

The Adventures of Freer



Charles Lang Freer in the Catskills, 1889. Photograph attributed to Frederick Stuart Church (1826–1900).



Charles Lang Freer. Photograph by Alvin Langdon Coburn (1882–1966). Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives.



Freer's Dream

Have you ever dreamed of doing something fantastic? Did you wake up and say,

“This could never come true!”?



Charles Lang Freer, 1880s. Photographic print by CM Hayes & Co., Detroit. Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives.

The Freer Gallery of Art was the dream of a poor boy who never had the chance to study past the seventh grade.

He was born on February 25, 1854, the third of six children. His mother died when he was fourteen, and he left school to work at the local cement factory to help support his family.

Fifty-two years later, Charles Lang Freer created this museum and donated thousands of works of art and an endowment of money to expand the collection.

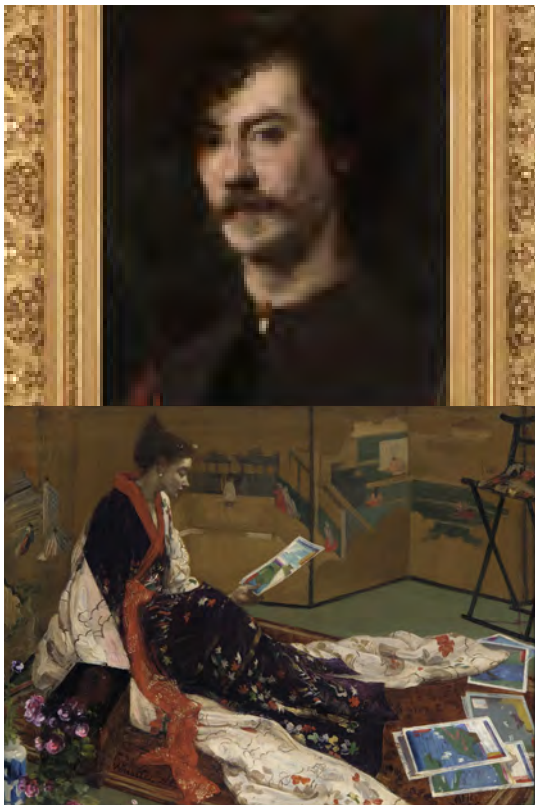
How did he do it? Freer's hard work, intelligence, and attention to detail earned him frequent promotions. He ultimately became a partner in America's biggest builder of railroad cars.

He was a self-made millionaire in the railroad industry and retired from the business at the age of forty-six. Freer spent the rest of his life collecting art and planning for this museum.



A Collection Begins

Freer built the Detroit house pictured above and asked his favorite American artists to paint pictures to decorate the rooms. The painting of Thomas Wilmer Dewing's daughter, depicted in the detail above, once hung over the fireplace in Freer's living room.



One of Freer's favorite American artists, James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), introduced Freer to Asian art.

Western artists like Whistler discovered Japanese art through woodblock prints like the one depicted in the painting on the left.

Originally, Freer had a large collection of Japanese prints, but he sold them to buy much older Japanese paintings and sculptures.

In 1894, Freer and Whistler spent two weeks in Paris sharing their interest in Japanese art. Freer promised to search all of the East for great masterpieces of ancient Asian art for the museum he dreamed of building and giving to America.

To learn more about an artwork featured in this guide, please click on its image to be directed to the corresponding entry in the Freer Gallery of Art's online collection.



Charles Lang Freer: World Traveler

I am dreaming of some old inland cities lying between Saigon and Peking—which someday I would like to search as I did Canton and Shanghai, only more slowly and thoroughly. From Egypt to the temples of Ceylon and Java and thence to the treasure houses of China and Japan is to me an experience of indescribable delight.

Charles Lang Freer, April 11, 1907, expressing regret over the brevity of his visit to China during his 1906-07 trip to Asia

In 1894, Freer set out on his first trip around the world. Where will your dreams take you?

Where will you go first?

How will you get there?

What will you collect to bring back?



Photograph of Charles Lang Freer (right) at Col. Frank J. Hecker's launch, July 1911. Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives.

Next stop:



Freer's many trips to Asia were a bit more adventurous than a package tour and a stay in a five-star hotel. He read everything possible about where he was going and he planned his own trips. As you will see, things didn't always turn out as expected!



CHINA

Members of Freer's entourage, Longmen, China, 1910. Photograph by Utai. Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives.

En route here my photographer was stoned, received an ugly blow over his right eye . . . the dropping of a pin now startles him. My cook sleeps with the new bread knife I bought in Peking (Beijing), . . . the photographer never sleeps, my servant wept last night when the temple cat mewed outside; so if the brigands overpower the guard, I shall dive under my folding cot.

Charles Lang Freer, October 18, 1910, writing on the experiences of his entourage on its way to Longmen

For Freer, this was a great adventure! Can you hear him laughing to himself about his trembling companions?

Are you ready to travel in a horse-pulled cart along a road like the one in the picture above?

In the Chinese Buddhist art gallery, there is a pair of ginkgo trees carved of white marble. As a lover of both art and nature, Freer must have been especially pleased with this addition to the collection. Along with being the oldest living species of tree, the ginkgo is famous in China for its use in medicine.

Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, sits deep in thought. What do you imagine he is thinking?

Do you have a favorite tree under which you like to sit?

What do you think about under your tree?



Illustration:
Vivienne Cho



JAPAN

Detail: Photograph of Charles Lang Freer and colleagues in Japan, 1907. Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives.

Life in Japan was a lot easier for Freer. Collectors welcomed him into their homes. He loved trekking and spent days visiting the many scenic natural sights that appear in Japanese art.

The only dangerous-looking characters Freer met in Japan were cast in bronze or carved from wood or stone.

Find the image on your *Mini Gallery* activity sheets with the fierce-looking guardian holding this bell in his hand.

This guardian is Kongo Yasha. Imagine meeting him on a dark road at night!



Did you know?

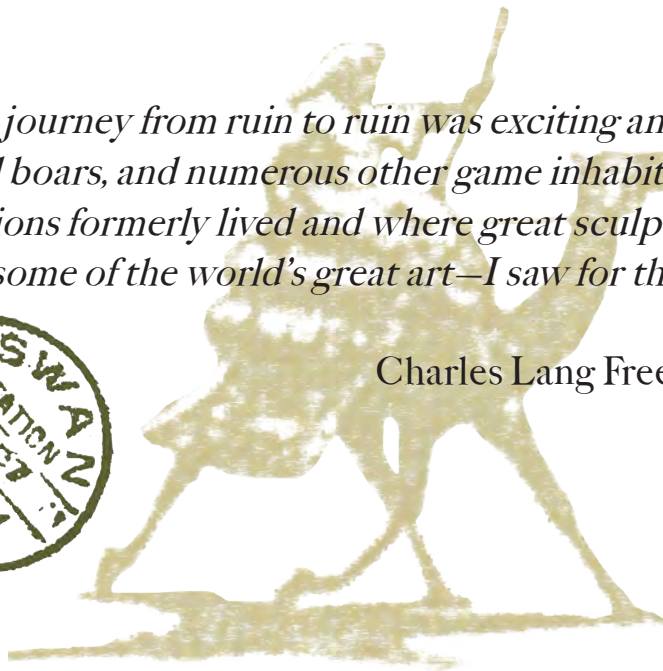
The Freer collection of Japanese screens is so large that each screen is only displayed for six months and then put back in storage for many years.





The journey from ruin to ruin was exciting and difficult... wild boars, and numerous other game inhabit the places where millions formerly lived and where great sculptors and painters did some of the world's great art—I saw for the first time.

Charles Lang Freer, July 7, 1907



Freer and colleagues in Cairo, Egypt, 1907. Photograph by P. Dittrich. Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives.

When most people think of Egypt, they think of the Great Pyramids, huge temples, and giant statues. They think big—REALLY BIG.

While many of his contemporaries collected large objects, Freer was interested in the finer details found on smaller objects. This wooden face is nearly life-size but the amulets average less than an inch high.



The eyes of this face, which comes from a coffin, and the other small objects in the same case are all made of glass. Freer marveled at the skill of ancient Egypt's glass blowers to create exquisite tiny objects.

Do you also collect miniatures—toy soldiers, stamps, coins, etc.?
Like Freer, do you also use a magnifying glass to examine your collection closely?

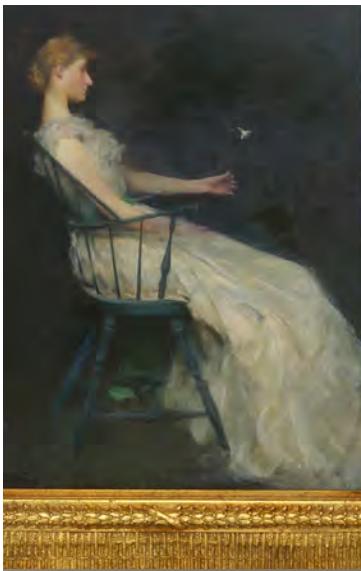


West Meets East

Freer collected both Asian art and work by American artists who were influenced by Asian art and shared similar ideas about beauty.



Nature & Simplicity



First, examine the painting of a lady holding a flower (left) and the American Pewabic pottery (above) that was made in Detroit.

Then, examine the Chinese stoneware jar depicted below.

Freer loved to compare objects from different cultures to discover shared ideas. Decide if you agree with the following:

In both the painting and the Chinese jar, flowers stand out against solid color backgrounds.

The soft and gentle colors of the objects make you feel like you are at peace with nature.

When you compare Freer's collection of Chinese and American art, as depicted on the *Mini Gallery* activity sheets, what other ideas about beauty do you think American and Asian artists share?





The Peacock Room

This dining room was created in London to hold a collection of blue-and-white Chinese porcelain.

Originally, the walls were yellow and the wooden shelves were brown, as depicted in the watercolor below. Frederick Leyland, the owner of the room, also owned the Whistler picture you see over the fireplace.



Illustration by Tennessee Dixon for *The Princess and the Peacocks; or, the Story of the Room* by Linda Merrill, New York, 1993.

Leyland was not at all happy when he saw the changes, but he continued to dine in the room until his death in 1892.

Later, in 1904, Freer bought the entire room! He installed the Peacock Room in his own house in Detroit. Now it is part of the Freer Gallery of Art, his gift to you and me.

Visit the Freer Gallery of Art or see the room online and decide for yourself if you agree with Leyland or prefer Whistler's changes to the room.

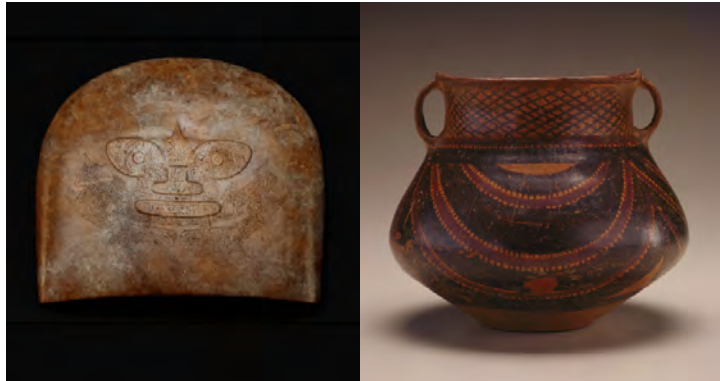
Now, Whistler also liked designing picture frames, furniture, and entire rooms to display his paintings. He asked Leyland if he could make some changes to the decoration of the room, promising “a gorgeous surprise.”

Inspired by Chinese porcelain and Japanese lacquer, Whistler transformed the room into a “harmony in blue and gold.”





Expanding Collections



Freer searched Asia to collect the earliest possible examples of art from each culture. His original gift of 2,255 objects included the jade plaque and clay storage jar on the left.

Thanks to the money Freer left to the museum, and to the generosity of friends like Agnes Meyer, the collection now has 14,153 objects for exhibition and 10,872 objects in the study collection.



This beautiful bird perched for more than fifty years on Mrs. Meyer's piano before coming to live at the Freer.

To find out more about this bird and many other objects in the Freer Gallery of Art, search the [online collection](#).



Agnes Meyer (1887–1970), ca. 1925. Edward Steichen. Freer Gallery of Art Archives.