

FREER HOUSE *is home to MPSI faculty, administrative offices and meeting rooms*

“Painting with Pottery” Explains Odd Piece in Freer Collection

Charles Freer amassed many magnificent pieces of pottery in his years as a collector of Asian, Islamic and American art. But for Louise Cort, curator for ceramics at the Smithsonian Institution’s Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, one piece stood out from the rest – and not because it was a masterpiece. The 1901 bowl was “odd,” said Louise, “a strangely lumpy attempt, probably by an amateur potter. It was a very, shall we say, uncertain movement in clay.” Why did Freer collect it?

Solving this mystery was the basis for Louise’s recent lecture at the Detroit Institute of Arts, *Painting with Pottery in the Peacock Room*. Approximately 165 people attended the lecture which, according to a DIA spokesperson, made it the most well-attended lecture of the 2011-12 program season in Danto Lecture Hall. Louise brought extraordinary depth to her study of Freer’s collection of ceramics and porcelains. She is a noted authority and scholar of historical and contemporary ceramics of Japan, South and Southeast Asia.

The Peacock Room began as the dining room of a wealthy ship owner in London. American artist James McNeil Whistler decorated the room in an elaborate peacock motif. Charles Freer purchased the room in 1904 and moved it to his Detroit home. After his death in 1919, the Peacock Room was installed in the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. In a new exhibit, *The Peacock Room Comes to America*, the Freer Gallery populated the Peacock Room with Freer’s ceramics arranged as he displayed them when the



The Peacock Room Comes to America Exhibit at the Smithsonian, shown as it appeared in 1908 in Freer’s Detroit home.



Freer House member Delf Dodge (lt), director of global operations at GM Research, and husband, architect Tim Dodson (rt) meet guest speaker Louise Cort (center) at the Freer House reception.

room was in his Detroit home (based on 1908 photographs).

As Louise studied the sophisticated artistic choices made by Freer in his collection, she kept returning to his purchase of the “lumpy” pot. “What was Freer thinking?” she asked again and again. She spent months studying Freer’s choices and charting trends in his purchases, including a large expansion of his collection immediately after the Smithsonian agreed to create the Freer Gallery to house it. As the ceramics re-filled the room, and Louise read Freer’s meticulously kept records, she suddenly saw the pieces through his eyes. He liked “the opalescent blue glaze on Chinese pieces that became iridescent as they decayed over

hundreds of years in tombs,” she said. He loved a “tea bowl with a runny glaze” and the “luster of low temperature ceramic glazes.”

So what was Freer thinking?

“Harmony of color,” Louise said. “It was all about the colors.” Freer “painted” the Peacock Room with color by grouping his ceramics in balanced swathes of color across the shelves. His sense of color was strong, almost spiritual, according to Louise. He wrote of the “surface beauty” of the pieces; of the “universality of elements that made these objects beautiful.” Freer lovingly collected the “lumpy” pot and cherished it for its “fine autumnal tones.”

After the lecture, about 100 guests returned to the Freer House, home of the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, for a reception and tour. They saw the space that once housed Whistler’s peacock masterpiece and tried to imagine the grandeur Freer brought to the room in 1908. “It’s amazing to realize it was actually here,” one of the guests said. “I’m impressed and grateful that Freer’s home has been preserved.”

Louise Cort’s lecture and reception was sponsored by the Freer House, the Asian & Islamic Art Forum of the Detroit Institute of Arts, and the Japan America Society of Greater Detroit and Windsor.