



The Freer House

Faculty and staff of the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute feel fortunate to have their offices in the former home of Detroit industrialist and art collector, Charles Lang Freer. The 22-room, Shingle-style home was completed in 1892 and designed by architect Wilson Eyre, Jr., the perfect space for Freer to display his expanding collection of paintings and porcelain. “My colleagues get jealous,” a faculty member said. “They can’t believe I get to work in such a beautiful atmosphere.”

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But being good stewards of the 117-year-old home requires partners, patience and plenty of funding. The effort is well worth it, according to William S. Colburn, director of the Freer House. “Charles Freer was a consummate collector of Asian, Middle Eastern and American art,” he said. “His house is a treasure of

American architecture, designed to display his collection with museum quality ambiance.” For more than a decade, William has worked to preserve and restore the Freer House, first as a historic preservation consultant and then as a member of its board of directors. The Freer House is a Michigan State Historic Site and



photo by Rose Foster

listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Freer made his fortune building railroad cars in the late 1800s, money that allowed him to retire at 46 and devote his life to his primary love – art. He owned the largest collection of works by American artist James McNeill Whistler, including his redecoration of the famous Peacock Room for Englishman Frederick Leyland, who never liked it. When Leyland died, the future of the ornate room, complete with stunning floor-to-ceiling murals, was in jeopardy. Freer purchased the room (walls, floor and ceiling) then custom-designed an addition to his Detroit home to house it. The Peacock Room resided

The Freer House through the Years

Above: Freer House Main Hall, 2012.

1890; House and Stable for C.L. Freer, Esq. Detroit, Mich. Rendering by Wilson Eyre. (*Detroit Institute of Arts Archives.*) 1906; Whistler Gallery in carriage house. (*Freer Gallery of Art Archives.*)



1890



1906

"The welfare of any community is . . . dependent upon the quality of its motherhood and the spirit and character of its homes."

– Lizzie Merrill Palmer, 1915



in Detroit for 13 years. Upon Freer's death, the room and his art collection were bequeathed to the Smithsonian Institution to become the Freer Gallery of Art.

Merrill Palmer Moves In

In 1920, the estate of Lizzie Merrill Palmer purchased the home for a new school dedicated to child and family development. For years, the home supported college students, researchers, and an infant and toddler preschool complete with sandbox and sliding board. In 1981, the independent Institute was incorporated into Wayne State University due to financial strains and the house endured architecturally insensitive renovations to convert it to office space.

Today some of those changes have been undone and the building looks more like the original home.

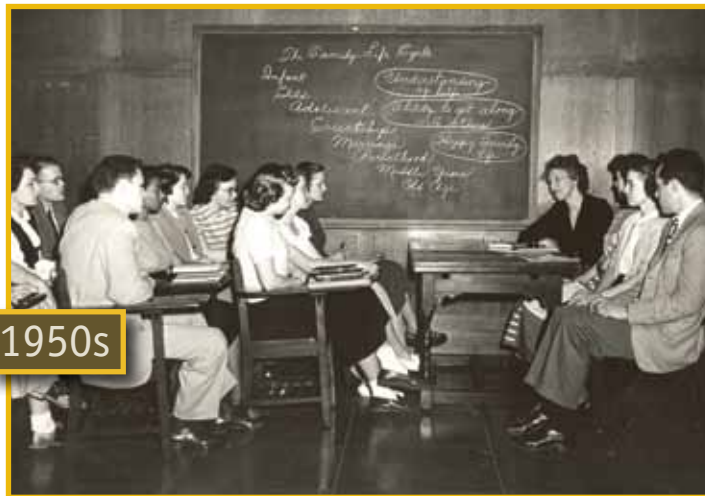
Reproductions of several large paintings from Freer's collection now hang throughout the first floor, thanks to generous donors who underwrote the cost of each reproduction. In 2010, thanks to the support of Wayne State, the cedar shingled roof and copper gutters were replaced, and the original stonework was cleaned to reveal beautiful colors and textures under decades of city grime.

Funding for Freer House projects comes from generous donors, many of them members of the Freer House, and from grants like those from the Americana Foundation that support a public lecture series related to Freer and his legacy. The lecture series has drawn hundreds of area residents to the house and the nearby Detroit Institute of Arts for presentations by Smithsonian Institution experts, historians and other art professionals knowledgeable about Freer's life and collection.

Counterclockwise from top left: Lizzie Merrill Palmer (*Merrill-Palmer Audio Visual Archive, Walter P. Reuther Library*). 1927; Nursery school tots play while Merrill Palmer student trainees observe (*Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute*). 1950s; Merrill Palmer trainees learn about child development and the life cycle (*Merrill-Palmer Audio Visual Archive, Reuther Library*). 1960s; Student teacher works on reading skills with Merrill Palmer preschool class (*Merrill-Palmer Audio Visual Archives, Reuther Library*).



1927



1950s



1960s

The Future of Freer House

A major achievement in increasing awareness of Freer's life and work was the 2012 installation of the timeline exhibit "A House and its History." Set in an arched passageway leading to the rear of the home, the archival photos, captions and quotes reveal Freer House history from construction to modern day. It also includes the intertwined history of Merrill Palmer Institute.

The Freer House was built with two large second-floor galleries full of natural light to maximize the viewing of Freer's art. The Exhibition Gallery known as the Hoobler Room has no major changes and is regularly used for meetings and small conferences. The Whistler Gallery, however, has had major alterations beginning in the 1950s and up through the 1990s. William and members of the Freer House hope to restore the Whistler Gallery to a space more similar to its original design that can be used as future meet-

ing space. They are also exploring ways to restore the courtyard garden area to a style closer to Freer's original plan. Both projects are the focus of a new and ambitious major fund-raising campaign.

Research on Freer's art, his life and even the furniture that once filled his home continue through the help of students, faculty and volunteers. "We've documented much of his furniture, decorations and

household objects that survive in the T.W. Brunk collection," William said. "We've uncovered more than 100 historical newspaper articles about his life and legacy. And we've done a digital inventory of many of his photographs and documents.

"As the layers pull back, we appreciate the depth of Freer's artistic sensibility with more clarity and understanding."



A symposium entitled, *The Living Legacy of Charles Lang Freer: Detroit and Washington, D.C.*, was held in October, co-sponsored by the Freer House/MPSI/WSU, the Detroit Institute of Arts and other partner organizations. Dr. Julian Raby, the director of the Freer and Sackler Galleries of Art, was the invited keynote. Over 150 people attended the symposium and another 60 guests attended a dinner event at the Freer House in Dr. Raby's honor.



Julian Raby

Left: Charles Lang Freer, photograph by Edward Steichen, 1916. (*Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian.*) Above: Dr. Julian Raby, (*Freer and Sackler Galleries of Art Archives, Smithsonian.*)

2010; Kril Enterprise employees work on roof replacement. 2011; Giclee reproductions of major works in Freer's collection adorn the home's walls throughout. 2012; Timeline photos are hung in the passageway through the carriage house; guests enjoy a musical interlude at a lecture on Freer and artist friend James McNeill Whistler.

2010



photo by Rose Foster

2011



photo by Meg Urisko



Concept for Whistler Gallery Restoration, rendering by Michael Brown



Concept for Courtyard Garden Restoration, rendering by Thomas Holleman.



"As we learn more, we better understand the significance of the Freer House to Detroit and the nation."
– William Colburn



photo by Carrie Leach

2012



photo by Rick Bielaczyc

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photo by Catherine Blasio

Left: Freer with Tomitaro Hara family and guests, Yokohama, Japan, 1907. (*Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian.*) Above: Dr. Lichtenberg and William Colburn welcome a visit by Swami Tyagananda with Dr. Madhu Prasad and family. Far right: Betty Roden, David Roden, (Counsel General to Republic of S. Korea in Detroit), Naoko Matsuda, Kuninori Matsuda (Counsel General of Japan in Detroit)

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