



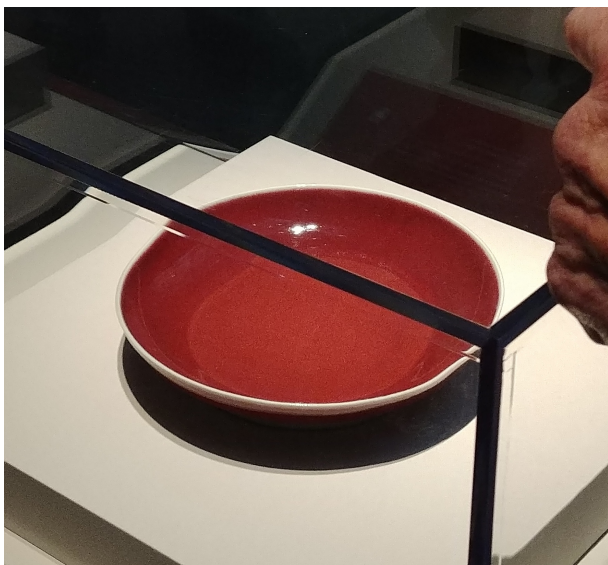
Checking out the Reopened Freer Gallery

We might not want to tell the eight graders about Charles Freer, donor of the Freer Gallery and its artifacts. Despite dropping out after middle school, he made enough money as a railroad car manufacturer that he retired at 44, and spent the rest of his life educating himself about Art. His passion was mostly Asian art, and always, the “ultimate examples” of particular genres. Seeking advice from an associate of artist James Whistler, Freer was refused: “Why do you ask my opinion?” The dealer respected Freer's eye.

Susan Papadopoulos hosted a recent guides tour of the Freer Gallery, the first Smithsonian art museum. It almost didn't happen. In 1906, the childless Freer decided to leave his collection, under strict conditions, to the nation. At that time, the Smithsonian's regents were mostly scientists, who

It took Teddy Roosevelt to cut through the paralyzing discussions of whether to act or not. The gallery, designed by Charles Platt under Freer's aesthetic direction, opened in 1923.

Curators are bound by specific instructions on Freer's bequest. The American art collection is fixed; no new paintings can be added. The Asian art collection has an endowment to collect “ultimate example” of different genres. These genres are housed in specific galleries whose locations cannot be changed. Certain pieces which might be thought disparate are displayed together. In the Japanese ceramics gallery, for example, we learned that the simple, translucent mono-colored pieces are actually some of the most valuable. Any imperfection would be very obvious. There were even sumptuary laws specifying which social classes could dine from which colors of plates. (European countries had similar laws concerning colors of clothing.)



Next to the perfectly pure plates one sees a Chinese Song Dynasty vase which appears cracked. This particular piece appears to have vertical cracks running from the bottom up and to the right, with a network of horizontal pieces in between. These flaws were deliberate, revealing a sophisticated understanding of the difference in drying times between the clay and the glaze. A perfect contrast to the perfect plates. This definition by difference is a hallmark of how Freer's displaying the collections is his artistic expression.



One can thus understand one reason why the collection cannot be shared with other museums: the other curators would not be bound by Freer's aesthetics. When the Japanese wanted to celebrate painter Katsushika Hokusai, many of his works were flown to DC from Japan.

Hokusai's work was particularly appropriate for Freer. Both life as a worker. Hokusai began in a print shop, became a painter, and his works celebrate the dignity of ordinary, laboring Japanese. He created many of the large screens which were Japanese artists' canvasses. Unlike the Chinese, the Japanese celebrate asymmetry, using contrast as an artistic device to stimulate the viewers. One of Hokusai's screens shows the ghost of iconic Mount Fuji. It is pure white, and one sees it by contrast to a gentle watercolor wash representing the sky.



Unlike Western works whose frames can be quite elaborate, the Japanese screens have simple wooden frames. They were used to partition rooms, often creating special private spaces. This Hokusai screen was part of a series representing the seasons, can could separate a room.

Scrolls were designed to be hung on special occasions. The Freer continues a type of this tradition: in the interest of preservation, silks and scrolls are typically exhibited for five or six months, and then stored for five years. The gallery typically exhibits less than a third of its holdings at any one time.

Special themed tours are available from time to time. The gallery celebrated its recent re-opening with tours of Buddhist art across cultures, for example. One travels through the different galleries focusing on the diffusion and evolution of Buddhism through different cultures and times.

Impermanence is a Buddhist tennant which will effect even the Peacock Room shortly. This London dining room belonged to Frederick Richards Leyland, a patron of American artist James MacNeil Whistler. You may have heard of "Whistler's Mother", a famous portrait which once adorned a U.S. postage stamp honoring Mother's Day. His portrait "Princess from the land of Porcelain", a Western woman in Japanese dress and surroundings, is much more sensual, and was the original centerpiece of the dining room.



Whistler had been engaged in decorating the foyer when the original artist fell ill. He had suggested that he re-touch the walls to mute the red roses in the wall coverings, since the colors clashed with his painting. Leland agreed. The project so engrossed Whistler that he repainted the room in green and gold leaf. When Leland returned, he was so shocked and angry that a life-long quarrel, ending in court, began. Papadopoulos explained the first round: Leland paid Whistler in pounds, each worth 20 shillings, rather than in guineas, worth 21 shillings. In those days, gentlemen preferred to pay in gold guineas, and the more common pound offended Whistler.

The peacocks for whom the room was named were actually painted after Whistler had been fired. One could even tell the

eighth graders that they are a type of graffiti: Whistler talked his way into the house while Leland was away and “tagged” the dining room. The peacock on the right is Leland, the plutocrat, One can see that Leland's chest feathers, for example, are actually coins. Are they the shillings that Whistler believed he was owed? Whistler, on the left, has a much bigger tail, which is the symbol of peacock masculinity.

During their legal battle, Whistler reportedly told Leland, “I have made you famous. My work will live when you are forgotten. Still, per chance, in the dim ages to come you will be remembered as the proprietor of the Peacock Room.” Technically, Freer purchased the entire room, moved it to his home in Detroit, and left it to the Smithsonian. So he is the proprietor who left it to the people.



At this writing the room holds diverse genres of the collection's pottery. In a few weeks, the pottery collection will be changed, impermanently, to the original blue-and-white traditional porcelain. To see either collection in a differently, in natural light, come Thursday afternoons, from noon to closing. The windows are opened to natural light. In a few weeks, the pottery collection will be changed to the original blue-and-white traditional porcelain.

Anyone studying oriental art and culture – from Buddhist to Muslim, from Japan to India, can find a tour which will make their corner of Asia come alive. Even young folks can appreciate “extreme collecting” when they experience Freer's gift.

Contributor: Tony Spadafora.

tony@YourDCGuide.com

202.302.6676