

FREER AND SWAMI VIVEKANANDA: DETROIT AND INDIA

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



Image of Swami Vivekananda appears courtesy of
Indies Services, Bhavnagar, Gujarat, India.
c. 1893.



Charles Lang Freer, 1909.
Portrait by Alvin Langdon Coburn
Freer Gallery of Art Archives,
Smithsonian Institution.



THE FREER HOUSE

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

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PHOTOS BY
ALEXANDER VERTIKOFF



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.



THE FREER HOUSE

FREER AND SWAMI VIVEKANANDA DETROIT AND INDIA

Meghan Urisko, 2013 Research
Kailey McAlpin, 2017 Research
Catherine Blasio, Exhibit Designer
William S. Colburn, Freer House Director and Exhibit Editor

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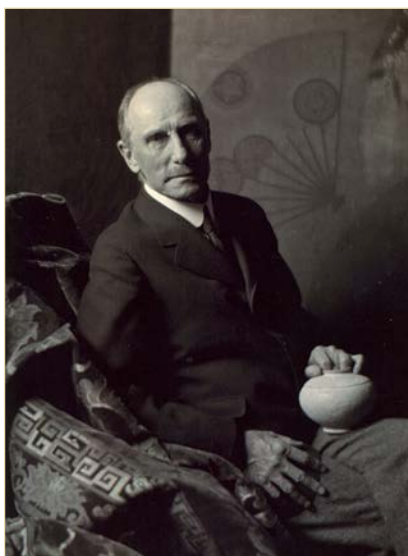
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MERRILL PALMER
SKILLMAN INSTITUTE
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June 2013



Charles Lang Freer, 1915.
 Photograph by Edward Steichen.
 George Eastman House,
 International Museum of
 Photography and Film.



Freer House, 1906.
 Photograph by C.M. Hayes.
 Freer Gallery of Art Archives,
 Smithsonian Institution.



Freer Gallery of Art, 1950.
 Library of Congress.

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. Heckler. 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.

**Telegram from Freer in Ceylon
to Hecker in Detroit,
Dec. 25, 1894**

Freer sent this telegram to his business partner Frank J. Hecker and their staff writing, "Merry Christmas to all, including heads of departments," from Anuradhapura, Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka). Freer's address is listed as the Hotel Oriental Colombo, the premier hotel of the British Colonial period. Freer traveled from Ceylon to India, arriving January 3, 1895, for a three month stay.

*Charles Lang Freer Papers
Freer Gallery of Art Archives
Smithsonian Institution*

Form B.

Class	Indian Government Telegraph.	No.	
RECEIPT FOR FOREIGN TELEGRAM.			
To (Station)	Extra charges prepaid in cash if any.	Ra.	As.
Signature of Telegraph Master.		INSTRUCTIONS (if any.)	

For FOREIGN MESSAGES ONLY

STAMPS must be affixed *whole*, the upper portion above, the lower portion below the perforation. The upper halves, after defacement, are returned with the Receipt to the Sender.

SPACE FOR STAMPS.

STAMPS in any way defaced cannot be received.

As INLAND MESSAGE WRITTEN ON THIS FORM WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.

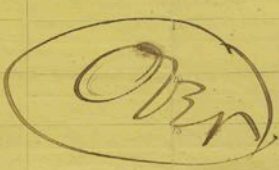
Class	No.	Words	Time (ordered for transmission, Madras Time.)	Sent to	L. L.
			Day. H. M.	At Hr. Mt. D.	Mo. Yr.
				By	

NOTHING TO BE WRITTEN BY THE SENDER ABOVE THIS.

TO (Station) (Name) <i>Hecker</i> (Address) <i>Detroit Michigan</i>	FROM (Station) <i>Anuradhapura</i> FROM (Name) ROUTE. OFFICIAL INSTRUCTIONS.
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16

CLASS OF MESSAGE (STATE OR PRIVATE.)		
<i>Merry</i> <i>all</i> <i>Departments</i>	<i>Christmas</i> <i>including</i> <i>Freer</i>	<i>to</i> <i>heads</i>



SENDER'S SIGNATURE AND ADDRESS (NOT SIGNALLED.)	<i>Charles L. Freer, Oriental Hotel, Colombo.</i>
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MESSAGE TO BE CONTINUED ON THE BACK, IF NECESSARY. TELEGRAPH MASTER

* If not marked *State* it will be classed as *Private* and no alteration can afterwards be made.

(P. 162) — Govt. Tel. Press, — 20000 — 27-6-74.



Photographs of Udaipur, c. 1896.

During Freer's trip to India he was enchanted with Udaipur, calling it "the most beautiful place I have ever seen." After returning to the United States, Freer received photographs of the city from Fateh Lal Mehta, a court official under Maharana Fateh Singh. The two met during Freer's trip to India and remained in contact for several years.

Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution





Freer's Travel Route through India with Selected Destinations, January 3 – March 20, 1895

Freer made his first journey to Asia in 1894, beginning with a brief stay in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) before a three month tour of India. He travelled extensively on the rail system seeing much of the country, from the palaces of Madurai to the sacred Ganges River, reveling in Indian life and culture. Freer wrote to his friend and business partner Frank J. Hecker, commenting on the Western tourists who limited their travels to major colonial ports: "they might as well just see Italy by visiting the Italian quarter in New York." Seeking adventure, he traveled through North Eastern India and present day Pakistan to the Afghan border, determined to ride the Khyber Pass. Freer wrote enthusiastically to Hecker "I am very well and over my head in love with India," describing it as, "this country where one can hardly turn round without having one's hat lifted by a half dozen or more marvels."

Map reflects present-day borders and official place names as of 2017

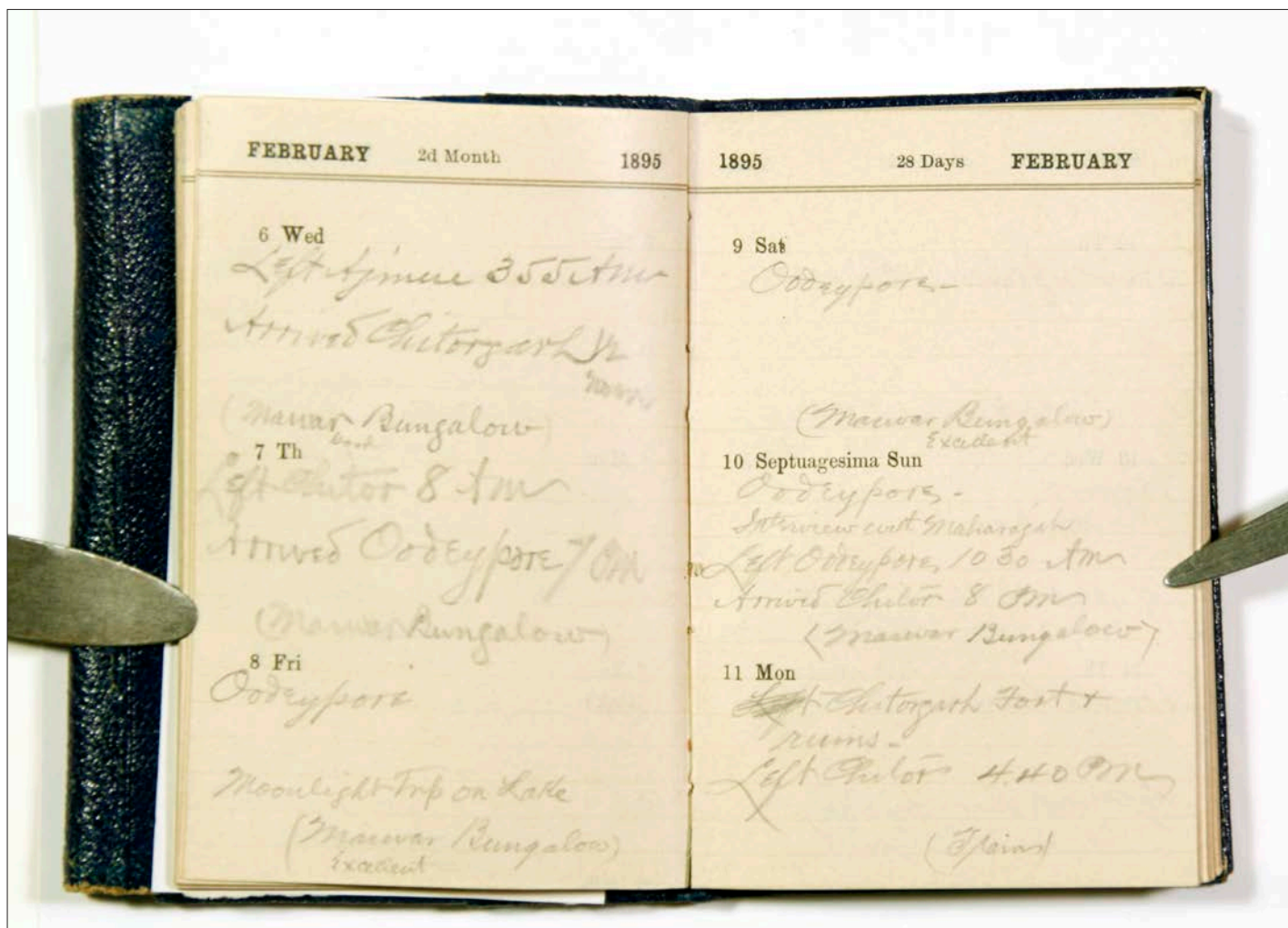




Photograph of Udaipur, c. 1896

Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution





Freer's Diary, February 6 – 11, 1895.

Throughout his life, Freer kept succinct diaries noting little more than where he was and what he did. The pages written during his stay in Udaipur (written "Oodeypore") reveal his delight with the bungalow secured for him by Fateh Lal Mehta, a court official under Maharana Fateh Singh, which he rates as "excellent" in his February 8th entry.

Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution





Photograph of Udaipur, c. 1896

Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution





Swami Vivekananda (1863 -1902)

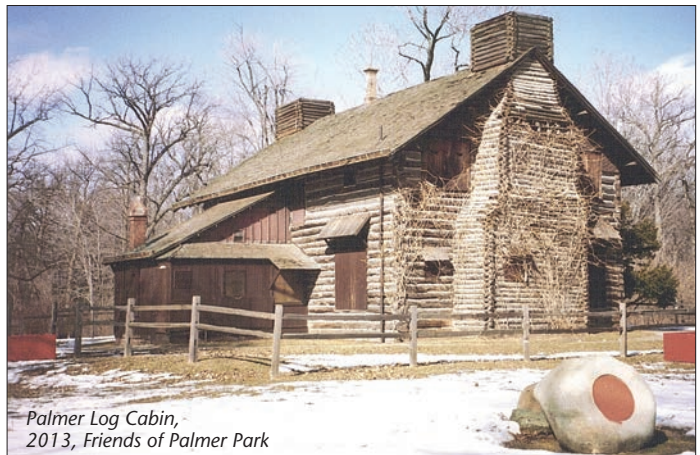
Vivekananda was a spiritual leader from India who gave birth to the modern interfaith movement and is credited with introducing the Indian philosophies of Vedanta and yoga to the West. During his life he lectured often in cities such as Detroit, Boston, and Chicago. Vivekananda is most well-known for his speech at the World's Parliament of Religions at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair: Columbian Exposition, where his message of universal brotherhood and diversity was praised. More recently, Coretta Scott King, wife of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called Vivekananda's talk "the most definitive statement of religious tolerance and interfaith unity in history." As Hindu practices like yoga, meditation, and vegetarianism increase in popularity, so does interest in Vivekananda. With religious tensions rising today, his message of peace and tolerance is needed more than ever, his admirers say.

Text adapted from "Many in Metro Detroit Praise Swami Vivekananda, Spiritual Leader who Birthed the Modern Interfaith Movement," Niraj Warikoo, The Detroit Free Press, March 11, 2012.

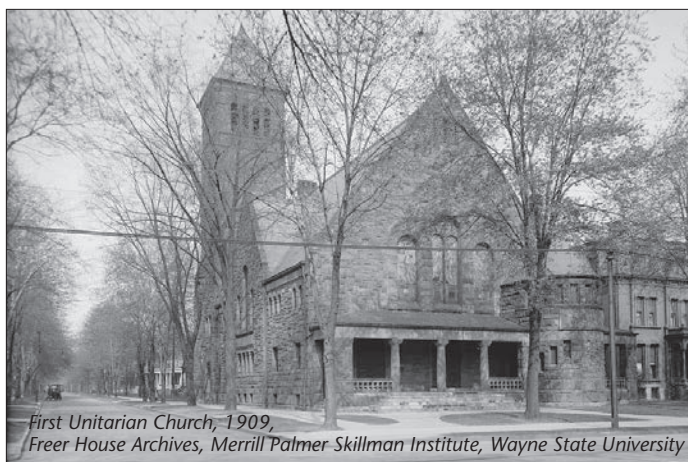
Image of Swami Vivekananda appears courtesy of Indies Services, Bhavnagar, Gujarat, India.



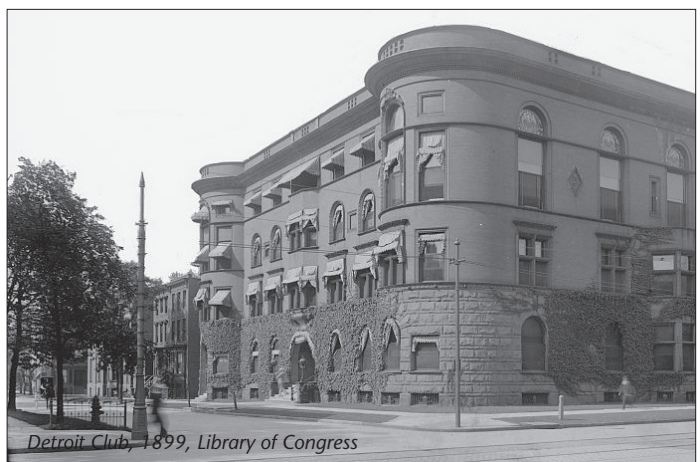
*Freer House, 1906, Charles Lang Freer Papers,
Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution*



*Palmer Log Cabin,
2013, Friends of Palmer Park*



*First Unitarian Church, 1909,
Freer House Archives, Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, Wayne State University*



Detroit Club, 1899, Library of Congress

Swami Vivekananda in Detroit

Launching his national lecture tour in Detroit in 1894, Vivekananda recognized that Detroiters, like most Americans of the time, were unfamiliar with non Judeo-Christian faiths and cultures. His lectures introduced Hindu philosophies and promoted an acceptance of the equal validity of all religions. The Swami's message of interfaith harmony and understanding included a critique of the aims and actions of some Christian missionaries in India, sparking controversy as well as strong support. Vivekananda's nine lectures in churches, a synagogue, and other venues, drew large crowds and extensive press coverage. He was hosted by a number of prominent Detroiters including Charles Lang Freer, Senator and Mrs. Palmer, and Mrs. Frances Bagley, wife of the late Michigan governor. He returned in 1896 for three lectures and classes on the four yogas. His last visit was in 1900 to see two converts to Hinduism.

Only three of the buildings that Swami Vivekananda visited still stand, including the Detroit Club, the Palmer log cabin, and the Freer House, where receptions and dinners were held in his honor. The First Unitarian Church on Woodward Avenue at Edmund Place, where he gave the majority of his lectures, was destroyed by fire in 2014.



The Parliament of World Religions, Chicago World's Fair, 1893

With thousands of visitors coming from around the world, organizers created small congresses within the fair to address specialty topics including literature, science, and religion. The congress known as the World's Parliament of Religions is recognized as the first global meeting of Eastern and Western spiritual traditions and the birthplace of interfaith dialogue.

Swami Vivekananda (circled above), then a young monk, represented Hinduism at the Parliament and opened the meeting with a speech advocating unity among all religions, arguing that the goal of every religion is ultimately the improvement of humanity. He asserted that engagement with India should focus on poverty relief before missionary work, as alleviation of poverty was of greater importance for social and humanitarian progress in India. The Swami's appeal for unity among differing faiths was strongly received by his audience, generating great interest in Hinduism and strategies for religious engagement with India.

Following the Parliament of World Religions, Swami Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Math, a monastic establishment, and Ramakrishna Mission. These twin organizations aim to enhance spiritual and humanitarian development. Established in India as well as America, both continue their work today providing communities with philanthropy, religious education, and centers for spirituality.

Keshav Prasad, contributing writer

Image courtesy of Indies Services, Bhavnagar, Gujarat, India.





GATHERING OF FRIENDS.
Detroit Free Press (1894-1922); May 14, 1894.
Postcard Historical Newspaper Detroit Free Press (1894-1922)

GATHERING OF FRIENDS.

EASTERN BROTHER CLASPED HANDS
WITH THE WITENAGEMOTES.

Hon. T. W. Palmer Was the Genial
Host of the Occasion.

The Witenagemote Club were entertained last evening by Hon. T. W. Palmer, at his residence. It was an informal gathering, designed especially to give the members the opportunity of meeting Kananda, the distinguished Hindoo, in a social way. The members of the club are all gentlemen well known in commercial and professional circles, and in them Kananda was able to surmise the kind of material of which a progressive American city is made. They had for the most part already made the acquaintance of the eastern brother at a reception given by Charles L. Freer and on that occasion had been charmed by the visitor's discourse and impressed by the force and philosophic directness of his views. The Witenagemotes are always keenly alert to imbibe new ideas, and the advent of Kananda here was watched by them with a great deal of interest. . . .

Kananda is ever ready for an argument when it is carried on in a friendly spirit among friends, although a bitter controversy is distasteful to him. Consequently last night he was a veritable lion in a social way, while in discourse he showed himself the exceedingly astute Hindoo that he is. Altogether the occasion was a delightful one, and the gathering of friends figuratively drank from the same big loving cup, plunging a toast for all the world, with no boundary lines of nationality apparent. Some of the busy, active leaders which have built up American industries were ready to concede the club that comes with eastern repose, and if Kananda is a dreamer they conceded there is something attractive after all in dreams, when one can escape from the hurry-scurry for a moment in depicting light of eastern philosophy. Mr. Palmer, it is needless to say, made a graceful host. He told Kananda how he himself found the quiet and peace of a farm, where metaphysical ideas come so freely, and the mysterious charms of nature seem so near.

Marshal Winney Taking Hold.
United States Marshal E. D. Winney, of Jackson, who was appointed by President Cleveland as successor to Capt. Harry O. Blanchard, will not enter upon the duties of his office until April 1. He has appointed Alfred W. Lazen, who was assistant when Mr. Winney was chief of police of Jackson, as first deputy and secretary. In place of Gen. Wallace, Mr. Wallace will remain in office until Mr. Lazen has become thoroughly familiar with the workings of the same. The marshal has also appointed Edward Crowe, a merchant tailor of Jackson, as deputy. Mr. Winney will remove to this city by April. Capt. Blanchard will go back to his office of chief prior in the United States Court, a position he held until he was appointed by Judge Swan to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Marshal Van Buren.

Death of Samuel S. McGrath.
Samuel S. McGrath, for the past two years chief road foreman for the east side of the city, is dead. His illness was of long standing, but he stuck to his post until about three months ago, since which time he has remained in a state of the depressing influence of his illness. Mr. McGrath never enjoyed any infirmity, and all his associates and inferiors in the employ of the board of public works speak of the deceased in the kindest remembrance. He was a brother of Justice McGrath, of the Michigan Supreme Court, and of the Rev. J. McGrath, of Lansing. The funeral takes place from the deceased's residence, at John R. street, Friday afternoon.

GATHERING OF FRIENDS.

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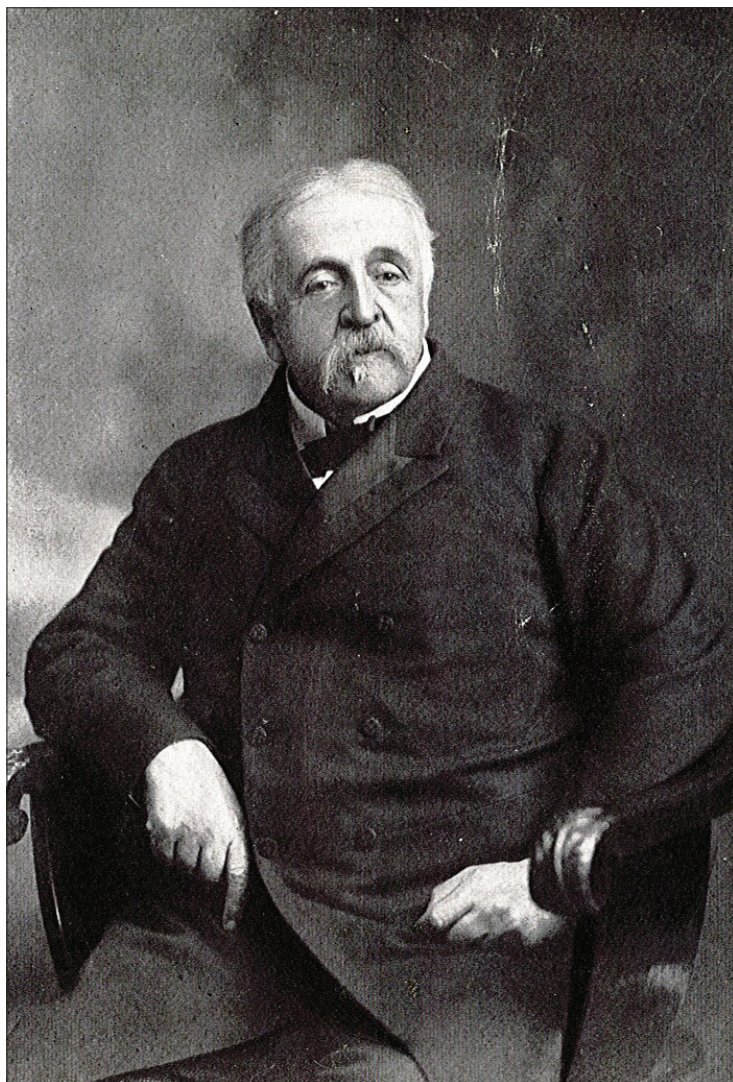
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Swami Vivekananda Visits the Freer House

Detroit newspapers record Freer's hosting of Swami Vivekananda at his home on at least two occasions. Freer held a private reception for Vivekananda on February 16, 1894, inviting many prominent members of the Witenagemote Club. He also entertained the Swami and select guests with a sit down dinner at his home on Ferry Avenue following Vivekananda's lecture at the nearby First Unitarian Church on February 17, 1894. Freer donated \$200 to Vivekananda for travel and living expenses, the equivalent of \$5,000 today. Vivekananda and Freer had a common interest in identifying "points of contact" between East and West. Freer's belief that "all works of art go together, whatever their period," provides an aesthetic counterpart to Vivekananda's message of interfaith harmony. It is also interesting to consider what effect meeting Vivekananda may have had on Freer's positive experience in India during his travels the following year.

Detroit Free Press, March 14, 1894
Historical Newspaper Digital Archives





Senator Thomas Palmer, Lizzie Merrill Palmer, and the Palmers' Log Cabin

Sen. Palmer served as president of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair: Columbian Exposition, where he likely met Swami Vivekananda at the World's Parliament of Religions. During his first visit to Detroit, Vivekananda stayed at the Palmer's home and visited their farm and log cabin (in today's Palmer Park.) The Detroit Free Press quoted Senator Palmer in 1894 telling Swami Vivekananda, "how he himself doted upon the quiet and peace of a farm, where metaphysical ideas come so freely, and the mysterious charms of nature seem so near." In 1916, Senator Palmer's wife, Lizzie Merrill Palmer, donated her estate to found the institution known today as the Merrill-Palmer Skillman Institute, which acquired the Freer House as its headquarters in 1921.

*Portraits of Senator Thomas Palmer and Lizzie Merrill Palmer
Merrill Palmer Audio Visual Archive, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University
Palmer Log Cabin from Encore Editions of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*



THE FREER HOUSE

FREER AND INDIAN ART

Kailey McAlpin, 2017 Research
Catherine Blasio, Exhibit Designer
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MERRILL PALMER
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JUNE 2017

Charles Lang Freer: Pioneering American Collector of Indian Art

During Freer's first and only trip to India, a three month stay in 1895, he was still a young collector of Asian art. While in India, Freer acquired only books and a few minor objects. It was not until 1907 that Freer began to collect Indian art seriously, acquiring superb objects from other British and American collectors. Most significant was a remarkably varied collection Freer purchased from Col. Henry Bathurst Hanna, which included an outstanding illustrated manuscript in Persian translation of the great Hindu epic, the Ramayana.¹

According to art scholar and curator, Brinda Kumar, PhD, "Freer's passion for India was seminal and enduring. The impressions of India formed on his trip lingered with Freer," Dr. Kumar writes, "and although he didn't visit again, as he had intended, he nevertheless considered Indian art and culture of key importance for foundational and comparative reasons as his interests in East Asian and Near Eastern art grew respectively."² Freer sought to include superb examples in his growing collection and regarded Indian art as "an important link in the chain which connects the potteries of Syria, Persia and Babylon, with the later art of China and Japan."³

Freer's pioneering vision and advanced aesthetic positioned Indian art as "fine art," at a time when Indian objects were mostly relegated in the West to the more limited spheres of ethnographic, archaeological or decorative interest. "Even towards the end of his life, Freer continued to be actively interested in Indian art and culture and recognized its importance in the burgeoning field of aesthetic appreciation and art historical scholarship," states Brinda Kumar.²

Once held entirely in his Detroit home, Freer's exceptional collection of Indian, Asian and American art was bequeathed to the Smithsonian Institution, where it is housed today in the Freer Gallery of Art on the National Mall in Washington, D.C..

¹ Freer: A Legacy of Art, Lawton and Merrill, Smithsonian, pgs. 123-125

² Description for the lecture, *From Traveler to Aesthete: Charles Lang Freer and Indian Art*, by Brinda Kumar, PhD, presented at the Detroit Institute of Arts, June 4, 2017

³ Charles L. Freer to Charles Morse, August 30, 1907



(top right) Ivory Throne Leg
India, Orissa, Eastern Ganga dynasty, 13th century
Ivory, 34.9 x 15.7 x 13.2. F1907.8
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian
(lower left) Main entrance, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.
(lower right) South and Southeast Asian Gallery at the Freer Gallery of Art
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian

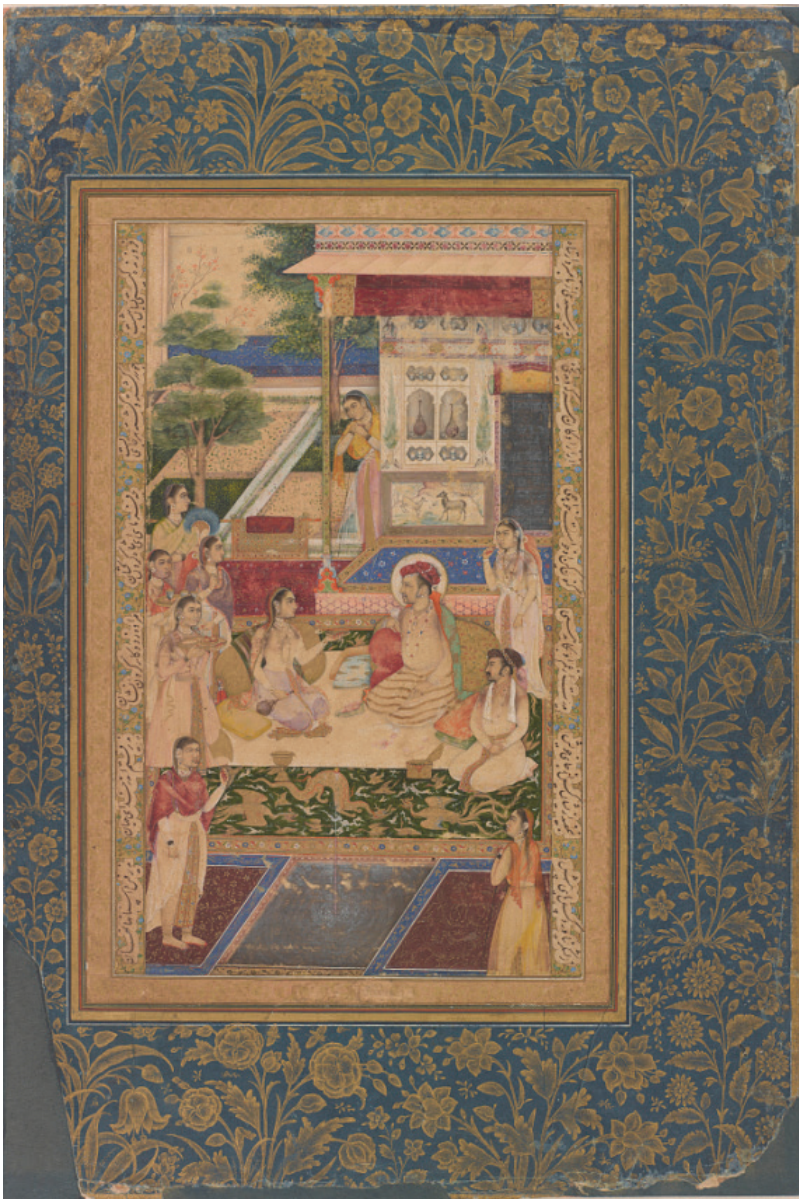




(left) **Hanuman returns the mountain with the four healing plants to the Himalayas**
 Zayn al-'Abidin, India, Mughal dynasty, Reign of Akbar, 1597-1605
 Ink, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 27.5 x 15.2. F1907.271.173-346
 Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian



(right) **Head of a young woman, among flowering stems**
 India, Mughal dynasty, c. 1620
 Color and gold on paper, 4.9 x 3. F1907.763
 Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian



(above left) **Jahangir and Prince Khurram entertained by Nur Jahan**
North India, Mughal dynasty, Reign of Jahangir, ca. 1640-50
Opaque watercolor, ink and gold on paper, 25.2 x 14.2. F1907.258
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian

(above right) Earring (jhumka)
India, 19th century
Silver, 7.7 x 3.7. F1907.678
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian

(left) Pendant
India, 19th century
Silver, glass, mica and paste, 5.4 x 4.4 x 0.6. F1907.685
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian

(right) **A Holi festival**
 India, Avadh (Oudh), Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow, 19th century
 Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 28.9 x 19.2. F1907.255
 Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian

(below) **Tomb of Shaikh Salim Chisti, at Fathpur Sikri**
 India, Delhi or Agra, late 19th century
 Watercolor on paper, 23.9 x 38.8. F1907.192
 Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian

