

The Gibson Family's Japanese Apothecary Chest

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The Gibson family's apothecary chest is located in the music room. It stands out against the classical Victorian decoration that makes up the rest of the room. The chest was gifted to Rosamund Gibson by her brother, John Colin Warren. The apothecary chest was made in and exported from Japan (Fig. 1). It has a lot of storage space, consisting primarily of drawers, with the topmost part shaped like a treasure chest. The chest was constructed using different types of wood. The handles of the drawers and hinges are made of silver metal, and their color complements the mixed wood well. The creator of the chest incorporated popular East Asian art elements such as wood carvings and Mount Fuji motifs all over it. For Japanese artists, wood was the canvas of choice for carving due to its abundance and low cost. Wood carvings were incredibly popular among the Japanese people, but it took a long time for Westerners to begin appreciating their beauty (Worthington 294-295).

Considering the size of the Gibson family's apothecary chest and the many artistic details it contains, the purchase must have been quite costly. They probably viewed the chest as a collector's item rather than one for everyday use. Different wood carving designs are engraved on almost every drawer and section of the chest. Each carved design is unique and sharp-edged, and repeats a specific and consistent geometric pattern. The very top of the chest's rightmost shelf holds an attached wooden cutout of Mount Fuji (Fig. 3). The shape of the mountain seems to have been carved, whereas the top of the mountain and the lava at the bottom are likely painted. Mount Fuji is the tallest mountain in Japan and a symbol of the nation. Its image is often used to promote national pride and sentiment (ABE 249). Generally, it gives meaning and a sense of purpose to an artwork. Japanese carvers typically planned their carving designs and their

placements pretty meticulously. It is possible that the Japanese maker of the Gibson family's chest chose to include Mount Fuji and placed it in a very visible position as an act of nationalism. The Gibson family probably perceived the depiction of the mountain to be an aesthetic decision made by the artist. Its inclusion brings the piece more overall visual appeal.

The chest was likely intentionally created for Western consumers, rather than having been produced for a domestic audience. Hokusai, a famous Japanese artist, produced many works depicting Mount Fuji; however, his art was readily overlooked by the Japanese due to its simplicity (Guth 468). Western audiences had a different opinion. Hokusai's works became renowned and defined Japanese art in the West. This detail points to its production for the West, but the art marks the chest with Japanese symbols and traditions, which would have allowed the Gibson family to flaunt an authentic piece of furniture while entertaining guests.

The apothecary chest played an important role in the Gibson family home as an indicator of their wealth and sophistication. Having it displayed in a public part of the home was most likely deliberate. Traditionally, the apothecary chest would have been used as a medicine cabinet. In the mid-eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, especially in the homes of English and American families, the apothecary chest would have been a mark of wealth because of the cost of the process to acquire one. While it was common at the time to have similar chests made, the Gibson family likely ordered their chest from a Japanese artist in Europe (Elterich vi). Often, a family would order an apothecary chest from a European furniture maker, who, in turn, would order their supplies from Asia so as to make it more genuine as an Asian artifact. This process alone would have been a mark of wealth; however, families who wished to emulate Japanese culture and traditional uses of the chest would then purchase expensive herbs and tinctures to fill it. Medicine and medical care were seen as a commodity, and doctors often had little to none of

the education we see from them today (Elterich vi). Instead, they would have had extensive knowledge of the herbs and other medicines that would fill the cabinet, but the family would not have used them without the direction of a doctor (Mackonochie and Heinrich n. p.). So, to have a cabinet full of healing properties simply for display showed that the family had plenty of disposable income. However, the Gibson family likely did not use their apothecary chest in this way. It is more likely that they used it as a writing center to hold stationary and other tools. They probably had their apothecary chest decorated with the special wood and beautiful, intricate artworks for this reason. They did not choose to display their wealth by lording their ability to have medical care over the people, instead taking care to appreciate and display the traditional artwork of Japan.

Along with the wood carvings and depictions of Mount Fuji on the Gibson family's apothecary chest, the use of Japanese lacquer is a decorative element that is equally important to the design of the chest. Japanese lacquer is a craft that has been established in Japan for centuries. The process for creating it is extensive, dangerous, and time-consuming, especially for higher-quality lacquer, thus making Japanese lacquer products expensive. Japanese lacquer is made from the sap of young *Rhus Vernicifera* trees (Yonemura 4-14). The sap is typically extracted in warmer seasons and then put through an enzyme catalyst oxidation process. Then, other elements, such as pigments, oils, gold flakes, and mother-of-pearl, are added into lacquer for decorative purposes (Hitchcock 473-476). This process can take months or years to complete. Japanese lacquer products are high value due to their production requiring extreme skill and patience, and because of lacquer's resistance to moisture and food, which makes it extremely practical for storage (Yonemura 4-14). The use of Japanese lacquer in the Gibson family's apothecary chest is another example of how it serves as a symbol of their wealth, since Japanese

lacquer was not easily accessible for most people during the nineteenth century, particularly if it was being exported overseas.

The apothecary chest is not solely just a representation of the Gibson family's wealth; instead, it also symbolizes the heavy Japanese influence that occurred in the Western world during the nineteenth century. This craze for Japanese-inspired goods was known as Japonisme and it can be seen in various sectors of the arts ranging from writing to decorative art. Japonisme opened up the Western world to a type of art that was not previously seen before. Japanese art includes asymmetry, empty spaces, and diagonal designs, which are elements that can be seen on the Gibsons' apothecary chest (Chiba). At the time the Gibson family acquired the apothecary chest, an Asian commodity of such good quality would not only have been viewed as a representation of the owner's wealth, but also as a representation of modernity, as Japanese-influenced products contrasted with previous Western art and were popular and trendy during the nineteenth century.

On the left-hand side of the apothecary chest is a depiction of a famous Chinese poem of a Buddhist riding a bull while playing the flute (Fig. 2). This poem and imagery show the man reaching enlightenment, a Buddhist ideal wherein human desires are shed in order for the individual to reach contentment, or enlightenment. The music of the flute stands for guiding the mind, which is represented by the bull. Bulls are typically wild and crazy, and the same can be said for people when we succumb to our desires (Olsen 176). This image shows the man's journey to enlightenment: when he is able to quell and guide himself using the music, he can control the bull. While Western audiences likely overlooked the significance of this image and simply enjoyed the designs on the chest, the inclusion of this motif ties the chest back to Asia and grounds it in its place of production, since it shows off important cultural symbols.

Another mark of Japanese art is the use of lacquer and mother-of-pearl. In lacquer, oftentimes a sprinkling of gold would lay on top. This gold can be observed throughout the artwork, especially in the leaves decorating the top of Fig. 2 and the small details at the bottom. Japanese lacquer was regularly used with mother-of-pearl, which can be seen in the chest (“Mother-of-Pearl”). Mother-of-pearl comes from mollusks and gives off the extravagant color of pearls, as they are made from the same material. When used together, the mother-of-pearl is placed atop a foundation base of lacquer. This combination creates a beautiful, delicate emblem that completes the chest.



Fig. 1. Full-view image of the apothecary chest and its intricate woodwork designs



Fig. 2. Mother-of-pearl figure of a man riding a bull and playing a flute



Fig. 3. Painting of Mount Fuji in the upper-left corner of the apothecary chest

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