

Portrait of a Collector as an Agnostic: Charles Lang Freer and Connoisseurship

Kathleen Pyne

We are all *condamnés* . . . : we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve . . . : we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among “the children of this world,” in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.—Walter Pater, “Conclusion,” *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, 1868¹

In visual art the aesthetic moment is that flitting instant, so brief as to be almost timeless, when the spectator is at one with the work of art he is looking at, or with actuality of any kind that the spectator himself sees in terms of art, as form and colour. He ceases to be his ordinary self, and the picture or building, statue, landscape, or aesthetic actuality is no longer outside himself. The two become one entity; time and space are abolished and the spectator is possessed by one awareness. When he recovers workaday consciousness it is as if he had been initiated into illuminating, exalting, formative mysteries. In short, the aesthetic moment is a moment of mystic vision.—Bernard Berenson, *Aesthetics and History*, 1948²

Connoisseurship in late nineteenth-century America and England was not simply a matter of the educated eye taking pleasure in the form and color of the aesthetic object. As the testimony of such consummate nineteenth-century aesthetes as Bernard Berenson and Walter Pater suggests, the ritual of contemplating art constituted a mystical moment of contact with a realm that transcended ordinary consciousness. Though the “Conclusion” to Pater’s bible of aestheticism, *The Renaissance*, scandalized his English contemporaries for its seeming embrace of a hedonistic philosophy of life bereft of social responsibility, it was instrumental in promoting the

religion of art as a surrogate for orthodox religious beliefs among the upper classes on both sides of the Atlantic. After the paradigm shift to a post-Darwinian universe in the 1860s, Pater, like many other members of the English intelligentsia, rejected the Christian notion of the afterlife of the human soul.³ Pater’s agnostic answer to the riddle of the great Unknown was that one could expect nothing better from this existence than the few blissful moments when the perfected structures of art released the psyche into a timeless space unburdened by the consciousness of death. As he contemplated different forms of art—from the school of Giorgione to the classical nudes celebrated by Winckelmann—Pater demonstrated how aesthetic experience ritualized into a quasi-religious practice could offer the refined sensibility the sensation of stopping time—of expanding the painfully short “interval” of earthly existence. This heady, intoxicated state, in Pater’s thinking, thus held out a psychic reprieve for the agnostic conscience.

Berenson’s testament to the mystical power of art may come as a surprise to those scholars who tend to think of him as a disinterested, Morellian connoisseur responsible for the first important catalogue of Italian Renaissance painting. Berenson’s late meditation on the nature of aesthetic experience titled *Aesthetics and History*, however, yields a revealing glimpse of how Pater’s religion of art served as a sacred text for an elite group of late nineteenth-century American agnostics—with Berenson standing first and foremost among them. Born in Lithuania to a reformed Jewish family, Berenson assimilated himself into the Protestant ethos of Harvard in the early 1880s, and like his father, rejected Jewish orthodoxy for the Enlightenment culture of Western Europe. Following his teacher Charles Eliot Norton, he took up the quasi-religious attitude to art characteristic of agnostics at Harvard, though Berenson’s embrace of Pater was too radical for Norton, who preferred John Ruskin’s and Matthew Arnold’s more socially responsible worship of culture.⁴ Of the late nineteenth-century American agnostics who celebrated the religion of art, James Turner has observed that in “Reverencing art, one revered the spirit in human-kind. . . . The acolytes of art, whether Christians or Jews, theists or agnostics, revered art as spirit enfleshed.”⁵

While Pater the aesthete definitively articulated the aesthetic credo of agnosticism, and Berenson the scholar

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1. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed.

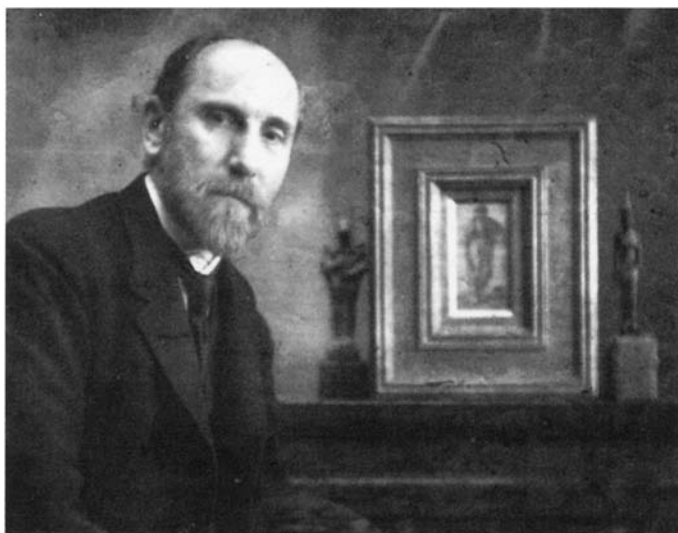
Donald L. Hill, Berkeley, 1980, 190.

2. Berenson, 93.

3. Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Belief and the Limits of Knowledge*, Baltimore/London, 1987. On Pater’s Spencerean language in his description of the biological forces, see Pater (as in n. 1), 186–87, 453–54.

4. Samuels, 25, 32–37.

5. Turner, 252.



1 Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Charles Lang Freer* (with Whistler's *Resting* and a pair of bronze statuettes, probably Egyptian), 1909. Washington, D.C., CLFP (photo: Freer Gallery of Art)

identified a category of objects that served its values, Charles Lang Freer (1856–1919; Fig. 1), the model of the late nineteenth-century collector as connoisseur, constructed a private world predicated on the idea of art as a link to another, higher realm. Though the agnostic elevation of formal beauty in the 1890s promoted the experience of art as a religious moment, it later validated the “pure” gaze of the connoisseur as a completely secularized cultural practice. The secularized lens of the later twentieth century in fact has dehistoricized Freer’s practice of connoisseurship so that this has been reframed in terms of a different ideological agenda. Freer’s fidelity to the art-for-art’s-sake rhetoric—of the “pure gaze” and the “pure” art object as ends in themselves⁶—has proved one of the stumbling blocks in establishing the meaning of his connoisseurship for the cultural history of late nineteenth-century America. This rhetoric has obscured the motives behind his accumulation of what is often perceived as an eclectic body of Asian and American artifacts: a group of Asian ceramics; selected examples of Asian painting and sculpture; and the paintings and prints of Whistler and his American followers. So far, this collection has eluded the ability of scholars to discern any coherent structuring principle that would relate these three groups, other than Freer’s “pure” pleasure in the formal qualities of the objects he purchased.⁷ One explanatory strategy favored by some recent studies is to examine Freer’s aesthetic disposition within the framework of the sociology of capitalism. Such an approach would situate the essentialist rhetoric of purity as a distinguishing mark that identifies the collector/connoisseur as one who has achieved a coveted social space

through the possession of cultural capital, which Pierre Bourdieu has defined as a self-legitimizing set of cultural signals manifested in terms of attitudes, tastes, knowledge, and credentials. As Bourdieu has observed, “The pure gaze implies a break with the ordinary attitude towards the world which, as such, is a social break.” This “charismatic ideology” separates society into “‘antagonistic casts’—those who understand and those who do not,” conferring upon the privileged few the aura of an aristocracy.⁸

To be sure, the Detroit industrialist Freer utilized both Paterian aestheticism and Morellian connoisseurship to define himself as an initiate into the upper reaches of American social space. Freer’s collecting activity provided an alternative avenue of self-definition apart from his role as an officer in the major company that built cars for America’s railroads in the 1880s and 1890s. Thus, the “pure gaze” differentiated Freer from the stereotypical “captain of industry”—the powerful and aggressive American male who was also boorish and philistine. Freer’s selectivity, his knowledge, and his discriminating gaze contrasted markedly with the collecting-as-power practices of the typical capitalist, J. P. Morgan, for example, who amassed a huge collection of artifacts, but did so indiscriminately, either by buying up whole lots of objects or by employing cognoscenti to choose for him. More profoundly, however, it was Pater’s notion of the aesthetic moment as a mystical experience of a world beyond that stood at the base of Freer’s compulsion to collect and that determined the types of art to which he was attracted. As I will argue here, Charles Freer’s motivations for assembling a highly personal collection of objects were formed within this late nineteenth-century paradigm of the agnostic religion of art.

At the center of the Anglo-American crisis of faith that produced so many agnostics among the northeastern elite was a psychic unrest impelled by Darwinian science. Historian D. H. Meyer has written that this philosophical and religious questioning was “the existential malady of the late nineteenth century,” and that it in turn led Protestant intellectuals to replace Christianity with the “more permanent and dazzling coherence” of science.⁹ Agnosticism, or the questioning of the existence of God and the spiritual realm, became increasingly commonplace in the Northeast corridor after 1880. When confronted with the Darwinian revelation of carnage in nature as a governing law of nature, liberal Protestants could no longer reconcile the equation of God (traditionally identified in the Northeast with nature) with goodness. These agnostics, however, did not reject religion per se; they simply shifted their sense of transcendence in the cosmos to a source other than orthodox religion. Although Turner has noted that “agnostics drew satisfaction promiscuously from [science, art, or nature] whichever one or ones offered most help in given circum-

6. On the “pure gaze” of the connoisseur as it functions as a marker of distinction in social space, see Pierre Bourdieu, “The Aristocracy of Culture,” in *Media, Culture and Society*, ed. Richard Collins et al., London, 1986, 164–93.

7. For a synopsis of Freer’s collecting activity, see Susan Hobbs, “A Connoisseur’s Vision: The American Collection of Charles Lang Freer,” *American Art Review*, iv, Aug. 1977, 76–101; eadem, “Whistler at the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.,” *Antiques Magazine*, cxx, Nov. 1981, 1192–202; David Park Curry, “Charles Lang Freer and American Art,”

Apollo, cxviii, Aug. 1983, 168–79; and Linda Merrill, “Acquired Taste” and “Composing the Collection,” in Lawton and Merrill, 16–18, 177–201.

8. See Bourdieu (as in n. 6), esp. 175, 178–79, 190, 192, where he draws upon José Ortega y Gasset, *La deshumanización del arte*, Madrid, 1976. For a clarification of Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, see Michele Lamont and Annette Lareau, “Cultural Capital: Allusions, Gaps and Glissandos in Recent Theoretical Developments,” *Sociological Theory*, vi, Fall 1988, 154–56.

9. D. H. Meyer, “American Intellectuals and the Victorian Crisis of Faith,” *American Quarterly*, xxvii, Dec. 1975, 590, 601.

stances," Norton, Berenson, and Henry Adams can be located within the specific group of intellectuals who turned to art. This group reacted to the Darwinian discourse by projecting their psychic needs for consolation in the face of human loss, as well as their "feelings of awe, dependency, exaltation, and reverence," onto "nontheistic objects" such as works of art.¹⁰ Especially in light of his personal history of familial loss and mourning, Freer's collecting emerges within this pattern of agnostic practice in which rarefied works of art were employed as totemic objects that reassured Freer of a transcendent reality.

A few years before he died, Freer jotted down the following thought: "Art is properly concerned with the living of our lives. . . . [There is] an instinctive sense that there must be some way through it to reach an understanding that redemption does exist."¹¹ Whether these notes represent his own ideas or those of the authors he read, they reflect the centrality of the art experience as a religious pursuit for Freer. Freer's tendency toward self-culture through art, however, was hardly unique: rather, it was symptomatic of middle-class Americans' obsession with therapeutic leisure in the 1890s, in response to the anxieties induced by the tensions within the urban industrial environment. In his massive study of the spiritual crisis of this Protestant elite, *No Place of Grace* (1981), Jackson Lears has shown how the bewildering forces of modernism led Boston Brahmins in particular to turn for spiritual comfort and physical restoration to what they perceived as the mysticism of premodern cultures, especially as represented in medieval Catholic and Asian artifacts. Admittedly, agnostics had no "monopoly" on the religion of art that was widely practiced by upper and middle classes in both the United States and England. Yet, within the scope of this sociocultural phenomenon agnostics were the "most reverent of all,"¹² because their aestheticism, as crystallized by Pater, was intimately bound up with the acute awareness of life's brevity, an awareness attendant upon the uncertainty of an afterlife that was engendered by Darwinism. Freer's desire to surround himself with rarefied objects specifically can be understood as a variant of the religious strategy adopted by the northeastern intelligentsia to preserve its traditional belief in a transcendent realm and in a group definition that placed its members in a privileged relation to that realm. Furthermore, Freer's faith in agnostic aestheticism can be related to his suspicion that he might have inherited a fatal disease, one that might eventually incapacitate him mentally and physically at a relatively young age, as it did with several members of his immediate family.

Public and Private Faces:

The Captain of Industry and the Aesthete

Freer's mother died in 1868, when he was in his early teens, and a few years later his father was stricken with the same

paralyzing illness to which his grandfather had earlier succumbed. In 1893 his youngest brother, Watson, seemed to develop the same paralysis, in conjunction with an uncontrollable nervousness. By 1902 Freer's brother Richard had died, and a sister and an older brother, George, had been stricken with a serious illness.¹³ Such a family history no doubt served as a sobering reminder of his mortality and more. Referring to his father's and grandfather's ailments, Freer told his friend and confidant Agnes Meyer near the end of his life that he never married for fear that he would pass on congenital syphilis.¹⁴ The crucial point that requires emphasis here is not whether Freer actually carried or was afflicted with this disease, but that with good reason *he thought* he was, and that his fears motivated much of his collecting activity.

Like so many other industrialists of his era, Freer was a self-made man. He began his climb to become a captain of industry by working in a cement factory, then a grocery store, and finally as a clerk in the employ of the Ulster and Delaware Railroad in Kingston, New York. Freer soon followed his superintendent, Frank J. Hecker, Jr., to Logansport, Indiana, taking a position as a bookkeeper for the Detroit, Eel River and Illinois Railroad; after that line was absorbed into the Wabash in the fall of 1879, Freer and Hecker went on to Detroit to set up a railroad-car manufacturing business, which was underwritten by the former owners of the Eel River Railroad. This company, the Peninsular Car Company, eventually merged with the Michigan Car Company, which in turn was later consolidated with other major car-building manufacturers into the American Car and Foundry Company in 1899. The following year Freer retired to pursue collecting on a full-time basis.

As Freer rose to visibility in Detroit's social register in the 1880s he not only began buying art, but as the disposition lists of his library would later reveal, he also cultivated his finer sensibilities by developing a voracious appetite for English Romantic literature.¹⁵ His first purchases of art objects were the staples owned by American industrialists of this era—pastoral and religious images in the form of prints by Old Masters, the Barbizon school, and contemporary Dutch artists.¹⁶ He also bought Whistler's prints from a number of New York dealers, and then in 1890 befriended Whistler in London. The twenty years that followed were for Freer two decades of building the finest private collection of Whistler's works, while at the same time he supplemented this core with Japanese prints and ceramics, as well as with works by Whistler's two American followers Dwight Tryon and Thomas Dewing. A trip to Japan in 1896 found him purchasing Japanese screens and ink paintings. Similarly, sojourns in the Middle East in 1906–8 allowed him to acquire a variety of ceramics from the region, while in the years

10. On the Anglo-American crisis of faith that erupted in the wake of Darwinism, see, e.g., Meyer (as in n. 9), 584–603; Turner, esp. 198–201, 248–61; T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920*, New York, 1981; Frederick Gregory, "The Impact of Darwinian Evolution on Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century," in David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science*, Berkeley, 1986; James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in Great Britain and*

America, 1870–1900, Cambridge, 1979; and William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, Cambridge, Mass., 1976.

11. File labeled "Miscellaneous—From: Charles L. Freer," CLFP.

12. Turner, 252; and Lears (as in n. 10), chaps. 5, 6.

13. Tomlinson, chap. 1, 161, 271.

14. Meyer, 1970, 18.

15. See the "Distribution of Mr. Charles L. Freer's Personal Property. Vol. II. Library Books," CLFP.

16. Tomlinson, 65. See also n. 7 above.



2 Wilson Eyre, Charles Lang Freer Residence, 33 Ferry Avenue (now Street), Detroit, 1890–91. Washington, D.C., CLFP (photo: Freer Gallery of Art)

1909–10 he brought back early and rare artifacts from China.¹⁷

Most of Freer's treasures were stored away in the quiet precincts of his shingle-style residence on Ferry Street (then called Ferry Avenue) in Detroit (Fig. 2), and unveiled only for occasional study. Freer had chosen Wilson Eyre as the architect for his house (1890–91), after he had glimpsed a modest example of Eyre's recent designs, "a lodge at a gate of a Germantown [Pennsylvania] estate that satisfied him completely."¹⁸ In contrast to the imposing, French Renaissance style of Hecker's mansion next door, Freer's brown, shingled structure receded into the foliage planted around it and shielded the occupant from the street outside. In its understated manner, however, the house still asserted its pedigree, since its reserved style emanated from Eyre's signature works "in the heart of the Main Line near Philadelphia"¹⁹—and beyond that, from the antiquarian roots of the shingle style in surviving eighteenth-century houses of Newport and Long Island. Thus, the nostalgic imagery that allied the Ferry Street house with early Anglo-American enclaves positioned Freer as a gentleman of means and good breeding who had "arrived."

Appearing at the very moment that industrialism had accelerated in the Northeast, the shingle style, as an antimodernist response, exploited natural textures and organic planning to assert its intimacy with nature. As the style of choice for upper-middle-class resort hotels and suburban family homes, it signaled a desire to provide an antidote to

the Darwinian environment of the city with its mechanical, accelerated pace and overcrowded conditions.²⁰ Though Ferry Street, located a few miles to the north of Detroit's commercial hub, was distinctly not suburbia, still Freer's residence provided a retreat from the onerous problems he shouldered at the car works during the weekday. Continually beset by business woes in the late 1880s and 1890s, Freer turned to the comfort of nature and culture as they were harmoniously orchestrated in his shingle-style snugger—a structure that outside suggested an English lodge and inside a Zen-inspired jewel box.

Escape from the pressures of business was mandatory for Freer, not simply in the form of semiannual or monthly vacations, but also on a daily basis. His position at the Michigan Peninsular Car Company made him responsible for bidding and sales operations in an atmosphere of unprecedented railroad expansion and phenomenal competition. The railroad industry had suffered mild setbacks during the 1880s, but with the severe depression of 1893–95 business turned "damnable," as Freer's artist-friend Thomas Dewing put it. Detroit's financial and business institutions were all but crippled during the period that followed the 1893 devastation, and the tensions between labor and capital—and between the primarily foreign-born workers and the native community—escalated toward a crescendo. In the financial panic, Freer's car company alone turned 5,000 men out of work, which added to the growing thousands of the city's poor. This act so angered Mayor Hazen Pingree that he threatened to levy new taxes on the company as well as on Detroit's corporate millionaires, who had grown rich while paying starvation wages to their workers.²¹

Such crises exacted a toll on Freer's physical and psychological health. After losing his job in the merger of the Wabash and Eel railroads in 1879, he became ill and went to the Canadian woods for recuperation. Again, in February of 1898, during the struggle to forge a giant merger between his car company and others, the tension proved to be too great, and Freer spent the rest of the year restoring himself at a spa in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and in his Detroit home.²² As the lengthy correspondence between Dewing and Freer shows, the artist regularly consoled the collector over the latter's complaints of fatigue and overwork. Termed "neurasthenia" by the Philadelphia physician George Beard in 1881, the nervous condition manifested by Freer was widespread among other middle-class Americans in this period. According to Beard, neurasthenia was at epidemic proportions among overworked white-collar workers and young middle-class women—particularly upper-middle-class Americans of New England descent who used their brains to an inordinate

17. Charles Lang Freer Diaries, CLFP. See also Tomlinson, 344–76, 463–67; and Lawton, "The Asian Tours" and "Colleagues and Dealers," in Lawton and Merrill, 59–130.

18. Julia M. Angell, "Mr. Freer among His Whistlers," *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 1923; Press Cuttings Book 1:30, CLFP. Freer's house is actually a variant of the shingle style, with Romanesque Revival stonework on the first floor and shingles on the floors above.

19. Vincent J. Scully, Jr., *The Shingle Style and the Stick Style: Architectural Theory and Design from Downing to the Origins of Wright*, rev. ed., New Haven, 1973, 121.

20. Ibid., 24–25, 56, 97, 162.

21. Letter no. 30, dated July 16, 1893, and letter no. 33, dated Aug. 18, 1893, from Dewing to Freer, Correspondence, CLFP; Melvin G. Holli, *Reform in Detroit: Hazen S. Pingree and Urban Politics*, New York, 1969, 56–68; and Tomlinson, chap. 1, 40, 156–60.

22. Tomlinson, chap. 1, 188; and Charles Lang Freer Diaries, 1898, CLFP.

23. F. G. Gosling, *Before Freud: Neurasthenia and the American Medical Community, 1870–1910*, Urbana, Ill./Chicago, 1987, 10–11, 63ff, 108–17; and George Miller Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (1881), New York, 1972, 65–67.

degree. A nervous condition thus distinguished the Anglo-American invalid as possessing a "finer nervous constitution" than that of working-class types or immigrants.²³ Coded as a racial disease by Beard, neurasthenia was endemic to the civilized temperament; therefore, the collapse of nerves marked the superior intellect of the highly evolved Anglo-American.²⁴ While rest cures with extremely confining regimens were prescribed for female neurasthenics, such therapies were usually modified for male patients to accommodate their more active, professional lives. Theodore Roosevelt and Thomas Eakins, for example, took rest cures in the wild, sleeping out of doors and traveling on horseback through the wonders of the West, such as the Badlands. Thus, the threat of effeminacy and overcivilization to their manhood was mitigated as their masculine virility was rehabilitated by immersion in such primitive living conditions.²⁵

Freer's self-prescribed remedy was also to take this latter course of action. After his emotional upset when the Wabash and Eel merged in 1879, he regained his equilibrium in the Canadian woods. During several autumns in the late 1880s he hiked through the Catskills accompanied by his friend Frederick Stuart Church, a Michigan-born artist with a robust, jesting personality. Together they performed this homosocial ritual, cooking over an open fire and sleeping under the stars (Fig. 3). While the artists' colony at Cornish was a more civilized, pastoral setting, in contrast to the masculinizing challenge of the Catskills that engaged Freer and Church, Dewing's summer retreat there in the New Hampshire hills in the 1890s provided Freer with the therapeutic regimen of rising early, retiring early, and taking in the beauty of the landscape, thus soothing body and mind. After the turn of the century and later, when he was subject to a debilitating stroke in 1911, Freer vacationed annually in the Berkshire mountains and made plans to build a retreat there that would serve as his "Nirvana," as he liked to think of it.²⁶

If Freer consistently went to nature as a source of therapy, he also depended heavily on the world of culture for emotional sustenance. The disposition lists of Freer's property drawn up at his death reveal him as an inveterate reader of Romantic and Aesthetic poetry and prose. In his library were volumes of Emerson, Thoreau, Carlyle, Keats, Wordsworth, Whitman, Maeterlinck, Pater, Wilde, Swinburne, Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti, Arnold, Ruskin, Morris, W. E. Henley, Arthur Symonds, Bliss Carman, Harriet Monroe, and William Vaughn Moody—many of them in multiple copies. Of Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam* alone he possessed at least six copies.²⁷ The Ferry Street residence, with its intimate spaces and well-shaded interiors (Figs. 4, 5),



3 Attributed to Frederick Stuart Church, *Charles Lang Freer in the Catskills*, 1889. Washington, D.C., CLFP (photo: Freer Gallery of Art)

was perfectly suited to the contemplative life of reading and self-education that Freer undertook in its cozy inglenooks and alcoves. It was not merely a cultivated taste or entertainment value that determined Freer's choice in literary works, however. His reading was also directed toward obtaining a philosophy of life that framed everyday ritual through the aestheticizing lens of art. Through exercising the aesthetic faculty, Freer re-created himself, producing a refined, "spiritualized" identity that reaffirmed his sense of himself as a member of the northeastern elite and as a soul that belonged to a higher order, above that of the masses.

The ground swell of spiritualism, Theosophy, and mind cure within the circles of Boston brahmins and the northeastern intelligentsia in this period reflects the inroads of agnosticism and the restless searching among liberal Protestants for viable religious beliefs in the face of Darwinian science. In 1893 Freer carried out a private reading course in the occult religion of Theosophy, and during a trip to Japan in 1895 began a study of Buddhism, which he continued after his return to Detroit.²⁸ At his death in 1919 Freer's library contained a wealth of tomes that answered his need for reassurance of the existence of the human soul: for example, *The Complaint: or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (1791) by Edward Young (at least two copies); the Upanishads; the Emersonian poetry and essays of writers such as Bliss Carman and Hamilton Wright Mabie, who regarded a spiritual force in nature and art as a source of therapy for the mind overtaxed by the strenuousness of

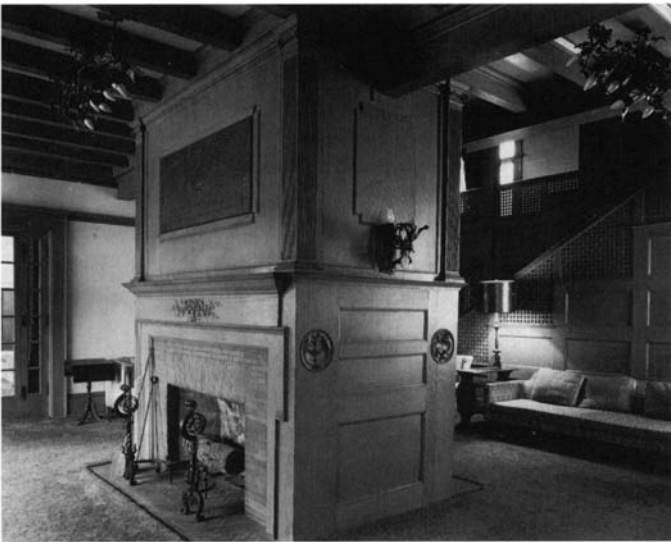
24. Bederman, chap. 3.

25. *Ibid.*, chap. 5.

26. Tomlinson, 88–89. Freer diaries relate that he was at Cornish during the summers of 1892, 1894, 1896, 1901, and 1906 (at Saint-Gaudens's house); in Aug. 1907 Freer visited the Dewings' new retreat in Maine. Also see letters no. 9, July 18, 1892; no. 32a, July 22, 1893, and no. 58, July 23, 1894, from Dewing to Freer; CLFP. For Freer's description of his Great Barrington bungalow as a nirvana, see his letter to Cameron Currie of July 31, 1916; CLFP.

27. "Distribution of Mr. Charles L. Freer's Personal Property. Vol. II. Library Books," CLFP. Of Pater's works, Freer owned at least eight volumes.

28. Freer's letter dated Feb. 27, 1893, CLFP, to the Theosophical Society journal *The Path* contains his order for a number of basic texts on Theosophy, including Madame Blavatsky's classic, *Isis Unveiled*, and several volumes by Annie Besant. For his study of Buddhism beginning in 1895, see letter dated June 17, 1895, CLFP, from Ama-no-hashidate, Japan, to Dwight Tryon; and letter 36, dated Dec. 8, 1898, CLFP, to Edward S. Hull returning the loan of Hull's "handbook of Buddhism." Freer's letter 272, of Sept. 11, 1896, CLFP, extends his subscription to the periodical *The Bramhamavadin*.



4 Wilson Eyre, First-floor hall fireplace, looking northwest to staircase, Freer residence, Detroit (photo: © 1981 Nicholas J. Valenti, courtesy Thomas W. Brunk Collection)

work; and spiritualist testimonials such as Mary Conan Doyle's *Visit to Heaven*, Kandinsky's *Art of Spiritual Harmony*, and Maeterlinck's *Inner Beauty*. There were publications on yogic philosophy, Buddhist reincarnation, and the Egyptian cult of the dead, as well as more popular works related to these religious investigations, for example, Ralph Waldo Trine's mind-cure text, *In Tune with the Infinite*, John Fiske's treatise on the evolution of the human soul, *The Destiny of Man*, Thomson Jay Hudson's *Law of Psychic Phenomena*, and other books on the mind-body connection.²⁹

As his letters to intimate friends Dwight Tryon and Agnes Meyer reveal, it was Buddhism that apparently most satisfied Freer's need for confirmation of a world beyond. The taste for Buddhism in part reflected the fashion in cultural capital in Boston, where since the 1880s a disposition toward mysticism was regarded as a "sign of advanced evolution." In this milieu there was rarely any precise, scholarly study of a particular set of precepts of a particular Buddhist sect; rather, Buddhism was popularized as a watery brew that freely mixed the principles of Buddhism with transcendentalism and spiritualism.³⁰ Freer, too, lacked any formal or rigorous training in Buddhism and satisfied his religious craving in theosophical texts and Buddhist handbooks written by British or American students. It was the occult side of Buddhism, however, specifically the survival of the spirit and memory in different forms over a duration of time, that Freer

relished. Musing on the idea of reincarnation, Freer wrote to Tryon that one can obtain a keener appreciation of the objects one

most loves after the memory has been toned by other impressions: shadowy recollections of unknown places, glimpses of faraway coasts and strange horizons that leave a mysterious something. If the Buddhistic idea is correct, and I am inclined to think it is, not one earthly existence alone is sufficient but several are required to develop [sic] an imaginative mind.³¹

Freer here revealed a rich fantasy life in which he found consolation in projecting himself into the imagined past lives of his objects.³² His collections of Asian antiquities and Whistler's works he especially valued as reservoirs of memory that could connect him with the spirits of other times and places, the mnemonic qualities of these works triggering his imagination to make connections with these spirits from faraway and ancient cultures. To fix and support his sense of that "mysterious something"—the sense that his life extended beyond its present earthly duration—he therefore looked not only to literary works and occult religions, but also to the transcendent art object.

The Religion of Art on Ferry Street

The need to reassure himself that there was a spiritual realm beyond this world, and the desire to renew himself through contact with the spiritual energies that he perceived in the transcendent object, guided Freer's aesthetic preferences. In this regard, one reading of Werner Muensterberger's psychological profile of collectors obsessed with accumulating certain types of objects (*Collecting—An Unruly Passion*, 1994) might suggest that Freer's art activity served as "an enriching respite" from the strains to maximize every profit margin in the capitalist marketplace. Muensterberger's study, however, further offers a deeper psychological function for the role of collecting in Freer's life, that the pleasure Freer received from selected objects might have provided a way of avoiding "exposure to the trauma" of old wounds, that is, the premature deaths of his parents and the danger that his father's death signaled for himself and his siblings. In such a scenario, Freer found a mode of healing those wounds, or at least controlling the anxiety that they generated in him, in the imaginative emotional life he created for himself in collecting.³³

Protected from the cacophony and speed of city life outside, the shadowed interiors of the Ferry Street house functioned for Freer as a consoling environment that main-

29. "Distribution of Mr. Charles L. Freer's Personal Property. Vol. II. Library Books," CLFP.

30. See Chisolm, 103ff.

31. Letter dated June 17, 1895, CLFP, from Ama-no-hashidate, Japan, to Tryon (as in n. 27); to which Tryon replied, "You are right. . . . Pre-natal experiences have as surely their effect and in this the Buddhist ideas are perfectly logical"; letter dated Oct. 25, 1895, from Tryon to Freer, CLFP. On Nov. 4, 1914, Agnes Meyer wrote to Freer about Buddhism, that she had been "thinking not only of its philosophy of which you have so wonderfully profited but of its intimate knowledge of the human soul of which I can assure you, you have profited no less"; see container 15, Agnes Elizabeth Meyer Papers, 1907–70, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

32. Using Walter Benjamin's relationship with his books as an example,

Muensterberger, 14–15, reiterates that some collectors create a similar private world of experience in seeking an almost "mystical union" with their objects. See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, New York, 1969, 60–61.

33. Muensterberger, 7, 9, 21, 27. In Muensterberger's theory, such cathected objects serve to reduce tensions between ego and id, to restore the balance between inner and outer representation, and to deliver compensatory self-assertion and self-centered affect. Meyer, 1927, 65, recalled Freer's belief in the ability of refined artworks to radiate spiritual energies.

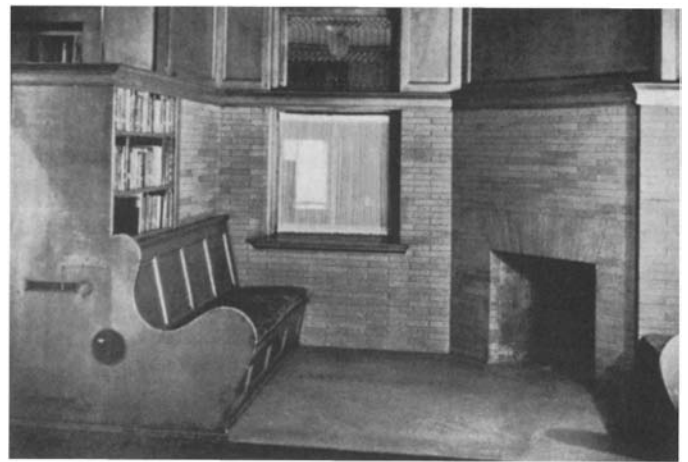
34. On the symbiotic relationship between the material environment, cultural practice, and group or individual identity, see Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr., and Vida Yazdi Ditter, New 152–53. I thank Charles M. Rosenberg for suggesting the relation of York, 1980, esp. chap. 4, "Space and the Collective Memory," esp. 128–31,

tained his mental stability by providing the ideal ambience for his ritual of meditation on the mysterious visual image. The space of the house was well suited to the practice of the religion of art: it established an atmosphere that facilitated Freer's search for the otherworldly realm of his pure objects, in a manner similar to the way in which the space and structure of a church reifies the sanctity of ritual by setting it off from the secular life all around it.³⁴ Without the usual domestic fixtures of a wife, children, or pets to distract him, Freer could give all his time and concentration to the study of the objects that functioned as his means of psychological renewal.

At times he moved certain paintings around in the house until he found the exact, subtle light conditions that would produce the sense of mystery—and perhaps intimacy—that was lacking in his human relations. In an enchanted state after receiving Tryon's *Daybreak, May* (1897–98; Fig. 6) in 1898, Freer went through this routine, just as he had earlier with Dewing's *Piano* (1891; Fig. 7), and wrote to Tryon that he was “impressed with its marvellous interpretation of the mystery accompanying day-break during the spring days. The moist atmosphere and morning dampness are wierdly [*sic*] and beautifully shown and every inch of the picture seems complete and perfect.”³⁵

In Tryon's painting the visualization of mystery that was so gratifying to Freer was dependent upon an effect of color and space that suggested an experience of something beyond a quotidian sense of being; that is, it rendered a perception of a supraphysical phenomenon that could not be accounted for in normative, rational terms within the parameters of mundane existence. With its opalescent horizon and ghostly forms that defy gravity, *Daybreak, May* catered to the taste for otherworldly landscape and implicitly spoke to the late nineteenth-century transcendentalist belief in a spiritual presence behind the veil of physical nature.³⁶ *The Piano*, purchased by Freer in 1891, also promoted a feeling of weightlessness, though here it is suggested in the form of a beautiful woman who is pared down to slender neck and arms (revealing ample charms in her décolletage). At one with the piano and the music she is playing, the pianist is represented as floating in the mists of a sea-green reverie, as if levitated into the ether by the refining powers of the music that she creates. Both the dematerialized style of Tryon and Dewing and the conceit of a musical style of painting, however, had their origins in Whistler's work (Fig. 8).

This musical aesthetic was apprehended by Americans and Europeans in the washlike applications of complex cool and warm color veils in Whistler's portraits and “nocturnes.”



5 Wilson Eyre, library fireplace alcove with window to west porch, Freer residence, Detroit (photo: © 1981, courtesy Thomas W. Brunk Collection)

Moreover, Whistler's strategy of distancing and veiling in these later works appeared to produce an image of the essential self—the human soul.³⁷ By 1901 Freer had become convinced that Whistler was the greatest artist of the nineteenth century, precisely because of Whistler's perceived spirituality, and had determined to build a definitive collection of his work.³⁸ Beginning by purchasing Whistler's prints—which eventually led to the “most comprehensive group of Whistler prints ever assembled”—at the end of the 1890s Freer increased his stakes in Whistler and bought Whistler's costly oils on every occasion permitted him by his profits from business ventures.³⁹ Attending the artist for extended periods in the last few years before Whistler's death in 1904, Freer relished finding this reputed soulfulness in the person of Whistler himself. In one instance, Freer wrote to his business partner Frank Hecker that Whistler was “wonderfully superstitious” and that he concocted the “most weird mental pictures of little mutual events which happened that time when I visited him in Paris just prior to Mrs. Whistler's death, and those of the last seven weeks spent so much together in London.”⁴⁰ Whistler, however, deliberately fashioned his own public persona in the terms of late nineteenth-century spiritualist discourse, and offered his admirers a mythic self that reinforced the perception of his delicate and nuanced surfaces as purified of “grossness” and “materiality.” In other words, Whistler presented himself and his work in the spiritualist terms that Freer, as well as the agnostics of the northeastern elite, most prized in the work of art and in the human personality.⁴¹

Halbwachs's discussion of space to Freer's use of his house and collection.

35. See Freer's letters to Tryon dated Mar. 21, 1898, and Mar. 31, 1898, CLFP. On his performance of this same practice with Dewing's painting, see letter dated Mar. 18, 1893, to Dewing, CLFP.

36. Tryon, Dewing, and Freer were all caught up in the late 19th-century reverence for Emerson, a movement which is outlined in H. L. Kleinfield, “The Structure of Emerson's Death,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Profile*, ed. Carl Bode, New York, 1969, 175–99. See also Lears (as in n. 10).

37. Among the American commentators on Whistler's antimaterialism, see, e. g., Charles H. Caffin, *The Story of American Painting: The Evolution of Painting in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, New York, 1907, 285–303; and Royal Cortissoz, “Egotism in Contemporary Art,” *Atlantic Monthly*, LXXIII, May 1894, 648. Sarah Burns, “Old Maverick to Old Master:

Whistler in the Public Eye in Turn-of-the-Century America,” *American Art Journal*, xxii, 1990, 28–49, exhaustively surveys the American responses of this type. Among the French and Belgian interpreters of Whistler as spiritualist, see Camille Mauclair [Camille L. C. Fausti], “James Whistler et le mystère dans la peinture,” *Revue Politique et Littéraire: Revue Bleue*, xx, Oct. 3, 1903, 440–44 (an English translation of this article is preserved in a typescript in the Library, Freer Gallery of Art).

38. Merrill, in Lawton and Merrill, 48, 50.

39. *Ibid.*, 42–43, 46–48.

40. Letter dated June 30, 1902, from Freer to Hecker, CLFP.

41. Theodore Child, “American Artists at the Paris Exposition,” *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, LXXVIX, Sept. 1889, 492. Burns (as in n. 37), 39, cites several other reviews that employ this antimaterialist rhetoric.



6 Dwight Tryon, *Daybreak*,
May, 1897–98.
Washington, D.C., Freer
Gallery of Art (photo:
Freer Gallery of Art)



7 Thomas W. Dewing, *The
Piano*, 1891. Washington,
D.C., Freer Gallery of Art
(photo: Freer Gallery of
Art)

8 James McNeill Whistler,
*Nocturne: Silver and
Opal—Chelsea*, early 1880s.
Washington, D.C., Freer
Gallery of Art (photo:
Freer Gallery of Art)



For Freer, as for the intelligentsia in the 1890s, the evolution of the human race was read into the progress of civilization and especially in the arena of the fine arts. In this context, the dematerialized style of Whistler and his followers was interpreted as the progress of the human species in sloughing off its physicality and moving toward a higher, more spiritual state of being. After surveying the contemporary art of Europe and America displayed at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, for example, Freer wrote to Dewing of his impression "that the art of yourself, Tryon, [Abbott] Thayer and Whistler is the most refined in spirit, poetical in design and deepest in artistic truth of this century."⁴²

The art object, however, was not simply a sign of human evolution; it offered itself as an agent of that progress as well. In the urban Northeast, where the belief in evolutionary progress assumed the dimensions of a secularized religion, Pater's influential notion of the work of art as effecting a "quickened, multiplied consciousness" and Arnold's regard for art as offering the best and the highest of human thought established the *objet* as a therapeutic vehicle of self-transformation. Thus, the appreciation of beauty distinguished the art lover from the less evolved man or woman, imputing soulfulness and refinement to the viewer who could enter into the mysteries of the religion of art. For Tryon the experience of art seemed "a pleasure almost too fine for this sphere and differentiates any one who possesses it from the

common humanity." To Freer Tryon elaborated his understanding of the power of the work of art to offer the religious experience of transcendence even further: "I cannot imagine a higher life than the rare moments when one is attuned to a really great art work, it seems to me to contain the essence of all religions and comes the nearest to true spiritual manifestations that are known."⁴³

Pater had given definitive utterance to the idea of the worship of art as a sublime ritual that granted access to the pure, spiritual world of the imagination in the late 1860s, and through the publication of his essays in *The Renaissance* in the United States in 1877, his rhetoric was widely taken up by younger American artists and critics who needed a way to justify the sea change in American art, from its former Ruskinian moralism to the agnostic worship of the aesthetic object. Indeed, a whole generation of poets in America and England, including Carman, Symons, and Henley whose volumes Freer pored over, were encouraged by Pater's admonitions to perfect life through the aestheticizing rituals of art. In serving the elite taste for the melancholy mood of aestheticism in the 1890s, they were fed not only by writers such as Pater, Swinburne, and Baudelaire, but also by visual artists such as Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Morris, and—most of all—by Whistler, especially in his "nocturnes" of the 1870s.

Whistler's art, however, was key to this aestheticism in every way. Even earlier than the nocturnes, he had arrived at a visual trope that concretized the idea of the religion of art

42. Letter dated July 19, 1893, from Freer to Dewing, CLFP.

43. Letter 122, dated July 21, 1907, from Tryon to Freer, CLFP. For a more detailed treatment of the hegemonic function of the evolutionary

paradigm in American culture in this period, see Kathleen Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century America*, Austin, Tex., 1996.



9 Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl*, 1864. London, Tate Gallery (photo: Tate Gallery Publications)

in his *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl* (1864; Fig. 9), a painting which was much exhibited and reproduced in the period from 1892 to 1905—the year in which Freer tried to buy it.⁴⁴ Here Whistler suggested the communion of a beautiful young woman with the imaginative realm of the figures on the blue and white Japanese vase, upon which her entire concentration is directed. If the whiteness of the figure below alludes to her purity, her dematerialized face, reflected in the mirror above, intimates her rapport with the spirit world. Both this painting and *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green: The Balcony* (Fig. 10)—the first oil painting by Whistler that Freer purchased (1892)—promote the religion of art as a ritual that promises beneficent effects, as the beauty of Whistler's female exemplars implies.

Nature and Culture: Environmental Therapies

Perhaps more than any other artist of his generation, Thomas Dewing made Whistler's representation of aesthetic practice the central theme of his oeuvre, especially after the turn of the century. Freer purchased picture after picture in this category (Figs. 11, 12), wherein one or two female figures inhabit a vacant interior that suggests Dewing's attempt to construct the purely imaginative space of a soulscape—the psyche in communion with a higher realm.

The only sound reverberating in these profoundly quiet rooms is that which emanates from the ritual of art, whether it involves the reading of a poem, the playing of music, or the perusal of an object of beauty. For the viewer of these works, the female figures themselves presented objects for aesthetic contemplation, their bodilessness figuring, to the contemporary viewer conversant with evolutionary rhetoric, as an index to the progress of American civilization. In keeping with predictions of evolutionists such as John Fiske and Alfred Wallace, the attenuated form of Dewing's woman signaled the evolutionary effects of self-culture, as well as her status as the consummation of the human race, a higher condition of being in which the physical body has been sloughed away to channel available energies toward the development of the mind. In this way the forces of evolution would inevitably produce civilized individuals who were all mind and sensibility.⁴⁵

Certainly, evolutionary scientists such as Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and their American followers on the one hand upheld the tradition of woman as sex in her reproductive function, a tradition that stemmed from Rousseau's writing of the feminine role in terms of a natural paradigm. Rousseau's project, univocally embraced by these nineteenth-century scientists, bifurcated the social body into masculine mind and feminine sex, and defined the problem central to the future of the human race as the regulation of feminine sexuality by masculine morality. On the other hand, American evolutionists also played upon the early nineteenth-



10 Whistler, *Variations in Flesh Colour and Green: The Balcony*, 1864. Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art (photo: Freer Gallery of Art)



11 Dewing, *Yellow Tulips*, 1908. Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art (photo: Freer Gallery of Art)



12 Dewing, *Girl with Lute*, 1904–5. Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art (photo: Freer Gallery of Art)

century Anglo-American Protestant revision of Rousseau, in which the feminine functioned as a moral force in society, that is, as a pedagogical force identified with the religious and aesthetic spheres as well. In this Evangelical revision of the feminine, the self-regulation of passion served as a mechanism of empowerment, through which women could raise themselves from the status of slaves to spiritual beings—the equals of men. Spencer's writings, which attained a wide currency in the United States, advanced the notion that the relatively high degree of civilization attained by the states of Western Europe, Britain, and the United States was apparent in the high social standing accorded to woman, in terms of her education and exemption from labor. Thus, woman figured as a transparent symbol that interpreted man's progress to the male subject. That her mind and morals were privileged over her body is not to say that woman was regarded as more intellectual than her male counterpart, but

that she served as a symbol of the transcendence of his culture, occupying a space altogether outside of masculine cultural hegemony.⁴⁶

The manner in which bodily attenuation, as exemplified in Dewing's woman, was recognized at this moment as a sign of spirituality by contemporary aesthetes was explained by the critic and Whistler devotee Sadakichi Hartmann in his article "On the Elongation of Form." "It is a psychological peculiarity of all cultured beings," Hartmann wrote, "that they find more esthetic gratification in long and thin objects. . . . The more we come to understand what form really is—that it is not merely for the senses, but that it may become expressive to the spirit—the better we will like this peculiar elongation of form."⁴⁷ Thus, the taste for elongation distinguished the aesthetic-minded as an elite class unto themselves. Hartmann also pointedly interpreted the elegance and bodilessness of Dewing's female figures as signs of the highly evolved

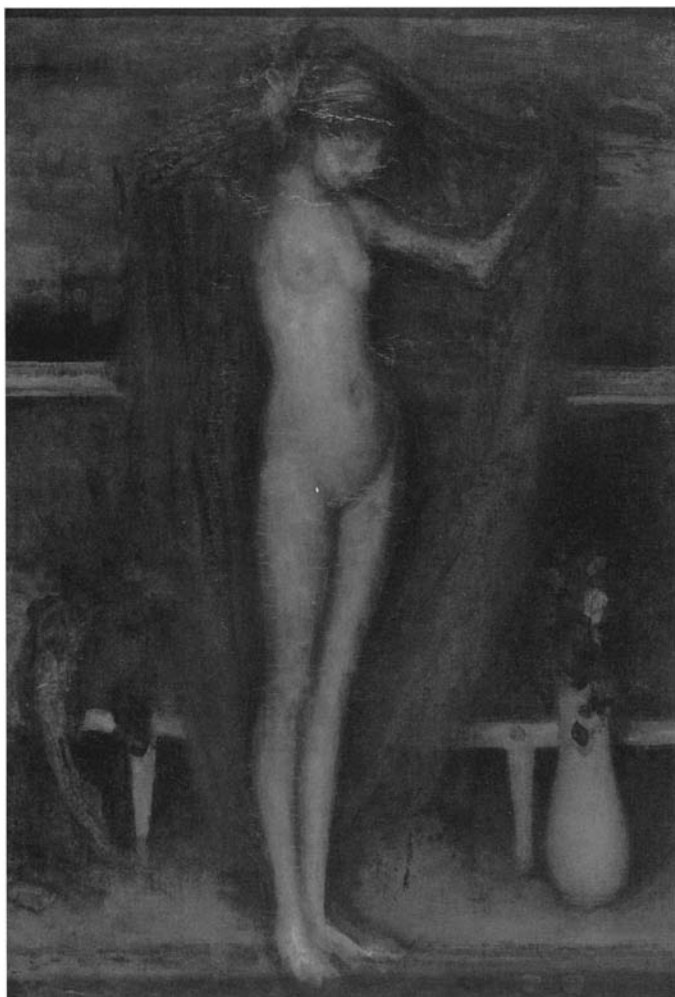
44. Andrew McLaren Young, Margaret MacDonald, and Robin Spencer, with the assistance of Hamish Miles, *The Paintings of James McNeill Whistler*, New Haven/London, 1980, 1, 28–29, give the exhibition and publication record for the *Symphony in White*, No. 2, and note that "according to Hobson, C. L. Freer of Detroit was prepared to pay £250,000" for it along with *Nocturne: Blue and Silver—Cremorne Lights* (Tate Gallery) and *Nocturne: Black and Gold—The Firewheel* (Tate Gallery).

45. On the coding of Dewing's female figures in terms of the late 19th-century discourse of civilization, see Kathleen Pyne, "Evolutionary Typology and the American Woman in the Work of Thomas Dewing," *American Art*, vii, Winter 1993, 12–29; and Hartmann, 27–35. On Fiske's and Wallace's beliefs in the prominence of mind over body in the highly evolved human race, see Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in*

Anglo-American Social Thought, Philadelphia, 1979, 32, 65.

46. Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood*, Cambridge, Mass., 1989, esp. 83, 131; Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, Madison, Wis., 1989, 19–42; Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850," *Signs*, iv, Winter 1978, 219–36; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, New York, 1977; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven, 1979, 19–25; and Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, Stanford, 1974, 67–87.

47. Hartmann, 33–34.



13 Whistler, *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Little Blue Girl*, 1894–1903. Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art (photo: Freer Gallery of Art)

status of modern American women in the hierarchy of world cultures. Another of Dewing's colleagues, the sculptor Frances Grimes, confirmed that this correlation of aesthetics with evolutionary ideology peculiar to northeastern Anglo-Americans was one that the artist himself might have had in mind. Grimes recounted the description of these women by the artist's wife, Maria Dewing, as "the farthest removed from what was animal,"⁴⁸ that is, on a sliding evolutionary scale from ape to angel.

In terms of the practice of self-culture, Dewing's women, following Whistler's, rehearse the act of connoisseurship and appreciation that Freer himself performed on a daily basis, as he contemplated these paintings or any of the hundreds of other objects in his collection within the hushed confines of his cloistered rooms on Ferry Street. If Freer (and other male patrons of Dewing's art) identified with the female models in

these images, such an identification with the feminine embodiment of refinement and civilization did not necessarily compromise his sense of his own masculine virility. In fact, Freer's participation both in homosocial outdoor rituals and in feminized domestic and aesthetic rituals corresponds to the paradox inherent in the construction of masculinity at the end of the nineteenth century. In the 1890s, for example, the feminist demands for reform of the family led to a wide acceptance among middle-class Anglo-American groups that men should be more involved in domestic responsibilities and aesthetic matters of decoration. Unlike "savages" and recently arrived immigrants, white American males exhibited the hallmarks of "civilized manliness" in terms of their domesticity and their sexual self-control. At the same time, the fear that white men were becoming "overcivilized" provoked a desire to reaffirm the virility and power of the race in terms of athletic, outdoor, and even violent rituals of a "primitive masculinity." In *The Strenuous Life* (1901), for example, Teddy Roosevelt advocated that white racial superiority and the perfection of civilization be achieved through practices of force and violence.⁴⁹

In relation to the feminine object Freer, too, responded according to the conventions of civilized manhood, particularly in his gratification of desire with lower-class women and his sublimation of desire with upper-class Anglo-Americans, such as those represented by Dewing's exalted Back Bay courtesans. Although Freer never married (possibly he feared communicating his congenital syphilis to a proper, middle-class woman), he was clearly interested in representations of heterosexual sexual habits, as evidenced in his collection of pornographic prints by Kiyonaga and in his personal sexual practices. He told his confidant Agnes Meyer that he could not "remember the numerous females with whom he had physical relations" and that he had "led a life of constant, if selective, sexual gratification."⁵⁰ On the other hand, when Meyer suggested that in a democracy the same sexual freedom permitted men should be granted to women, Freer balked and reaffirmed the late nineteenth-century construction of the civilized woman as pure and passionless, avowing that the "casual pursuit of desire" was "only a transient excitement, not a matter of lasting satisfaction," in contrast to the experience of marriage, and that this pursuit was especially "frustrating . . . for women" and "often tragic" as well. Furthermore, he had developed feelings of love only twice in his life, and then for two married women (one of them being Meyer herself), and this love "would never lose its mystery" because it was "unconsummated." Thus, he viewed his "renunciation . . . not [as] a loss, but [as] a path to far more exalted human relationships."⁵¹ Such a construction again rehearses the paradoxical response of contemporary male critics to Dewing's female figures, which might be succinctly encapsulated in their description as "languid demi-virgins" who bore a "chaste voluptuousness."⁵² Freer's

48. Frances Grimes, "Reminiscences," ca. 1950s, typescript, Augustus Saint-Gaudens Papers, Dartmouth College Library, Hanover, N.H., Special Collections Division, microfilm roll 3565r#36, frame 357.

49. Bederman, chaps. 3, 5; Margaret Marsh, "Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870–1915," *American Quarterly*, xI, June 1988, 165–86; and Michael S. Kimmel, "The Contemporary 'Crisis' of Masculinity in

Historical Perspective," in *The Making of Masculinities*, ed. Harry Brod, Boston, 1989, 121–53.

50. See Agnes E. Meyer, "Charles Lang Freer and His Gallery," 40–42, container 126, Meyer Papers (as in n. 31).

51. *Ibid.*

52. See, e. g., Hartmann, 33–34; Sadakichi Hartmann, "Portrait Painting



14 Dewing, *After Sunset*, 1892. Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art (photo: Freer Gallery of Art)

attraction to the unworldly, dematerialized form helps to explain his fixation on Whistler's work, even while Whistler's ethereal female figures are paradoxically constructed by heterosexual masculine desire, as are Dewing's. The subtle seductiveness of the female object played a role in attracting Freer to these images, even though he privileged their spiritual refinement in his praise of these works, implicitly disavowing any erotic allure. Thus, Whistler's nude (Fig. 13), defined by an adolescent liteness, satisfied Freer's request for a picture that would offer a "resurrection thought."⁵³ Though Dewing represented his highly evolved Anglo-American women as engaged in the intellectual pursuits of literature and art, his repressed desire for these women is also signaled in his subtle eroticizing of their figures by exposing seductive expanses of necks, shoulders, bosoms, and arms to the viewer.

Freer, however, did not need to focus on any one feminized object in order to feel the refining effects of beauty: he had only to immerse himself in the general atmosphere of his house to obtain a heightened sense of being, since he believed it was possible to attune himself to the energy forces that "radiated," like an electrical or a magnetic field, from sources of beauty.⁵⁴ Dewing and Tryon had stippled ethereal color schemes on the walls and woodwork in brown and blue

with imitation gold leaf, so that the rooms softly glowed like an "opalescent, shimmering dream of color and pattern, comparable to a peacock's breast or the wings of a butterfly."⁵⁵ The downstairs hall, parlor, library, and dining room were also hung with their mural decorations (Figs. 4, 5), predicated on the elegant aesthetic that the northeastern intelligentsia connected with superior and thus spiritualized (as opposed to materialistic) art forms. This was accomplished in the Freer decorations by means of working within an attenuated pictorial format, and—on top of that—of building attenuated human or natural forms within that format.

Moreover, Dewing's and Tryon's landscape decorations reiterated the agnostic question of the survival of spirit after death, and offered the reassuring response that there was a regeneration of life in nature, and that nature possessed renewing and therapeutic properties. Set in the lush green woodlands of New England, Dewing's *After Sunset* (1892; Fig. 14) finds his characteristically attenuated women ("ten heads high," as the painter Theodore Robinson caustically commented),⁵⁶ listening in the still of a midsummer evening for the eerie song of the elusive hermit thrush. With Freer's taste for aesthetic poetry in mind, Dewing conceived his image of two women searching through long grass and wavering lilies to recall the melancholy scenario of Rossetti's "Ode to Hope"

and Portrait Photography," in *The Valiant Knights of Daguerre*, ed. Harry W. Lawton and George Knox, Berkeley, 1978, 41; and Ezra Tharp, "T. W. Dewing," *Art and Progress*, v, Mar. 1914, 156–57.

53. Letter dated May 6, 1892, from Freer to Beatrix Whistler, Glasgow University Library; quoted by Merrill, in Lawton and Merrill, 45.

54. Meyer, 1927, 65.

55. Henry C. White, *The Life and Art of Dwight William Tryon*, Boston, 1930, 81; quoted by Merrill, in Lawton and Merrill, 25. On the decoration of the house, see also Thomas Brunk, "The House that Freer Built," *Dichotomy*, III, Spring 1981, 5–53.

56. Theodore Robinson, *Diary*, IV, Mar. 8, 1896, Frick Art Reference Library, New York.



15 Tryon, *Dawn*, 1893.
Washington, D.C., Freer
Gallery of Art (photo:
Freer Gallery of Art)



16 Charles Adam Platt, *Court of the Freer Gallery*, 1920.
Washington, D.C., U.S. Commission of Fine Arts (photo:
Commission of Fine Arts)

from his sonnet cycle *The House of Life* (1872), in which the soul seeks in nature a sign of its survival in an afterlife.⁵⁷ Tryon refused to let his cycle of the seasons for Freer's house end with the gloom of winter in the fourth panel, and added a fifth panel that he called *Dawn* (Fig. 15), which depicted the earth in spring and thus stressed the regenerating powers of nature.⁵⁸

Freer obviously gravitated to the nurturing possibilities of beauty in aestheticized scenery and women such as Katherine Rhoades and Agnes Meyer, his younger companions, who in his later years doted on him and reinforced his taste for the strangeness and mystery that they located in the East. Cultural artifacts were also equally powerful in soothing the demons within. The subtle glazes of a Chinese pot or the "weird" opalescent glow of a landscape functioned as a form of emotional therapy for Freer in his meditation on the art object. This kind of silent communication with the ideal

world beyond, through the instrumentality of the pure object, was at the core of the art experience for Freer. Thus, in planning the museum that he would present to the nation in 1906, he significantly placed a garden courtyard (Fig. 16) at the center of the gallery for reflection on the ideal world just visited.⁵⁹ As Meyer recalled, Freer mandated that his artworks have "ample distances between them, because he had learned from the Orientals the need that beauty has for broad spaces in which it may expand and radiate." Freer also used his rare objects as if their magical properties would at a touch confer a sense of control and well-being, especially at a time when his world was in chaos. When desperately ill at the end of his life, "he would cling to certain pieces of jade with deep satisfaction and with an almost religious faith in its comforting and restorative powers."⁶⁰ What Freer perceived as mystical, strange, and even occult in the coloristic subtleties of Whistler and his American followers, and in the abstracted designs of their Asian sources, for him emanated from a deep spiritual influence. In short, he invested certain objects with the talismanic powers of a life force, with regenerative powers that could fill the void at the center of his universe created by the loss of parents and siblings, by the loss of faith in a higher power, and by the prospect of his own mortality.⁶¹

Although recuperating in nature was part of Freer's regular therapeutic regimen, whether in the form of hikes through the Catskills, visits to the Cornish artists' colony, or retreats to the Berkshires, the very act of contemplating nature in a work of art could perform this therapy as well. For example, the quiescence that the Chinese Sung painters offered in their landscapes, Freer thought, could serve as an antidote to the frenetic, discordant environment of early twentieth-century America. During the serious illness of his last years, he drew deeply on the Chinese "calm acceptance

57. Dewing's letter to Freer, no. 145, dated Oct. 19, 1892, CLFP, recounts how the picture is structured to "fit the Rossetti address to Hope or many Swinburne lines," making it clear that the two men had discussed this poetry as well as the landscape project. On Rossetti's intentions in the *House of Life*, see Richard L. Stein, *The Ritual of Interpretation: The Fine Arts as Literature in Ruskin, Rossetti, and Pater*, Cambridge, Mass., 1975, 201–2. On the importance of bird song to Dewing's mystical experience of the Cornish landscape, see Pyne (as in n. 43), chap. 4.

58. On the seasons cycle for Freer's house, see Linda Merrill, *An Ideal Country: Paintings by Dwight William Tryon in the Freer Gallery of Art*, Washington, D.C., 1990, 112–17.

59. Meyer, 1970, 11.

60. Meyer, 1927, 65, 80; and Meyer, 1970, 20.

61. Muensterberger, 28, 32, recalls cases similar to Freer's behavior and investment of transcendent powers in objects.



17 Dewing, *Four Sylvan Sounds: Falling Water and the Hermit Thrush*, 1896–97, one of a pair of two-fold screens. Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art (photo: Freer Gallery of Art)



18 Dewing, *Four Sylvan Sounds: The Wind through the Pines and the Woodpecker*, 1896–97, one of a pair of two-fold screens. Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art (photo: Freer Gallery of Art)

of the world,” a repose that he thought was imbued in their landscapes through the Buddhist communion with nature.⁶²

The most monumental instance of Freer’s tendency to conflate nature’s consoling effects with the artwork’s therapeutic capabilities is embodied in the pair of folding screens that he commissioned from Dewing in 1896, after he returned from Japan to his pressured business routine at the Detroit car works. The allegorical female figures of *Four Sylvan Sounds* (originally called *The Four Forest Notes*, 1897; Figs. 17, 18) represent falling water, the hermit thrush, the wind through the pines, and the woodpecker. Again, the touchstone for the form of this commission might have been a work by Whistler, a two-fold screen that Dewing and Freer had undoubtedly seen in Whistler’s Paris studio in 1894.⁶³

The nature imagery of Dewing’s screens, however, is another matter. While to some extent his representations correspond to Emerson’s cataloguing of New England forest music in his poem “Woodnotes,” the screens also suggest Freer’s recent experience in Japan on the peninsula of Ama-no-hashidate (Bridge of Heaven), where the collector had secluded himself for a short period of time in a remote hut.⁶⁴ There, without furniture or Western conveniences, Freer was immersed in mountains, pine trees, and the

rhythms of the surf in the bay.⁶⁵ He was, in effect, acting the role of the Buddhist philosopher-sage in his forest retreat—one of the standard Zen figures of Chinese and Japanese painting. In touring the major art collections of Japan, Freer undoubtedly became familiar with these images, and then later indulged his taste for the quietist, meditative image by purchasing numerous examples of the Chinese paintings (Fig. 19) that had served as the sources of the Japanese versions. Freer’s companion of his last years, Katherine Rhoades, whom he schooled in Asian art, conveyed Freer’s self-projection into these paintings when she wrote that the human figures in them “seem to be seeking further—for the unattainable; and this same sense of infinity is felt by the spectator himself—as though the mountain, flower or stream, actually depicted were there but to suggest the pathway to some wider and more beautiful vision beyond.”⁶⁶

The idea of seeking the assurance of a transcendent reality in nature is not an interpretation based in Asian philosophy. Rather, Freer’s response to these landscapes is symptomatic of how contemporary agnostics living in the northeastern United States misread Zen Buddhism to reflect their own sense of loss. Freer’s interpretation (via Rhoades) recapitulates the same agnostic quandary Dewing had earlier worked

62. Meyer, 1927, 69.

63. Susan Hobbs, “Thomas Dewing in Cornish, 1885–1905,” *American Art Journal*, xvii, Spring 1985, 21; and Merrill, in Lawton and Merrill, 171.

64. Emerson was one of Dewing’s favorite writers. Christina Cocroft, “Thomas Wilmer Dewing: The Man and His Art,” M.A. thesis, George Washington University, 1971, 148, first suggested the Emerson poem as a source for the screens; cited in Hobbs (as in n. 63), 21, 32, n. 59. In Dewing’s letter dated June 4, 1896, CLFP, to Freer, he wrote, “I think I have found out

all about the subject,” alluding to a “subject” unelaborated and unidentified in the letter because, as he insinuates, Freer knows its identity from a previous conversation.

65. Letter of June 17, 1895, CLFP, from Freer at Ama-no-hashidate, Japan, to Tryon.

66. Katherine N. Rhoades, “The East and West in Art,” *The Chronicle*, Mar. 1918, n.p.



19 Song Xu, *Wang Wei's Villa at Wangquan* (detail), Ming dynasty, second half of 17th century. Washington, D.C., Freer Gallery of Art (photo: Freer Gallery of Art)

out in *After Sunset* (Fig. 14), an image of two women searching through an oceanic New England landscape for an elusive sign of the spirit world. It was obviously an ineluctable thought that Freer lived with on a daily basis in the Ferry Street house: he was reminded of it in Dewing's and Tryon's landscapes, as he walked through the downstairs rooms, as well as in his Japanese and Chinese scrolls as he studied these treasures in the silence of the upstairs gallery. Dewing's screens provide one case in point of how the northeastern intelligentsia displayed a tendency in the 1890s to confuse Buddhist meditation on nature with a latter-day Transcendentalist desire to locate a spiritual influx in nature. The screens represent the same misunderstanding as that conveyed by William Sturges Bigelow to Phillips Brooks, that "Buddhist philosophy is a sort of spiritual Pantheism—Emerson, almost exactly."⁶⁷

The most pervasive form of this hybrid spiritualism was mind cure, a religio-psychotherapy that drew from the traditions of liberal Protestantism and Buddhism.⁶⁸ At his death Freer had in his library, as noted earlier, one of the most famous mind-cure texts, Ralph Waldo Trine's *In Tune with the Infinite* (1897).⁶⁹ Restating what had become a staple of mind-cure doctrine, Trine advised the suffering, nervous reader to turn to the feminine presence of nature for a powerful source of infinite spiritual energy, an inflow that would regenerate body and soul. If few Americans could hope to duplicate Freer's experience in Japan, the Anglo-American upper and middle classes in the northeast participated, as Trine and his colleagues suggested, in the recreative use of nature in the New England countryside. Even though Darwin's picture of nature as "red in tooth and claw" took root in the popular imagination as a truism, another

paradox of the period is that both believers and agnostics at the same time refused to relinquish their old convictions about the benevolent effects of nature's awesome spectacle and beauty.⁷⁰ The nature poems and essays of contemporary American literati—the very narratives that composed Freer's regular literary fare—thus reiterate the desire to see nature as an "all-source" of spiritual and physical energy to which all have access.

To take just one from the many examples of this genre owned by Freer, Hamilton Wright Mabie's *Essays on Nature and Culture* (1896) encouraged the reader to take to the woods for recuperation from the unremitting battering that urban life imposed on Americans. The greatest refreshment in nature, he wrote, "flows from the unconsciousness in which her forces are put forth and her processes carried on."

We fly to Nature, and are led away from all thought of ourselves. We escape out of individual into universal life; we bathe in the healing waters of an illimitable ocean of vitality; we come into contact with a mighty organism which continually receives and as constantly gives out, in perfect unconsciousness of its functions. . . . Insanity goes out of one's blood when the song of the pines is in one's ears and the rustle of leaves under one's feet. In the silence of the wood health waits like an invisible goddess, swift to divide her stores with every one who has faith enough to come to the shrine.⁷¹

The imagery that Mabie employs, of the goddess waiting in a woodland bower, uncannily corresponds to that of Dewing's screens, in which lithe females in classical garb nestle into cozy niches of leaves as they play the gentle music of their

67. Letter no. 21, dated Aug. 19, 1889, from Bigelow at Nikko, Japan, to Brooks; reprinted in Akiko Murakata, "Selected Letters of Dr. William Sturges Bigelow," Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1971, 82–83. In the early 1890s Fenollosa was to castigate this faddish interpretation of Buddhism among the Bostonian elite, terming it "theosophy mixed with a little diluted Hegel," that is, "neither Buddhist nor Eastern, but a mixture of Transcendentalism with English Psychical Research"; letter from Fenollosa

to Isabella Stewart Gardner, on Marion Crawford's books on Buddhism, ca. 1893, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; quoted in Chisolm, 104.

68. On mind cure, see William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902), New York, 1961, 99–111; and Gail Thain Parker, *Mind Cure in New England, from the Civil War to World War I*, Hanover, N.H., 1973.

instruments, to such a degree that Mabie's text—appearing in the same year as Dewing's conception of the screens—can be regarded as another likely source for Dewing's imagery and a post-Darwinian gloss on Emerson's nature writings. Mabie's appreciation of woodland sounds, as having an effect of silence on the listener in the way in which their harmonies induced repose and soothed the nerves, was couched in a language that would have been familiar to contemporaries such as Freer who were conversant with the literature of mind cure. Mabie's evocation of nature's music, as well as Dewing's visual representation of the same phenomenon, underlines the tendency of elite Anglo-Americans in the 1890s to avail themselves of aesthetic experiences in nature and art as therapeutic moments, as fortifications of the self against the crushing demands of "society" and the onslaught of modern life.

In the woods the very sounds make the silence more evident and refreshing. The murmur of pines, the song of birds, the rustle and fall of leaves, the ripple of the brook, conspire to preserve the essential silence even while they seem to violate it. They are sounds so detached from the world of society . . . that they deepen our feeling of detachment from it; . . . they soothe and harmonize. The quiet which reigns in the woods, so delicious to tired nerves and the spent mind, is not the repose of death, but the harmony of a fathomless life.⁷²

This, "the harmony of a fathomless life," as offered in the coloristic idiom of quietude explored by Dewing and Tryon, was the environment that Freer created for himself on Ferry Street.

Fenollosa's Evolutionary Civilization and the Freer Gallery of Art

Freer continued throughout the 1890s to shape his collection according to his need to find religious solace in the transcendent object of beauty. Through his friendship with Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853–1908; Fig. 20), the leading specialist in Asian art, however, Freer began to envision a public use for his collection. After having taught art and philosophy at Tokyo University for many years, Fenollosa was convinced that Eastern and Western cultures were approaching a fusion in the twentieth century and that a "new art . . . half dematerialized by the spiritual force with which it is transfigured" would signal the beginning of this millennial epoch. After his final return to the United States from Japan in 1901, he singlemindedly set out to convert Americans of all classes to the religion of art as a route to achieving social progress. When pledged as a national museum in Washington, D.C., a few years later, Freer's collection would figure in Fenollosa's scheme as the institution that would spearhead this progressive reform.⁷³



20 Photographer unknown, *Ernest Francisco Fenollosa*, ca. 1900 (photo: from Chisolm, frontispiece; courtesy Yale University Press)

A native of Salem, Massachusetts, Fenollosa exemplifies how the New England elite enlisted evolutionary rhetoric in order to support the survival of Anglo-American hegemony. At Harvard in the early 1870s, he studied philosophy and evolutionary science, especially favoring the theories of Hegel and Herbert Spencer, and at the same time excelled in art-history courses under the tutelage of Charles Eliot Norton. After graduation Fenollosa maintained his dual focus on religion and art, briefly attending the Unitarian Divinity School and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts school, before taking up a position as professor of philosophy and political economy at Tokyo University in 1878. Once installed in Tokyo Fenollosa made a reputation for himself by resurrecting the great masterworks of ancient Japanese art and urging contemporary Japanese artists to revitalize their national culture by reviving the Kano school of painting. By the time he returned to Boston in 1891 to accept the post of curator of

69. Ralph Waldo Trine, *In Tune with the Infinite* (1897), in *The Best of Ralph Waldo Trine*, Indianapolis, 1957.

70. Turner, 254–59; Peter J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America*, New York, 1969, 13, 17–18; and John Higham, "The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890's," in *The Origins of Modern Consciousness*, ed. John Weiss, Detroit, 1965, 28–29, 47–48.

71. Hamilton Wright Mabie, *Essays on Nature and Culture*, New York, 1896, 231, 235–36, 270–71.

72. *Ibid.*, 249–51.

73. The standard work on Fenollosa is Chisolm. On Fenollosa's theory of cultural fusion, see Chisolm, 96–97, *passim*; on his relationship with Freer, see *ibid.*, 170–75.

Japanese art at the Museum of Fine Arts, he had been initiated into the Tendai Buddhist sect and become a professor at the Tokyo Fine Arts Academy. Fenollosa had also built an important collection of Japanese art for himself, which he then sold to Charles G. Weld of Boston on condition that it be installed in and given to the museum upon Weld's death.

Most important, Fenollosa came back to the United States firmly convinced that he was to be the "prophet" of the approaching millennium and the "reformer" of American aesthetics and morals. A memorandum written to himself not long after his return expresses his pacifistic Buddhist-Transcendentalist agenda, to be accomplished through the medium of art:

To mould the future ought to be my aim.

I must go back to my work on Hegel, I must inform myself on present psychologic progress, and I must bring them together on the basis of Buddhist mysticism. Here, having established intellectual foundations, I may afterward pass beyond this beginning, and fearlessly construct on the basis of the mystical view. I must here become a preacher and prophet appealing to all that is noble and inspiring in man's experience; not stand on the defensive, but on the aggressive; not with the nomenclature and formulae of Christian preachers, nor with those of Eastern Buddhism; but translating both into a common universal language of human experience and reason. . . .

I must be an actual seer for my race. . . .

But . . . the art function must be duly subordinated to, or rather synthesized with, all efforts toward moral and political construction. We cannot ignore the great economical questions of the day, nor the terrific problem of the world's suffering, sin, and disease. Any undue art development which turns away the mind from sympathy with these must be a failure. But the function of art must be so used as to brighten and gladden the lot of the poor, social rearrangement giving them leisure to cultivate taste, like the Japanese peasant. By giving them more highly skilled manual and artistic education, we shall also give these very laborers the power to assist in the beautifying of our cities and homes. . . . Let us learn from the East to see these individual and social principles symbolized by every beautiful and significant thing in nature. Let us preach sermons in terms of beautiful scenery, and dispense spiritual balm from our delicate renderings of flowers. Let every suggestion in our decoration be dignified by its prophecy. Let us make the new art about us a new nature half dematerialized by the spiritual force with which it is transfigured.⁷⁴

In the six years that Fenollosa was at the Museum of Fine Arts he relentlessly proselytized for the quasi-religious social

practices that Americans could learn, he thought, by studying the harmonious spacing of Japanese art. Writing numerous articles and mounting exhibitions on Japanese screens, kakemonos, metalwork, and prints—including the famous Bing collection—Fenollosa set about his mission to educate the American public in morality through aesthetics, and by doing so he carved out a place for himself at the cutting edge of the new and important field of Japanese studies. His prominence in this field of cultural affairs was recognized in 1892 when he was appointed to the jury of the Fine Arts Palace at the World's Columbian Exposition. Unfortunately, however, this stature was not enough to save Fenollosa from the scandal that forced his resignation from the Boston museum when in 1895 his wife, Lizzie Goodhue Millet, the daughter of an old New England family, divorced him, and he then married his assistant, Mary McNeil Scott.

After a period of self-exile in Japan writing and lecturing on Japanese culture, Fenollosa returned to the States in 1901 and began a whirlwind coast-to-coast crusade, preaching his gospel of art as a panacea for the wasteland that industrialism had made of the American environment. It was at this time that a fast friendship was formed between Fenollosa and Freer. The two men in all likelihood had met sometime earlier, during the organization and operation of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago when Freer had worked on the committee to secure loans from Michigan collections for the Fine Arts Palace at the Exposition.⁷⁵ That Freer was acquainted with Fenollosa's scholarship by 1896 can be presumed from his recent trip to Japan and interest in collecting Japanese art. The dealer Howard Mansfield, for example, in 1896 cited Fenollosa's opinion about a painting that Freer was considering purchasing, as if Fenollosa's word was especially meaningful to Freer. After renewing their acquaintance in the autumn of 1901, when Fenollosa gave a series of three lectures at the Detroit Museum of Art, Fenollosa served as a paid consultant on Freer's purchases of Japanese and Chinese objects and helped the industrialist to refine his final selections of Asian art for Freer's bequest to the Smithsonian. While Fenollosa's account of the evolution of Asian art shaped Freer's gallery, Freer also tried to make sure that this interpretive framework would be respected for generations to come by offering a public educational program, the basis of which was not only the collection itself but also a lending library of Fenollosa's slides from his art-history lectures.⁷⁶

In constructing his view of the history of world art, however, Fenollosa learned from Freer as well. As early as 1892, Fenollosa had predicted that a fusion of East and West into a new world culture would occur in Japan. A few years later, he revised this opinion, holding that, though Japan would be an important mediating force, both East and West would produce "a common, but as yet unknown type, the

74. The entire text of Fenollosa's memorandum, entitled "My Position in America," dated May 1, 1891 (bMS Am 1759.2.60, Fenollosa Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University) is published in Yamaguchi Seichi, "Fenollosa's Prospect in America from His Memorandum of 1891," *Journal of Saitama University*, xii, 1978, 102-4.

75. Chisolm, 170, says that they met in the early 1890s, while Aline Saarinen, *The Proud Possessors: The Lives, Times and Tastes of Some Adventurous American Art Collectors*, New York, 1958, 135, claims that their meeting was not until 1900.

76. Chisolm, 154-61, 170, 174-75. Letter from Mansfield to Freer, dated May 28, 1896, CLFP.

77. Ernest Francisco Fenollosa, "Chinese and Japanese Traits," *Atlantic Monthly*, lxix, June 1892, 774; idem, "The Symbolism of the Lotos," *The Lotos*, ix, Feb. 1896, 580-81. In these essays Fenollosa referred to the East and West in language that implied feminine and masculine genders, but in his poem "East and West," read to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard in 1892, he more explicitly named these cultures as "feminine" and "masculine"; see Chisolm, 97.

type of the world's future." To this dialectical synthesis of opposites, the feminine East offered spiritual insight, aesthetic sensitivity, and "harmonious living," while the masculine West contributed intellectual analysis, competitiveness, and mastery of nature.⁷⁷ The Whistler paintings in Freer's collection must have struck Fenollosa as a revelation of this prophecy as it was becoming reality in the present, while the works of Whistler's followers, Tryon and Dewing, in Freer's collection undoubtedly suggested that this Hegelian evolution of world spirit was taking place in America. The significance of Whistler's appearance, Fenollosa explained, was that Whistler was the "first great master who comes after the union of East and West, the first who creates naturally and without affectation in their mingled terms."⁷⁸ For Fenollosa Whistler's art hinged on the sense of mystery and infinity that the painter evoked, primarily through his masterful manipulation of infinite gradations of color and light. Whistler's endless and vast repertoire of shifting, ephemeral effects produced a lyrical vision of the world in which a transcendent reality seemed not merely possible to imagine, but the true and hidden essence of existence.⁷⁹

Fenollosa's evolutionary philosophy of aesthetics cast Whistler's art in the religious terms of late nineteenth-century agnosticism, an understanding which accorded well with Freer's own use of art. Fenollosa's scholarship thus provided a forceful direction in Freer's quest after 1900 to create an art collection that from ancient to modern times chronicled the presence of spirit in the material form of the eternal, perfected object. Dividing Freer's collection into three parts, Fenollosa traced this movement from East and West to its culmination in the modern age, represented in Whistler's work at the center of the collection.⁸⁰ Indeed, even Freer's attraction to ceramic pottery had its origins in Whistler's color. His first purchase of a Japanese pot with an underglaze blue landscape in 1892 was made because it recalled Whistler. Bringing large numbers of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean wares back to his Detroit residence, Freer carefully compared the nuances of their glazes to Whistler's subtleties (Fig. 24). From 1902 to 1908 Freer also pursued iridescent Egyptian pots and blue-green Syrian Rakka wares that he valued for their ability to illustrate how the lineage of Whistler's universal aesthetic could be traced back to increasingly earlier points in history. Freer "permitted Whistler's taste to dominate the whole development of his collection," Agnes Meyer wrote, and he intended all his objects to serve "as an extension, an amplification" of Whistler's spirit and artistic principles.⁸¹ Thus, it was Whistler's use of cool glazes over warm grounds or of blue and violet pastel crayons on tinted and roughly textured papers that, according to Fenollosa, determined Freer's preference for the soft clay grounds of earthenware pottery, with their endlessly varied mottled

glazes, "shootings of tone through tone," and mysterious, dissolving lights.⁸² Prizing delicately inflected glazes and simplified forms over innovative shapes, Freer looked past the ponderous bodies of many of his ceramics, seeing the pot as a dematerialized color field. Such an approach to pottery served to reinforce his notion of Whistler as an uncanny genius who had reinvented ancient and "universal" aesthetic principles.

The master narrative of Fenollosa's great history of Asian art, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* (1912), established an original connection of the East to the West through the migration of Greek aesthetic principles into the Buddhist art of India, China, and Japan, via the Near East. At the same time, his teleological view of civilization's evolutionary trajectory demanded that the genius and spirit of the East be reborn in the modern epoch of the West. Thus, Fenollosa could not describe what he considered the height of Chinese culture, that of the Southern Sung dynasty, without continually referring to what he considered the heights of Western art—Whistler, Manet, the Italian cinquecento, and so on. In this respect Whistler had not only "outsesshiued Sesshiu," but also, through his attenuated and dematerialized aesthetic, his art signaled a recovered unity of the human psyche, a unity that had been fragmented and lost after the first golden ages. In 1907 Freer himself was eventually led by Fenollosa's theories to attempt to trace these aesthetic principles back to their supposed source in Egyptian art and pottery. In the years before he died, Freer devoted nearly all his economic and physical resources to demonstrating the existence of such universal aesthetics and constructing a correlative sequential development in his collection with representative pieces from the Near East and the Far East.⁸³

Freer, Berenson, and the Rhetoric of Purity

While determining the origins of Freer's aestheticism has required considerable reconstruction from archival documents, Bernard Berenson's career as a man of letters and his public pronouncements on art and aesthetics render the ideological origins of his aesthetics more readily accessible. Berenson's philosophy of aesthetics offers a clarifying gloss on Freer's use of art, because both men were definitively shaped by the evolutionary paradigm of self-culture as an agent of progress. Like Freer, Berenson (1865–1959; Fig. 21) based his lifelong study of art on a Hegelian belief in aesthetic experience as an agency of self-refinement and social evolution that would lead to a utopian civilization. The "ideated life" of art, he wrote, was "what distinguishes us from the other higher mammalia," and it was "this capacity [that] leads higher and higher," although "the longed-for goal . . . [was] far away."⁸⁴ His aesthetic tastes and philosophy were formed by the rarefied atmosphere of Boston—by the very milieu at Harvard that molded Fenollosa. Under the

78. Ernest F. Fenollosa, "The Place in History of Mr. Whistler's Art," *Lotus; Special Holiday Number in Memoriam, James A. McNeill Whistler*, Dec. 1903, 16.

79. Fenollosa, esp. 60–63.

80. *Ibid.*

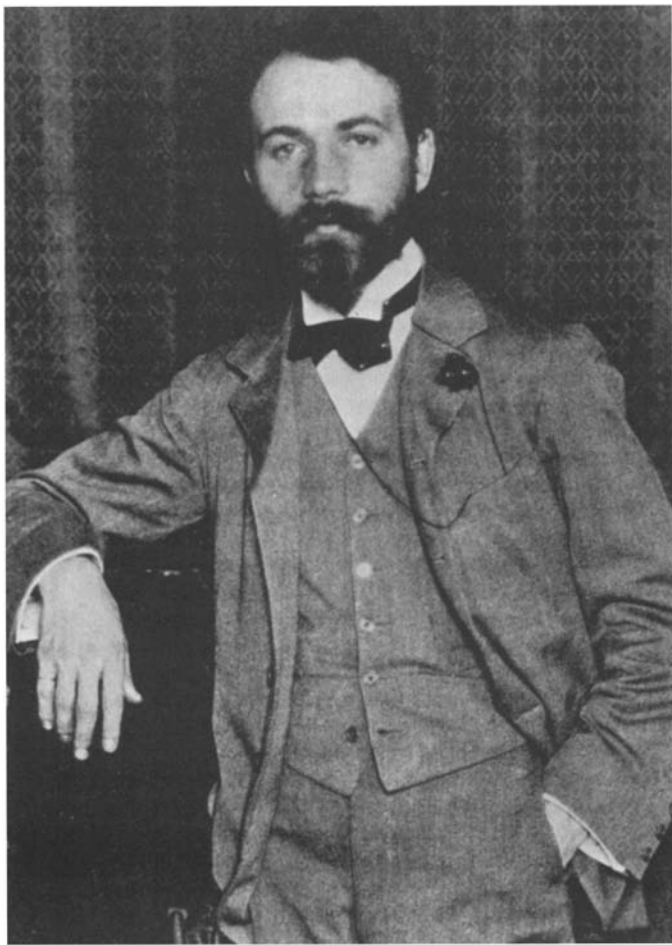
81. Lawton and Merrill, 59, 75, 191–92; and Meyer, 1927, 67.

82. Fenollosa, 62–63.

83. Fenollosa's statement that "Whistler had outsesshiued Sesshiu" is quoted in Freer's letter to John Gellatly, dated Mar. 30, 1904, CLFP. On Freer's quest in Egypt, see his letter dated Feb. 3, 1907, to Frank J. Hecker, CLFP. For Fenollosa's comparative method emphasizing the unity of East

and West, see Ernest Francisco Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, London, 1912, I, chap. 5, "Greco-Buddhist Art in China," chap. 6, "Greco-Buddhist Art in Japan"; and II, chap. 11, "Idealistic Art in China: Southern Sung." See also Tomlinson, 467. Tomlinson asserts (520) that Freer turned to collecting Chinese art after 1908 because he could no longer afford to buy Japanese art. I believe that Freer's reasons for the shift were more complex, namely, that at this moment he was following Fenollosa's program for demonstrating the unity of aesthetics in Asian cultures.

84. Berenson, 36.



21 Photographer unknown, *Bernard Berenson*, ca. 1900 (photo: from Samuels, fig. 22; reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of Harvard College)

sway of Arnold and especially Pater, Berenson styled himself as a "man of culture" who was by definition a believer in evolution, "an Agnostic, or a Pantheist, whether Hegelian, or Buddhist . . . and above all an idealist."⁸⁵

While still in his native Lithuanian village before immigrating to Boston, Berenson's father had rejected Jewish orthodoxy for the philosophy of the Enlightenment. As a college student in the early 1880s, the young Berenson styled himself as an English aesthete complete with long curls. His self-construction as an androgynous aesthete only enhanced his cultural capital with Back Bay society matrons, who welcomed a rising "man of letters" to their circle, and he soon established a lifelong relationship with the doyenne of the Boston art world, Isabella Stewart Gardner. If the sphere of beauty had been coded earlier in the century as exclusively feminine, Berenson's identification with that sphere in the 1880s posed no problem for his heterosexual attractiveness to women

as a sensitive, refined, "feminized" man either then or in his later years, and signals the extent to which rigid male and female roles began to yield and overlap by the turn of the century.⁸⁶

While at Harvard Berenson completed the process of assimilation into the world of Protestant agnosticism. The charismatic Episcopalian minister Phillips Brooks, who often officiated at Harvard's chapel, enticed Berenson to attend services in the gilded and painted interior of Trinity Church where Brooks was rector. There, Berenson could reinvent himself as Pater's Marius who, he mused, "was drawn to the kind of life the early Christians seemed to be living, and its ritual and discipline. . . . Salvation is not an act but a way of life."⁸⁷ Art and religion were so intertwined for Berenson as to be inseparable. As the "mother and nurse of art," Christianity with its myths and rituals did not merely provide Berenson with a foundation for his humanistic philosophy and a focus for his study of aesthetics; it thoroughly seduced him to the extent that he had himself baptized into the Episcopal faith by Brooks at Trinity.⁸⁸

As with Pater's Marius, Berenson's salvation was art as a way of life. In *Aesthetics and History* (1948) Berenson clearly laid out his credo of art as a "life-enhancing" structure that works through "ideated sensations."⁸⁹ Here he was drawing upon Hegel's discussion of artworks as aesthetic structures which are properly concerned with identifying universal manifestations of the divine. In Hegel's scheme art mediates symbolically between the visible and invisible worlds, and the development of painting is specifically directed toward figuring the life of the soul. For Berenson, the artistic defined itself against the natural, and as such it distanced itself from "cannibal appetites" or any kind of action that incited "reproductive or transitive energies." Instead, Berenson located the art experience in "a realm apart, beyond actuality . . . , a realm of contemplation, of 'emotion recollected in tranquility' . . . where nothing can happen to the soul of the spectator . . . that is not tempering or refining."⁹⁰

Given this taste for art forms that suggested a pure state of being, it is not surprising that Berenson was also drawn to highly abstracted types of Asian art, which he collected for a short time during the period leading up to World War I. Significantly, it was Fenollosa who introduced him to twelfth-century Chinese painting at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in October of 1894. Berenson remembered this visit to the museum as *the* ultimate art experience of his life, an experience that left him "prostrate and weeping."⁹¹ Later, after he had made Freer's acquaintance, he visited Freer's collection in Detroit in 1904 and 1914. To Isabella Stewart Gardner, Berenson expressed his envy of Freer:

Dear Freer, there is a collector after my own heart, and America will owe him a debt that all our other collectors put together will not have earned. And he really lives for nothing else, and has no axe to grind. How I wish I were now starting out in life! I should devote myself to China as I have to Italy.⁹²

85. Samuels, 24–25.

86. Marsh (as in n. 49), 181. On Berenson's romantic involvements, see Samuels, *passim*; and Ernest Samuels, *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Legend*, Cambridge, Mass., 1987, *passim*.

87. Quoted in Samuels, 39.

88. *Ibid.*, 46. Samuels (as in n. 86), 468, 524–25, recounts how Berenson eventually reaffirmed his Jewish identity after World War II.

89. Berenson; this volume also appeared in an Italian version translated by Mario Praz.

90. Berenson, 68, 77.

91. Roberts, 7.

92. Letter from Berenson to Isabella Stewart Gardner, dated Jan. 1, 1915; quoted in Rollin Van N. Hadley, ed., *The Letters of Bernard Berenson and Isabella Stewart Gardner, 1887–1924*, with correspondence by Mary Berenson, Boston, 1987, 531. My thanks to Linda Merrill for this reference.



22 After Li Long-mian, *A Country Retreat (Shan-zhuang tu)*, Sung dynasty (?), before 1453. Florence, Berenson Collection (photo: reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of Harvard College)

Freer, too, was much impressed by Berenson, and noted that Berenson “sees very deeply into the finest periods of Chinese and Japanese painting,”⁹³ a comment that reflects their mutual privileging of the category of Zen-inspired, ethereal Sung painting and its correlative, Muromachi works. To Fenollosa the paintings of the Southern Sung culture (Fig. 22) represented “the most idyllic illumination of all human experience” in a virtual earthly paradise where appeared the “Chinese Wordsworths” who “breathed” their “people’s passion” and love for nature into the “great mirror” of their art. The Sung court was really the counterpart of the modern New England elite, an implicit comparison Fenollosa called into play by describing the practice of the educated class (“statesmen, artists, poets, Zen priests”) of spending “mornings at work in the city; but their afternoons, evenings and holidays on the lakes, at the terraces on the causeways or the

rocky islands . . . in the countless villas that dotted the edge of every bay and creek . . . where parties might congregate, and in conviviality enjoy the beauties of sunsets or discuss poetry.”⁹⁴ To Berenson these images provided intimations of infinity, “of the stream of existence toward the infinite sea.”⁹⁵ Much of the later correspondence from Freer in Detroit, New York, or Massachusetts to Berenson in Italy involved efforts to exchange photographs of landscape scrolls by artists such as Ma Yuan, a Sung painter whose achievements Berenson likened to those of Beethoven.⁹⁶

That Berenson’s method of appreciating Ma Yuan was by way of comparing his scrolls to the symphonic form suggests a belief in the universalizing language of art,⁹⁷ a belief promoted by the writings of Hegel and Pater and shared by cognoscenti, such as Freer and Fenollosa, who championed Whistler’s pure, symphonic, painterly syntax. The elements

93. Letter from Freer to Frederick W. Gookin, dated Jan. 22, 1904, CLFP.

94. Fenollosa (as in n. 83), II, 33, 35–36.

95. Letter of Jan. 22, 1904, to Gookin, CLFP. Harold Acton, “The Arts beyond Our Pale,” in Roberts, 16, quotes from Berenson’s musings in his diary.

96. Their correspondence is housed in the CLFP, and consists of nine

letters dated 1915–17. In a letter of Nov. 20, 1914, from Agnes Meyer to Freer, Meyer Papers (as in n. 31), just after the Berensons’ second visit to Freer’s Detroit home, Meyer addressed Freer’s insecurities about Berenson’s personal response to and estimation of Freer.

97. Letter dated Aug. 3, 1917, from Berenson to Freer, CLFP.

of visual form, Fenollosa wrote, comprise a "highly organic universe" and are capable of "self-subsistent and orderly progressions of individual beauty; . . . though bound up with the feeling of the thought implied, they are as positive and transcendent as the world of pure instrumental music."⁹⁸

For Berenson, as for Fenollosa and Freer, these masterworks were also situated in a historical trajectory that



23 Salon at Villa I Tatti, Florence, with panels from the Saint Francis polyptych by Sassetta, flanked by heads of a Buddha and a bodhisattva (photo: from E. Samuels, *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Legend*, Cambridge, Mass., 1987, fig. 13; reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of Harvard College)



24 Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Charles Lang Freer* (with Whistler's *Venus Rising from the Sea* and a Near Eastern jar), 1909. Washington, D.C., CLFP (photo: Freer Gallery of Art)

brought East and West together in the project of realizing the world spirit. Indeed, the installation of Asian art at Berenson's Tuscan villa, I Tatti, provides a final commentary on his conviction of this evolutionary doctrine. In the salon, for example, he symmetrically flanked a Sassetta altarpiece with the sculpted heads of a Buddha and a bodhisattva (Fig. 23). Intended to educate and condition the eye to discern hidden formal and spiritual connections between East and West, Berenson's cross-cultural comparisons inherently recall Freer's practices in building his collection (Fig. 24).⁹⁹ The habit of mind revealed in the rooms of I Tatti recapitulates in miniature Fenollosa's teleology of world art, as well as the rationale of Freer's collection. It was a rationale that was easily discernible to those who in the 1890s had embraced the utopian project of social evolution through self-culture. After the horrors of World War I, however, this evolutionary discourse lost its viability, as well as the specific understanding of its basis in Hegel and Pater, while the rhetoric of purity lived on to support the modernist project of a more completely abstract art.¹⁰⁰

98. Fenollosa, 60, continued, "Subject, indeed, is not thus lost; but rather absorbed by, or translated into, the beauty of form," thus invoking Pater's characterization of the ideal artwork as a musical work "in which the constituent elements of the composition are so welded together, that the material or subject no longer strikes the intellect only; nor the form, the eye or the ear only; but form and matter, in the union or identity, present one single effect to the 'imaginative reason,' that complex faculty for which every

thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol." See Pater (as in n. 1), 108-9, which draws on Hegel's articulation of art as a "concrete interpenetration of meaning and shape"; and G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford, 1975, 304.

99. Walter Kaiser, "East and West at I Tatti," in Roberts, 12.

100. See Mark Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting*, Cambridge, 1991.

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Kathleen Pyne is an associate professor in the history of art at the University of Notre Dame, where she teaches English and American art, and the author of the forthcoming Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century America (University of Texas Press, 1996) [Department of Art, Art History, and Design, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556].