

The Peck House

THOMAS WOLFE WAS OFF HIS ROCKER: YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN.
DANIEL SUTHERLAND PROVES IT.
YOU CAN GO BACK, EVEN TO A FASCINATING CORNER OF YOUR HOME
YOU DIDN'T KNOW EXISTED WHEN YOU LIVED THERE.

Daniel Sutherland, Ed. '68, CLAS '73, Ph.D. CLAS, '76, distinguished professor of history at the University of Arkansas, is a Detroit native to his core: East Sider, Southeastern High, Wayne State University. He aspired to become a teacher, but one who instructed on the finer points of hard tackles, not history

"I wanted to be a football coach," Sutherland says. "I played football [at WSU] for three years until I hurt my shoulder. I started out as a physical education major. I didn't add history until my junior year."

Here's where it gets strange. Since becoming a history professor Sutherland has authored nine books and edited or co-edited six more, nearly all on the American Civil War era. "It's sort of an easy field to keep taking different perspectives and reinterpreting things," he explains. Then, suddenly, 14 years ago he decided to write his first biography.

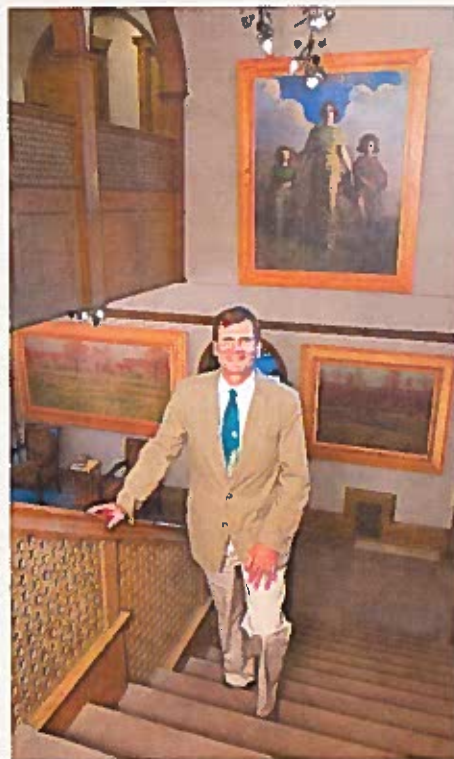
Ulysses S. Grant? Jefferson Davis? Balderdash. Of all people, Sutherland selected the flamboyant, enigmatic 19th century artist James McNeill Whistler, probably best known for his austere 1871 painting "Arrangement in Grey and Black No 1" – a.k.a., Whistler's Mother.

Why? Sutherland, 68, thinks it may have been due to a childhood memory that's rattled inside his brain all these years – from the Detroit Institute of Arts.

"My interest [in Whistler] began as a 12-year-old, and it began at the DIA," he says. "It was your typical elementary school trip to the local art institute. Our class was walked through the gallery where his most famous, or notorious, painting was hanging: 'Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket.'"

"I had never seen anything like that in my life and I asked my teacher, 'Who painted that?' She took 90 seconds to tell me about James Whistler. Then I knew that name, and it stuck with me. But I was out playing baseball the next day. I didn't become an art historian at 12."

History is a mystery, but now it gets really strange. More than a dozen years in the research and writing, Sutherland's *Whistler:*



A Life for Art's Sake, was published this year (Yale University Press). The "Nocturne" that mesmerized him as a boy and still hangs at the DIA is the background of the book's cover. (Whistler coined the term to describe works that evoke scenes at night or twilight.)

His is the first new bio on the artist in 20 years, and Sutherland's timing, it seems, could not have been better. Several museums, including Washington, D.C.'s Sackler Gallery and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, mounted major Whistler exhibitions this year, representing the largest re-examination of his work in decades. What's more, a new documentary by filmmaker Karen Thomas, *James McNeill Whistler & the Case for Beauty*, with actor Kevin Kline as the voice of Whistler and Sutherland featured as an on-camera expert, began airing on PBS stations in September.

What Sutherland didn't know – how could he have known? – was that during his nearly 12 years as a Wayne State student, he was a Hail Mary pass from the Freer House, completed in 1892 by industrialist Charles Lang Freer and at one time containing the largest collection of Whistler artwork in the world! Freer, who became a patron of Whistler's and by many accounts one of the prickly artist's few close friends, ultimately donated \$1 million to build the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, which now houses the bulk of his expansive collection of American and Asian works, including his Whistlers.

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HAVING NO INKLING HOW DEEPLY THE ARTIST WOULD IMPACT HIS LIFE ONE DAY, SUTHERLAND LITERALLY WHISTLED PAST WHISTLER HISTORY. "I PASSED IT BY MANY TIMES," HE SAYS OF THE HOUSE AT 71 EAST FERRY STREET, "BUT I NEVER HAD ANY REASON TO COME INSIDE."

Charles Lang Freer moved to Detroit from Kingston, N.Y., in 1880 with his business partner and best friend, Frank Hecker, to work at a company called Peninsular Car Works that manufactured freight cars. Freer, a canny businessman, ultimately negotiated the merger of a dozen railroad car companies and sold his stock in the deal, providing him sufficient wealth to retire at 47 and concentrate on his true love: art.

He commissioned noted Philadelphia architect Wilson Eyre Jr. to design his Detroit home, a showplace to house his art and be a work of art itself. An anachronism in an age of ornate Victorian-style homes (like Hecker's), the Freer House is one of America's most significant examples of Shingle-style architecture still standing and the only Eyre-designed residence in Detroit. The home attracted visitors from around the world eager to meet Freer and view his spectacular collection – a collection that included Whistler's legendary Peacock Room, a masterpiece of interior decorative mural art in the form of a lavish dining room backdrop created to show off a London shipping



The Peacock Room

magnate's Chinese ceramics. Freer, a world traveler, bought the room and transported it from England to Detroit intact. (After Freer's death in 1919, the Peacock Room was permanently installed in the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.)

The Freer House was acquired in 1921 by Merrill Palmer School and eventually became the property of Wayne State and its Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute. The shift from luxurious one-man gallery to educational office space has taken a toll over the years, but an effort is afoot to bring the house back to its original splendor.

"The goal is to try and protect what we have, make informed decisions, and help give people a sense of what the building used to be," says William S. Colburn, a historic preservationist hired four years ago as Freer House director. With the assistance of the volunteer Friends of Freer House, quarterly events have been held

at the house to increase awareness and build a membership base of support. "We're now attracting up to 200 people and we can't accommodate them," Colburn says, "so we're partnering with the DIA. We do lectures there, then people walk over here for a reception and open house.

"There was no connection between the DIA and this house five years ago," he notes. "There was no connection with the Smithsonian Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, either. Awareness of Freer history in Detroit among their staff and curators was minimal. We're changing that by asking those curators to do lectures here. They say, 'I have to make it because no one has ever asked me before.' We bring them to the house, then they go back to Washington and say, 'Hey, there's this whole history of our founder in Detroit.' We've done [lectures about] Freer in China, India, Japan. We try to accomplish about 10 different things with every event."

Last June, Sutherland returned to his hometown to promote his book through a lecture at the DIA titled *"Jimmy and Me: My Life With Whistler."* During his visit, this scholar who spent nearly a fifth of his life with James Whistler walked through the Freer House for the very first time.

"I hope they can really restore it to the way it looked when Freer lived here," Sutherland says. "It's marvelous that the house itself has survived."

Whistler, hailed as the greatest painter of the Gilded Age, has been depicted in previous biographies as an eccentric dandy and shameless self-promoter who feuded with Oscar Wilde, sued an art critic over a negative review and wrote anonymous notices about his own exhibitions in newspapers. Sutherland, however, notes that of the 20 Whistler biographies written since his death in 1903, his is the first to rely extensively on Whistler's personal correspondence.

"I'm not an art historian, so I looked at his life holistically," Sutherland explains. "No one had really dived into his letters, letters he wrote, letters other people wrote him. I even paid particular attention to correspondence between other people, talking with one another about him."

"There was more to Whistler than that stereotypical image many have portrayed. He was so conscious of his public image, even he talked about there being two Whistlers. He was a perfectionist, and insecure at heart. He was never quite sure he got things right. Some of his works took years to complete. He'd look at it, scrape it down and start all over."

Sutherland, who's contemplating a biography of Whistler's mother, Anna, for his next project, was asked how he sustained creative enthusiasm for Whistler over 14 years. "First of all, you don't know it's going to be that long," he says, laughing. "The great thing with Whistler was, he was so much fun, and so different from anything I'd ever done. That accounts for the long time span."

"I had a lot of catching up to do. I had to learn not only about him, but also about art history, the people around him, the world he lived in. People talk about having a learning curve? I had a learning arc."



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