

Presentation 1

America's National Museum of Asian Art: Displaying and Collecting Japanese Paintings at the Freer Gallery of Art

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Profile

Frank Feltens is Japan Foundation Assistant Curator of Japanese Art at the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. A native of Germany, he earned a PhD in Japanese art history from Columbia University with a thesis on Ogata Kōrin. He has organized a number of exhibitions at the Freer and Sackler, including *Japan Modern: Prints in the Age of Photography* (2018-19), *Painting the Classics* (2018-19), and *Hokusai: Mad about Painting* (2019-20). His upcoming exhibition, *Meeting Tessai: Modern Japanese Art from the Cowles Collection* (2020) will feature a transformative gift to the Freer Gallery's Japanese art collections. Feltens has published and lectured widely on Japanese art, most recently on the painters Ogata Kōrin and Sakai Hōitsu, and the photographers Domon Ken and Tōmatsu Shōmei.

In the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War, in 1906, the regents of the Smithsonian Institution accepted Charles Lang Freer's groundbreaking gift to the Nation. The industrialist pledged his collection of Asian and American art to the Smithsonian, alongside funds to build and maintain a museum to house the artworks. It was the first time that the Smithsonian had been offered a collection of art, and at the time of its opening in 1923, the Freer Gallery of Art was the Smithsonian's first national art museum.

Although the museum is housed in the political heart of the United States, Charles Lang Freer had amassed his collection not for political but for aesthetic purposes. The arts of Japan and China above all enthralled Freer and he was drawn to the two cultures' millennia-old history. Freer used art in the same as he used nature—as an escape from the stresses and boredoms of human existence. The philosophy and mission of the Freer Gallery of Art is built on these two parallel notions—politics and aesthetics. In exhibitions and programming, the museum still upholds these principles as driving forces of our thinking.

When Freer gifted his collection to the Smithsonian Institution, he did so with the explicit request that the works be made available for study and looked after carefully. This is one of the reasons why everyone can request a viewing of artworks at the Freer. We also maintain one of the largest conservation and scientific research facilities in America.

In Freer's mind, the best way to ensure access to and preserve the condition of the works in his collection was by avoiding to lend them to other institutions. The Freer Gallery is unique among Asian art museums in the West in that its collections may never leave the building. Also, no loan objects may be exhibited in the Freer. New acquisitions can be added to the collection through gifts and purchases.

The Freer Gallery's spaces are divided by regional areas, with Japan occupying five galleries on the Western side of the building. Storage and conservation facilities are located beneath the gallery level. The Freer Gallery's Italian palazzo-inspired building was designed by Charles Platt, an architect well known for building country estates for wealthy Americans. The interior layout was heavily informed by early 20th-century notions of looking and the psychology of art—notions that still influence curatorial choices at the museum today. Visitors are guided through the museum along corridors from which they can choose freely which adjacent galleries to enter. The corridors usually do not display art and function as gateways that provide visitor's the chance to explore the museum at their own pace. They are free to choose the order and direction by

which to view the art displayed in the galleries. An open courtyard at the center of the building provides a park-like atmosphere. The space reflects an early 20th-century understanding that viewing nature does not require personal engagement (as opposed to looking at art) and serves to replenish the mind before heading back into the galleries.

The Freer's Japan galleries are commonly used for rotating exhibits. Traditionally, one theme is chosen per gallery. Gallery 8 is devoted to religious art, whereas gallery 6 is frequently devoted to ceramics. Gallery 5 is traditionally the screen gallery and holds the largest glass cases in the building. The largest gallery, number 7, variously displays hanging scrolls with paintings or calligraphy, alongside other small-format works. An alcove called gallery 6a was traditionally used to showcase tea utensils but has recently been converted into a highlight space where objects of particular importance are shown.

The Freer Gallery has ceiling windows. The glass, however, are covered with a UV-filtering layer, preventing any harmful rays from reaching the art displayed. Artificial lighting is adjusted so it augments and not overshadows the natural light. The mix of natural and artificial light enables visitors to experience the artworks in a very different way depending on the time of the day or the season they come to the Freer Gallery. On a winter evening, for example, the *mise-en-scène* feels much more dramatic than on a summer morning, increasing visitors' awareness of the changing impact of different seasons and different hours of the day on viewing art.

Today, approachability, easy looking, and sparking curiosity are at the core of the Freer Gallery's mission of exhibiting its collection. We conduct regular visitor surveys to explore the demographic of our audience, their expectations, and satisfaction rate. The fact that the Smithsonian's collections belong to the people of the United States comes with the responsibility of making exhibits approachable to anyone without dumbing down the content. This creates challenges and opportunities for curators as they are writing labels—all texts in an exhibition are edited in-house for consistency and approachability.

Exhibitions in the Freer Gallery of Art exclusively draw from the museum's own collection. The will of Charles Lang Freer permits the acquisition of new works of art through purchases and gifts, but it prevents any part of the Freer's collection from ever leaving the building. We are also not able to borrow works from outside institutions and display them in the Freer Gallery—the adjacent Arthur M. Sackler Gallery is used for that purpose instead.

To mark the centennial of Freer's death, in November 2019, we opened that largest special exhibition in the Freer Gallery's history. The show combines all five Japan galleries into one exhibition focusing on the paintings, sketches, drawings of Katsushika Hokusai. Hokusai was Freer's favorite painter and he amassed the world's largest collection of his paintings, sketches, and drawings. In fact, there are more works in the collection of the Freer Gallery by Hokusai than by any other single artist.

In order to tie all five galleries into one exhibition, design choices had to be made that depart somewhat radically from the serene atmosphere of the Freer building. The corridor along the Japanese galleries in the West side of the building needed to link all the galleries thematically. We decided to create selfie-worthy wall murals with the title of the exhibition emblazoned in large letters. To turn the corridor into an intuitive point of departure, the opening wall text and a timeline of Hokusai's life were placed there. In a departure from the one-gallery-one-theme model, the exhibition creates a clockwise flow from one gallery to the next to explore Hokusai's work as a painter chronologically. As a first ever for the Freer Gallery, we installed a touchscreen panel where visitors can explore volumes of Hokusai manga that are in the museum's Gerhard Pulverer Collection of Illustrated Books. In the future, we hope to add more innovations to display in the Freer Gallery, an ambition that gains particular momentum as we are approaching the museum's centennial in 2023.

In the U.S. capital, the Freer Gallery has a special role to showcase the rich and multi-faceted culture of Japan and other Asian nations. We strive to uphold that mission while making sure to reflect shifting paradigms in our rapidly changing world.