

Eugene I. Meyer, Jr.**1875–1959****Financier and Chinese Art Collector**

Eugene Meyer, Jr., was descended from a distinguished Jewish family in the Alsace-Lorraine region of France. His father left France and established himself in California before settling in New York, where he became a partner in the distinguished financial firm of Lazard-Frères. Meyer attended the University of California, Berkeley, for one year and finished his undergraduate studies at Yale University in 1895. He traveled in Europe and worked at several banks before he founded his own highly successful equities firm in 1904.

Meyer began collecting Asian art following his 1910 marriage to Agnes Ernst (1887–1970) and their honeymoon travels to Japan, Korea, and Russia. This interest grew when he and renowned collector Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919) served on a committee, jointly sponsored by the Archaeological Institute of America and the Smithsonian Institution, to establish the American School of Architecture in Peking and thus ensure the removal of Chinese art was handled by trained archaeologists. Although this effort proved unsuccessful, Meyer and Freer remained lifelong friends and mutual collectors of Asian art.

Through most of their collecting career, Eugene and Agnes Meyer relied on Freer as a connoisseur of early Chinese art. They sometimes collaborated with Freer on purchases by negotiating the price and dividing the objects between their respective collections. In 1915, for example, dealer Marcel Bing in Paris owned an outstanding group of bronzes that were to be sold through C. T. Loo's gallery. Freer led the negotiations with Bing, and Meyer advised on the transaction. They lent the ancient Chinese ritual bronzes, now jointly owned by the Meyers and Freer, to a landmark exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1916. These Chinese bronzes were the first of their kind, antiquity, and quality to be displayed in the United States.

In the fall of 1917, Meyer moved his family to Washington, D.C., when he became a member of the Advisory Committee of the Council of National Defense. Over the years he held several government appointments as director of the War Finance Corporation (1918), head of the Federal Farm Loan Board (1927), and the first president of the World Bank (1946). In 1933 he purchased the *Washington Post* newspaper. Eugene Meyer's personal involvement with the family's art acquisitions dwindled due to his other commitments, but his crucial financial backing remained an important constant.

A provision in the first codicil to Freer's Last Will and Testament, dated May 4, 1918, stipulates the terms of his gift to the nation: a museum of Asian art on the National Mall. Freer selected a small group—Eugene and Agnes Meyer, collector Louisine Havemeyer, his business partner Frank J. Hecker, and the museum's architect, Charles A. Platt—to oversee the possible expansion of the future museum's Asian holdings. After Freer's death in 1919, the Meyers continued to show deep commitment to the Freer Gallery of Art.

Literature

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Agnes E. Meyer, *Out of These Roots: The Autobiography of an American Woman* (Boston, 1953).

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Henry Allen, "Meyer Collection: A Legacy, A Gift," *Washington Post* (September 27, 1971).

Warren I. Cohen, *East Asian Art and American Culture: A Study in International Relations* (New York, 1992).

Thomas Lawton and Linda Merrill, *Freer: A Legacy of Art* (Washington, DC, 1993).

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For documentation about Eugene and Agnes Meyer, search the Charles Lang Freer Papers; see http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_arc_238779 and http://www.asia.si.edu/archives/finding_aids/Freer.html

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