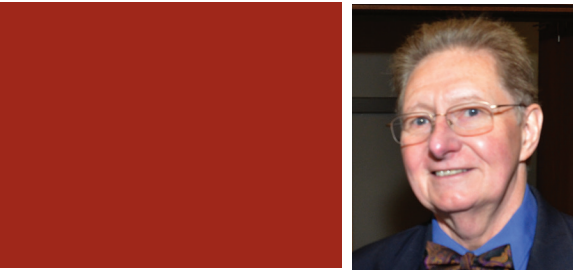


# Remembering Thomas W. Brunk, PhD, Freer House Scholar (1949-2018)



Above, Dr. Brunk (rt) with a student at the 2003 dedication of the Freer House and Merrill Palmer Skillman historical plaque.

Right, Dr. Brunk (in the Freer House Peacock Room) proudly displays his collection of personal objects once owned by Charles Freer (2018).

*From William Colburn  
Director, The Freer House*

Thomas Brunk began his ground-breaking research and documentation of the Freer House as a young man in the 1970's. His advocacy for the house's preservation became a lifelong endeavor. His authoritative book, *The Charles Lang Freer Residence: The Original Freer Gallery of Art* (Dichotomy 1999), firmly established the house as an outstanding landmark of local, national and international significance. His contributions to the preservation of Detroit's historic buildings include such landmarks as Pewabic Pottery, the Scarab Club, the Prismatic Club, Masonic Temple and Indian Village.

He mentored hundreds of students and preservationists, generously sharing his knowledge and passion. He insisted that every Freer House exhibit, project, or program be properly researched, sourced and documented to assure its accuracy and authenticity. Through it all he was the embodiment of "a scholar and a gentleman."

Dr. Brunk received the Michigan Historic Preservation Network's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2017 for his decades of contributions to preservation in Detroit and Michigan. The event was hosted at the Freer House. His gracious acceptance speech encouraged others to carry the torch for the arts and historic preservation in our city.

The success of the Freer House rests on Dr. Brunk's shoulders and his decades of exceptional research, documentation and preservation. Truly no one can fill his shoes. We will miss him greatly.



*From Susan A. Hobbs, PhD  
Director, The Thomas Wilmer Dewing  
Catalogue Raisonne*

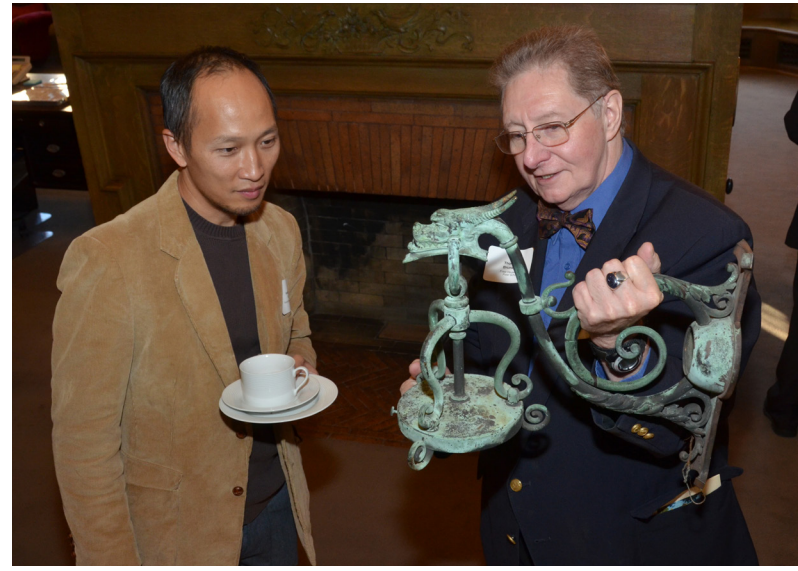
I first met Thom at the Detroit Institute of Arts in the early 1970's. I had given a talk on Charles Lang Freer, when a young man wearing a bow tie came up to me. He promised to take me to the Freer house on my next visit. At the time, I was the first curator of American Art hired at the Freer

Gallery of Art in the Smithsonian Institution in Wash. D.C., a museum best known for its world-class Asian art. My job centered on the collection Freer had assembled by the artists of his own country.

Eventually I took Thom up on his promise. When we approached the Freer house, it seemed dark inside and out. As I recall, it was used as just another office building and seemed as if no one knew



*Left, Dr. Brunk with Dr. Julian Raby, director of the Freer and Sackler Gallery of Art, at the 2012 Freer Legacy Symposium reception.*



*Right, Dr. Brunk shows Freer's original bronze Chinese dragon garden light fixture to a guest at a lecture program in 2014.*

or cared about it. We entered through the back door, left ajar and allowing leaves and debris to blow in. Thom was concerned at this neglect. The rooms had been cut up with additions, the original 1906 gallery room suffered from a lowered ceiling and covered skylights, and the woodwork and walls had been vastly altered. With his newly minted Ph.D., Dr. Brunk undertook the ground-breaking research required to save Freer's once elegant and beautifully appointed home and bring it back to life.

Thom and I shared our academic "finds" almost weekly from the 1980s through the early 2000s. We had hoped to jointly produce a book on Charles Freer, but that was not to be. Yet Thom continued his passionate devotion to the story of Freer's life. He was eager to demonstrate the

ground-breaking, aesthetic instincts of this man, whose modest boyhood was so like his own. Thom's contribution to the effort is his remarkable monograph on Freer's unique shingle-style house. Thoroughly researched and complete, it will remain an essential authority on the subject for years.

Today, the Freer House appears to a visitor more as Thom had always hoped and dreamed it would. The decorative paint finishes are being rediscovered, the Whistler Gallery has been opened up, and facsimiles of Freer's vaunted American art works are hung in their original locations.

Thom's passion for Detroit's history and architecture changed my life as a scholar. My family and I will cherish the memory of Thom, as a unique and fascinating person, for the rest of our days.

*From Rose Foster  
Operations Coordinator  
MPSI and the Freer House*

Thomas was a kind hearted man with a passion for historic preservation. He knew so much that he would talk to you as long as you were willing to listen. He had a subtle sense of humor, usually followed by a soft giggle, which made you laugh even if it was sometimes a challenge to understand all his wisdom. It was always a pleasure to be in his company and listen to information about "Mr. Freer." I feel fortunate to have known him.

*From George Bulanda, former managing editor, Hour Detroit magazine*

I'll always recall with fondness how warmly Thomas invited me to his home in 2009 to talk about Charles Lang Freer,

whom he always referred to as Mr. Freer. I was researching a piece about Freer for Hour Detroit. He was very generous with his time, possibly because he had spotted a fellow time traveler in Detroit's history, a kindred spirit. We both loved art and antiques, so he invited me to his home several times. We talked not only about Mr. Freer but of our love for art, especially Detroit-generated pieces.

I'll never forget when Thomas gave me a sheet of Mr. Freer's personal stationery, which I treasure today. These simple gestures of artistic affection go over the heads of most people, but not those who love art and beauty and history.

God rest his kind soul.

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*We will miss him greatly.” – William Colburn*