

An American Collector in Egypt



By Peter Saenger

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The American industrialist Charles Lang Freer collected all kinds of art, from Asian ceramics to paintings by James McNeill Whistler. But he considered ancient Egyptian art the “greatest” in the world, acquiring more than a hundred small-scale Egyptian treasures as much as five millennia old. Before he died in 1919, Freer donated his collection to the U.S., and it now forms the core of the Smithsonian Institution’s Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. “A Collector’s Eye: Freer in Egypt,” a new exhibition opening there on Jan. 28, features more than 120 artworks, most of which Freer purchased during three trips to Egypt between 1906 and 1909.

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Freer’s rise to riches was a classic Gilded Age story. Born in Kingston, N.Y., in 1854, he made a fortune in railcar manufacturing, and by his mid-40s he could step back from business. Unmarried and childless, he began to study religion and spiritualism. The art historian Kathleen Pyne writes that Freer’s art collecting was part of the same quest, as he searched for “the transcendent art object.” From Luxor, the site of an ancient Egyptian capital, Freer wrote a friend in 1907 that “one forgets the confusion of busier places and in the

midst of things worth while has a chance for thoughts worth while if he cares to encourage them. I have tried lately to reason a little with myself; to think to what purpose to devote my few remaining years.”

While other wealthy collectors amassed large-scale, historically important Egyptian works, Freer was “looking for the peculiar...looking for colors,” especially green, turquoise and blue, says exhibition curator Antonietta Catanzariti. For instance, the show includes dozens of rosette discs, each less than 2 inches in diameter, of the kind used to decorate the palace of Rameses III in the 12th century B.C. Freer placed the beauty of a work above its historical significance and cared little whether a decorative plate, for example, was in pieces.

In 1909, he bought a striking funerary mask made of highly prized sycamore fig wood, more than 3,000 years old, that had been used in an Egyptian death ritual: To help a spirit return to its mummified body, the corpse would be fitted with a mask featuring an idealized portrait of the deceased, with vivid, painted-glass eyes. Freer also liked colorful glass mosaics made in Roman Egypt as inlays for furniture, which depicted types of characters found in classical Greek comedies—courtesans, old men, soldiers.



An Egyptian jar made ca. 1500-1200 B.C. Photo: Freer Gallery of Art

Amulets of glass, faience and lapis lazuli, some an inch or less long, take the shape of animals symbolizing gods, including a lion, an ape and a crocodile. Horus, the Egyptian god of the sky, appears as a bronze falcon on a shrine-shaped coffin from circa 600 B.C. and on a soapstone slab inscribed with magical spells from circa 300-30 B.C. A glass jar from the 14th century B.C., vividly marked with zigzaggy waves of yellow, black and white, looks like Pop Art.

Freer usually bought art at a deliberate pace, but sometimes he could go to extravagant lengths. He fell in love with and purchased a glass collection of almost 1,400 necklace beads, ear studs, furniture inlays and other small glass objects owned by the dealer Giovanni Dattari. When the archaeologist Walter Dennison urged him to acquire a cache of gold earrings, bracelets and medallions found at an Egyptian site, Freer bought them sight unseen.

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His collecting trips ended in 1911, when he apparently suffered a heart attack, but he continued to display his Egyptian treasures in his Detroit home. Among them was one of the oldest surviving parchment manuscripts of the Gospels, copied in Egypt around the year 400. Because of the manuscript's fragility, a digital copy will substitute for the original in "A Collector's Eye," allowing visitors to turn the pages on a screen. The manuscript includes a passage not found in the canonical Gospels, in Mark 16: "And Christ replied to them, 'The term of years for Satan's power has been fulfilled, but other terrible things draw near.'" Whatever darker themes Freer's Egyptian finds evoked, collecting satisfied him in a way business success never did. As he wrote from Luxor, "Happiness is with me."

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