Creating A Harmonious Environment: An Art Collector's Garden
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The Challenges
Revitalizing Freer's garden is an exciting interdisciplinary project that requires the insights and skills of passionate academics, artists, craftsmen and supporters. The initial challenge was how to see past the extensive changes made to the former garden site. Freer significantly modified the original garden of 1895 with a major addition to his home in 1906 (one part held Whistler's Peacock Room). After Freer's death in 1919 the entire garden was repurposed as an outdoor kindergarten area of the Merrill-Palmer School, then in midcentury the site was completely rebuilt as a geometric parterre. Since no planting plans have been found, a complex challenge has been finding and interpreting evidence from sources as archival documents, contemporary newspaper articles, period photographs, and correspondence from visitors. With effort, the tree and shrub lists have been determined from detailed invoices, newspaper reports and photographs. Tree and shrub species in the revitalized garden are as specified in the original documentation, some cultivars are a close contemporary match.

The Primacy of Textured Composition
A key insight is understanding that Freer's garden created a distinctive aesthetic space. Its tone was important for visitors as they passed through it from the ever-bustling world beyond Freer's art collection, as well as when viewed from the interior rooms, however fleeting or concentrated that framed moment may have been. How then are the plants to be arranged in the revitalized garden, given Freer had consulted both artist Thomas W. Dewing and architect Wilson Eyre, Jr., among others? The compiled plant list and careful inspection of enlarged period photographs show a distinctive blending of then-obscure Asian and Western plants were chosen for compositions rather than as an assembly of garden plants then in vogue. The plant palette is remarkably refined for any era: the shrubs and trees have mostly small to medium sized matte leaves, while the floral focus, other than the roses along the property boundary, is of small flowers, sometimes in trusses, primarily in whites and pinks. A select few bloom in dark colors that play with ever changing shadows. This palette provided Freer with a seasonal progression without a distracting floral extravaganza: the result was elegance and sophistication. Freer's interest in aesthetic "points of contact" between American and Asian art was subtly supported by the garden and its primacy of textured composition. An essential role of the garden was to offer visual repose: its colors and textures were in harmony with the original interior decorative paint surfaces (now buried or lost) and the extraordinary art that once hung on the walls within.

Revitalizing a Nuanced Aesthetic
Reaching within and beyond Japanese, Chinese and American design influences (the Moon Gate was removed for the 1906 addition), Freer created a sophisticated harmony - a nuanced aesthetic - unlike any other. Designing the revitalized garden has required balancing these traditions without prioritizing one. In addition, diverse University public-space criteria had to be addressed and contemporary realities would challenge Freer's use of lawn and gravel. The arcing walkway that guides one between the street and the carriage house echoes Freer's original carriage path. The missing original exterior porch railing leading to the former Peacock Room has been replicated, and new iron fencing with bluestone masonry columns has been installed to compliment and enclose the courtyard garden. A replica of the signature lantern currently outside the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, that was a 1905 Christmas gift from his friend and the respected international dealer in Japanese art, Sadajirō Yamanaka, (1865-1936), has been commissioned.

The Freer House, Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, Wayne State University

Freer House and Garden, 1904. Photograph by C.M. Hayes, University of Glasgow Special Collections

Precise measurements for lantern replication by the Runciman team
Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919) made his fortune in railroad freight car manufacturing in Detroit. His remarkable shingle style residence on East Ferry Ave. was designed in 1892 by Wilson Eyre, Jr. Freer’s home contained one of the world’s greatest collections of Asian and American art, including works by Whistler and the Peacock Room. Freer bequeathed his collection to the Smithsonian where it is housed today at the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

The Freer House (1892) is ranked as one of the most important historic buildings in Michigan. Its fine architectural detail and rich cultural history are both locally and internationally significant. The Freer House is also recognized for its role in child and family development as the home of the renowned Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute since 1920.

The Freer House membership organization works to preserve this landmark through public events, tours and fundraising for restoration. Recent accomplishments include the reproduction of original paintings for the main hall and parlor and a new historically appropriate roof. Current goals include the courtyard garden and the Whistler Gallery restoration projects.

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Over 110 individuals, organizations, businesses, foundations and garden clubs have made the Freer House Garden Project possible through their generous support. We welcome your participation.

*The Freer House Garden is dedicated in honor of Phebe Goldstein and in memory of Denise Little*
GARDEN & COURTYARD REVELATION
THE CHARLES LAND FERRY HOUSE
Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux designed the garden and park system of Chicago, Illinois. The design was inspired by the parks of London, England, and Paris, France. The park system consists of 14 major parks, each designed with a unique character and purpose. The parks are connected by a network of streets and avenues, creating a seamless system that is both functional and aesthetically pleasing.

The park system includes:

- Grant Park
- Lincoln Park
- Humboldt Park
- Garfield Park
- Washington Park
- Jackson Park
- Gale Park
- Garfield Square
- Forest Park
- Oak Park
- West Pullman Park
- South Shore Park
- Homewood Park
- South Chicago Park

Each park is designed with a unique theme and includes a variety of features, such as gardens, playgrounds, sports fields, and rest areas.

The park system was designed to provide a place for Chicagoans to enjoy nature, exercise, and socialize. The parks also serve as a backdrop for cultural events and activities, such as concerts, festivals, and exhibitions.

In conclusion, the park system of Chicago is a testament to the foresight of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, who created a place of beauty and recreation that continues to serve the city's residents today.