

ART

Freer Gallery gets an early start on celebrating its 2023 centennial

The small but dense exhibition ‘Freer’s Global Network’ showcases the sweeping interests of the museum’s namesake, Charles Lang Freer

By Mark Jenkins

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Getting a head start on the centennial celebration of its 1923 opening, the Freer Gallery of Art is offering a bit of backstory. “Freer’s Global Network: Artists, Collectors and Dealers” illustrates the role of four colleagues in shaping the collection of the museum’s namesake, Detroit industrialist Charles Lang Freer. Yet the largest portrait in the 22-object show is not of Freer or any of his aesthetic advisers, but of Theodore Roosevelt.

He’s integral to the museum’s history, since in 1906 the then-president urged an initially reluctant Smithsonian Board of Regents to accept Freer’s gift of his collection of Asian and American art. Roosevelt is also part of a larger tale briefly recounted by this small yet dense exhibition (which is supplemented by [more information online](#)).

Freer procured artworks from Japan, China and the Near East at the same time the U.S. was acquiring an overseas empire — and banning Asian immigration under the Chinese Exclusion Act. Roosevelt was a key instigator of the American expansion, during which the country took control of Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico and — less permanently — Cuba and the Philippines. If art collecting is a form of soft power, Freer began amassing treasures in an era of concrete American clout.

The retired rail-car manufacturer, who died in 1919, traveled the globe to accumulate thousands of art objects in just two decades. Among his tutors were four people whose influence is chronicled in this show: ceramist Mary Chase Perry Stratton and three art dealers, Dikran Kelekian, Bunko Matsuki and Yamanaka Sadajiro. The guidance of the latter two is evident in a display of 17th- to 19th-century Japanese ceramics that include dark-glazed raku ware (recommended to Freer by Matsuki) and light-glazed Satsuma ware (suggested by Yamanaka).

Both varieties of pottery are subtle and austere, save for one touch: There's a sake flask whose stopper is shaped like a tanuki, a raccoon dog that figures prominently in Japanese folklore.

Kelekian, an Armenian who worked for the government of Iran and eventually became an American citizen, introduced Freer to Syrian ceramics from the 11th to 13th centuries. Freer brought some and showed them to Stratton, a Detroit friend who was impressed by their metallic glazes. It inspired her to apply similar finishes to smaller jars, some of which Freer purchased.

Freer displayed his ceramic holdings in the Peacock Room, transplanted from its original home in London to the collector's Detroit mansion. The elaborately decorated chamber has been a prominent attraction at the Freer since it opened and is just a few steps from the gallery that currently hosts "Freer's Global Network."

The Peacock Room combined two of Freer's enthusiasms: his pottery collection and the work of James McNeill Whistler, the American painter who spent much of his life in London and who designed the original room. Included in this show is one of Whistler's "nocturnes," a near-abstract landscape in shades of blue whose flat composition shows the influence of Edo-period Japanese woodblock prints.

In addition to Whistler's picture, three of the show's five other American paintings are linked to Asia. (The exceptions are a somber Whistler rendering of Freer and the Roosevelt portrait, made by the now largely forgotten Gari Melchers.) Childe Hassam's "The Chinese Merchants" impressionistically depicts a Chinatown street scene in Portland, Ore. Thomas Wilmer Dewing's two pictures of women in flowing white gowns amid leafy landscapes are impressionist treatments of a classical subject, painted on Asian-style folding screens.

Dewing became an agent for Freer, buying pieces from Yamanaka's New York gallery. Among the other members of the collector's circle were C.T. Loo, a Chinese-born dealer, and Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer, friends of Freer who helped supervise the Freer Gallery's completion after its namesake's death. (Eugene Meyer later bought The Washington Post, which his family owned from 1933 to 2013.)

Loo was dubious about a Tang Dynasty statue of a bodhisattva, bought by the Meyers and included here. Its awkward appearance is probably the result of having being assembled from pieces of several sculptures. More graceful are a trio of Chinese bronze vessels, two bought by Freer and one by the Meyers. They're all about 3,000 years old, making them by far the most ancient items in the show.

The Freer is usually associated with Whistler and items from Japan and China, but this exhibition gives a sense of its founder's broader interests. "Freer's Global Network" demonstrates that the collector's interests, if not quite global, were remarkably sweeping.

If you go

Freer's Global Network: Artists, Collectors and Dealers

National Museum of Asian Art's Freer Gallery of Art, 1050 Independence Ave. SW. si.edu/museum/freer-gallery.

Dates: On indefinite view.

Admission: Free.