An exhibit at the historic Charles Lang Freer House
Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, Wayne State University

“Mr. Freer’s garden and grounds are those of a man who has traveled far and seen much.”
Detroit Sunday News Tribune, September 5, 1897

**THE FREER HOUSE**

The Freer House is considered to be one of the most important historic buildings in Michigan with its outstanding architecture and history as “the original Freer Gallery of Art.” Today, parts of the building continue to serve as offices for child and family development faculty of the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute/WSU, while major sections of the house serve as space for visitors, meetings and events.

The Freer House features quarter-sawn oak paneling, built in cabinets and seating, and ornate decorative light fixtures and hardware. Reproductions of 11 paintings by the American artists, Dewing, Tryon and Thayer, have recently been installed in their original locations. Restoration goals include the revitalization of Freer’s historic courtyard gardens, restoration of the 1906 Whistler Gallery as an exhibition and meeting space, and creation of a public welcome and interpretative center for visitors in the former carriage house. To support restoration of The Freer House or join as a member, please call 313.664.2500 or contact: william.colburn@wayne.edu.
An Art Collector’s Garden

This exhibit was created by
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Freer House, Merrill-Palmer Skillman Institute
and
Michael D. Coleman, College for Creative Studies

Created in conjunction with the Freer House lecture:

The Artist’s Garden:
American Impressionism and the Garden Movement, 1887-1920
by
Anna O. Marley, PhD
Curator of Historical American Art, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
presented at the Detroit Institute of Arts

October 5, 2014

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Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919)

Born in Kingston, N.Y., Freer came to Detroit in 1880 to establish the Peninsular Car Works, a railroad freight car manufacturing company, with Frank J. Hecker. In 1890, the young industrialist and art collector commissioned Wilson Eyre, Jr., of Philadelphia, to design his Ferry Avenue home. A collaboration of client, architect and artists, the house reflected Freer’s ideals of harmony, simplicity, and surface beauty.

His fortune secure, Freer devoted his life to the study of art. His acquisitions included paintings by the American artists Dewing, Tryon and Thayer, and the largest collection of works by James McNeill Whistler. Encouraged by Whistler to explore aesthetic points of contact between East and West, Freer expanded his interests to Asia and the Middle East, establishing one of the world’s greatest collections of Asian art.

Visitors from around the world came to Detroit to meet Freer and view his home and collection. Freer was a major cultural force in the city, actively supporting Pewabic Pottery, the Detroit Museum of Art (today’s DIA), the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts (today’s College for Creative Studies), and the University of Michigan. In 1906, Freer signed an agreement with the Smithsonian to bequeath his collection to the nation. From 1906-1919, his Detroit home served as the original Freer Gallery of Art. Upon his death in 1919, Freer’s collection was moved to Washington, D.C., to be housed at the Freer Gallery of Art, America’s first national art museum.

Freer’s home was acquired in 1921 by the Merrill-Palmer School. Today, the house is listed on the City of Detroit, State of Michigan and National Register of Historic Places. Freer House Members, Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute and Wayne State University are dedicated to preserving and restoring this internationally significant historic structure.

To help support the Freer House or join as a member, please call 313.664.2500, or contact William Colburn at william.colburn@wayne.edu or Rose Foster at rmfoster@wayne.edu.
Artists and Freer’s Garden

To create a truly unique garden, Freer turned to his friend, Tonalist painter Thomas Wilmer Dewing. In a letter to industrialist William G. Mather about his Ferry Avenue garden, Freer noted that the “original outlines and color schemes were created by my good friend, T.W. Dewing.” Well known for his interest in horticulture, Dewing created a plan that blended Eastern and Western plant varieties to create a lush, leafy landscape.

Maria Oakey Dewing, wife of Thomas Wilmer Dewing, was also an accomplished painter and amateur botanist who felt that in order to paint landscapes an artist must have “a long apprenticeship in the garden.” When she visited Freer’s home in 1892, she, Dewing, Dwight Tryon, and William C. Lebrocq applied extraordinary decorative paint treatments to the interior surfaces to complement paintings being created specifically for the house. Given Oakey Dewing’s expert knowledge of plants and interior design, it seems likely that she played a part with her husband in planning Freer’s original garden.

“At home in Detroit, Freer had discovered the benefits of moving from his art gallery to his garden, cultivated as carefully as his collections, where he could meditate in peace upon the works of art he had studied indoors.”

Linda Merrill, Freer: A Legacy of Art

Maria Oakey Dewing, between 1875 and 1885
Fratelli Vianelli (Firm).
Thomas Wilmer Dewing and Dewing Family Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Maria Oakey Dewing tends her gardens in Cornish, New Hampshire, c.1875-1905, photographer unknown.
Thomas Wilmer Dewing and Dewing Family Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Poppies and Italian Mignonettes, 1891
Maria Oakey Dewing. Oil on canvas. Originally owned by Charles Lang Freer, now in a private collection.
Wilson Eyre, Jr., the renowned Philadelphia architect, whom Freer described as “every inch an artist,” designed Freer’s shingle style house and created the basic layout of the garden. With the active hand of landscaper, Eutrope Ferrand, Freer’s city lot was planted to give the illusion of being larger than its actual size, creating the feel of a rambling country estate.

**AN ARCHITECT AND FREER’S GARDEN**

*Freer House, 1906.* Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

*Proposal for Freer House addition and landscaping,* 1904 watercolor on brown paper, Wilson Eyre, Jr., *Detroit Institute of Arts.*


“The Freer place was laid out and planted by E. Ferrand who, for 25 years has been doing landscape and garden work in Detroit.”

*Detroit Sunday News Tribune*, September 5, 1897.

The *Detroit Sunday News Tribune* published an article in 1897 describing Freer’s lot as, “a garden that requires the special assistance of an educated landscape artist for its close interpretation,” and mentioning it was planted with a “view to harmonize the colors of the foliage with that of the blooms.”

The “landscape artist” that Freer chose was French born horticulturalist and nurseryman Eutrope Ferrand. According to the article, “Mr. Ferrand had carte blanche from Mr. Freer in planting his garden.” Ferrand also landscape the lot of the Hecker House next door.
Freer House, 1892.
Taken just after construction, this image shows the Freer House before the garden was installed.
Collection of Thomas W. Brunk.
Freer House and Garden, 1904.
This view provides a sense of the gardens and landscape from 1893-1904, before construction of the rear addition to Freer’s home.
Photograph by C.M. Hayes, University of Glasgow Special Collections.
Freer House and Stables Showing Rose Bushes and Garden, 1904. The row of rose bushes, recommended to Freer by artist Thomas W. Dewing, created a beautiful border running from E. Ferry Avenue to the stables. Photograph by C.M. Hayes, 1904. University of Glasgow Special Collections.
Hecker and Freer Carriage Houses and Garden, 1904.
The carriage houses belonging to Freer (R) and Hecker (L) sit side-by-side, reflecting the friendship of these two business partners and neighbors. Note the elegantly curved path of crushed stone leading from E. Ferry Avenue to the rear stables and carriage house.
Photograph by C.M. Hayes, 1904. University of Glasgow Special Collections.
Although the garden elements of this plan by architect Wilson Eyre, Jr., were not specifically followed, the rendering shows how the new addition in 1906 transformed the space into a courtyard garden. Watercolor on brown paper, Wilson Eyre, Jr., 1904. Gift of Louisa Eyre, Detroit Institute of Arts.
Freer's garden changed to accommodate a major addition at the rear of the house in 1906. Whistler's Peacock Room was installed in the section at the far left.

Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution.
After the new addition to the house in 1906, the visual focus of the garden was an ornamental Asian stone lantern given as a Christmas gift to Freer in 1905 from his friend Sadajiō Yamanaka (1865-1936), a respected international dealer in works of Japanese and Asian art with showrooms in Kyoto, Tokyo, Beijing, London, Boston, and New York.

Replication of the original stone lantern, today located outside the Freer Gallery of Art on the Mall in Washington, D.C., is a priority goal and focal point of the Freer House Garden Plan.
In 1920, the Merrill-Palmer School of Detroit acquired the Freer House. The gardens and courtyard were converted into an outdoor play lot for the nursery school children enrolled in its progressive early childhood education program. Swing sets and sandboxes replaced the plants and shrubs as fresh air and exercise were seen as integral to healthy growth. When Merrill-Palmer constructed new buildings in 1958, the playground was relocated. In 1965, landscape architect Eleanor L. Roche designed a minimalist green garden for the space. A small fountain with a bronze sculpture was surrounded by geometric planting patterns and slate pathways echoing the stone walls of the house. The stairs leading up to the Peacock Room were enlarged and the original railing was removed.
The Peacock Room Porch Railing Restoration

One of the main goals of the Freer House Garden Revitalization Project is to recreate the original Peacock Room Porch Railing that was removed by Merrill-Palmer (see photo above, left.) The original design has been reviewed by a skilled ironworker who has developed a plan to recreate and reinstall the railing. Restoring the railing will be a significant addition to the Freer House garden. For more information or to donate, contact William Colburn, Director, The Freer House, at william.colburn@wayne.edu or 313-664-2500.

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THE FREER HOUSE GARDEN REVITALIZATION PROJECT

The garden is not only integral to the history and restoration of the Freer House, it is also significant as an important piece of American landscape history. Its design, influenced by an architect, a horticulturalist, and artists, provided a harmonious setting for Freer’s home and his Asian and American art collection.

The restored garden will be an inviting setting for quiet contemplation and outdoor events for the Freer House, Wayne State, and the community. The plan will reintroduce the gentle arc of Freer’s original carriage path as a walkway from Ferry Street and restore the garden using trees and plants authentic to Freer’s aesthetic vision but with sustainable, low level maintenance requirements. It will also replicate and reinstall the long lost Peacock Room porch railings and add a newly designed yet historically compatible garden fence and gate.
The Future Garden

Conceptual Rendering of the Revitalized Freer House Garden.
This rendering envisions what the Freer House garden will look like with plantings, a new fence, and a replica of Freer’s Asian stone lantern. Rendering by Thomas Holleman, 2012.
Historical authenticity is an important focus of the Freer House Garden Revitalization Project. Using original plant lists, surviving photographs, and historical accounts, the Garden Project Committee researched each layer of the garden’s history. The design plan incorporates elements of both the 1893 and 1906 Freer House gardens, using plants and trees authentic to Freer’s vision but updated to create an accessible, sustainable, low-maintenance environment.

“Japan contributes to make the Freer place a joy forever, as does Virginia, and Scotland and France. So does distant China and Colorado and also the plants of our own Michigan. In essence, the Freer garden is evidence of the owner’s extensive travels and it would indeed be a dull man who, working in this wonderful garden, would yawn.”

-Detroit News Sunday Tribune, September 5, 1897

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CULTIVATE HISTORY

Revitalizing Freer’s Gardens and Help Beautify Detroit

Financial contributions are needed and welcome! Individual and corporate sponsorship levels to support the garden’s restoration are available. For information call William Colburn, Director, The Freer House, at 313-664-2500, william.colburn@wayne.edu, or Rose Foster at rmfoster@wayne.edu

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In Memoriam

The Freer House Garden Revitalization Project is dedicated to the memory of Denise Little, a vibrant leader and active member of the Freer House Garden Project Committee. As an artist, entrepreneur and volunteer, Denise was committed to restoring the gardens at the historic Freer House and creating a place of beauty for all to enjoy. The Freer House, Wayne State and the Garden Project Committee will continue to fulfill Denise’s vision for this exciting project.

Denise Little

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