

Dining in Style with the Gibsons

By Luke Mager, James Thompson, Richard Quach, Eric Ye, and Jonathan Li



Fig 1.



Fig 2.



Fig 3.

In his study of neo-traditional contemporary Chinese art, Ian Robertson says that Chinese art addresses widespread human behavior and thrives in the presence of burial rituals, spirituality, pilgrimage, and superstitions. The dining set in the Gibson House Museum was created before the Chinese contemporary art era, but it still holds its beauty, as the viewer's relationship with the art is not limited to one time period. The images of prayers, music, and eating with friends, shown in Figs. 1, 2, and 3, can still resonate with people today.

Before the construction of the Gibson House, the appreciation for Asian art had long prevailed in the city of Boston. From 1845 to 1847, the city unveiled the "Great Chinese Museum," an exhibition that was said to have inspired one of America's legendary poets—Emily Dickinson. Moreover, during the nineteenth century, Harvard University cultivated and sponsored many pioneering scholars of China's cultural and archaeological heritage. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston also accommodates the finest and most extensive collection of Japanese art outside Japan. Given the popularity of Asian artifacts and prevalence of Chinoiserie, many of these objects found themselves in the homes of wealthy families in Victorian Boston (Dirda).

Chinoiserie was a trend that started around the late eighteenth century. With expanding global trade, foreign goods became popular commodities among affluent Westerners. Dave Pullins's article about Chinoiserie notes the story of Lady Fiddlefaddle: "In 1755, The World published the tale of Lady Fiddlefaddle, who, upon inheriting 'beautiful vases, busts, and statues' that came from Italy, had them 'flung into the garret as lumber, to make room for great-bellied Chinese pagoda, red dragons, and the representation of the ugliest monsters that ever, or rather never, existed'" (n. p.). There was a sense of novelty growing in owning these works. Eastern art was seen by many Westerners as "disproportionate and ugly" due to its striking difference from

Western art. But Chinoiserie became so popular because it was such a contrast to the neoclassical style of art. These two styles were very different, making Asian art stick out. Valued artwork back then was influenced by Greek and Roman culture and focused on the classical past as well as values such as order and rationality. But Eastern art had a different style that was unique. This art was then plastered on wallpapers, dishes, and furniture that could be shown off in a person's house. It was a way of showing that you were cultured without saying it.

Although the Western understanding of Eastern artworks started in the thirteenth century with Marco Polo's exploration of China, the obsession with them did not begin until the seventeenth century, when there were stable trade between Europe and China (Zuroski 6). According to Eugenia Zuroski, the appearance of those porcelain products "coincided with the renewed English efforts to create a trade with China" (7). While there was an increasing demand in Europe for Chinese products such as tea, silk, and silver, the Chinese Emperor imposed strict policies on those foreign trades, so it was difficult to initiate trade with China (7). For example, the British East India Company could only import a small number of porcelain products in the seventeenth century, which is why trade with China was representative of the power of those European countries, and all of its products were very rare (8). Ultimately, chinaware became symbolic of wealthy families because of its rarity.

This influx of Eastern art did not go unnoticed by the public. Even though much Asian art and culture was enjoyed and bought by wealthy people, many people became alarmed at the cultural invasion they felt was happening. People began to dislike Asians and their cultures, which resulted in discrimination. Asians were immigrating to America in search of jobs. Many groups saw the job market shrink, as Asians were willing to work longer hours for less money. Americans became upset at the immigration of Asians and grouped them and the

Chinoiserie phase together. This paranoia became known as “Yellow Peril,” wherein Asians were seen as a threat to many in the West. Many saw people flocking to buy Eastern art and businesses preferring to hire cheaper labor. Resentment toward Asians grew. What made things worse was that people already saw Asians as more primitive, so all of this combined to create a period of discrimination and xenophobia (Chung).

With that being said, people were still able to appreciate Eastern art. Some were even so captivated that they wanted to attempt it for themselves. In *A Manual for China Painters* (1907) by Nicola de Rienzi Monachesi, the delicate and precise methods used in this traditional art style are carefully laid out. Monachesi spent ten years studying, performing china painting, and carefully learning the skill. Overglaze and underglaze are essential in china painting. You can clearly see the overglaze, as it gives Figs. 1-3 their shiny appearance, while the underglaze lays out the foundation on which paint can be applied. China painting in particular is an extremely difficult process, since it requires immense heat as well as very specific paint to fuse the colors with the porcelain. Colors in china painting are divided into three categories—hard, medium, and soft—which define the heat required to fuse them. The gold on the perimeter of Fig. 1 is an example of hard color, while the blue on the women’s dress is an example of soft color. In Fig. 1, you can see the paint is not rubbing off, but rather fades into the plate, since it is fused with extreme heat. This method allows colors to overlap smoothly rather than blend together. Having to repeatedly apply heat to fuse each layer of color is a tedious process, but it creates beautiful images. The art seeks to achieve a composition of ornament to elevate the value and beauty of the piece. Monachesi wanted the art of china painting to be released from its cloud of mystery, as so many people saw it as an untouchable foreign art.

Along with individuals like Monachesi, British producers, who originally made glasses to serve the upper classes, tried to copy and repeat the process of creating Chinese porcelain, but, eventually, they only improved on their own technology (Berg 127). Due to the difficulties of domestic porcelain production, British retailers soon realized the potential market for imported Chinese porcelains (127). And their prediction was correct: in 1721, more than 2 million pieces of porcelain were imported and the duties counted up to £104, 375 (130). The middle as well as the upper classes, including the later Gibson family, were expected to purchase some porcelain, and this chinaware, which was loved by these target customers, was soon copied by factories (129). Eventually, artists began making porcelain on their own, which led to a prohibition on importing the original Asian products (130).

In understanding the difficulties in making Chinese porcelain, we can see in Figs. 1, 2, and 3 many elaborate details in their designs. After all, it required immense skill to draft, burn, and produce the porcelain product. One of the plates in the dining set consists of elaborate flower decorations on the side and five figures in the middle (Figs. 1 and 2), portrayed as three servants serving two scholars resting in chairs. In the outer echelon of the plate and casserole dish, animals are present that seem to represent bats. As described by Denise Leidy, the author of *How to Read Chinese Ceramics*, “[t]hese auspicious animals [bats] represent the five blessings of traditional Chinese culture—wealth, health, longevity, a virtuous life, and a natural death” (40). The emphasis on these blessings is referring to the people in the center of the plate. When looking deeper at the five figures in the center, the clothing of the two scholars identifies them as higher members of society compared to the three servants. The outside imagery signifies the wishes of the artist to see the scholars and servants obtaining the five blessings of traditional Chinese culture.

There is also a letter “R” label on every single piece of porcelain. This type of monogram was a common way for collectors to signify their ownership of a piece or set. This practice was not unusual due to the competitive nature of collecting such art. The difficulties are described in the book *The Great Chinese Art Transfer: How So Much of China’s Art Came to America*: “The wealth that developed in the United States after the Civil War made collecting art—any kind of art—possible, but would-be collectors faced various handicaps” (St. Clair 11). Having such pieces of fine china shows the influence and power that the Gibsons had compared to other collectors in the area. The stunning beauty of the dining set is apparent at first glance, but its history and culture are far richer.

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