Thomas Brunk

Interviewed by

Lillian Wilson

October 20, 2014

Detroit, Michigan

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Library and Information Science

Kim Schroeder, Instructor

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Brief Biography: Thomas Brunk is a scholar and steelworker who has studied the life of railroad industrialist and art collector, Charles Lang Freer, for over forty years. Brunk was born November 25, 1949, in Romeo, Michigan. He is president of the Friends of the Freer House, a committee of the Merrill-Palmer Institute of Wayne State University. Friends of the Freer House is dedicated to the restoration of The Charles Lang Freer House in Detroit, which was built between 1890-92 and where Freer lived from 1892 until his death in 1919. Brunk earned a PhD in art and architectural history from the Union Institute in Cincinnati, OH in 1997. He lives in Detroit, Michigan.

Interviewer: Lillian Wilson is a PhD student in the History Department at Wayne State University.

Description: Thomas Brunk Interview

Accession: WSOH2604

Access: No restrictions.

Abstract: In this interview, Brunk discusses the life of railroad industrialist, art collector and founder of the Freer Gallery, Charles Lang Freer. Freer lived in Detroit from 1879 until his death in 1919. This interview was conducted in the Charles Lang Freer House at 71 East Ferry Street, in the room that originally served as Freer's dining room, on the first floor of the house.

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Subjects: Brunk, Thomas, 1949-

Caulkins, Horace (1850-1932)

Charles Lang Freer House – Michigan

Chinese art -- porcelain

Col. Frank J. Hecker House – Michigan

Detroit (Mich.) – Archival resources

Dewing, Maria Oakey (1845-1927)

Dewing, Thomas (1851-1938)

Eyre, Wilson (1858-1944)

Ferry Street – Detroit – Michigan

Freer Gallery – Washington, DC

Freer, Charles Lang, 1854-1919.

Hecker, Frank, 1846-1927

Japanese art – ceramics

Jerome, Thomas Spencer (1864-1915)

John Alexander Pope (1906-1982)

Korean art -- ceramics

Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute – Michigan

Meyer, Agnes Ernst (1887-1970)

Peninsular Car Company – railroad

Pewabic Pottery

Pewabic Society -- Detroit

Society of Architectural Historians – Michigan

Stratton, Mary Chase Perry (1867-1961)

Thayer, Abbott Handerson (1849–1921)

Warring, Grace, 1899-1995

Warring, Stephens Thomas, 1860-1944

Wayne State University – Michigan

Whistler, James McNeill 1834-1903

White, Stanford (1853-1906)

Yondotaga Club – Detroit

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Transcript of interview conducted October 20, 2014 with Thomas Brunk, at the Charles Lang Freer House, 71 East Ferry Street, Detroit, MI.

By: Lillian Wilson

Wilson: Alright, I am Lillian Wilson, and I am meeting with Thomas Brunk, at the Freer House at 71 East Ferry Street in Detroit and today's date is October 20, 2014 and it is exactly 2:30 p.m. Ok, so, you first visited the Freer House in your early twenties?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: Okay. And could you talk about that experience a little bit?

Brunk: Well, then it was owned by Merrill Palmer, not Wayne State University. And there were still people who had been around since almost the beginning. So, they were keenly aware of Freer and his life, and valued the house, which was a whole different institutional mentality than Wayne State brought when they acquired it. It was just an old house.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: So they had this connection which they continued on. About a year later I became involved in their preservation committee, or a committee that we started to work on preserving the house and interpreting it. There was no real program for that.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: There was a lot of interest but nothing had really happened about that. And that later grew to Friends of Freer House.

Wilson: Right. Which you're now the president of?

Brunk: Yes. And--in terms of my impression, of course my keen interest was Freer's relationship with Pewabic Pottery which brought me here.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: And the architectural interest, because I was president of the Society of Architectural Historians.

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: At the time. So there were two interests simultaneous. There were offices primarily being used here, so not everything was readily available to see. It takes a while, as you know, to kind of, get a grasp, mentally, of what's here.

Wilson: Yeah.

Brunk: It's a complicated house.

Wilson: It is.

Brunk: So, there were a number of issues, I made several visits back. Of course the Pewabic fireplace in the Hubler Lounge, which was installed in 1911 is a keen one.

And then I knew Ella Peters, Mrs. Stratton's assistant, who glazed the iridescent fireplace in the Peacock Room.

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: In 1961 for Merrill Palmer.

Wilson: So the--so what is currently the Peacock Room in this house, in Detroit?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: Okay. So what exists in the other room, right across the hall.

Brunk: You mean across the courtyard?

Wilson: That's right, across the courtyard, yeah.

Brunk: Yes, the fireplace that's there.

Wilson: Okay. And then the original from Whistler's Peacock Room is in Washington.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: So she essentially remade it in the sixties.

Brunk: Right.

Wilson: Many years after Freer.

Brunk: Which indicates Merrill Palmer's interest in preserving the thing, there's already one Pewabic fireplace, so they wanted to reiterate that.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: Because they were redoing that whole room as a library. It was really very nice. Which got trashed when Wayne acquired the place.

Wilson: Right. Sure. Where is the other Pewabic fireplace?

Brunk: In the Hubler Gallery.

Wilson: In the Hubler Gallery upstairs.

Brunk: That's the one that Freer installed when he built the gallery.

Wilson: Oh, right. Okay. So you and Freer both shared an interest in Pewabic Pottery?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: And ceramics.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: Asian ceramics, Japanese ceramics.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: So do you think that your interest in--what came first for you, the interest in the Japanese ceramics or the interest in the Pewabic Pottery?

Brunk: Pewabic Pottery primarily through its architectural applications.

Wilson: Mmm-hmm.

Brunk: And then I became more interested in it and later in 1979 was a founding member of the Pewabic Society.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: So.

Wilson: And then Freer having--living in Detroit around the time of his first trip to Asia -- is that correct?

Brunk: Um-hm.
Wilson: He--he was already aware of and interested in Pewabic Pottery, had the fireplace built, like you said, upstairs in the gallery, and do you think that that had an impact on his aesthetic in terms of his collecting Asian art?

Brunk: Well, I think what needs to be understood is the relationship that Freer had with Mary Chase Perry and Horace Caulkins, which was a symbiotic relationship, I mean he had glaze chemists whom he could discuss how ancient pieces of ceramics might have been made.

Wilson: Ah. Um-hm.

Brunk: So there was a sharing in that. Perry already had, before she probably even became acquainted with Freer, a knowledge of Asian pottery…which influenced her. Because in 1901 she writes about ancient Korean ware.

Wilson: Oh, okay.

Brunk: Which is pretty sophisticated.

Wilson: Yeah. Sure.

Brunk: For that period. And Freer really begins buying art pottery by 1894, possibly a little earlier, but we don't have really his purchase records until 1894.

Wilson: Okay. Even though he was a master, double entry bookkeeper.

Brunk: Yes, yes.

[Laughter]

Brunk: But then he went into a ledger system, which Hecker also used. And those Hecker records have all been trashed.

Wilson: How did they come to be trashed, just turnover?

Brunk: His children.

Wilson: Oh, his children. Okay.

Brunk: Ledger books aren't too interesting for most people.

[Laughter]

Wilson: That's right. Well, um, but important if we were to have them and know these questions—um, the answers to these questions, rather.

Wilson: Okay, so, when did you first visit the Freer Gallery in Washington, DC?

Brunk: I think it was 1976, and as I told you before, I, when I got there, Mrs. Smith who was the librarian, I was pretty young and--

Wilson: Yeah.

Brunk: And had the audacity to ask if Dr. Pope was in, and he was the director and she was like, "How dare you ask me that question?"

[Laughter]

Brunk: And I gave her my card and asked her to deliver it to Dr. Pope, which she did.

Wilson: Sure.

Brunk: And she came back a little surprised because he had invited me to lunch.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: At that time there was a lunchroom in the Freer Gallery for the director, and in that room was the Peacock Room table.

Wilson: Wow.

Brunk: And that's where we had lunch. We talked about his family, I knew all about them so--

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: It was kind of an interesting conversation.

Wilson: Sure.

Brunk: Again, he knew Freer. So I mean there was a lot of Detroit connections when the Freer Gallery opened. And as I said Joseph Stephens Warring and his son Charles installed the collection in Washington.

Wilson: Right. So Pope was appointed by Freer?

Brunk: No, no. He became director later on. He was a Chinese scholar, and blue and white porcelain were his primary interests.

Wilson: Like Ming Dynasty porcelain?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: And was he on the original board of trustees appointed by Freer?

Brunk: No.

Wilson: No. Okay. Because that might have been a conflict of interest…

Brunk: Right.

Wilson: I imagine. So why do you think he invited you to lunch?

Brunk: Because he wanted to find out who this Detroit person was I'm sure. [Laughter]

Wilson: Okay. Yeah, okay. And you were still in your twenties at that point, so a young man.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: Do you remember learning anything in particular at that point about Freer from him. Or did you teach him anything that he didn't know about Freer?

Brunk: Well, I think he was surprised because I knew which house he was born in, and which year, and I said, you know it's on the next street from where I live today. Which kind of surprised him.

Wilson: Sure.

Brunk: And I said Albert Khan was the architect for your parent's house. So, I think he was a little flummoxed by all that I knew about his family.

Wilson: Yeah, yeah. Your wealth of knowledge. And he was born in Detroit, Pope was born in Detroit.

Brunk: Yes, in 1906.

Wilson: Interesting. Okay, and then went to Washington, was appointed director.

Brunk: I'm not sure which year, I want to say maybe in the forties, late forties.

Wilson: So he had been at the—he had been there for many, many years then, thirty, forty years, then before you, this young scholar came and had an interest in Freer.

Brunk: And at that time Freer's vouchers and all of those things were in the same metal box as it came out of his safe.

Wilson: My goodness.

Brunk: So no one had really been through much of that material at all. Today that of course is all been changed, but--

Wilson: And it's all in the archives at the Freer Gallery now. Did he let you see any of those things?

Brunk: Oh yes.

Wilson: Oh he did.

Brunk: Oh yeah. The librarian brought them out.

Wilson: Right. And what was her name again?

Brunk: Mrs. Smith. Priscilla Smith.

Wilson: So, okay, she must have been surprised too by you coming in and knowing so much, huh?

Brunk: Well, I mean, it's interesting how paradigms affect people's decisions.

Wilson: Sure.

Brunk: Because there are things and she would show me on this thing and she said, you see that's junk. And I thought, well, no that's J-N-K, Freer's secretary, Kennedy, that's not junk at all.

[Laughter]

Brunk: Those are his initials, that means he posted the information.

Wilson: Right, okay. Little tiny things that, you know, you had a knowledge of, to the average person, even somebody working that closely with the archives, just might not have known.

Brunk: Well, she had no idea who he was.

Wilson: She had no idea. Right. Interesting. Okay.

Brunk: So, she didn't like me correcting her.

Wilson: No, I bet not.

Brunk: But I said, you might want to be careful about that.

Wilson: That's right.

Brunk: Cause you know it's not junk.

Wilson: Junk. Okay. Very funny. Okay. And how long did you spend, that particular trip, in DC?

Brunk: I think probably five days at the Freer.

Wilson: Okay. And did you see Pope again after that?

Brunk: No.

Wilson: No.

Brunk: No, I didn't.

Wilson: Okay, okay. So you were friends with Grace Warring, who was Joseph Stephens Warring's sis—uh, daughter.

Brunk: First child.

Wilson: First child. And he had three children?
Brunk: Five.

Wilson: Oh, five. Okay. So him and his oldest son were the ones that took the collection to Washington? We have our family tree.

Brunk: His oldest son, yes. Cause there were two girls and then Charles.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: So Charles would have been eighteen-years-old…

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: Nineteen years old when Freer died. Actually seventeen.

Wilson: Right in 1919.

Brunk: So around ‘22, ’23, you know he’s going to be another four years older, so twenty-one-years old.

Wilson: So all children were born in this house, all five children?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: You were friends with Grace.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: And you met her--she was a neighbor of yours, is that right? Can you talk a little bit about how you came to know her?

Brunk: Tracking people down, I found the 1940 census.

Wilson: Oh, okay.

Brunk: And then I went through city directories and found that she was living in the Alden Park Manor, just down the street from me.

Wilson: Um-hm.

Brunk: So I wrote her a letter--and it was interesting, my friend Susan Hobbs, who was the first curator of American art at the Freer.

Wilson: Okay, yeah.

Brunk: Was here in Detroit as a guest and had communicated with Grace that she would be here and Grace invited her, to her apartment before I did, when she came back she said, “Well, it’s filled with Freer’s stuff!”

[Laughter]

Wilson: Wow. And this was at Alden Park in Indian Village, is that right? And you currently live in Indian Village?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: So she was a neighbor of yours, um, and you visited the Freer Gallery with her, her first visit, around 1990?

Brunk: Well, I think she may have been there before.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: But she was supposed to go to work at the Freer Gallery

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: But her mother would have nothing to do with a woman going to Washington on her own.

[Laughter]

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: So that didn’t happen.

Wilson: Okay, okay.

Brunk: I think it probably was about, I think it was 1991 that we went to Washington.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: And already Freer would have--Grace would have been ninety-years-old.

Wilson: Yeah.

Brunk: So it was like taking a dinosaur to the Smithsonian.

[Laughter]

Brunk: because no one believed there was anyone alive that knew Freer, let alone actually worked for Freer.

Wilson: And was born in his house.

Brunk: And was born in his house.

Wilson: And grew up in his house.

Brunk: And as we walked around the thing she would talk about the paintings and where they were at in the house.

Wilson: Unbelievable, yeah.

Brunk: So they had a reporter, or a photographer, following us around.

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: Documenting the visit.

Wilson: The Washington Post, or--?

Brunk: No, the Smithsonian photographer.

Wilson: Oh, the Smithsonian photographer. Does anything in particular stand out to you or anything that really stand out to her during that trip, visiting?

Brunk: Well, this painting of the children [Abbott Handerson Thayer's *A Virgin,* 1892-93] was one of her favorites.

Wilson: And that's above the staircase, I believe.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: That connects the Freer and the Sackler today.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: So it was still there at that time?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: Okay. So that was a favorite of hers?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: Okay, anything else that you remember being sort of funny?

Brunk: Well, there was an interesting comment that she mentioned when I brought her back a copy of her father's first pay stub from Freer. And she just was surprised at the low amount. And she said, "And to think of that room with all the gilded furniture." Which was the parlor.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: So.

Wilson: Yeah, so, basically thinking about how underpaid her dad might have been?

Brunk: Well, I don't know if he was underpaid at the time, I can't quite believe that but--

Wilson: Right. Interesting.

Brunk: Her sensibilities maybe.

Wilson: But certainly a wealthy collector like Freer and she felt that that was--

Brunk: Well, I mean, I'm sure Freer didn't pay the top dollar, but by the same token he paid enough to get allegiance and clearly Stephen was very much obliged to Freer, and the Peacock Room was the first thing to be taken out of the house.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: And Stephen was very concerned about how sloppy they were in removing it, and complained to Washington about that.

Wilson: Right, because the Smithsonian, you had mentioned the Smithsonian sent their own movers.

Brunk: Well they actually hired a Detroit company.

Wilson: They contracted someone out.

Brunk: They had a person handling the dismantling of it.

Wilson: Okay and Stephen Warring, who was the curator of the collection in this house, and took very good care of it obviously, was upset about the way that they were handling it.

Brunk: Well and interestingly enough in the Smithsonian annual report it mentions or cites the fact that of all the stuff that was shipped, there were six railroad cars of pottery that left here, but not one thing was damaged or broken.

Wilson: Amazing, amazing. So it went via rail.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: I mean, I don't know how else it would have gone then, right?

Brunk: No planes.

Wilson: No planes. That is really incredible. Okay, so it would have been packed up and then the rail would have picked up right down the street here.

Brunk: Or down on Fort Street probably.

Wilson: Okay, okay. Wow. And six crates, you said, six big cars. Boxcars.

Brunk: Six big boxcars of just pottery.

Wilson: Amazing.

Brunk: Not paintings or anything else.

Wilson: So Stephen was really, uh, probably responsible for how well those things were packaged

Brunk: Oh sure.

Wilson: And then he went to Washington to see their installation, to oversee that. Very interesting. Now what was still in this house that Grace then inherited, and then you inherited, when Freer died?

Brunk: Well, there was a chair that Freer had designed for himself that was made by the Davenport Company in Boston. A library chair, a Japanese table with a green metallic finish and a lamp, all of Freer's bedroom furniture, which was custom made for the house.

Wilson: Oh wow.

Brunk: Two tables and two chairs from the dining room here. With the same hardware--

Wilson: Oh yeah, that we're looking at right now. Okay.

Brunk: Another small desk. A table from Stanford White. The costumer, or clothes tree.

Wilson: Oh. So like the mannequin that would have been used to fit the clothing?

Brunk: No, no to hang clothes.

Wilson: To hang clothes. Okay, okay. So what Freer would have used for dressing.

Brunk: Right, well, actually it probably was in the back hall.

Wilson: Oh, okay. To keep like jackets and things like that?

Brunk: There's small closet but you know if you had extra people you would need something else.

Wilson: That's right. So you then inherited all of those things…

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: From Grace?

Brunk: Yes. And plus silver and pottery and a whole ream of Freer's stationary and…
Wilson: Okay. So, had you expected Grace to give you those things? I mean you'd been friends for a long time.

Brunk: No but when her nephew came from South Dakota he—what was he going to do with all that stuff? They had no place in their home in South Dakota, and shipping it back, and, so I helped settle the estate after Grace died and…

Wilson: Oh, okay. And you were in her will, I assume, at that point.

Brunk: No I don't think I was in her will, I think he just gave the stuff to me.

Wilson: And she didn't have children.

Brunk: No. She was never married.

Wilson: But her nephew didn't have any need for it, would have been too complicated moving it.

Brunk: No, and he's an art teacher in Spearfish, South Dakota.

Wilson: Oh, okay.

Brunk: It's the only nephew or--she had. She had no nieces and no nephews.

Wilson: Okay. Wow. So just one. Richard Warring Hicks, is that right?

Brunk: Um-hm.

Wilson: Okay. So that was the nephew who then gave you the okay to keep those things.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: Do you have a particular favorite?

Brunk: Well, I like the library chair, it's very comfortable.

Wilson: Oh, okay. So you use these things in your own home now.

Brunk: Oh yes.

Wilson: Wow. Okay. That's very interesting. So I imagine it's an interesting talking point when people come over and you can tell them that you have--

Brunk: Some people, yes.

Wilson: Okay. Yeah, that's fascinating. Okay, now Freer didn't have children.

Brunk: No. He was never married.

Wilson: Never married. Who were—who were, just jumping ahead a little bit, who–did he have a best friend, did he have a companion, did he ever date? I mean, was any indication of that in his letters that you've looked at?

Brunk: I've never found any evidence of him dating but--

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: Again, there are business letters, and there are personal letters, and often times personal letters were handwritten so there would be no copy of those.

Wilson: Okay. So whoever received them…

Brunk: That would be the only copy there was.

Wilson: Okay, that's right, okay.

Brunk: Because in the Pewabic records we have a handwritten note from Freer about his house he's building in the Berkshires.

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: And telling Ms. Perry that unless her tiles [indistinguishable] the house surely wouldn't stand. I mean it's an interesting side of him to find these letters.
Wilson: Mmm-hmm. You mean his particularly—his close relationships with artists and maybe even other art collectors at the time?

Brunk: Well he had of course Catherine Rhoades was an early friend of his. I mean there were many very beautiful women and many very independent women.

Wilson: Sure. Yeah.

Brunk: Which is kind of a whole other aspect that someone needs to explore at some time.

Wilson: I agree. He was friends--the friendship that I'm aware of, and have read the most about was his friendship with Agnes Meyer, who was the wife of Eugene Meyer who owned the Washington Post in the—at the turn of the century.

Brunk: He was a stockbroker too.

Wilson: Stockbroker.

Brunk: He was the one who leveraged the $500,000 out of Park Davis stock for Freer to build the Gallery.

Wilson: Right. So big—they were both on the board of trustees.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: Agnes and—and their names still appear on the Freer Gallery today when you walk in. And I'm--that is a very interesting thing that there seems to not be very much on. And I don't know, how would you take that, if you were to write about that or think about that?

Brunk: Have you read the little book that the Freer Gallery published by Agnes Meyer?

Wilson: Yeah, yeah.

Brunk: Which is kind of curious.

Wilson: I agree.

Brunk: Because when Susan was working on Freer and I said to Susan, "So have you gotten a copy of his death certificate?" And she looked at me like, "Why would I want—why are you asking me that?"

Wilson: Yeah. This is Susan Hobbs? Susan Hobbs.

Brunk: Um-hm.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: And I said, “Because you want to know what it says.”

Wilson: Sure.

Brunk: And it indicates that he died of complications from syphilis.

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: And Agnes Meyer makes some allusion to that, but she doesn’t say it. Also he dies at 11:30 in the morning, and when Hecker reports his death via the newspapers he says he dies in the evening. Which is kind of curious to me.

Wilson: Yeah. Sure, sure.

Brunk: I mean how would you get that confused?

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: And I have to believe that the death certificate has the correct time on it.

Wilson: Right, because the coroner would have stamped that, and written that.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: So…
Brunk: And you wouldn’t make a mistake of lunchtime versus midnight.

Wilson: No, no probably not. And—so he died in New York. And were the Meyers, was Mrs. Meyer in New York when he died then?

Brunk: I don’t know if she was in New York or at Mt. Kisco.

Wilson: So maybe either. Because the Meyers had their vacation, or their rural home, in Mt. Kisco.

Brunk: Um-hm.

Wilson: And that's actually where the Meyer children grew up, Katherine Graham actually talks about that a lot, about her wonderful time there. But Agnes Meyer was an extremely--how could we characterize her? She was very outgoing, very independent even though she was a woman of the times, she was married and had children but she, um, was also very, um, disinterested almost in the sort of domestic, and more interested in the socialite side of things.

Brunk: Um-hm.

Wilson: So I mean what do we make of these friendships with these independent women, of these beautiful independent socialites?

Brunk: Well, she was keenly interested in Chinese art.

Wilson: Okay

Brunk: So there was that connection.

Wilson: Sure.

Brunk: She was also interested in Pewabic. And they have a study collection, a very wonderful Pewabic piece and the Meyers came to Pewabic Pottery in Detroit and bought some stuff 1918. So I mean there was a collabor—I mean they often bought things together and then sort of separated them between them.

Wilson: Interesting. So they had a similar aesthetic, they sort of had their finger on the pulse of the art world--and did the Meyers' every go to Asia? Did they travel?

Brunk: They must have. I can believe that they wouldn't have.

Wilson: Yeah.

Brunk: It's also interesting to me that Freer's reaction and how he collected things and the way he treated living artists.

Wilson: Yeah, let's talk about that. So, how--

Brunk: Which is highly unusual.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: Because he would always ask permission from the artists before he would lend the works for exhibition. So he didn't consider himself the owner.

Wilson: That's right.

Brunk: Which is unlike most, almost every other collector I can think of.

Wilson: Um-hm.

Brunk: I don't know another exception to that.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: I'm always looking for one, but I haven't particularly found one.

Wilson: I suppose the only exception that I could think of, or someone that had a similar sort of patron artist relationship, would be someone like Duncan Phillips, who opened up the—opened up his home, donated his collection as a—to the public, it's a private museum but open to the public, had a similar sort of relationship where he would support artists like Arthur Dove and give them money and then you know, sort of very artist focused. But you, know, not to the degree, I don't think that as you're saying, Freer was. Um, and Freer's collection massive at that date, compared to the Phillips Collection.

Brunk: I think the other thing that's terribly important is that Freer's collection is there for study purposes.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: No admission should ever be charged. Which they're trying all the time to break.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: And Mellon and all the others studied Freer's will.

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: When they were thinking of giving their collections.

Wilson: Interesting.

Brunk: They wanted to see what kind of conditions he had put on it.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: The problem with Smithsonian was that they no interest in art, they were scientific.

Wilson: That's right.

Brunk: And Freer's other thing was that he wasn't willing to just give them the collection. It was to remain in his hands during his lifetime.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: Well, I'm pretty convinced that by 1901 Freer knew that he had this issue with syphilis. So for him--his lifetime--who knew how long it would go on?

Wilson: That's right.

Brunk: And the treatment for syphilis at that time was rubbing with mercury.

Wilson: Oh, well, that poses other problems.

Brunk: The feet and hands. So, one of the two was going to get you.

Wilson: That's right.

Brunk: It's just a question of when.

Wilson: That's right. So he was aware that his life was coming to an end—his death wasn't sudden.

Brunk: No, no, he was terribly ill before that.

Wilson: In some reports, I've read that he died of a stroke?

Brunk: Well, I think the death certificate sort of--

Wilson: Sure.

Brunk: The stroke was probably sort of the last symptom.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: Of his ongoing illness.

Wilson: So the syphilis aspect is not something um, that visitors today who go to the Freer House or the Freer Gallery today are not going to be told about.

Brunk: No. I don't think that--for most people that creates more of a problem than it does answer any questions.

Wilson: I agree, I agree. Certainly for us, I mean, because it leads to all sorts of questions, doesn't it? But the focus, the idea that he died from a stroke I think leads to questions about, you know was his lifestyle, as this wealthy industrialist, so stressful, things like that, things that we typically associate with stroke today, but—it was—it sounds like it was a symptom of a bigger problem.

Brunk: Well and he—when he and Hecker were leaving Logansport, Indiana to come to Michigan, he was quite ill, and took a trip to Quebec to just relax and recover from it.

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: So that's in 1879. But, you know, when we say ill, I mean I think we have a misconception of what the quality of life was in—at that time.

Wilson: Hmm. Okay.

Brunk: I mean you think of infant mortality.

Wilson: Sure.

Brunk: And I don't know if—I mean I do a lot of genealogical stuff and you see maybe fifteen kids and seven of them are dead before a year old.

Wilson: It's unbelievable. Right.

Brunk: So there were no vaccines, there were no, you know…

Wilson: Yeah.

Brunk: Things that we take for granted today.

Wilson: Take for granted. So how would you then describe his quality of life in this house? What do we know about his daily routine for example or what he would have done while he was living here, and maybe not traveling, which he did frequently?

Brunk: Well his date books have a lot of information, people would come and go and that sort of thing. But he wrote them for himself.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: So there's always questions.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: And many times there will be weeks and everyday it just says "Detroit, Detroit, Detroit, Detroit, Detroit," nothing else.

Wilson: Right. Just where he was essentially. Where he woke up that day. Now how did he come to know the Warrings?

Brunk: Well he hired Joseph Stephens Warring as his coachman, I think I have it--he began working for Freer on June 1, 1894

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: So. And Stephen, by 1898, '97, when Freer was getting rid of his horses, because it was just too much of a maintenance issue, Stephen said, "Well, my God, I better get—I better find some other use for myself or I'm out of a job."

Wilson: That's right.

Brunk: And that's when he became a quick study of the plants and the gardens, and told Freer, "You know, I can take over the gardens."

Wilson: Yeah.

Brunk: And the same thing happened by 1899 when Freer's collection starts growing, and then of course by 1906, when he gives the collection to the Nation, that changes the whole thing here. Freer has the house redone. I mean, when I say redone, touching up to paint, because people were beginning to come here.

Wilson: So now who, who was—first of all, I'm curious about who would have stayed here in terms of artists and important people during Freer's life here before the--there was an indication that it was going to become public—that the collection was going to be moved and become public—who were the people that were—that would have been staying here?

Brunk: Um-hm. I'm not sure there's all that many.

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: His brother Richard lived here for a while, in the red room at the corner. And then he brought Watson Freer here to Detroit to work for the Peninsular Car Company.

Wilson: And Watson was another brother?

Brunk: Was his youngest brother.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: And Watson married Anna Hecker.

Wilson: Oh. Okay. Right next door.

Brunk: Right next door.

Wilson: How convenient. Okay.

Brunk: And Freer built them a house right on the corner of John R.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: So. And then Watson was ill, he was always a sickly child, in any case, and went back to Kingston, and got a farm and he was dead when the Freer Gallery was opened and his wife died just before it was opened.

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: So they didn't visit the Gallery.

Wilson: So did any of his siblings, any of his brothers get a chance to visit the Gallery?

Brunk: No. I think all of his siblings were dead by the time he died.

Wilson: And so was he when the museum opened. So as far as artists who came here, could you talk a little bit maybe about that, the artists that would have come and stayed?

Brunk: Well of course Tryon and Dewing were the primary ones. And I think this is important to come back to too, by December of 1889 he had pretty much settled

on house plans with Wilson Eyre. And there's a published announcement of the house to be built in Detroit in the Philadelphia paper.

Wilson: Ah.

Brunk: So the plans are dated in 1890, but it's interesting to me that this main part of the house did not change during Freer's lifetime.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: And when he was designing the house he didn't even own an oil painting yet.

Wilson: So his collection really grew during the last ten, fifteen of his life.
Brunk: Well, twenty years, yes.

Wilson: Oh, yeah, right, okay.

Brunk: But you'd think as he traveled and traveled and traveled, most people would be tempted, with lots of money, to change the décor but he was very content with this. And interestingly enough I could never get Grace to come back to Freer House.

Wilson: Why do you think that is?
Brunk: I don't think she wanted to see anything but what was in her mind.

Wilson: So how do you think it was in her mind?

Brunk: I think the house when Freer lived here.

Wilson: Yeah. And how did it look? What were the major changes between when Grace lived here, and Freer lived here and when you came here for the first time in the early seventies?

Brunk: Of course the walls have all been painted, the paintings were gone. Until we had these reproductions put in place, no curator from Freer [Gallery] had ever

had any sense of where these paintings hung and the visual relationships created by them.

Wilson: Right, almost like the conversations between the paintings themselves.

Brunk: Exactly. Because they were created as part of the architecture.

Wilson: That's right.

Brunk: And this border below that painting there--you see that molding that runs across? That's on both sides of the hall was a blue border done by Maria Oakey Dewing.

Wilson: Ah. And that would have been to compliment the paintings that would have hung. And the walls had a sort of—they were finished, right?

Brunk: Metallic finish.

Wilson: A metallic finish, in a variety of—in different colors, in a variety--in the different rooms.

Brunk: Yes. So you can imagine with these metallic glazed walls, and these ornate Stanford White frames, it must have been pretty spectacular.

Wilson: Unbelievable. So, um, when did those artists actually come and paint the walls? Because they were living here at the time that they were working on the house.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: Okay, okay.

Brunk: They were here in 1892.

Wilson: Oh, so right after the house was--

Brunk: Well Freer moves in in November of 1892 and the artists come the following month.

Wilson: So he had a very clear idea of—at least in terms of American artists, who he wanted to be a part of--and they were young artists at the time.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: And then he actually collected their oil paintings in addition to having their hand finish on the walls. Were other people doing that at the time—having artists come and stay and paint their walls?

Brunk: I don't really know of any others.

Wilson: I don't either. So it's a very interesting aesthetic that he had.

Brunk: And he gave them free reign.

Wilson: I know, yeah, which--

Brunk: So it wasn't like he said, you know, "This is kind of what I want," although I know when he did the woodwork in the hall--

Wilson: Yeah.

Brunk: And he wanted it rubbed with iron filings

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: So that as the iron would oxidize it would change the coloration of the wood.

Wilson: To a more, like, to like a greenish?

Brunk: Well not so much green but dark, the iron would rust.

Wilson: Yeah would rust, oh rust, right, of course. And that would have complimented whatever metallic finish, which in any color it would have been beautiful--just unbelievably beautiful. And so that was all painted over when Wayne State--

Brunk: In 1953.

Wilson: In 1953. Okay. Because--

Brunk: It was antiqued.

Wilson: Antiqued.

Brunk: Painted green.

Wilson: Oh wow. Because Merrill Palmer did want to keep the house from the late 1920s until then, until the fifties, she did keep it in its original state essentially.

Brunk: Pretty much, yes.

Wilson: So it was in the late fifties when Wayne State bought the house.

Brunk: Well, no it was 1980.

Wilson: Oh. So it remained as Freer had it—

Brunk: But I think these metallic finishes were probably changed—

Wilson: Before that.

Brunk: Before that.

Wilson: Okay. When it was—

Brunk: We don't have any direct records that show us that.

Wilson: Right. William [Colburn] has mentioned that, we're not sure when it happened.

Brunk: but I'm sure they had, probably water leaks, or this or that which necessitated repainting.

Wilson: Absolutely.

Brunk: And they weren't going to spend the money to have someone try and reproduce these expensive metallic treatments.

Wilson: Absolutely. Yeah, they were hand done.

Brunk: I mean he was using aluminum.

Wilson: I know.

Brunk: In 1892. I mean that's--

Wilson: Very expensive.

Brunk: Just not heard of.

Wilson: It'd be like using gold today, I mean essentially, right?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: I mean the price of aluminum which some people don't know was very, very expensive. So the windowsill in the front room has little flecks of aluminum which is really beautiful in contrast to those pastels. So a lot of care, and Freer had his own aesthetic but he also had this particular relationship based on what you're saying, to allow artists to get as creative as they liked, he trusted them, to a large degree.

Brunk: Well, I think that they had an understanding.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: I can't imagine they just said, "To hell with Freer we're just going to do whatever we want."

Wilson: Because he was living here anyways and he would have seen it.

Brunk: But this room was modeled after Whistler's dining room in yellow.

Wilson: So this was the original dining room and that door would have gone to the kitchen.

Brunk: To the pantry.

Wilson: To the pantry.

Brunk: And it had a revolving door so that you wouldn't smell cooking odors.

Wilson: Oh wow. So it's yellow today but not the yellow that Freer would have…

Brunk: It's pretty close.

Wilson: Oh it's pretty close.

Brunk: I was pretty careful on the analysis of this.

Wilson: Of the under painting.

Brunk: Yeah.

Wilson: And it was modeled after Freer's—I mean Whistler's dining room.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: And where was Whistler's permanent home?

Brunk: London.

Wilson: London.

Brunk: And he had a studio in Paris.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: And in 1890 Freer makes his first trip abroad to London with the purpose to call upon Whistler to cut out the middleman in purchasing things. Because he was not happy with the price, he was not happy with the quality of stuff that he was being able to purchase.

Wilson: That's right.

Brunk: And there's a very interesting newspaper account of that, and if you've read *With Kindest Regards*, she reproduces that article,

Wilson: Yeah.

Brunk: and that was given before the Wittanagamo Club. On the 29th of this month I'll be speaking at the Wittanagamote Club, I'm a member and I'll be talking about Whistler meets the Wit.

[Laughter]

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: So.

Wilson: So they meet in London, and he goes with the express purpose of meeting Whistler, and he goes and meets him at his home, right?

Brunk: Calls on him.

Wilson: Calls on him.

Brunk: Unannounced. And the butler comes back and says, "You know Mr. Whistler will see you I whatever minutes," and Freer being a railroad man looks at

his watch and, I mean…they became very close friends and clearly Freer was Whistler's most important patron apart from Leyland who Whistler had already threw off.

Wilson: That's right. Well, they got into that horrible fight about the Peacock Room. Now, Freer did buy the Peacock Room and the *Princess from the Land of Porcelain* from a London art dealer, is that right?

Brunk: He bought the *Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, first.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: He was not interested in buying the room.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: Whistler's sister-in-law was the one that said, "Convince Freer that he needed to buy the room." It was Mrs. [Blanche] Watney that owned the house, had the room taken out, she couldn't decide if she was going to sell it. It was for sale, then it wasn't for sale, then it was for sale, then it wasn't for sale. Finally the gallery, Obach Gallery, was able to remove the room and reinstall it in their gallery, and they published a catalogue, I have one of those catalogues from Freer.

Wilson: Oh fantastic.

Brunk: with photographs.

Wilson: So his catalogue of the room before he bought it.

Brunk: And he made a trip especially to London to reconsider because he, what's he going to do with this room, it's going to require a building, where and how…

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: This is in 1904 and Stephen just has his last child born in 1904 and they're running out of space on the third floor so Freer buys the room and the painting,

the Whistler painting, from Obach Gallery, with the stipulation that they not say who had bought the room and at one point the newspapers—the New York papers—reported that J.P. Morgan had the bought the room.

Wilson: Ah.

Brunk: And reporters were calling here to see what was happening and Freer wouldn't give them any information

Wilson: Sure.

Brunk: So that's when he gets Eyre back and they planned these two wings to the carriage house for the Warrings to live there and the Peacock Room, or the blue room as he called it, there.

Wilson: Right. And then he brought the painting, *Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, put that above the mantle.

Brunk: Where it belonged.

Wilson: Where it belonged, because that was where it originally was at Leyland's house in London.

Brunk: It was there before the Peacock Room was built.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: The painting was already there.

Wilson: Then Whistler went through and it was [Thomas] Jekyll, an artist by the name of Jekyll who painted the original for [Frederick] Leyland and then Whistler wanted to paint a room that would compliment his painting, is that right?

Brunk: Well, and I think he got carried away.

Wilson: Yeah.

[Laughter]

Brunk: And the worst part was that he was inviting newspaper reporters--

Wilson: His friends.

Brunk: It's not a very good way to please your patron.

Wilson: I don't think so. But Freer seems to have had a different disposition than Leyland, and even other patrons, who like Henry Clay Frick , who almost right around the same time as Freer died, he died, just a few years later and donated his collection, but Freer had a different--

Brunk: And I have to think that this idea of the educational value of the collection was always pretty paramount in Freer's mind.

Wilson: Ah, okay.

Brunk: Which is, in addition to the way he treated living artists, are two dynamic concepts, as far as I'm concerned.

Wilson: Yeah. For a man of—

Brunk: Seventh grade education.

Wilson: That's right. So very interesting how his, the importance of education worked in his own life and also in terms of what he ended up doing with his collection.

Brunk: Um-hm.

Wilson: I have a quote from the Detroit Century Box, have you ever read the Detroit Century Box?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: Freer wrote this on New Year's Eve in nineteen—or 1899, 1900. And he says, "The possibilities of Detroit as a manufacturing center are immeasurable! Her excellent climate, her blue skies, her clear running waters will not change! Her educational, mechanical and business methods will change - for the better!" And I thought that was interesting, and you've obviously seen this before, and that was opened up in 2000, so it was 100 years between, so he wrote that on New Year's Eve 1899, 1900 it was buried, and opened 100 years later, so I think reading that you know he wasn't from Detroit, he didn't grow up here, right? He came here exclusively for the purposes of working and basically masterminding this Peninsular Car Company, so I think a question that a lot of people ask, and I'm sure you've heard this question many more times that I have even, is: Why didn't he donate his collection to the City of Detroit? And we could go several ways--

Brunk: Well, why do you ask that question? Because the City of Detroit didn't have a museum.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: The Detroit Museum of Art was privately owned until 1919.

Wilson: Right. So 1885 the Detroit Museum of Art was founded over on, I believe it was Jefferson Avenue—

Brunk: Um-hm.

Wilson: There as a small version. And it wasn't opened until 1927 right here on Woodward, so he was long gone by then.

Brunk: But Freer and Hecker each gave 10,000 dollars to buy the land where it was built.

Wilson: Um-hm. Did any of Freer's--because I know some of his collection was sent to other museums, it's not just in the Freer Gallery. Is any of it in the Detroit Institute of Arts?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: Okay. So there were select works.

Brunk: Which is the third point that I wanted to make--

Wilson: Okay.
Brunk: When Freer would dispose of things most collectors would send them to auction or sell them through a dealer.

Wilson: Yeah, that's right.

Brunk: And Freer did not do that. He gave them to Smith College, to Oberlin University, to Grand Rapids Library, to Detroit Public Library, as seeds for institutional collections, that again could educate people.

Wilson: Yeah, he was very, as you said that really ties in to his, so this idea of spreading knowledge and appreciation for art. So paintings and I assume…

Brunk: Prints.

Wilson: Prints.

Brunk: Scrolls, pottery.

Wilson: So it wasn't exclusively the, the relationship between him and the Smithsonian is one—is the most widely known thing about him, but based on what you're saying is the fact that he did spread his—

Brunk: And you have to remember this whole concept of the Mall plan with Theodore Roosevelt, and the primary person who handled that was Charles Moore, from Ypsilanti, who was Freer's friend.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: And Moore had visited Freer in 1885 and visited his small collection of graphic arts on Alfred Street.

Wilson: Ah.

Brunk: And later became director of the Detroit Museum of Art.

Wilson: Moore did?

Brunk: Yes he did. In 1914.

Wilson: So he was part of this, Freer had his own particular aesthetic and his own particular relationships with the artists but he also had his won way of giving that was probably set apart from other men of his stature.

Brunk: And I'm sure that Moore convinced Freer that, you know, "Look Washington—New York has the Metropolitan—the place for this collection is on the Mall."

Wilson: Because there was no other art museum at that time.

Brunk: No. That was the first museum of art.

Wilson: That's right. There was no National Portrait Gallery, no American Art Museum, no National Gallery of Art—

Brunk: No.

Wilson: Which has a separate board of trustees.

Brunk: There wasn't even a thought for one.

Wilson: No Hirshorn, certainly.

Brunk: No.

Wilson: So he really did have this vision and maybe thinking that—do you think that maybe he thought that more people would have access to it there in the nation's capital?

Brunk: Oh, of course.

Wilson: Yeah.

Brunk: I mean—

Wilson: And they do, right?

Brunk: Absolutely. And Stanford White would have been the architect if he hadn't been shot in 1906.

Wilson: Oh. So Freer had an architect, everything was—it wasn't like: "Give the Smithsonian my art, and then they'll figure out a place."

Brunk: No. Freer sketched out the plan for the galleries.

Wilson: That's right.

Brunk: He was—

Wilson: Very involved.

Brunk: But he never visited the site, he never went back to Washington, after the site was selected.

Wilson: Was that because he was ill? Or—

Brunk: A combination, I think. And the architect was a friend of Freer's from the 1890s, that had written about Italian gardens, done much work in Michigan as well. The Alger House out at the Gross Pointe War Memorial is one of his buildings.

Wilson: Yeah, that's a beautiful building the War Memorial. Is there anything else that you think we should talk about, about Freer and the house or his collection?

Brunk: Well it's interesting because I asked Grace about where the furniture was in the house that she had in her apartment--

Wilson: And that you now have.

Brunk: Yes, and she told me these things and I said, “Well, what about the lights in the hall?” And she said, “Well, you could never see the bulb.”
Wilson: So these lights right here [in the front room on either side of the double fireplace]?

Brunk: Would have had beaded glass shades.

Wilson: Oh my goodness.

Brunk: Covering the bulb. Which would send the light off in directions…

Wilson: Unbelievable.

Brunk: So that you wouldn’t be looking at a bare--

Wilson: Like we are right now.

Brunk: Like we are now, yes.

Wilson: So there—the metal work here, was this [Samuel] Yellin that did these?

Brunk: No, no. George Shaw, Philadelphia.

Wilson: So there was—

Brunk: Wilson Eyre designed them and Shaw made them.

Wilson: I see. And there was some sort of, you said, the beaded glass cover over the bulb.

Brunk: It would come up and clip around the bulb.

Wilson: Unbelievable. So really just to continue that discussion that we had about how this would have looked with the finish, right?

Brunk: And it was always carpeted with oriental rugs overtop.

Wilson: So wood floors and then the rugs over top.

Brunk: Well, it was carpeted wall to wall.

Wilson: Oh, wall to wall?

Brunk: Oh yes.

Wilson: So he would have the rugs cut then to fit the room?

Brunk: Well they were stitched, they were only seventeen inches wide so they had to be stitched together.

Wilson: I see.

Brunk: Because the looms weren't big enough.

Wilson: That's right. And those are ones that he would have brought back with him from his travels or ordered?

Brunk: Or that he purchased in New York.

Wilson: Okay. So what else did Grace say about the furniture, and where it was?

Brunk: I should have brought that letter she sent me about it but, she discussed it was all harmonious with the surroundings and the parlor was the unusual room, it had gilded furniture.

Wilson: And the parlor was this first room here?

Brunk: With the Dewing paintings.

Wilson: With the Dewing paintings and the aluminum window sill. So gilded furniture--

[Laughter]

Wilson: And where is that furniture today?

Brunk: Hecker inherited it.

Wilson: So you don't have any of the gilded furniture?

Brunk: No.
Wilson: Unfortunately. So anything else that she told you about the house that you think people should know about it to sort of—

Brunk: Well, interestingly enough when Grace died and I was taking the bed down it was Freer's mattress that was still on the bed.

[Laughter]

Wilson: So what did you do with it?

Brunk: I threw it out, of course.

Wilson: Yeah.

Brunk: I mean--

Wilson: So she was sleeping on his mattress?

Brunk: Yes. It was a very expensive mattress.

Wilson: I can imagine it was. But probably quite old.

Brunk: Well, 1892.

Wilson: To 1995, but worth every penny I suppose if it--

Brunk: It was in good shape.

Wilson: If it lasted 100 years. So you threw things like that away that just wouldn't have—

Brunk: I have Freer's linens with the "F" inscribed on them.
Wilson: And you still have those?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: So what do you do with—I mean, do you you just have them--you just--

Brunk: Well, I use them once in a while when we have some Smithsonian curators--have them to dinner, I give them a Freer napkin and Freer plate. I have his dish services that [Eero] Saarinen talks about—

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: The white with the gold trim.

Wilson: So you have that too?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: Okay. Like a complete dish—a complete service?

Brunk: Well, there's some pieces that are gone now.

Wilson: Sure. But several place settings

Brunk: Oh yes.

Wilson: Like eight place settings?

Brunk: Eight. Ten.

Wilson: Ten. So the dishes that he actually hand selected and bought and I imagine he probably had many different sets of dishes, but, his main one perhaps.
Brunk: yes.

Wilson: And Grace got that?

Brunk: Yes.
Wilson: So why do you think—did he have nieces and nephews, Freer?

Brunk: Yes. They inherited stuff. When the Japanese came, oh, I don't know, maybe twenty-five years ago to do that film--

Wilson: Yeah.

Brunk: And the Freer Gallery was cold shoulder to them. And they were asking me something about Freer's will and I said, "Well, I have a copy of it." And they were quite amazed with that.

Wilson: That's right.

Brunk: It gives all the inheritance.

Wilson: So you have a copy because Grace obviously would have had a copy. Or did you get it on your own through the archives?

Brunk: No, I got it from the archives.

Wilson: From the archives, okay. But I assume Grace knew what was going—well, they would have been given to her father first.

Brunk: Right.

Wilson: To Stephen. And then when Stephen died he left it to Grace because she was his oldest child?

Brunk: Probably, or still living with him.

Wilson: Oh right.

Brunk: And I have also a Pewabic vase about this tall [approximately two feet] that Mary Chase Perry made for Freer when he bought the Peacock Room, decorated with peacocks.

Wilson: Hmm. So you have your own Freer Gallery?
[Laughter]

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: So we don't really need to go to DC to see--

Brunk: Well, I don't know about that.

Wilson: No, but how incredible that you live with these things. I mean I think that a lot of people are maybe be surprised by that or find that interesting.

Brunk: Well it's—

Wilson: It's your life though.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: How fascinating. And to go to someone such as yourself that had such a deep appreciation for it and interest in Freer I think Grace must have appreciated that as well.

Brunk: And since that time the nephew has shipped backed to me a Japanese—a carved Japanese chair that was in the hall.

Wilson: The front hall.

Brunk: In this hall here.

Wilson: Okay, yeah. So you have that too.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: And do you have enough that you need to put any of it in storage or are you just, have you just curated it in your home?

Brunk: I have a big enough house.

Wilson: That's good. Okay. So when the Smithsonian—so you mentioned that when there's people visiting they'll actually come to your home?

Brunk: Um-hm.

Wilson: Oh, okay, okay. So there are scholars and--

Brunk: Well, we bring them here. Because up until that time, even though two of the directors, well actually you know Pope, you know [Harold] Stern came after Pope from Down River Michigan, who became the director after Pope, and--but there was no interest at the Freer in Freer or Detroit or I mean, that had nothing to do with anyone there.

Wilson: And do you think that that's because it was the focus is typically now, even today, on the Asian collection—the collection of Asian art?

Brunk: Well, you think that it wasn't until the 70s that Susan Hobbs became the first curator of American art and even when she was published her book on the Peacock Room Smithsonian said, "Well, your name won't appear on the book." And she fought with them until they—

Wilson: Hmm.

Brunk: Until she got that changed. We just don't do that. Well, that's not true.

Wilson: Right. You think that's because there was a sort of undermining of Western artists in relation to the Freer Gallery, just the focus was again on the collections of Eastern art? Why would they not want her to put her name on her book, or not allow her?

Brunk: Well, when Lodge became the first director, it wasn't too many years after that that he changed some of the galleries from Freer's scheme. And a lot of the American works went away.

Wilson: Ah.

Brunk: Because when I was there in the seventies, they still had a cabinet shop and wood, boards of wood to make cabinets out of. That would match and these were beautiful cabinets.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: And they would bring some out. Linda Merrill brought some out for an exhibition. And they also have some furniture that was sent down to Washington, from Freer House. Pretty much standard sorts of things. Desks and business furniture.

Wilson: After he died, when the house was being cleaned out and the Warrings left.

Brunk: And there are disposal lists of who got what and where it came from in the house and--

Wilson: So we do know those things it just wasn't appreciated at the time and like you said, two of the directors were—the first two directors you said were from Michigan?

Wilson: That's really phenomenal. Why do you think that there's that—is it coincidental?

Brunk: Well, I think it's coincidental, yes. But people that he knew and because you know he initially had no works could be added and later he changed the codicil that Asian art and Near Eastern art could be added because he realized that there were being important finds coming out that were changing the way that was being viewed. So nothing in the American collection can--

Wilson: Change.

Brunk: Change. And nothing in the collection can travel from the Gallery.

Wilson: That's right.

Brunk: But the study collection, the Pewabic piece that Mrs. Havemeyer gave, is the study collection so those can actually travel because they're in the study collection.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: So I have some pots, some Pewabic pots that belonged to Freer.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: I have a tobacco jar from 1904 and this Pewabic pot so I'm going to give those to the Freer Gallery and for their study collection.

Wilson: So that they can maybe one day travel but they will be cared for by the conservators there.

Brunk: Oh yes.

Wilson: Anything else you want to talk about?

Brunk: Well, I think that's about it unless you've got some other questions you want to—

Wilson: Well, there's certainly more questions, always about Freer. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk about these things.

Brunk: I think the one thing you ask about his friends, you know of course Thomas Spencer Jerome, whose grandfather was a governor of Michigan, lived on Alfred Street, and in 1899 Freer buys a villa in Capri and Jerome lives there.

Wilson: And how did he know Jerome?

Brunk: From Detroit.

Wilson: And Freer lived, you said, with the McLaughlins, on Alfred Street, when this house was being built essentially. So they met, they knew each other—

Brunk: Well, he and Jerome knew each other before they were both Witenagemote members.

Wilson: Okay. Which is where you're speaking soon. So what do you think that was—he was just generous with his friends? Why did Jerome live there?

Brunk: Well, they were close friends. And then they have a falling out about 1906 and Freer gives the villa to Jerome

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: And he has a woman, Henriette Raup, who's living there, who worked for him in Detroit and later went to Capri and when Jerome dies in 1914 a lot of his money and books was given to the University of Michigan and they put on a Jerome Lecture every year.

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: Henrietta Raup was kind of a problem.

Wilson: She was—she knew Jerome.

Brunk: Yes, she worked for him.

Wilson: Went there and lived there

Brunk: Lived with him. And she was from Michigan and she comes back to Michigan they finally get rid of her, she was probably having a mental breakdown at the time. I mean it's—these are all research questions that need to have someone do some work on.

Wilson: I agree. His many friendships with various people.

Brunk: Well, a lot of Detroit Club.
Wilson: Yeah.

Brunk: The Iondotaga Club which Freer was a founding member of.

Wilson: And how he socialized here and also in DC and in New York, too, because he had those groups as well. And the exchange, right? Like you mention the Meyers would come here, he was in New York, and there was this sort of exchange because of the railroads I imagine.

Brunk: Have you read that article that Mansfield Wright wrote about Freer, I think probably about 1930. Because he's the one who introduced Freer to Whistler's things in the 1880s so you might want to get ahold of that.

Wilson: Yeah, that's a great idea. To understand that link there.

Brunk: Well, at least get a sense of it.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: And of course you have to remember that when Mansfield writes this it's after the fact, Freer's gone there's no one to argue with him

Wilson: That's right.

Brunk: So it's like when Agnes Meyer writes that little booklet.

Wilson: That he died.

Brunk: You know, I mean she has her story and I suppose that's true of all of us we have our--as Dr. Dorsey used to say, he'd always refer to someone as "my Lillian, my Thomas, my this" I remember when--

[Laughter]

Brunk: I said to Dr. Dorsey, "Why do you do that?" And he said, "Because my

Thomas and my Lillian are unlike everyone else's Thomas and Lillian."

Wilson: I love that. It's true.

Brunk: So I mean you know that you sort of have to keep that in the back of your head too.

Wilson: And everyone had their own Freer. It sounds like.

Brunk: Um-hm.

Wilson: So Jerome would have had a different impression of him…

Brunk: Which only makes sense.

Wilson: Of course. The Meyers, people that lived in this house, the Warrings.

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: Everyone had their own Freer. So several books need to then be written about everyone's Freer.

[Laughter]

Brunk: Well Grace told me about the morning that her father found Mr. Freer on the floor upstairs in the gallery.

Wilson: Oh.

Brunk: And there was always this concern because you know if he's gone, so is your livelihood.

Wilson: So a real concern for the Warrings then, living here, this was it for them, this is where they lived, too.

Brunk: And then by 1910 Freer moves them over to the house on the corner of Palmer and John R.

Wilson: The Warrings?

Brunk: Yes, which he owned and gave to them.

Wilson: So that's where Mr. and Mrs. Warring lived then, and I assume died in that house?

Brunk: Yes.

Wilson: And then Grace moved to Indian Village, Grace was living there probably.

Brunk: Well, then she moved up to, a few blocks up the way, I'm drawing a blank—

Wilson: North of Ferry Street. Um, what year did he find him on the floor? Or when did Freer really get sick.

Brunk: It was probably after he came back from China. Because he became pretty sick then.

Wilson: From the syphilis or from some other--fever or--?

Brunk: I think from just over exertion.

Wilson: Okay.

Brunk: All the combination of--and who knows what he may have caught on the interior of China.

Wilson: Right. All sorts of—

Brunk: Things that were foreign to us.

Wilson: Absolutely, that today we have to take medicine for before we go. Interesting. So there's many Freers that need to be considered here.
Brunk: These three attitudes about his relationship with artists, his educational value of the collection and the disposal of things to other institutions.

Wilson: Yeah.

Brunk: It's really pretty distinctive characteristics.

Wilson: Right.

Brunk: You might find one in another collector, or an aspect in another collector but these are pretty responsible sorts of attitudes.

Wilson: Right. Yeah. And then the social factors that would have impacted that such as—

Brunk: And he had no reason to be concerned about them.

Wilson: Right that's right.

Brunk: Like giving the gift to the country. I mean in 1904 when he first offers it, there's no income tax, there's no reason to give anything to the country.

Wilson: Theres's no tax break. Yeah, interesting. And I wonder if his not having a wife or children as was common for most of the industrialists that we know quite a bit about of that age, the Gilded Age essentially, not that they all gave, I mean Carnegie didn't give his children much, um, it was that whole idea of spreading the wealth to the public, Freer certainly followed that, but in his own particular way, based on what you've said.

Brunk: And you know he commissioned Wilson Eyre to design houses for his siblings.

Wilson: That's right.

Brunk: That were built in New York.

Wilson: Yeah. In Kingston? In the Kingston area, yeah, okay, right.

Brunk: So you know it's--he helped them a lot of ways. Helped his nieces and nephews. He was also clever enough to realize those that weren't doing anything with their lives and he didn't do much with them.

Wilson: Yeah, so, his philanthropy was a lot about education and a lot about educating other people with what he knew about art and his travels and things like that too. So certainly those three things that you outline are--

Brunk: And he'd always defer to someone else. I mean he never--

Wilson: Yeah that's so interesting.

Brunk: Took the spotlight on being an expert on anything. Which certainly wasn't true.

Wilson: Yeah because he had the premier collection of certainly Asian art in the country, and American art I mean at that time. There was several people at that time but he had a premier collection of two very vastly different places. And for him to not consider himself an expert--why do you think that is?

Brunk: Well, I don't know that he didn't consider himself as being expert in some things but he just deferred to other people and it wasn't important. When Clara Dyer writes a thing about Mary Chase Perry and Arthur Wesley Dow was here.

Wilson: Ah.

Brunk: Morse was here and she's going to use this stuff and Freer writes back to her, she sends him a copy of it, and Freer writes back to her that it's really of no interest what we think of her work, her work stands on its own. I think this is part of that deference.

Wilson: Yeah. Lots of things. Lots of things that he was thinking and doing. Do you think that he was an introverted person--or do you think that he was--?

Brunk: I don't think he was introverted. Um, there's a wonderful cartoon of him in the Wit books John Woods Dunmore did of Freer as the Duke of the Grand Trunk Junction.

[Laughter]

Brunk: So I--he was very clubbable.

Wilson: Right. Belonged to a lot of organizations.

Brunk: And eventually quits the Yondotaga Club which he formed because the members couldn't, wouldn't leave business out of it. And there was no business to be done there.

Wilson: Right. How do you spell the name of that club? It's an Indian name right?

Brunk: Y-O-N-D-O-T-E-G-A

Wilson: Yondotaga.

Brunk: It still exists, on Jefferson Avenue, with gates by Stanford White.

Wilson: And you're going to be speaking at the--

Brunk: Witenagemote.

Wilson: Alright. Well, thank you so much for taking the time.

Brunk: I hope it's useful. Let's make you a copy of this.

[End]