

Harold Philip Stern
1922–1977
Curator of Japanese Art



A native of Detroit, Michigan, Harold Philip Stern belongs to a generation of American scholars whose interest in Asian art was ignited by language training and military service in Japan during and after World War II. In 1949 he was named the first Fellow in the exchange program organized between the Freer Gallery of Art and the University of Michigan, an educational alliance established by the bequest of museum founder Charles Lang Freer (1856–1919). Two years later Stern became an assistant in research at the Freer Gallery and, later, the institution’s first curator of Japanese art.

A scholar of Japanese art—the subject of his doctoral dissertation was *ukiyo-e* painting—Stern augmented the museum’s holdings by acquiring exceptional works of Japanese painting, sculpture, ceramics, and metalwork, which served to enhance American awareness of Japan’s artistic heritage and achievements. For the Freer Gallery’s fiftieth anniversary in 1973, Stern put 118 Japanese masterworks from the collection on view. When Emperor Hirohito and Empress Nagako visited the nation’s capital in 1975, Stern selected forty objects from the Imperial Household for their private viewing. The royal visit was a major triumph for the Gallery.

Stern served as the Freer Gallery’s assistant director from 1962 to 1971. When John Alexander Pope (1906–1982) retired in 1971, Stern became the museum’s fourth director, a position he held until he died six years later.

Literature

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