

Japanese Leather Wallpaper as Gilded Luxury

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The golden Japanese leather wallpaper is the most striking feature of the Gibson House,



aside from the various Victorian furniture and decorations. Gilded Japanese wallpaper covers almost all the walls of the house’s entryway, from the ground to the top floors (Figs. 1 and 2). The gold and classic red carpets set off the stunning splendor and grandeur of the Gibson House. The wallpaper is in two layers: the lower layer is heavy “leather,” or paper white material, and the top is a floating engraved gold pattern (Fig. 3). This pattern suggests the subtle and modest style of Japanese

culture, while

Fig. 1. The lamp illuminating the Japanese leather wallpaper shows its heavily detailed pattern of plants and fruits.

the gold shows the luxury of this wallpaper. The gold pattern has a distinguished feel, especially when touched with the hand. These golden patterns form many three-dimensional elements, such as branches, fruits, or leaves, which illustrate common symbols of Japanese culture such as “chrysanthemums, peonies, pomegranates, insects, [and] fans” (Wailliez 62). In Japanese culture, the gold style was “like the castles themselves, intended to arouse a sense of awe in [the] beholder” (Momoyama 2). In

addition, the design of the wallpaper shows squares of gold and silver in various sizes, which corresponds to the fact that wallpapers in The Gibson House were made in gold leaf (Starr 61).

The first wallpapers, originating in the sixteenth century, were employed to decorate the insides of cabinets and smaller rooms in merchants' homes, rather than the grand palaces of the aristocracy. However, by the early twentieth century, they had spread to hallways, kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms, as well as reception areas. Despite



its pervasiveness, wallpaper has long been seen as the weak cousin of the decorative arts. Wallpaper was created in Spain and expanded throughout Europe, namely to Italy, Holland, and France (Rosoman 93).

Fig 2. Japanese leather wallpaper showcased in the stairwell of The Gibson House. It features a painting of a beautiful young woman.

The role of wallpaper in the homes of upper-class Europeans and Americans was essential to its boom during the nineteenth century. Since Japan began making leather wallpaper for the Western market in the 1870s, it is reasonable to assume that the wallpaper in the Gibson House was produced there (Leung 36). After Japan opened its harbors to the West in the 1850s and 60s, the majority of the Japanese wallpaper exported to the United States from Japan had simple elements of local culture, especially fruits and flowers. The intricate patterns of Japanese design in people's homes were more than solely decoration; they also upheld the owners' status and reputation. This foreign wallpaper would present the wife as "educated, artistically aware,

religious, and concerned for the development of the children” (Brown 9). The use of foreign wallpaper in the home contributed to the reputation of those in the upper classes.

The consciousness of the outer world made those in the higher classes who owned this wallpaper come to be seen as honorable and educated. The presence of the foreign wallpaper showed off certain values they wanted to present to others among the wealthy class. This appreciation for the foreign was due to advancements in science, technology, and arts spreading at rapid speed during the nineteenth century. Many new inventions and ideas, including the infamous Japanese leather wallpaper, emerged in this era. These changes were heavily reflected in the social culture of the upper classes.

Although the Japanese leather wallpaper inside The Gibson House stands out for its beauty, creating the actual wallpaper was a tedious and detailed task. Craftspeople needed to know what kind of material they would use when constructing the wallpaper. In the industry, the wallpaper can be classified under two types: rag-based paper and wood-based paper. Rag paper is fairly thick and has a characteristic fibrous feel; it is a highly acidic paper that turns brittle and brown with age. Wood-based paper, on the other hand, usually stays white, but can be rather dirty when removed from an ancient structure. Wallpaper types and diverse material sources are essential to individuals who buy them; some are manufactured by soaking cotton, linen, and wool rags to make a pulp, while others are termed “wove paper,” which was invented at the end of the eighteenth century (Rosoman 93). The wallpaper in The Gibson House is most likely rag paper that came from the fibers of the plant called *Edgeworthia Papyrifera*. This plant is native to Japan and its bark is used for paper making.

The first step in making the wallpaper was cutting the wooden block cylinders that the leather paper would be put onto and embossed. Workers would take large cylinders of hardwood

suspended on a frame with an engraver next to it and they would create the design on the hardwood using a knife or chisel. The engraving process was one of the most important parts of the process because it produced the design of the wallpaper. This part of the job was normally done by men due to of how much time and strength it took. Women could not sustain such work (E.D. 84).

The next step was to emboss the paper. Female workers normally did this part. They would take one yard square of three to four large sheets of paper, dampen them with water, and paste them on top of the engraved hardwood with the design. The dampening of the paper allowed for it to be thick, heavy, and manageable, along with giving it a sponge-like texture (“Wallpaper Designs” 57). The worker then took a brush, which was small, with a long handle and soft bristles, and began pounding the paper in the engraving of the wood. The worker did this repeatedly, turning the wooden cylinder and making sure the paper took the design from the wood. Once the full length of the paper was covered, the paper was hung on a T-shaped bamboo pole to air dry (E. D. 85). Once the paper dried, it was time for decoration.

The paper was laid out onto a large table and coated in sizing. This act made the surface smooth and non-absorbent. The paper was then dried again, and was ready for further decor (Starr 62). The workers took pieces of tinfoil and attached them to the paper with a type of mordant. A mordant is a substance that combines with a stain or dye to fix it to a material. The workers took soft brushes and beat the tinfoil into the patterns (E. D. 85). The tinfoil used was meant to create the effect of gilding. Gilding gave the design its decorative gold appearance and also served as protection from dirt and dust (“Gold Tooling”). Again, because this part of the job was very light and needed ease, it was done by women. The design was painted using oil, colors, and varnish. The Japanese also used ink for painting in similar ways to Chinese artists such as

Hasegawa Tohaku (Kleiner 1080-1081). In other workshops, like those in France, they used thinner leaves or other metal leaves in the design process to lower the expense of ornamental manufacture (Radepont 120).

To give the paper its finishing touches, it was covered in a few coats of lacquer. Lacquer is made from trees called *Urushi*. This step was crucially important, as it would protect the paper from any discoloration or dust. The lacquer also gave the design its gold metallic color. When it came time for the lacquer to dry, the



paper was hung in a room padded with straw. The straw padding was saturated with water, giving the room a damp and warm temperature so the lacquer would dry. Once dry, the paper was washed in a *sabi*, meaning rust, which shows all the fine lines in the gold design (Starr 62). The female workers then took their stencils to touch up and fix any areas of the paper. Once the paper was completely decorated, it was hung up to dry again, cut, and then sent off to merchants to be sold.

Fig. 3. This is a close-up of the golden flowers, fruits, and grapevines commonly seen on the wallpaper.

The pattern of the Japanese leather wallpaper in the Gibson House is extremely coherent, unlike most exported wallpapers, which “may have endured a considerable amount of handling” (Webber 345). There was a “desire to define and mobilize cultural tradition” due to there being a boost in “worldwide fluidity of social theory or ideology” (Morris-Suzuki 760). This desire is what makes the Japanese wallpaper so significant to The Gibson House. The artistic Japanese

touch in the decoration of these homes was a trend amongst the elites. The wealthy felt superior with this art in their homes because it proved they were engaged with the world around them and with emerging fashion trends.

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