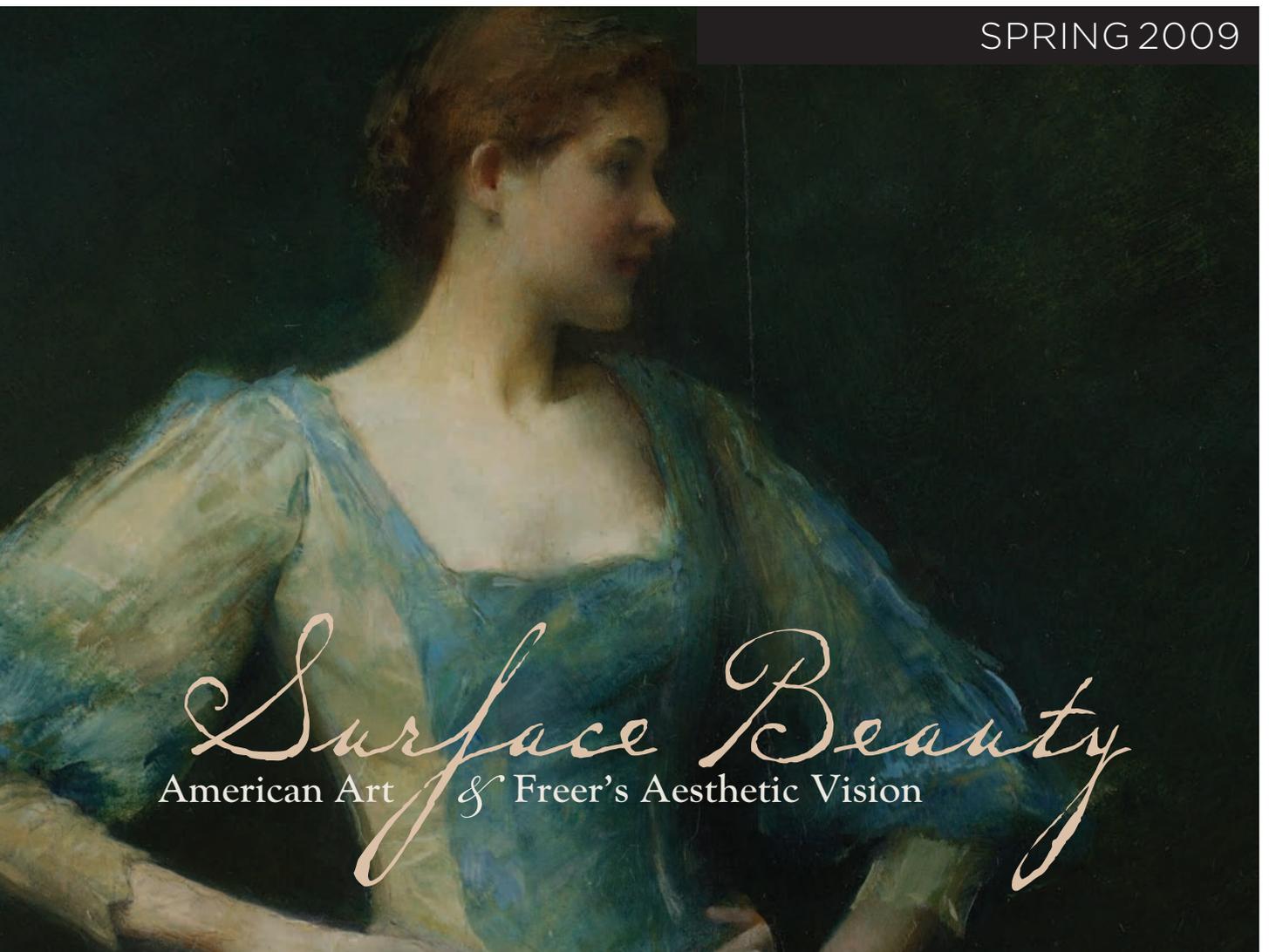


ASIAN ART
connections
A RESOURCE FOR EDUCATORS

SPRING 2009



Surface Beauty
American Art & Freer's Aesthetic Vision

POSTER
INSIDE!

classroom activity

Suitable for Grades 9–12

United States History (Gilded Age, 1870–1900) and Visual Arts

OVERVIEW

Examining an artwork in depth fosters observation and critical thinking skills. Looking closely also stimulates conversation about the artistic, cultural, and historical context in which a work of art was made. In this session, students focus on two paintings by the American artist Thomas Wilmer Dewing. Charles Lang Freer, the founder of the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian Institution, avidly collected Dewing's art. This activity explores how Dewing's paintings express his unique aesthetic vision as they also embody the late nineteenth-century idea of the American Renaissance.

Essential Question

How does this work of art represent new trends in American society during the Gilded Age?

Duration

This lesson plan requires one class session of sixty minutes.

Materials

Poster of *The Four Sylvan Sounds*

Handout 1—Japanese Folding Screens

Handout 2—Tanagra Figurine

Handout 3—Window into Art (one per student)

Vocabulary

Lyre	A hand-held harp played in ancient Greece
Renaissance	A period of intense development in the arts, humanities, and sciences
Sylvan	Relating to or of the woods
Tanagra figurines	Small terra-cotta sculptures from ancient Greece that primarily depict women of the upper class

Background Information

During the Gilded Age (1870–1900), the rise of the United States as a world power and the explosion of industry, scientific advancement, education, and money led many newly wealthy Americans to discover ways of understanding, appreciating, and participating in artistic culture. In this period, often called the American Renaissance, artists consciously developed a cosmopolitan approach to learning about and creating art. They looked to classical, European Renaissance, Asian, and non-Western artistic traditions for inspiration. Artists, writers, and tourists traveled enthusiastically around Europe, exploring art, architecture, and archaeological sites. They studied the art and culture of Japan, a nation that had only recently opened trade relations with the United States due to a treaty signed with Commodore Matthew Perry in 1854.

Many American industrialists, such as Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919), Henry Clay Frick (1849–1919), and Andrew W. Mellon (1855–1937), who made their vast fortunes during the Gilded Age, acted as art patrons and philanthropists. These wealthy Americans acquired “masterpieces” for their personal enjoyment, and later many of their artworks became part of public collections in museums. Their accumulation of “cultural capital” through this patronage served two seemingly contradictory purposes. By supporting artists and cultural and educational institutions, patrons legitimized their new economic, social, and political power. They also actively participated in democratizing culture by making art and education available to a wider public audience.

Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919) acquired his immense wealth by creating a monopoly on railroad cars in Detroit, Michigan. After retiring in 1899 at the age of forty-five, Freer dedicated his life to collecting art from Asia as well as works by American artists. He gave his collection to the Smithsonian Institution in 1906, along with funds to build a new museum. The Freer Gallery of Art, the first museum on the National Mall dedicated to the fine arts, opened to the public in 1923, four years after Freer's death.

Freer served as a patron to a number of artists, including Thomas Wilmer Dewing (1851–1938), whose works were displayed in Freer's home and were a cherished part of his American collection. Although New York City was his professional base, Dewing was inspired by the New England landscape, and he spent his summers at an artist's colony in Cornish, New Hampshire.

Like many American artists during the Gilded Age, Dewing incorporated international elements into his work. *The Four Sylvan Sounds* illustrates the way he drew from a variety of sources—here, the woodlands of New England, the sculptures of ancient Greece, and the decorative painting and folding screens of Japan.

OBJECT INFORMATION

The Four Sylvan Sounds

1896–97

Thomas Wilmer Dewing (American, 1851–1938)

Oil on wood panels

Each 175.7 x 153 cm

Gift of Charles Lang Freer F1906.72–73

Format

These paintings are actually a pair of two-panel wood screens with metal hinges. Dewing may have been inspired to create them after he visited the studio of James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) in Paris in 1895 and saw a Japanese screen painted with a nocturne (night scene). His interest may also have been sparked by Freer's purchase of twelve Japanese screens. In fact, Dewing often acted as Freer's art agent and helped him purchase screens and other works from a Japanese dealer based in New York City. Freer might have used these screens in his home as a room divider in the Japanese manner. (See Handout 1—Japanese Folding Screens.)

Foliage

Dewing was inspired by the landscape of New England for the vegetation in these paintings, while the flatness of the overlapping leaves and flowers recall Japanese decorative artworks. The regularized forms and slightly raised edge around the leaves' contours (particularly in the lower left of the far left panel) suggest Dewing may have used a stencil, a technique borrowed from Japanese artists. It is also possible that Maria Oakey, his wife and an accomplished flower painter, may have worked on the foliage. (See Handout 1—Japanese Folding Screens.)

Figures

The female figures draped in classical robes represent the four sounds of the forest, or Sylvan sounds. (See Sound in next column.) These figures were likely inspired by Tanagra figurines—small ancient Greek terra-cotta sculptures of well-to-do women. The sculptures were well known in the 1890s, and Dewing attended an exhibition of Tanagra figurines a few years before he painted these screens. (See Handout 2—Tanagra Figurine.)

Sound

The Four Sylvan Sounds represents the sensual pleasures that surrounded Dewing in his New Hampshire summer retreat. Corresponding with Freer in 1894, Dewing wrote, "I wish you could be here, taking in this cool fresh air filled with bird notes & scents of flowers." Sound was a particularly important element in the environment he wished to convey through his paintings. Each figure (from left) holds an instrument that suggests one of the four sylvan sounds.

- The lyre refers to wind through the pine trees.
- The drum represents the woodpecker.
- The xylophone suggests the sound of running water.
- The flute evokes the song of the hermit thrush.

ACTIVITIES

Display the poster in the classroom, and hand out a copy of the Window into Art activity to each student. Explain that they should look closely at the paintings on the poster and fill out areas 1–3. During the group discussion, they should fill out window pane 4.

As students respond to specific elements in the works, offer information about the paintings and their context, including the additional images if appropriate. Have the students share their lists.

Extension Activity

On poster board or a large piece of paper, write general concepts related to the Gilded Age, such as "Wealth," "Industry," "Art and Design," and "Philanthropy." Ask students to select one of the "learned" items they noted on pane 4 and write it on an index card. Tape each card to the paper and draw lines to one or more of the "big ideas" to which it relates.

Adding Music to Your Lesson

Further explore the musical elements of this artwork by playing related music, such as piano compositions written by Amy Beach (1867–1944) that were inspired by the hermit thrush. Beach was an active composer during the Gilded Age, and she often participated in an artist's colony close to the one in Cornish, New Hampshire, where Dewing spent his summers.

"A Hermit Thrush at Eve, op. 92, no. 1" and "A Hermit Thrush at Morn, op. 92, no. 2" are available on *Under the Stars: The Solo Piano Music of Amy Beach*. Composed by Amy Beach; performed by Joanne Polk. *Arabesque*, AR7604 (1998).a

handout 1

JAPANESE FOLDING SCREENS



Trees

Master of I-nen Seal (1600–1630)

Japan, Edo period, 17th century

Ink, color, and gold on paper

154 x 357.8 cm

Freer Gallery of Art, purchase F1962.30

This two-panel Japanese folding screen was on view in *Patterned Feathers, Piercing Eyes: Edo Masters from the Price Collection* at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in 2008.



handout 2



TANAGRA FIGURINE

Statuette of a draped woman

Greek, Boeotian

Hellenistic period, 3rd century BC

Terracotta

19,6 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1907 (07.286.2)

Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

handout 3

WINDOW INTO ART

1. Sketch the most interesting part of this work of art.

2. List three things you notice about the images.

3. Write three questions you have about this object.

4. During the discussion, write down three things you learned about this artwork.

exhibitions

THE FREER GALLERY OF ART AND ARTHUR M. SACKLER GALLERY at the Smithsonian Institution together form the national museums of Asian art for the United States. The Freer Gallery also houses a collection of American art from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the world's most important collection of works by James McNeill Whistler.

FREER CURRENT EXHIBITIONS

Guests of the Hills:
Travelers and Recluses in Chinese
Landscape Painting
THROUGH MARCH 15, 2009

Golden Seams: The Japanese
Art of Mending Ceramics
THROUGH MAY 10, 2009

Moonlight and Clouds:
Silver and Gold in the Arts of Japan
THROUGH MAY 10, 2009

Winslow Homer:
Four Views of Nature
THROUGH MAY 25, 2009

Surface Beauty: American Art
and Freer's Aesthetic Vision
THROUGH JUNE 2009

Ongoing Freer Exhibitions

Ancient Chinese Pottery and Bronze
Arts of the Indian Subcontinent
and the Himalayas

Arts of the Islamic World

Black and White: Chinese Ceramics
from the 10th–14th Centuries

Buddhist Art

Charles Lang Freer and Egypt

Freer and Whistler: Points of Contact

Japanese Screens

Korean Ceramics

The Peacock Room

The Religious Art of Japan

Vietnamese Ceramics from
the Red River Delta

SACKLER CURRENT EXHIBITIONS

Moving Perspectives:
Lida Abdul and Dinh Q Lê
THROUGH MARCH 1, 2009

Moving Perspectives: Jun Nguyen-
Hatsushiba and Fiona Tan
MARCH 14–JUNE 7, 2009

The Tale of Shuten Doji
MARCH 21–SEPTEMBER 20, 2009

The Tsars and the East:
Gifts from Turkey and Iran
in the Moscow Kremlin
MAY 9–SEPTEMBER 13, 2009

Ongoing Sackler Exhibitions

The Arts of China

Contemporary Japanese Porcelain

Sculpture of South and Southeast Asia

Taking Shape: Ceramics in Southeast Asia

TOURS

We offer a variety of tours related to the museums' ongoing and temporary exhibitions. For detailed information about offerings for school groups, please visit our website at www.asia.si.edu/education/ToursForStudents.htm.

To request a tour, please submit a tour request form online at www.asia.si.edu/education/TourRequestForm.htm.

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ImaginAsia

In our popular family program, children ages eight to fourteen accompanied by an adult use an activity book to explore an exhibition and then create a related art project to take home. Family programs take place on the dates and times listed at www.asia.si.edu and do not require a reservation.

This spring, ImaginAsia offers programs related to Japanese art and folklore associated with the tenth-century tale of the monster Shuten Doji.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Freer Gallery of Art
Jefferson Drive at 12th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20560-0707

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery
1050 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20560-0707

Hours

10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily;
closed December 25

Admission is FREE to the museums,
exhibitions, and programs.

Information

www.asia.si.edu
202.633.1000

Information desks open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Food Service

For information on food services
at the Smithsonian, please visit
www.si.edu/dining/default.htm

Transportation

Ride the Metro's orange or blue line to
Smithsonian Station. Parking on the Mall
is extremely limited.

Library

The museums' non-circulating research library
specializes in Asian art as well as American
painting at the turn of the twentieth century.
It is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays,
except for federal holidays.

Accessibility

Accessible entrances to the Freer and
Sackler galleries are located at Independence
Avenue SW. Wheelchairs are available at
the guard's desk at each museum entrance.

Smithsonian Institution
Freer Gallery of Art
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery
P.O. Box 37012, MRC 707
Washington, DC 20013-7012

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