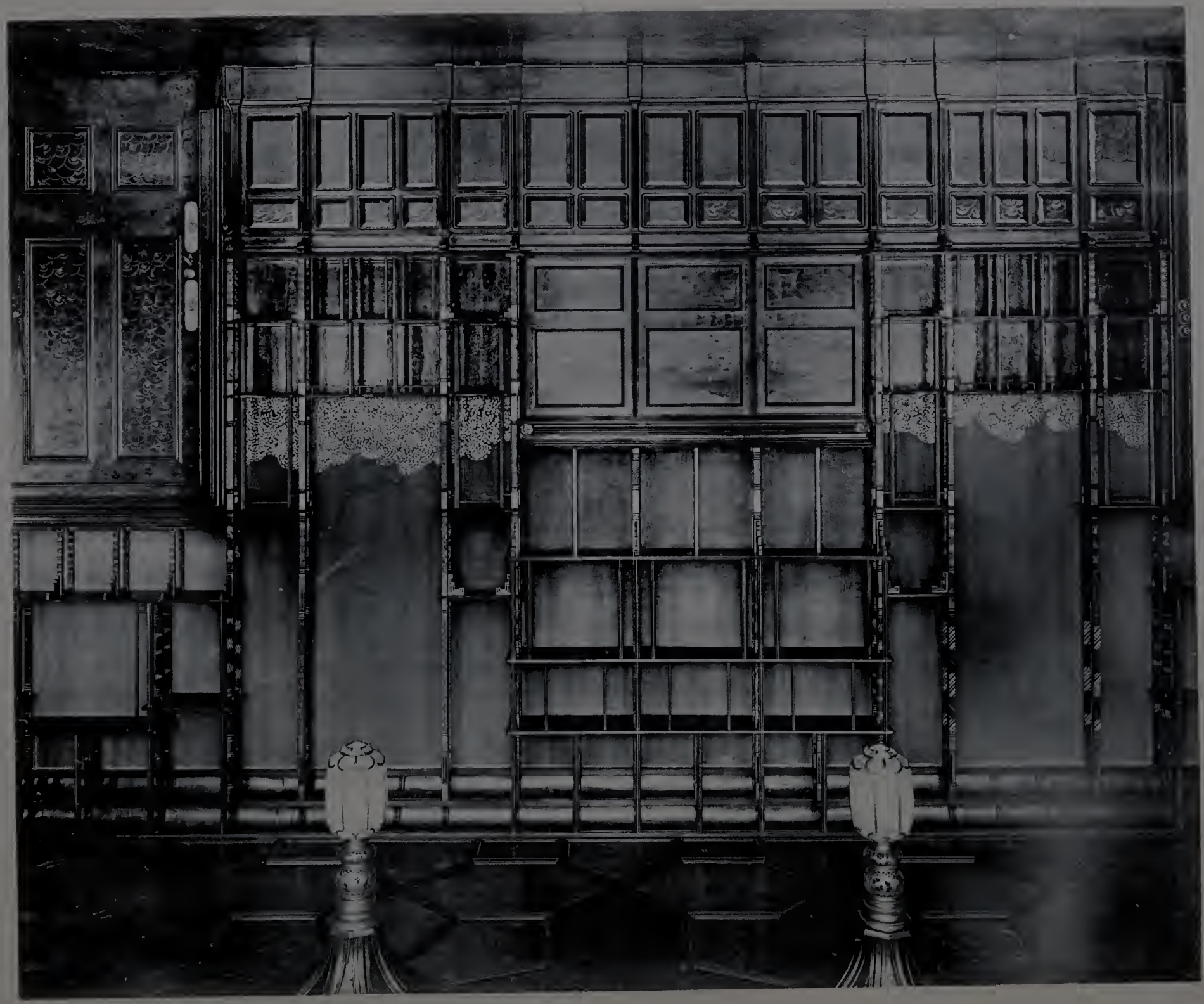
In such a period the creation of a Peacock Room was possible. Would it be possible to-day? I think not. A hotel company might conceive some such idea, but they would try to please all tastes and so be certain to get the work done in the form of a compromise that would offend and interest nobody. If the thing were suggested to a millionaire, would he not be sure to answer, "I can invest my money better in paintings by Old Masters whose value is already decided. Why should I risk an experiment by a new man!"

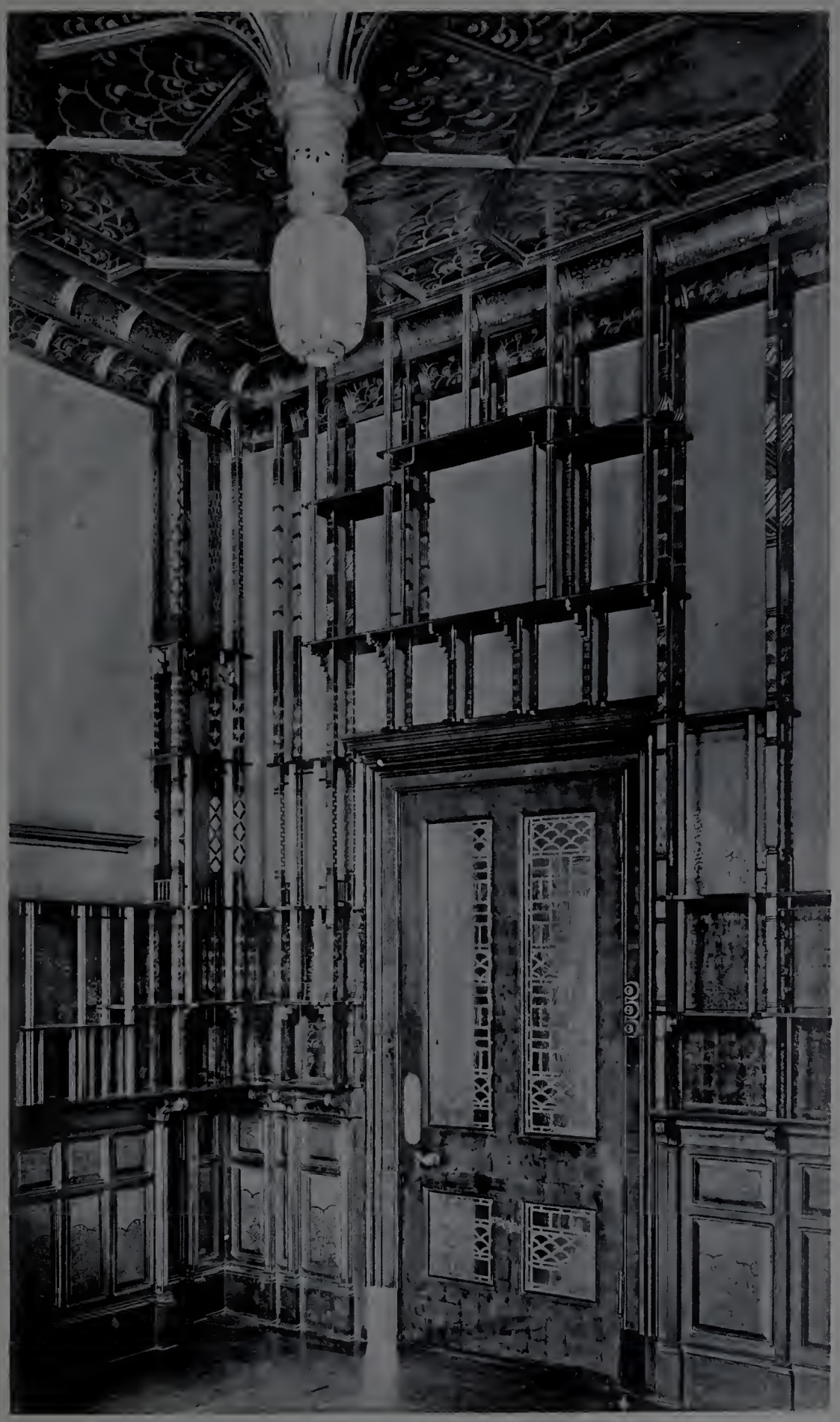
It is by thus putting ourselves in his place, that we can best estimate the value of Mr. Leyland's achievement. In his case wealth and good taste were of course associated with good luck, for an artist of Whistler's rank is not to be found in every age. But, in recognising these factors in the making of Mr. Leyland's splendid reputation as a collector, we must not forget to do justice to the courage which enabled him to use his other gifts with such splendid effect. Taste nowadays is far more diffused than in his time, and wealth too, but convictions of any kind and the pluck to stand by them have ceased to be a national characteristic. For that reason the Peacock Room is not likely to find a rival in our generation, unless, indeed, the marked outburst of energy and enthusiasm in Germany happens to concentrate into some unexpected crystal of genius. Yet, when all allowances are made for the direction an age gives to the work of those who live in it, the greatness of a great man cannot be taken away from him So when justice is done to Mr. Leyland's more strenuous generation, and his strong personality, we must never forget that these could not have produced this splendid specimen of domestic decoration without the assistance of Whistler, who proved by the labour he devoted to the Peacock Room that he possessed not only the exquisite talent which even his contemporaries do not now deny him, but also that capacity for deliberate and strenuous application which is no small part of what we term greatness.

C. J. H.

Messrs. Obach & Company are indebted to A. T. Hollingsworth, Esq. for the loan of a considerable portion of the Nankin Porcelain shown in the Peacock Room.







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