Charles Lang Freer did not become a serious art collector until 1890, and most of the major paintings he acquired between 1890 and 1905 feature beautiful women being refined. Examples include major works by James McNeill Whistler, Thomas Dewing, and Abbott Thayer. In his talk, Dr. Kenneth Myers will argue that Freer identified with the refined women in these paintings, understanding them as symbols for the kind of life he hoped to live in his beautiful new home on Ferry Street.

Gender roles and stereotypes were unusually extreme in late nineteenth-century America. Middle-class and wealthy Americans assumed that men were naturally materialistic and competitive, while women were thought to be naturally spiritual and nurturing. Men had to make themselves hard in order to succeed in the Darwinian jungle of the modern workplace. Genteel women were largely excluded from paid labor outside of the home, but were expected to assume primary responsibility for the establishment and maintenance of a nurturing home. The sexual division of labor encouraged and often required that women take the lead role in the inculcation of self-discipline, morality, religious faith, and the appreciation of all the “finer” or “higher” things in their children, husbands, and themselves. Given the ubiquity and coercive power of these gender roles and stereotypes, it is not surprising that during this period many artists used images of beautiful young women doing something refined to represent an ideal to which they believed that all truly cultured people—men as well as women—should aspire.
About the Speaker


Acknowledgements

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Friends of the Freer House

The Friends of the Freer House is devoted to raising awareness of the history of Charles Lang Freer and support for the preservation and restoration of the C.L. Freer House. The group is a membership organization affiliated with the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, Wayne State University and is open to the public. For membership information call (313) 872-1790

Mark Your Calendar

Sunday, May 3, 2009

Dr. Ann Gunter
Art History Department
Northwestern University

“Freer and Egypt”