

ISSUE NUMBER 96
THE MAGAZINE PUBLISHED
IN THE INTEREST OF
PRESERVING AND
RESTORING THE
MODEST AMERICAN
20TH CENTURY HOME,
THE BUNGALOW,
AND THE RICH LIFESTYLE
THAT IT AFFORDS

AMERICAN BUNGALOW

RESTORATION
ACCESSORIES
HISTORY
FURNISHINGS
EVENTS
ARTS AND CRAFTS
UPGRADING
PHILOSOPHY
GARDENS
PROJECTS
LANDSCAPING





THE CHARLES LANG FREER HOUSE. THE BLUESTONE WAS QUARRIED IN FREER'S HOMETOWN, KINGSTON, NEW YORK. THE HORSESHOE ARCH IS EMBEDDED IN WHAT WAS ORIGINALLY THE CARRIAGE HOUSE. IN 1904–6 WILSON EYRE, JR. REMODELED IT TO ACCOMMODATE JAMES WHISTLER'S FAMOUS PEACOCK ROOM, AND AN ADDITIONAL TOP-LIGHTED ART GALLERY.

RIGHT: THE FLIGHT OF STAIRS IS BROKEN AT A LANDING WITH AN ORIEL WINDOW. EYRE DIMINISHED THE VERTICAL THRUST OF THE STAIRS TO AVOID DISTURBING THE DOMINANT HORIZONTAL LINES. NOTE THE REAPPEARANCE OF THE HORSESHOE ARCH ON THE INTERIOR. THE LEAF-FORM LIGHTING FIXTURE, DESIGNED BY EYRE, AND MODELED BY EDWARD MAENE, IS VISIBLE AT TOP RIGHT.

CHARLES LANG FREER AN AMERICAN SUCCESS STORY

BY DOUGLAS J. FORSYTH

WHEN PRESERVATIONISTS think of Detroit, their inclination is to mourn for buildings lost over the years. Certainly many fine structures have come down. From the early 1950s, the city suffered a radical loss of population. Fortunately, residents now show signs of returning. So we have reason to celebrate this renewal by calling attention to the astonishing inventory of fine buildings that remain.

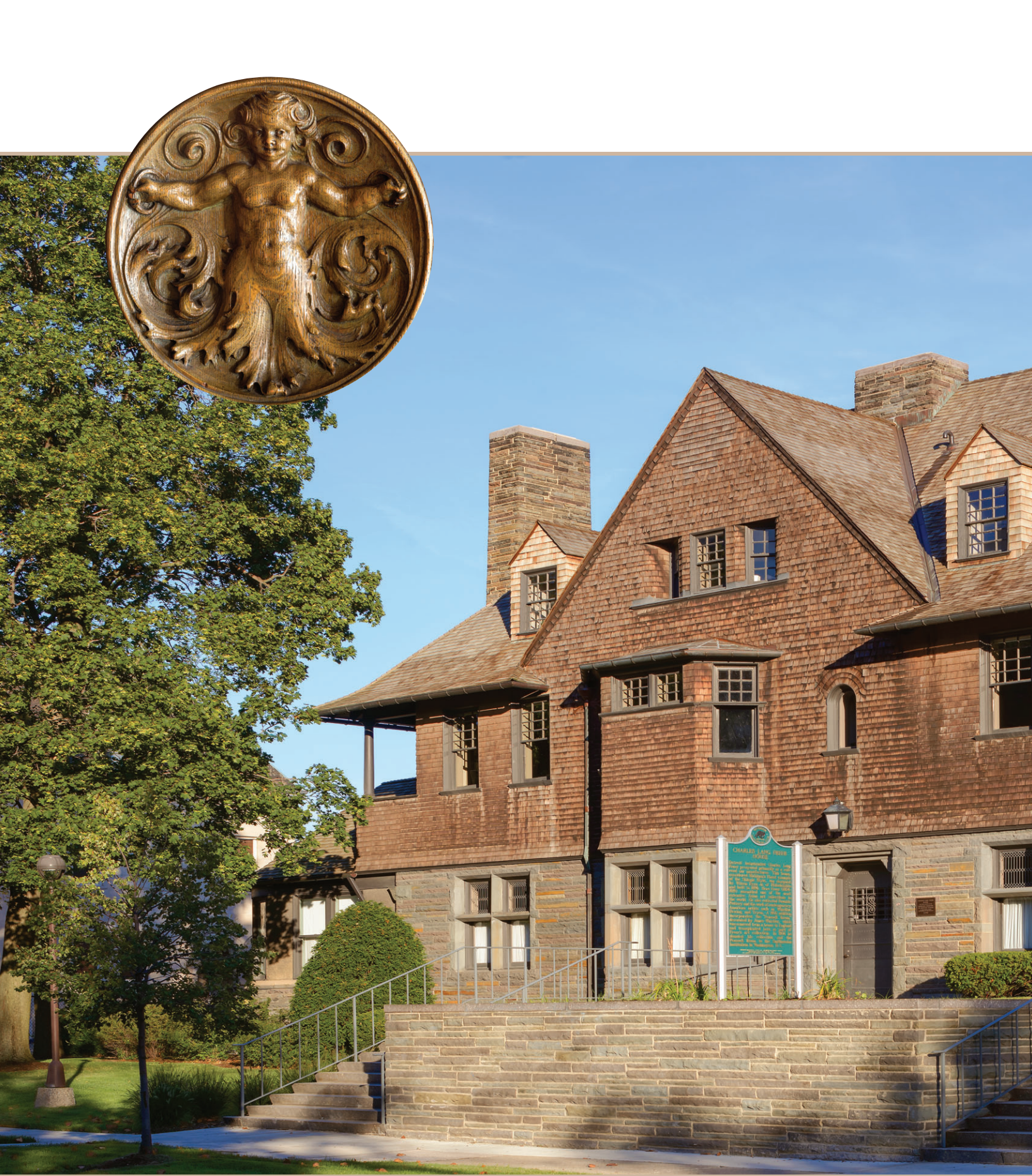
One striking example is the shingle-style dwelling that Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919) had built, beginning in 1890, on E. Ferry Ave. (now E. Ferry St.). His architect was Wilson Eyre, Jr. (1858–1944), a master of the shingle style of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thanks to the work of the late Vincent Scully, noted Yale art historian, we now think of this mode of expression as one of the tap roots of modernism in American architecture. Its practitioners were searching for a distinctly American style of residential building, one that would be free from historical revivalism, that would make form true to structure, and make that structure reflect the needs of contem-

THE MAIN HALL. EYRE USED A TIGHT BASKETWEAVE WOOD SCREEN IN THE PLACE OF BALUSTERS TO CONTAIN THE BROAD, DEEP STAIRS.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEXANDER VERTIKOFF







THE FRONT FAÇADE OF THE FREER HOUSE, FACING FERRY ST. IN FREER'S DAY THE SIDE PORCHES WERE OPEN.
INSERT: A MEDALLION CARVED BY EDWARD MAENE, FOR THE MAIN HALL.

porary life. To these values, shared by the Arts and Crafts movement, Freer and Eyre were deeply committed.

Freer was born in modest circumstances in Kingston, New York, in 1854. While still an adolescent, he was discovered by Frank J. Hecker, a local railway supervisor who hired Charles away from the Kingston general store to his railway company. Both Hecker and Freer came to Detroit in 1879 and became seriously wealthy. They organized a series of freight car manufacture companies, including The American Car and Foundry Co., which became the leading firm in that sector. So successful were these ventures, that Freer could choose to retire at age forty-five. Twelve years earlier the two business partners had bought adjoining lots on E. Ferry Avenue. The grand mansion Hecker had built was inspired by the Chateau de Chenonceaux in the Loire valley. For Freer, Eyre built a less pretentious mansion next door for \$54,000. Bluestone for the first story came from a quarry in Kingston, New York. The second and third stories were shingle-clad. Use of this material must have struck contemporaries as peculiar. Shingle-style buildings had begun appearing on summer cottages and vacation clubhouses, but would have seemed informal on such a grand urban residence.

This was not the only sense in which Freer's aesthetic taste stood out. He had only an elementary school education, but he turned himself into one of the great art connoisseurs of his generation. His first purchases were etchings by Dutch and German grandmasters and by European and American contemporaries.



Small gold plaque with text, likely identifying the artwork.





LEFT: A GICLÉE PRINT OF DWIGHT WILLIAM TRYON'S *EARLY SPRING IN NEW ENGLAND* (1897), IN A REPRODUCTION OF ITS ORIGINAL FRAME, BY STANFORD WHITE, HANGS IN THE HALL. THE ORIGINAL OF THIS AND OTHER PAINTINGS FEATURED HERE ARE IN THE SMITHSONIAN MUSEUM'S FREER GALLERY, ON THE MALL IN WASHINGTON DC. TOP: THE LEAF-FORM LIGHTING FIXTURE FOR THE MAIN HALL, DESIGNED BY WILSON EYRE, JR., AND MODELED BY EDWARD MAENE. ABOVE: FRONT DOOR.

In 1886 or 1887, he discovered the work of James McNeill Whistler. Over the course of his life, Freer would assemble the largest collection of Whistler's work and become his friend as well.

At the time when Freer began planning his new house he made the acquaintance and was buying the paintings of a group of younger American artists, influenced by Whistler, often called the tonalists. Among them were Dwight William Tryon and Thomas Wilmer Dewing. Freer wanted to hang works by these two artists in the main hall and adjoining public rooms in his house, and he shared Eyre's drawings and plans with them. In 1892, after Freer moved into his house, Tryon and Dewing participated in final decisions about wall treatments and paintings. Dewing's wife, Maria Oakey, also a painter and an authority on interior design, contributed to the specification of the color palette.

The main public rooms of the mansion bear the mark of other designers and craftsmen. Stanford White designed the frames for the paintings. The New York frame maker and decorator, William C. LeBrocq, contributed to the color scheme, putting a layer of "Dutch metal," a bronze and copper alloy,

on the wall surfaces in the hall, giving them an opalescent quality. Eyre, who worked closely with artists and craftsmen in Philadelphia, brought with him Edward Maene, a wood carver who also modeled the leaf-form lighting fixtures designed by Eyre. Custom-made furniture was ordered from the distinguished New York and Boston company, A.H. Davenport. The bronze doorbell, in the form of a bear, was the work of artist-friend, Frederick S. Church, and the sculptor Theodore Bauer. Tryon designed a bench for the hall and Dewing worked with Michigan resident, Eutrope Ferrand, to create the gardens.

During the first decade of his residence in the Ferry St. house, Freer dramatically increased his collection of Asian art. In 1902-6 and again in 1909, he had Eyre design expansions, mostly to accommodate his growing collection. He sent a copy of Edward Morse's *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings*, suggesting that he study the section on "Tokoma" for ideas on how to treat the gallery's interior spaces. The Freer residence was among the first American houses explicitly influenced by Japanese architecture.

Eyre also created a gallery on the second story of what had been the stables. While that project was underway, Freer purchased the celebrated Peacock Room created by Whistler in





THE VIEW INTO THE LIBRARY FROM THE MAIN HALL. ABOVE THE FIREPLACE HANGS A GICLÉE PRINT OF DWIGHT WILLIAM TRYON'S *WINTER* (1893); A REPRODUCTION OF HIS *SPRINGTIME* (1892) IS VISIBLE TO THE RIGHT. A GICLÉE PRINT OF ABBOT HANDERSON THAYER'S *A VIRGIN* (1892-3) HANGS ABOVE THE DOOR. A PRINT OF TRYON'S *AUTUMN* (1892) IS VISIBLE TO THE FAR RIGHT.



HORSESHOE ARCHES ON THE SECOND-FLOOR GALLERY OF THE MAIN HALL. NOTE THE BASKETWEAVE WOOD SCREENS, AND THE LEAF-LIKE LIGHTING FIXTURE. THE FIGURE IN THE ROOM AT LOWER RIGHT IS AB'S OWN BOB WINTER.



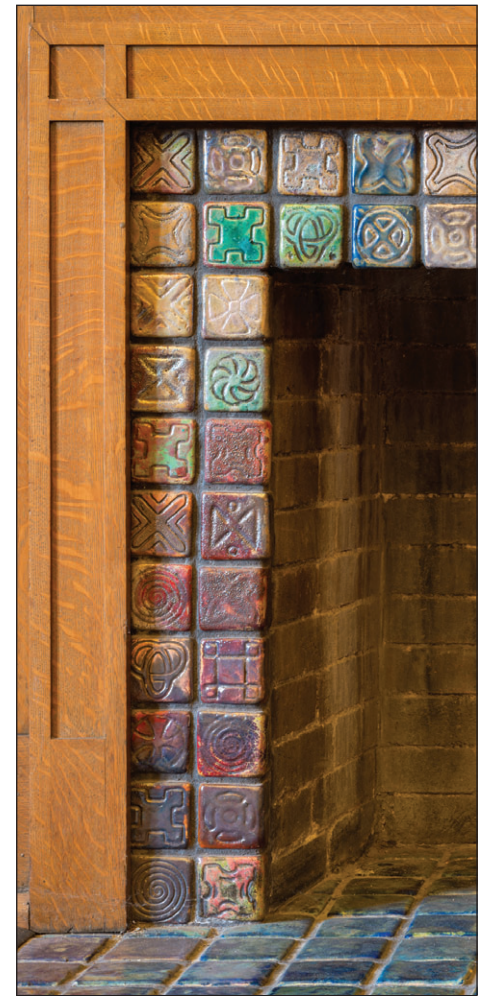
A TOP-LIGHTED GALLERY, ADDED IN 1909 TO ACCOMMODATE FREER'S GROWING ART COLLECTION, IN WHAT HAD BEEN UTILITY ROOMS IN THE MAIN HOUSE.

the 1870s to accommodate the porcelain collection of Frederick Leyland, a London shipping magnate. Freer reassembled Leyland's Peacock Room in Detroit, filling it with his own, much finer, Japanese and Chinese ceramics collection. In his new top-lighted gallery expansion he commissioned friends and fellow members of the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts to design a Pewabic Pottery fireplace surround.

After Freer's death, a legend developed that Detroit had "lost" his art collection to the Smithsonian Institution and to Washington DC because Freer resented the lack of respect shown by city luminaries for his cultural contributions. In reality, Freer had begun discussions with the Smithsonian back in 1902, the year he began the first expansion of his house. In 1906 six months before the Peacock Room was reinstalled in Detroit he had finalized his donation plans with the museum. The Freer Gallery of Art was already under construction on the Washington Mall in 1919, the year Freer died.

Luckily ownership of the Freer House passed in 1921 to the Merrill Palmer Institute, founded by Lizzie Pitts Merrill to promote research in child development. Wayne State University became the owner in 1981. Change in purpose led to

FREER ASKED HORACE JAMES CAULKINS AND MARY CHASE PERRY, OF PEWABIC POTTERY, TO PUT A PEWABIC FIREPLACE SURROUND IN HIS 1909 GALLERY.





FREER'S DRESSING ROOM.





FREER HOUSE FROM THE BACK (NORTHWEST).


modifications to the house. A round window above the space housing the Peacock Room was enlarged. The two open porches were enclosed. Woodwork in the hall was stained a pale green. The 1905 gallery was altered to accommodate heating and cooling equipment. Freer and Eyre probably would have greeted many of these alterations with benevolent tolerance, since they believed that great buildings must alter with changing times.

Recognition of the value of what Freer and Eyre had built, dormant for a number of years, revived in the late 1950s. Midtown Detroit was one of the first districts to make a

comeback. Proximity to major cultural institutions, including Wayne State University, the College of Creative Studies, the Detroit Institute of Art, and the Detroit Medical Center helped to stabilize the area during the city's decline. Consolidating Ferry St. became a core project of Preservation Wayne (today Preservation Detroit), founded in 1975 by students at Wayne State, the first Detroit recipient of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Honor Award. In 1980, East Ferry St was declared a National Historical District and became a city Historic District in 1981.

In 1993, Wayne State and the Merrill Palmer Institute dedicated \$3 million to restore the Freer house. This project continues. Office functions have been removed from public spaces. Giclee reproductions of the frames and paintings by Tryon, Dewing, and by Abbott Handerson Thayer have been rehung. Heating and cooling systems have been removed from the gallery room of 1906. The roof has been replaced with period-appropriate cedar shingles. A major project is underway to recreate gardens, as much in the spirit of the original as possible.

Tours through the Freer House take place several times a year. It hosts a program of lectures on the house and on Freer's career as a collector. These are free and the public is welcomed.

Information about lectures and tours is available on the house's website: www.mpsi.wayne.edu/freer. 

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