

Charles Lang Freer

1854–1919

Industrialist, Collector, Connoisseur, and Museum Founder



Born in Kingston, New York, Charles Lang Freer left school at age fourteen to work in a cement factory and then as a clerk for the local Kingston and Syracuse Railroad. Colonel Frank J. Hecker (1846–1927), a Civil War veteran and railroad executive, hired young Freer as a bookkeeper. Attracted by the potential opportunities offered by the fast-growing railroad industry, they moved to Detroit, Michigan. Hecker, Freer, and a group of Detroit businessmen launched the Peninsular Car Works in 1879. Within a few years the factory was expanded to the Peninsular Car Company. In 1899 Freer oversaw the merger of thirteen railroad-car companies into the American Car and Foundry Company, which is still in business today. Freer retired from business at age forty-five, an extremely wealthy man.

In 1887 Freer acquired his first works by expatriate American artist James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903). His long relationship with Whistler as a patron and collector resulted in the Freer Gallery today having one of the world's most sizable and significant collections of the artist's work. The Gallery also houses *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, the London dining room that Whistler redecorated in 1876–77, complete with the artist's *La Princess du pays de la porcelain* (1863–64) over the mantelpiece. Freer also acquired works by contemporary American artists, including Thomas Wilmer Dewing (1851–1938), Dwight William Tryon (1849–1925), and Abbott Handerson Thayer (1849–1921).

By the early twentieth century, Freer was an internationally recognized connoisseur of Asian art. He formed pivotal relationships with international collectors, scholars, and dealers, among them Dikran Kelekian, Ernest Fenollosa, and Matsuki Bunkyo, who operated a gallery of Japanese art in Boston. Between 1894 and 1911 Freer made five extensive tours by steamship to destinations in Japan, Korea, India, China, and Egypt and other areas in the Middle East. His extensive notes about what he encountered and purchased are now in the museum's archives.

As a connoisseur and collector, Freer acquired objects that appealed to his particular aesthetic sensibilities. He appreciated the formal qualities of color, surface, and texture, whatever an object's origin. When he proposed donating his collection of Asian and American art to the Smithsonian in 1904, Freer made it clear that his collection was to be understood as a harmonious whole, with works from "widely separated periods of artistic development. . . . They are not made up of individual objects, each object having an individual merit only. . . . For those who have the power to see beauty . . . all works of art go together, whatever their time period." By the time the Freer Gallery of Art opened to the public in 1923 as the Smithsonian's first art museum, it was an unrivaled repository of ceramics, scrolls, prints, paintings, sculpture, and other works from throughout Asia.

In the first codicil to his Last Will and Testament, dated May 4, 1918, Freer announced a gift of one million dollars to be used in creating a building (construction was already underway by then) to house his collection and to maintain its upkeep, to hire a curator, and later to purchase Asian art. He named fellow collectors Eugene and Agnes Meyer and Louisine Havermeyer, the museum's architect Charles Platt, and his old friend Frank Hecker to oversee future acquisitions. Freer felt his American

holdings were complete and harmonious and thus were not to be supplemented. He did permit that “for the promotion of the ideals of beauty . . . occasional purchases shall be made of very fine examples of Oriental, Egyptian, and Near East fine arts.” His Will also stated that the Freer Gallery was not to display works from other collections in its spaces, nor was it to lend objects for exhibition elsewhere. While the Asian holdings of the Freer Gallery of Art have greatly expanded from the more than 9,000 works of art that Charles Lang Freer acquired and donated, the original aesthetic taste and educational mission of its founder have been upheld over the past century.

Literature

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