

Rosamond Gibson's Vanity and Writing Desk

By Miko Ukaji, Annalise Chae, Lewis Levy, Haoyeng (Polly) Peng, and Lena Yang

The Gibson House, which was built in 1859 by Catherine Hammond Gibson, is the pinnacle of a high-status house. The Gibsons were considered one of Boston's most elite families during their time. The mansion, located at 137 Beacon Street, in Boston, Massachusetts, is Victorian and furnished exquisitely with exotic pieces. The Gibson House featured all of the most modern technology of the time, from a heating ventilator that runs down the center of the house to gaslighting throughout. Items were shipped to the house from around the world. During the late Victorian era, Asian furniture was a common status symbol in America.

In the Gibson House, both Rosamond Warren Gibson's vanity and desk were inspired by the Eastlake style, which became popular from 1870 to 1890. Unlike the other popular styles of the time, such as Elizabethan, Rococo, and Renaissance, the Eastlake style is known for its simplicity and practicality. Without deep and complex curves, these pieces of furniture are easy to clean. Additionally, Eastlake pieces in America were usually made of different types of wood, which were influenced by Asian style. Asian pieces became trendy status symbols in the wealthy community due to the expensive shipping fees required to transport exotic pieces of furniture across the sea from Asia. The popularity of Asian objects first began in Europe during the seventeenth century, when Europe had very little trade with Asia and China in particular. What started off as just trade for silk quickly turned into a demand for the goods and furniture that China had to offer. Traditional bamboo chairs and porcelain became a booming trend in America during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, because of the rarity and high price of genuine Asian pieces of furniture, many upper-class families turned to other materials to

mimic this furniture. The Gibson family engaged in this practice, with many faux bamboo-inspired pieces of furniture in their house.

It was in the late nineteenth century that faux bamboo furnishings saw popularity in America and Europe under the influence of Orientalism. Machinery improvements enabled the production of larger volumes of various pieces of furniture. R. J. Honer is considered to have established the distribution of faux bamboo materials, including bird's eye maple, pine tree, and cherry. In general, the price depended on the material, with bird's eye maple being the most expensive and grainy yellow pine being the cheapest. For instance, a bird's eye maple wardrobe could cost anywhere from \$2,500 to \$15,000. Yellow ochré was painted on the surface of these pieces to reproduce the texture of real bamboo. Additionally, there were some practical differences between real bamboo and faux bamboo. Real bamboo was generally not sturdy enough to support large pieces of furniture. On the other hand, faux bamboo not only had a higher resistance, but it also cost significantly less compared to genuine bamboo imported from China. The vanity and desk in the Gibson House, too, are made from bird's eye maple, the fiber structure of which resembles that of bamboo if you look at them under a microscope. Combined with the fact that the tree was locally available in the New England area, it is no coincidence that the Gibson family would utilize the bird's eye maple. Due to the Gibson family's prosperity, it would make sense that they would use the more expensive material, as it was a way to show off their luxury.



The five-sided chest of drawers positioned on the left of the vanity
(Photo #1 taken by: Haoyeng Peng)



The whole vanity with the looking mirror
(Photo #2 taken by: Lewis Levy)



The overall look of the vanity from the left angle
(Photo #3 taken by: Annalise Chae)

In Rosamond Warren Gibson's bedroom, the vanity features two chests of drawers, on either side, positioned with the mirror in the center. There is a small stool with a cushion placed in front of the mirror. The stool has an ergonomic design that would allow Rosamond to sit comfortably for a long time to put her makeup on regularly. The mirror features a rectangular shape, with its sides surrounded by faux bamboo. Physical appearance was the key social indicator for white women during the nineteenth century. The prettier they looked, the better "prospect" they had to marry a better man. The creation of the mirror illustrates the usage of moving the "male gaze," the critical standard that men have for women's appearance, to women themselves. White women like Rosamond could then use the mirror to look at themselves in order to create a perfect public image for the purpose of being attractive to men. When Rosamond would sit on the stool, she could do her makeup, as it was convenient for her because everything she needed was on either side of her. Rosamond could stand up and get closer to the mirror to check her makeup and make sure she looked presentable.

The design is accessible and integrates a substantial amount of decorative items. In the late nineteenth century, vanities, like other cabinet furniture, became a matching part of the bedroom suite. The doctrine of "separate spheres" maintained that the woman's sphere was the world of privacy, family, and morality. The man's sphere was public, economic striving, political maneuvering, and social competition. Women had more time at home to take care of the family, so they had to appear attractive in front of their husbands or children by dressing up and putting on makeup to meet the standard of Victorian Angel in the House/True Woman. Therefore, Rosamond's vanity is even larger than her writing desk. Women were in a disadvantaged position in intimate relationships in the nineteenth century, so the vanity represents women getting ready to please their husbands. Women's image was recognized as their responsibility in marriage. Since

they spent most of their time in the bedroom and the rest of the house, they had little opportunity to deal with things outside of family issues.



The overall look of the writing desk
(**Photo #4** taken by: Lewis Levy)



A closer look at the desktop
(**Photo #5** taken by: Lena Yang)



The porcelain figurines scattered around the writing desk
(**Photo #6** taken by: Miko Ukaji)

When walking into the right side of the bedroom, you can see a desk. If you look closely, you will notice a multitude of miniature figurines on top of it influenced by Asian art. The trimmings of the desk are also inspired by Asian culture due to their resemblance to bamboo. The chair seat has floral designs to represent femininity and the usage of lighter colors attests to the graceful lady who sat there. The desk was used to write letters, specifically by women. The types of literature that women wrote were letters that represented the Victorian age of everyday life. During the Victorian era, literature was a powerful weapon, especially for people in mental asylums. Some of the women felt that writing gave them the power to reflect on the social limitation placed on them due to their gender. Writing gave the women an outlet because if they said anything out loud, the misogynistic society would ridicule them for expressing their own opinions. For instance, Sarah Stickney Ellis's popular conduct book provides a first-hand writing by a woman during the Victorian era. In her writing, she describes how "[a]s women, then, the first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men—inferior in mental power" (qtd. in Hughes). Ellis depicts gender inequality, as women must accept that men are held in higher regard. The desk in particular allows for women's thoughts to be illustrated in a creative way, whether it be poetry or politics. In the Gibson House, Rosamond would be seen writing letters at this desk and her actions show the differences in gender roles. Men would be too busy at work and providing for the home to write. In contrast, women had the time to write because they were seen in a lower position in society, wherein their job was to maintain the home. The desk was the vehicle for creative thinking for women in a male-driven era when they were not supposed to think for themselves.

The Gibson House is a pristine example of the upper-class Bostonian lifestyle in addition to a great history lesson about antique Asian furniture. However, this house and its furnishings

not only show the lifestyle of Boston's elite, but they also explain many of the common gender roles at that time. From the delicate vanity set with mirror and drawers on each side, to the small detailed desk in the corner of the room, Asian furniture became a main feature of the Gibson House. The vanity expresses the social norms and expectations for women in the nineteenth century, especially the responsibility to be beautiful, fragile, and feminine. The desk in Rosamond's room showed her duty as a woman in high society to contribute to her husband's political responsibilities through writing letters as well as an illustration of creative thinking when it was time for her to write down her thoughts. Thank you for taking the time to read this write-up. We hope it provided insight into how Asian furniture became prominent in the Gibson House.

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