
<Review of the 147th International ARC Seminar (Prof. Charlotte Horlyck)> Mining the Archive for Collecting Histories of Korean Art

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Abstract

In the 147th International ARC Seminar, Professor Charlotte Horlyck presented findings from her recent book *The Emergence of the Korean Art Collector and the Korean Art Market (1700–1950)*. Drawing from archival research at the National Museum of Asian Art, Horlyck traced Charles Lang Freer's evolving interest in Korean ceramics—from *buncheong* ware to Goryeo celadon—guided by Japanese art dealers, encounters abroad with the *chanoyu* tea ceremony, and two landmark collection auctions. Freer's strategic acquisitions and philanthropic legacy established one of the first major collections of Korean art in the United States and played a pivotal role in introducing American audiences to Korean ceramics.

On May 21, 2025, the Art Research Center welcomed Prof. Charlotte Horlyck as the speaker for the 147th International ARC Seminar. Horlyck shared segments of her research from her new book *The Emergence of the Korean Art Collector and the Korean Art Market - The Histories of Material Culture and Collecting 1700-1950* (2024). She is the Head of the School of Arts at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and a Lecturer in Korean Art History.

In this seminar, Horlyck puts particular focus on Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919), a prominent American art collector whose extensive East Asian Art collection led to the founding of the Freer Art Gallery, now the National Museum of Asian Art, part of the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C.. She traced the evolution of Freer's aesthetic interests and how, over time, he assembled one of the largest Korean art collections in the Western world during the early 20th century. She examined, in particular, how these changes in his taste reflected larger trends in American upper-class society and guided the direction of collecting Korean art in the United States.

Funded by a grant from the National Museum of Asian Art, Prof. Horlyck conducted archival research in Washington, D.C. in 2008, where she spent four months consulting the Charles Lang Freer Papers.¹⁾ These archives contained meticulous records of Freer's collecting practices, including a detailed inventory ledger in which he documented and edited descriptions of individual objects. This archival material proved instrumental in uncovering Freer's evolving motivations and aesthetic preferences over the course of his collecting career.

1. Beginning with Buncheong

According to Horlyck, Freer's professional journey began at the age of eighteen when he joined the Delaware Railroad Company, where he met Colonel Frank Hecker, who later became a pivotal business associate and lifelong confidant. After acquiring a substantial profit, Freer retired in 1899 and redirected his focus toward art collecting, alongside a broader cultural movement among America's newly wealthy industrial elite. As with other members of the upper class—such as the infamous Boston Brahmins²⁾—Freer embraced art patronage as a means of cultivating personal refinement and leaving a lasting legacy.

During the seminar's Q&A session, ARC Research Manager Travis Seifman drew a parallel to the legendary Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924), a contemporary of Freer's who also leveraged her wealth to found a major cultural institution in Boston to display her impressive collection.³⁾ Rather than establishing a large trust to fund a private institution, in 1906 Freer donated a large portion of his best-quality East Asian art pieces to the U.S. government. In 1923 the Freer Gallery of Art opened as a public art museum.

Freer did not begin his journey into the world of art collecting particularly interested in Korean ceramics, Horlyck explained. At the time, Korean art remained largely undocumented in English-language publications—the first comprehensive English-language volume on the subject was not released until 1929, she noted.⁴⁾ As a result, Freer relied heavily on a network of Japanese art dealers based primarily in New York, including Takayanagi Tōzō, Matsuki Bunkyo (1867–

1940), and Yamanaka Sadajirō (1866–1936).

These dealers greatly influenced Freer's tastes throughout the 1890s and into the early 1900s. Additionally, periodicals such as *The Collector* and *Pottery and Porcelain* served to educate upper-class collectors about ceramics from all over the world.⁵⁾ Indeed, Yamanaka remained a central source for East Asian artifacts up until Freer's death.

In 1896, Freer acquired his first two objects that were identified as “Korean” from Yamanaka (catalogued as F1896.57 and F1896.87), one of which was later determined to be of Qing dynasty origin while the other is indeed from the early Joseon Dynasty (1392–1895). These objects—tea bowls used in traditional tea ceremonies—were both likely classified at the time as *buncheong* ware (분청), a Korean ceramic style developed in the late 15th century. Characterized by the application of white slip and a transparent glaze over stoneware clay using a variety of techniques, *buncheong* ceramics were regionally diverse and predominantly produced in provincial kilns all over Korea.⁶⁾ This type of ceramic remained popular for everyday usage among Korean citizens, but fell out of favor with the Joseon Court in the late 16th century when white porcelain became the official ceramic standard. Additionally, designated royal kilns were constructed closer to the capital city, Hanseong (modern-day Seoul), leaving the provincial kilns free to experiment with designs according to the tastes of a more local market.⁷⁾

Long before Freer began building his collection, *buncheong* tea bowls held a very competitive market in Japan. Following the Imjin Wars (1592–1598) and the codification of the *chanoyu* tea ceremony in Japan, *buncheong* wares became highly prized.⁸⁾ This is due largely to tea master Senno Rikyū (1522–1591) who emphasized rustic simplicity as a core tenant of the *chanoyu*.⁹⁾ He declared that the simplicity of brushed or dipped *buncheong* designs from the southern region of Korea perfectly encapsulated the Japanese *wabi* style, making these tea bowls perfect vessels for the tea ceremony.

Japanese kilns eventually began to emulate the *buncheong* techniques, particularly in locales such as Karatsu, and altered them to suit Japanese taste and demands.¹⁰⁾ Yamanaka's decision to offer such bowls to Freer may have also been informed by Freer's 1895 trip to Japan, during which he witnessed the *chanoyu* ceremony firsthand. Horlyck describes his notes on the tea ceremony performed at the temple Ginkakuji in Kyoto, where he wrote the comment “very, very interesting” next to a description of the *chanoyu* in his guidebook. This experience, alongside the knowledgeable guiding of Yamanaka, seems to have kickstarted Freer's enthusiasm for traditional Korean tea bowls.

In 1897, Freer acquired ten additional bowls labeled as

“korai-jawan,” or old Korean wares, though only six were later confirmed to have originated in Korean kilns.¹¹⁾ These pieces ranged a bit more in appearance and dating: three bowls were porcelain, while the rest were stoneware, the color palette ranged from ash glaze to celadon to white slip, dating anywhere from the late 12th century to the early 19th century. Nonetheless, this acquisition at the time marked a significant expansion of his Korean holdings.

2.1 A Turn Towards Celadon

In 1898, Freer purchased twenty-one items from the sale of the noteworthy Charles Dana Collection, which featured over 600 East Asian antiquities. Among his acquisitions were two *buncheong* pieces and four celadon vessels. One of the latter (F1898.48) may have been of Korean origin, although Horlyck noted that contemporary scholarship suggests it is likely Pusan ware produced in Japan in the late 17th century. The Pusan ware piece in the Freer collection features a darker celadon glaze, with inlaid cranes, which are reminiscent of Goryeo period designs, however, the shape of the vessel and the cloud design are not generally elements corresponding to a celadon ware from this period. Despite the questionable origins of the item, Horlyck highlighted Freer's annotation in the auction catalogue describing the piece as “fine” and “supreme,” which reflected his shifting interests in Korean ceramics and foreshadowing new taste for celadon aesthetics.

Later that same year, Freer acquired an inlaid Goryeo celadon bowl featuring a willow tree and duck motif from Yamanaka, overlooking several air bubbles along the interior and the rough, uneven shape of the vessel [F1898.65]. Despite its imperfections, Freer acquired the bowl, demonstrating his rapidly growing appetite for purchasing celadon wares at this time.

Horlyck contextualized this shift in taste within a broader trend: collectors across the United States, Japan, and China increasingly favored the subdued, earthy tones of celadon over the more elaborately decorated wares of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Other American collectors, like Samuel T. Peters (1854–1921) and Russell Tyson (1867–1963) for example, as well as Japanese collectors, began rapidly purchasing items marketed as Korean celadons. Even Chinese celadon ware sales increased at around this time. In her 2013 article for Cambridge University Press, Horlyck cited a 1914 New York exhibition where Chinese and Korean celadon pieces were displayed side by side as evidence of this rising interest in celadon pieces as a larger trend among East Asian art collectors globally.¹²⁾

Freer's second trip to Japan in 1907 marked a turning point. At the suggestion of Col. Hecker, Freer acquired the entire collection of celadon vessels previously owned by Horace Allen, a former U.S. diplomat who was stationed in Seoul from 1890 to 1905. Hecker's correspondence indicated stiff competition from another collector, Sir John Howard Webster, and after Allen's

preference to sell the collection intact was announced, he suggested a speedy response. Freer, with Hecker acting on his behalf, ultimately purchased the entire collection sight unseen for \$5,000, adding a significant number of high-quality celadon pieces to his collection. Shortly after, he acquired an additional well-preserved Goryeo celadon vase for \$900 from a source in Japan [1907.76].

It's clear from the cost of the items that Freer had a vested interest in obtaining high-quality pieces, a unique appreciation for Goryeo celadon wares, and an acute ambition to assemble one of the largest assortments of Korean ceramics outside of East Asia. According to Horlyck, this acquisition firmly established Freer as a pioneering collector of Korean art in the United States.

2. Looking for a Legacy

Horlyck emphasized that Freer's efforts to build a distinguished collection were not merely motivated by personal interest, but by a deliberate desire to construct a lasting cultural legacy. Lacking the aristocratic lineage of his European peers, Freer turned to connoisseurship and public philanthropy as means of establishing social distinction. His encounters with major Japanese collectors such as Hara Rokurō and Nezu Kaichirō during his second trip to Japan further reinforced his aspiration to achieve recognition on a global scale, and served to make connections with extremely knowledgeable figures in the art world at this time. This reinforced his public image in the United States and abroad as a serious, established collector of East Asian art and brought lasting notoriety to his work that is valuable to academics like Prof. Horlyck today.

In 1906, Freer donated the bulk of his collection to the United States government - a move that underscored both his nationalistic intent and his desire for posterity. Horlyck noted that Freer's timing was extremely fortuitous; by the 1910s, Japan had introduced stricter export controls, and the growing international demand for Korean art made such acquisitions increasingly difficult and expensive for both aspiring and established collectors. Freer's ability to amass a collection that was not only extensive but also of exceptional quality solidified his position in history as a foundational figure in the history of Korean art collecting in the West.



Figure 1. Tea bowl. Stoneware with transparent glaze. 16th century, Joseon Dynasty. The first of Freer's Korean acquisitions, purchased in 1896. National Museum of Asian Art (F1896.85)



Figure 2. Tea bowl. Stoneware with white and black inlays and celadon glaze. Second quarter of the 17th century, Joseon Dynasty. Pusan ware type, acquired from Charles Dana's collection in 1898. National Museum of Asian Art (F1898.48)



Figure 3. Tea bowl with inlaid design of chrysanthemum and four lichee clusters. Stoneware with white and black inlays and celadon glaze. Late 13th-early 14th century, Goryeo Dynasty. Acquired from Dr. Horace N. Allen's collection in 1907. National Museum of Asian Art (F1907.314)

[Notes]

- 1) Freer C.L. Correspondence and notebooks. Charles Lang Freer Papers. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Accessed June 25, 2025. The records mentioned by Prof. Horlyck in this lecture are largely available online in the Smithsonian Online Archive.
- 2) There is a litany of academics who have written about the connection between the upper-class industrial elites of the Boston area and the expansion of art museums in the United States and Japan. Fenollosa himself was both related to and funded by members of this elite circle, for example. For more information on him, see Reed and Brooks. For more information on the purposeful efforts of these influential elite contemporaries of Freer and their motivations for art collecting, see Harris and Pyne.
- 3) Thorpe and Dykstra. Gardner also knew Ernest Fenollosa; they moved in the same intellectual, upper-class circles in Boston and shared friends like Okakura Kakuzō, the first curator of Oriental art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. While there is no confirmed evidence that Freer and Gardner knew each other, it's likely that they shared many friends in common due to social status and their ambitions in collecting East Asian art in the early 19th century.
- 4) Eckhardt, A. (1954). *History of Korean Art*. Yonsei University Press. Horlyck cited this book as the first comprehensive English-

language publication on Korean art.

- 5) Horlyck cited these publications as examples of instructional guides for the then-new upper-class self-cultivating art collectors. All six volumes of *The Collector* (1889-1895) are available on HathiTrust; volume 3 is freely available on JSTOR. William Prime's *Pottery and Porcelain of All Times and Nations* is available on the Smithsonian Online Archive.
- 6) Choo, Koh.
- 7) *Ibid.*
- 8) Maske, p. 7-14.
- 9) Saito, p. 375-385
- 10) Maske, p. 1-20
- 11) Goepper, Ch'oe, p.155. See also: Maske, p.17
- 12) Horlyck, 2013.
- 13) Figures 1, 2, and 3: National Museum of Asian Art. Collection Database.

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