

A Beautiful Bird is a Peacock

By Marilyn Litvak

This is an undeniable truth. Artists throughout the ages have created incredible works of art inspired by the peacock.

And on a recent trip to Washington, D.C., that fact was reinforced with my tour of the Peacock Room at the Freer Sackler Galleries.

The Freer Sackler is the Smithsonian's Asian Art Museum with the Galleries located on the National Mall not far from the White House.

Living in an area of the Palos Verdes Peninsula which is zoned for peacocks, I have a special interest in this, oh so beautiful bird, for peafowl roam freely in my neighborhood.

Each morning our family awakens to the birds arriving in the backyard looking for breakfast which we are only too happy to provide. A small amount of fodder, such as a little bird seed and some cracked nuts, seem to prevent them from digging in the flower beds. And although our house is several blocks away from what is known as restaurant row (a number of houses that also put out food for the critters), the peafowl manage to find us easily enough.

Thus, I begin my visit of the Freer Sackler with a look at Whistler's full-size Peacock Room. This beautiful dining room venue was conceived and created back in the late 1800's by American artist, James McNeill Whistler. Yes, that very Whistler whose portrait of his Mother is world renowned. Whistler's friend and patron, English shipping magnate, Frederick Leyland, had requested Whistler's help with decorating his newly refurbished London mansion. Whistler responded with the beautiful blue and gold peacock wall murals you see below.



But Leyland wasn't happy with what Whistler created.

And after much drama in the lives of these two men, the dining room was ultimately acquired by American industrialist, Charles Lang Freer, who had it installed in his Detroit mansion. Upon Freer's death in 1919 and the creation of the Freer Gallery in DC, the Peacock Dining Room was moved to Washington in 1923 for all to view and enjoy—fighting peacocks and all.

Although I had visited the museum previously, what was drawing me back this time was a chance to see the Peacock Room filled with Asian ceramics from Freer's own collection. And also a new exhibit titled Peacock Room Remix with Darren Waterson's *Filthy Lucre* installation. (See picture below.) For me, cracked pottery on the floor was a reminder of the discord between Whistler and Leyland--such a shame.



My Palos Verdes neighborhood too has had discord over peacocks. Some neighbors love them; others not at all. At one point, the city was sued by several residents to have all the peafowl removed from our community. But fortunately they didn't win. And the beautiful bird lives on in a designated peafowl area—my neighborhood.

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