

Theodore Roosevelt's *Portrait* by GARI MELCHERS

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WHEN THE GREAT Detroit railroad industrialist, Charles Lang Freer decided to donate his magnificent collection of East Asian, American, and Middle Eastern art to the Smithsonian Institution in 1906, it was the first and largest such gift from a private patron. His initial bequest consisted of 2,250 cataloged art objects, \$1 million dollars in funds to build a museum, and financial instruments to maintain and curate his collection. But the massive gift came with stipulations. The Freer Gallery of Art—named for its benefactor—would be prohibited from accepting gifts of art to be added to the collection, a device to ensure that the highest level of connoisseurship, established by Mr. Freer, would not be compromised. The museum would also be prohibited from exhibiting art that was not a part of the Freer's permanent collection. Finally, once a work of art became part of the Freer collection it would not be permitted to leave the museum as a loan for any reason. Negotiations between Freer and Samuel P. Langley, the director of the Smithsonian Institution, regarding the restrictions associated with the gift, continued for about six months and finally stalled, until President Theodore Roosevelt successfully intervened on behalf of the donor. To express his gratitude, Charles Freer commissioned a life-size painting of the president and wisely chose Gari Melchers, one of the most

accomplished naturalistic portrait painters of the day, to create the portrait.

Melchers, christened Julius Garibaldi Melchers, was the son of a German-born American sculptor who displayed great aptitude for painting at an early age. He received formal instruction in Europe, where his works, shown in salons, received favorable attention, awards, and invitations for exclusive memberships in societies and associations of designers and artists. He won a Grand Prize at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle and was commissioned to paint the panels *Peace* and *War* for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Late in his career Melchers was awarded a Gold Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

President Roosevelt enthusiastically accepted Freer's gift for a commissioned portrait and invited Melchers to the White House on Friday, February 28, 1908, for lunch. Afterward the president showed Melchers his riding habit, as he had decided he would be painted as a horseman. Melchers wrote in his diary, "He was very nice about everything and put on his riding clothes—and we discussed the question of black or yellow boots—cravat and waistcoat color—until everything was decided—and he arranged with me to come for work at nine Saturday morning." The next day the president stood in the

small dining room for a sketching session with the artist. Melchers noted in his diary, "The President never asks for a rest—and stands an hour or two without losing his place." The sessions continued for more than a week. "The president is remarkable, full of strength and vigor, kind and considerate—and talks remarkably well on all subjects," wrote Melchers on Sunday, March 1. On March 15, after the portrait was finished, Roosevelt wrote to Melchers, "I am delighted with the picture and am especially pleased that it should be done by an American artist." Freer was pleased as well, saying it captured the "dignity, force and character" of the president. "Art is a language," he wrote Melchers on March 19, 1908, "and your portrait will talk to the people through coming centuries."

The monumental painting, *Portrait of President Theodore Roosevelt*, by Gari Melchers measures approximately 4 by 7 feet. Freer paid Melchers \$2,500 for the portrait and donated it to the Freer Gallery of Art later in 1908.

SOURCES

Melchers's diary entries and the letter to Melchers from Roosevelt, quoted in Michelle Crow-Dolby, "Painting a President," posted May 9, 2014, *Gari Melchers Home and Studio* (blog), online at www.garimelchers.wordpress.com; Freer letter to Melchers, quoted in Joelle Seligson, "Thanks, Mr. President!" posted February 15, 2016, *Freer/Sackler* (blog), online at www.freersackler.si.edu. Also see Thomas Lawton and Linda Merrill, *Freer: A Legacy of Art* (Washington: D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Press, 1993), 189, nn. 42, 43.



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