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

PHOTO BY
ALEXANDER VERTIKOFF

THE FREER HOUSE
71 E. Ferry Street, Detroit MI, 48202 | 313-664-2500 | www.mpsi.wayne.edu/freer/
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.

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A HOUSE AND ITS HISTORY

Resendes Design Group

Phebe and Sid Goldstein

John Douglas Peters and Christine Consales

Marianne Endicott

Rosemary and Terry Foster

John and Mary Ann Hannigan

Marilyn and Gerald Tuchow

Nancy and Joel Kaufman on behalf of Kaufman Children's Center

Hon. Claudia Morcom

Judith Gleicher Seiff

In memory of Steven D. Myers, by friends of Steven D. Myers and Izumi Suzuki Myers

Marjorie Beeghly and Glenn Wasek

Anna Sui

Jack D. and Nancy E. Hauri

Stella M. Resko and Michael A. Taylor

With thanks to David Hogge, Archivist, Freer Gallery of Art

In honor of Dr. Thomas W. Brunk, Freer House Scholar


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THE FREER HOUSE

MERRILL PALMER SKILLMAN INSTITUTE for Child & Family Development

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

American Foundation
CHARLES LANG FREER HOUSE
THE ORIGINAL FREER GALLERY OF ART

Born in Kingston, N.Y., Charles L. Freer came to Detroit in 1880 to establish the Peninsular Car Works with Frank J. Hecker. In 1890, the young industrialist and art collector commissioned Wilson Eyre to design his home. A collaboration of client, architect and artists, the house reflected Freer’s ideals of harmony, simplicity and sophistication, creating, as one visitor described, “a dream of beauty, inside and out.”

His fortune established, Freer devoted his life to the study of art. His acquisitions included paintings by the American artists, Dewing, Tryon and Thayer, and the largest single 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 and established 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 Detroit, actively supporting the Pewabic Pottery, the Detroit Club, the Detroit Museum of Art (today’s DIA), the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts (today’s CCS), and the University of Michigan. In 1906, Freer signed an agreement with the Smithsonian to bequeath his collection to the nation. Upon his death in 1919, Freer’s collection was moved to Washington, D.C. to be housed in the Freer Gallery of Art on the National Mall.

Freer’s home was acquired in 1921 by the Merrill-Palmer School. Today, the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute of Wayne State University and members and supporters of the Freer House are dedicated to preserving and restoring this “nationally significant” historic structure.
All his life he thought double-entry bookkeeping one of the most beautiful things in the world.

Aline B. Saarinen, The Proud Possessors, 1958

Peninsular Car Works, Detroit, ca. 1885. Freer and his business partner, neighbor, and lifelong friend, Frank J. Hecker, made their fortunes manufacturing railroad freight cars at this factory on E. Ferry Avenue at Russell Street. In 1899, he orchestrated the merger of 13 railroad car companies into American Car and Foundry Company, allowing him to retire at age 47 to collect art.

Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library
The closer one can live to himself, the better he is off, and the best part that is left of me is probably represented at 33 Ferry.

Charles L. Freer to Frank J. Hecker, 1907

Above: House & Stable for C. L. Freer, Esq. by Wilson Eyre, Jr., 1890. Philadelphia architect Wilson Eyre, Jr., designed a unique Shingle style house that reflected Freer’s cultivated taste. Detroit Institute of Arts

Left: The Freer House, 1892. Collection of Dr. Thomas W. Brunk
Meanwhile I think I may tell you without the least chance of being misunderstood, that I wish you to have a fine collection of Whistler’s!! perhaps The collection.

James McNeill Whistler to Charles L. Freer, 1899

James Abbott McNeill Whistler, inscribed “To Charles Lang Freer—a un de ces jours” (til we meet again). Freer received this photograph from Whistler probably in 1899 as a token of the close friendship between “the Master” and his greatest patron. Photogravure attributed to Mortimer Mempes, 1885.

Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian
My great desire has been to unite modern work with masterpieces of certain periods of high civilization harmonious in spiritual suggestion.
Charles L. Freer to Samuel P. Langley, Secretary of the Smithsonian, 1904

Freer comparing Whistler's *Venus Rising from the Sea* with glazed Islamic pot. Autochrome by Alvin Langdon Coburn, 1909.
Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian
Dedicated in memory of Steven D. Myers, by friends of Steven D. Myers and Izumi Suzuki Myers, Freer House, April 1, 2012.

Freer at Hara estate, Honmoku Sannotani (present-day Sankeien Garden), Yokohama, Japan, 1907. Front, left: Hara Yasu (wife); Freer; Hara Tomitarō, a prominent banker, silk merchant, and art collector; Hara Haruko (daughter). Back: Miss Gates, Hara family English tutor; Nomura Yōzō, Yokohama art dealer; a ricksha man. Freer traveled widely throughout the Near and Far East from 1894 to 1911, broadening both his knowledge and collection of Asian Art.

Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian
I have been making some quiet comparisons of the large decorations of the [Peacock] room with the most successful things of a similar nature of fifteenth and sixteenth century work in the Orient.

Charles L. Freer to Richard A. Canfield, art collector, 1904

Peacock Room in Detroit with Freer's arrangement of Asian and Islamic pottery.
Freer purchased Whistler's famed Peacock Room in 1904, moving it from London to his home. Photograph by George Swain, 1908.
Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian
The Picture (Whistler) Gallery. Between 1904 and 1906 Freer completed major additions to his house including a gallery where he displayed selections from his extensive Whistler collection (above), the Peacock Room, and family living quarters for his caretaker and curator, Stephen Warring. Photographs by C.M. Hayes, 1906.

Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian
Freer's gift to the nation. In 1906 Freer signed a deed gifting his collection to the Smithsonian, to be transferred upon his death. The Freer Gallery of Art opened to the public in 1923. The similarity between the galleries in Freer's home and the museum reveal his use of the house as a design prototype for the display of art.

Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian
My pleasure has been in discovery, not in possession.

Charles L. Freer, 1915

Permission of the Estate of Edward Steichen
In 1916, Lizzie Merrill Palmer’s will provided funds for a school to train college women in homemaking and motherhood skills. The Merrill-Palmer School was established in 1920. One year later it acquired the Freer House as headquarters, placing administrative functions in the main house and one of the nation’s first laboratory nursery schools in the rear addition. Edna Noble White, the first director, laid the foundation for a progressive, interdisciplinary training program in childhood development that set national standards and achieved world-wide recognition.

Merrill-Palmer acquired additional houses on the first block of E. Ferry to form a campus (today’s Inn on Ferry Street). In the 1950’s and 60’s the Knapp and Skillman buildings were constructed for offices, classrooms and children’s activities.

Merrill-Palmer was acquired in 1981 by Wayne State University and merged with the Skillman Center for Children in 2005. Today, Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute is in the forefront of lifespan research, education and community service, with the goal of strengthening families by improving the health and well-being of children, youth and seniors.
Children romp now in former “castle” of art.
Home of late C.L. Freer, famous connoisseur, used by Merrill-Palmer Nursery.
Babies given lessons in once Peacock Room.

*Detroit Free Press, 1922*

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*Nursery School Students with Teacher, 1931.* Merrill-Palmer opened the nation’s second laboratory nursery school in 1922. Children’s mental, physical, and emotional development was observed by Merrill-Palmer students through play activities and behavioral and longitudinal studies.

*Merrill-Palmer Audio-Visual Archive, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University*
The Merrill-Palmer experience was truly transformational in my life. I learned to think analytically and live intuitively here.

Graduate of the Class of 1971

Campus Life, 1950s. From the 1920s to the 1960s Merrill-Palmer evolved from a school to an institute, and acquired the homes on the first block of E. Ferry to form a campus. Classes and administrative functions were held in the Freer House, which served as the center of student life. Each afternoon students, teachers, and guests, such as Dr. Jean Piaget (left), gathered for tea and conversation.

Merrill-Palmer Audio-Visual Archive, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University
We were a community of learners in and out of the classrooms… in our houses living together, in the community with the children and families we served; and with the faculty who engaged us and inspired a love for lifelong learning.

Graduate of the Class of 1971

Graduate Students of 1954. Students at Merrill-Palmer came from all 50 states and 46 other countries including India, Turkey, Japan, the Netherlands, Argentina, and the Philippines, creating an internationally diverse environment for the study of child development.

Merrill-Palmer Audio-Visual Archive, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University
Children must be taught how to think, not what to think.
Margaret Mead, 1935

Margaret Mead and Students, ca. 1965. Merrill-Palmer gained international renown for its research in child and family development and the Merrill-Palmer Quarterly. Celebrated scholars, such as Austrian child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, Swiss child developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, and American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead, visited to lecture and engage with students. The tradition continues with MPSI’s guest scholars and colloquia.
Merrill-Palmer Audio-Visual Archive, Walter P. Ruether Library, Wayne State University
Merrill-Palmer believes that new knowledge about human ‘being’ is the force that will best enable tomorrow’s better world to rise above its most perplexing human problems.

Merrill-Palmer: The Proper Study of Mankind, 1958
Hands-on experience fosters deeper learning at any age; whether a curious 3-year-old or a creative 83-year-old, all people continue to change and grow.

Peter Lichtenberg, Ph.D. ABPP, Director, Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute/Institute of Gerontology, Wayne State University, 2012

Continuing a legacy of excellence. Merrill-Palmer was acquired by Wayne State University in 1981. Today’s Lifespan Alliance, a partnership between the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute and the Institute of Gerontology, studies human health and development from birth through the final stages of life.

Above: Rosemary Foster
Right: Institute of Gerontology