Freer's Photographs, Diaries, and Objects: Networking a National Collection
NA+DAH 2020 White Paper
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June 1, 2020

Introduction

Past decades have seen a growing interest in the formation of museum collections and the role collectors, dealers, and curators play in acquiring, exhibiting, and hence shaping art historical scholarship. Pioneering nineteenth-century American collector of Asian art, Charles Lang Freer traveled extensively in Asia and bequeathed his collection to the Smithsonian as the nation's museum of Asian art. Freer presents a unique research opportunity to understand the circumstances of art collecting in his era due to his detailed and prolific record keeping. Therefore, this project examines key developments in his collecting that eventually led to the formation of a national museum.

We are investigating how Freer's travel routes and the photographs he collected differentiated him from the other contemporaneous collectors interested in the Near East and South Asia. By overlaying this information with his diary entries and object purchase records, we hope to understand how Freer's firsthand engagement with the region and his social contacts impacted his aesthetic taste and collecting priorities.

Over the past year and especially since the 2019 Pittsburgh convening, we have realized that we need to sharpen our focus, and have thus decided to concentrate on the period between 1907 and 1909. This period reflects both Freer's increased interest in collecting Near Eastern art and regional travel, but also coincides with initial talks regarding his foundation of a national museum in Washington, D.C. Using Freer's diaries, we have identified many associations based on correspondence, collection and museum visits, lectures, shared travel, and collecting transactions,which we will correlate with the 1,815 relevant objects acquired by Freer during this period.

New Timetable

May-June 2020: Complete data collection and preparation

June-August 2020: Explore models for network analysis; continue research in secondary sources and on photography; attend bi-monthly project workshops

September- December 2020: Continue network analysis component, complete research on photography, secondary sources, etc to contextualize results and see relationships between material; attend bi-monthly project workshops; explore platforms for sharing research results with museum colleagues, scholarly audience and online.

Spring 2021: Prepare for Getty 2021 Convening as initiative requires; complete analysis; attend bi-monthly project workshops; dissemination projects underway.

June 2021: Attend Project Symposium

Research Investigation
- **What are your research questions *right now* given your work thus far on the project? Have your questions changed since the project launched? If so, how and why?**
    - Exactly how much information can we derive about Freer's collecting decisions based on the available data?
    - What are the best network analysis tools for our project?
    - How can/should we interlay our data analysis metrics and other research?
    - What are the gaps in our data?
    - To what extent will we be able to carry out a comparative analysis of Freer as a collector with other American collectors of his time?

    These questions have much more to do with the research/analysis process than did the questions with which we began. Those original questions will come into play again once we have a more complete picture of our data and what it can tell us.

- **What are your current technical/computational tasks? Within the context of this question, please be sure to address the current state of your data, including its completeness and its current organization.**
    - To date we have set up our data collection protocols and standards, and made modifications as we tweaked our research focus and refined our project vocabulary. In December/January, we evaluated the current state of our research and made the decision to focus on the major period of Freer's collecting of Near Eastern art beginning in 1907. We have completed the first stage of our data collection, focusing on diary entries 1907 to 1909.
    - **Current technical/computational tasks:** standardizing terms, building and maintaining authority lists and adding those IDs to research data.
    - **Current state of our data:** multiple spreadsheets of authority tables and research data; corresponding TMS Constituent records with associations.
    - **How complete is it:** we're not sure, as it needs to be tested and analyzed using software.
    - **How is it organized:** people authorities, geography authorities, diary research data organized chronologically.

- **What are your current art historical methodologies? Have these changed since the project launched? If so, how and why?**
    - Close looking and analysis of original documents and photographs
    - Secondary source reading
    - Research on people and institutions to verify and complete names, life dates, and relations

- ○ While there have not been significant changes in methodologies from when we began, we are thinking more about how to shape the data that we gather from the sources, in what format to save and store them. This was not something that we had paid much attention to before we began actively working with the data.

- **What are your current network-analytic approaches? Please provide a rationale for your choices and explain how they align with your research questions. Have these changed since the project launched? If so, how and why?**
  - ○ So far our focus has been on preparing our data, and we are now reaching the point of making decisions about how to construct our network(s): should it be uni-or bi-modal, what are the key attributes of our nodes and edges, and how will we incorporate chronology, to name only a few of the questions we have been considering.
  - ○ With our data preparation nearing completion, we expect to turn our attention to the network analysis component of our project immediately following the June convening.
  - ○ Being new to network analysis when the project began, our ideas have evolved, and will no doubt continue to evolve as we learn more, and as we have the opportunity to see the progress made by other teams in the initiative.

- **What preliminary conclusions have you drawn, what results have you found, or do you have anything otherwise surprising or interesting to report about your research?**
  - ○ When we began the project we were not aware that the parameters we had established for the project would result in an unwieldy amount of data. Furthermore, as we dug deeper into the data it became clear that Freer's most productive years of travel and collecting for Middle Eastern and Ancient Near Eastern material were the period from 1907 to 1909. This is a preliminary conclusion about his travel and collecting patterns on a large scale, but our analysis of the data has not progressed to the point yet to allow for any preliminary conclusions specific to this period.

Project Management
- **Going well/what victories have you snatched from the jaws of defeat?**
  - ○ Data collection in the Archives has been productive.
  - ○ We have refined our research questions and sharpened our focus both temporally and geographically.
  - ○ We have a much better sense of our data, and the work of data collection/scrubbing/classification is well underway.
  - ○ We have established a regular schedule of Zoom meetings at a time that works for our far flung group and which is helpful in keeping the project on track.
- **Changes/challenges**
  - ○ When this project was initially conceived, all four team members worked at the Freer|Sackler, three in the same small team. At the time of the 2019 convening, Zeynep had just moved to Istanbul to begin a demanding new job, and in November, Nancy left the museum and is pursuing other projects. These changes as well as other developments within the museum have created some challenges in terms of allocating

time to the project and finding ways to meet, to name only the most obvious. The pandemic has exacerbated those challenges, particularly regarding time available for this project, and added some new ones. Chief among these is the current inability to access library or archives material. As each team member has been working to find the new normal in her/his circumstances we have also been working as a team to figure out how best to work together going forward.

Looking Ahead
- **Questions or topics for discussion**
  - Given that many other teams in the group are also separated by distance and time zones, what suggestions/practices can be shared about working together in those circumstances?
  - How did other teams make their decisions about which network analysis tools were best for their project?
  - What suggestions are there for managing data so that it stays clean and available as a resource, but works with the programs we want to use?
  - How are other teams representing change over time in their data?