

Historical Contact between Japan and the United States at the Freer House 113 Years Ago

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The Freer House, located just north of the Detroit Institute of Arts, was once the residence of Detroit industrialist Charles Freer from the late 1800s until 1919. Freer was an art collector who bequeathed his collection to the United States. He also built a museum with his own money to house his collection on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Some of the Japanese art he collected would be considered national treasures if they would have remained in Japan. It is remarkable that Freer recognized and appreciated the beauty of Eastern art more than 100 years ago.

In December of last year, the Chunichi Shimbun published an article about Suketami Ito, the founder of the Matsuzakaya Department Store. Ito documented in his memoir his visit to Freer's home in Detroit while traveling in the U.S. Let's follow his steps in Detroit.

The leader of the traveling group was a prominent Japanese industrialist named Eiichi Shibusawa. Last year's NHK Taiga Drama Series "Seiten wo Tsuke" was based on the life story of Shibusawa. The group, consisting of 51 members, departed Japan in August, 1909. In the early morning of September 30, they arrived via railroad in Detroit, one of their stops in the U.S.

On the day of their arrival, the traveling group attended a luncheon at the Detroit Yacht Club on Belle Isle. Dr. Jokichi Takamine, who was an advisor to Parke, Davis & Company was known for his invention of Takadiastase and the isolation of the pure hormone adrenalin. After luncheon, they toured the Parke-Davis headquarters and factory. Subsequently, they visited the high-end car maker Packard's plant. They saw the thriving Detroit scenes with their own eyes. The following day, October 1, 1909, they visited the Burroughs Adding Machine Company's headquarters in Detroit. It was said that there was a competitive match performed between the Japanese group skilled with abacus and the Burroughs adding machine there.

It was that afternoon when the group, including Shibusawa and Ito, visited the home of Charles Freer. Unfortunately, Freer was out of town for his art buying trip.

However, he made sure that many of his Japanese art objects of highest quality, such as the “Autumn Grass” screen by Hon’ami Koetsu, were on display for the Japanese visitors to view in the gallery at Freer’s home. Appreciating Freer’s Japanese collection, Ito must have had mixed feelings. He later wrote in his memoir, “A long time has passed since our country’s artifacts were taken overseas.” It is not difficult to sense Ito’s lament for the destructive force of the “Haibutsu Kishaku” movement, which caused many of Japanese artworks to be sold and dispersed to foreign countries. Shibusawa wrote, “Mr. Freer has already left for his world tour. I hear that he is currently staying in Peking, China. Looking at his portrait, we are toasting to his health. We are also going to send a telegram to show our respect to him.”

Presently the Freer House does not contain Freer’s art collection. As a sister institution of the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Freer House concessionary hosts lectures and exhibitions. Being an old historical building, the Freer House has been suffering wear and tear. Last year the building was severely damaged by a water leak caused by the malfunctioning HVAC system. The Freer House is currently owned by Wayne State University. It may take some time for WSU to repair the damage and restore the building.

Although we regret that many important Japanese art works were taken out of Japan, we cannot deny the fact that the Freer House played a positive role in transmitting the wonder of Japanese art to the world. Besides Shibusawa and Ito’s story discussed in this report, many other historical facts of developing friendship between Japan and the U.S. through art have taken place here at the Freer House. I encourage all of you to go to the Freer House and reminisce the time when the great Japanese historical figures visited there. When you go, you may be able to hear more profoundly interesting stories from the Freer House Director Colburn, who is such a kind person.