

At Dinner with the Gibsons:

The Chinese Porcelain Dining Set

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Extravagant dinner parties, expensive imports, and extreme wealth marked the lifestyle of Boston's richest families: the Boston Brahmins. The Gibson family represents a prime example of the extreme display of wealth that characterized the Brahmins. The wealthy pioneers of 1830s New England invested heavily in global trade to acquire material possessions—such as Asian ceramics—to supplement the materialistic nature of Victorian American society. Though Asian ceramics were new and exotic goods at the time, Asian influence on the West has already been around for centuries. The new interest in Asian ceramics was simply a continuation of the trend of the West adopting parts of Asian culture. The Gibson family was heavily involved in this trend, as shown by their dining sets.

Dining sets, such as the dining set at the Gibson House, were a crucial part of Victorian dining, especially Victorian dinner parties. These dinner parties were extremely popular, delicate, and ritualistic (Scarpitta 1). The Victorian dinner party was not only a meal shared by friends, but also a social and financial opportunity for the hosts. If the dinner party was a success, especially for the growing, newly-rich middle class, they would be offered a respectable place in society and social circles (Scarpitta 4). Depending on the ultimate goal of the dinner party, or the social standing of the family, dinnerware at events would vary in excessiveness of finery. For example, a family might have used porcelain, such as the Gibson House dining set, or silver, when attempting to display their material possessions and impress guests. However, some families actively resisted strict Victorian dinner parties and preferred simpler and less serious dinners (Scarpitta 3). Dinner was traditionally served *à la Française*, meaning that the lavish

dishes were set out on the table; however, the newer *à la Russe* style called for dishes placed on a sideboard to allow for table decorations (Scarpitta 3). Victorians ate an assortment of foods; an extreme amount often appeared at the dinner table (Flanders 175-176). The Gibson family may have eaten soup, fish, roast, stew, curries, vegetables, meat dishes, desserts, and cheese all in one meal at the most extravagant and elaborate dinners. Though food and conversation were important, so was organization: the layout of dishes and dinnerware were dictated with the sharp eye of the hostess who oversaw the evening (Flanders 174). Most likely, the imported Chinese porcelain dining set found in the Gibson House was used for dinner parties as a display of wealth and luxury, as well as a symbol of the materialistic culture of the Victorian era.

The trade route between China and the West, which allowed the Gibson family to acquire the dining set, dates back hundreds of centuries; even from the time of Columbus's voyages to America in the fifteenth century, Europe had an established trade relationship with China. When America gained independence, it quickly established a trade route across the Pacific to partake in the exchange of ideas and objects with China. The Americans soon came to realize China's paramount position in East Asia and were introduced to the complexities of the trade (Mudge 30). Fortunately for the Americans, they were able to enlist the help of friendly European merchants, who assisted them in navigating complex trade procedures (30-31). Due to the already-established European trade relationships with China, America received the benefits of a strong trading partner without the hassle of venturing into dangerous and unknown territories. However, America also entered at a time when the British East India Company maintained a virtual monopoly in China's trade. Soon, the Americans became direct rivals with the British and often carried cargo in neutral trading ships at a time when most of the West was involved in the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) (31-32). America benefited heavily from its new trade route

across the Pacific—many entrepreneurs obtained vast fortunes as a result of their trade with China, and the objects they brought home sparked an immense domestic interest. The goods were incredibly expensive due to import taxes and the cost of overseas trade; however, for many *nouveau rich*, goods such as the porcelain dining set were “exotic” pieces (Oshinsky). As a result of this interest in exotic goods and the trade conditions that took place during various wars, merchants could heavily mark up pieces. Most notably, during the nineteenth century, Americans were able to take advantage of the first and second Opium Wars (1839-1842; 1856-1860). Due to China’s reduced influence and power, Americans were able to secure much better trade conditions at reduced prices.

Global trade allowed Chinese porcelain to develop into a desirable commodity for overseas collectors. In her work *Atlantic World Trade and the Production of Social Meaning: Silver, Ceramics, and Spinning Wheels*, Heidi C. Nickisher records the origins and functions of the first porcelain objects, and how they landed in the hands of families like the Gibsons. Nickisher writes about how porcelain was first used for cowrie shells. The shells were employed as currency throughout Asia, India, and Africa (67). Eventually, porcelain developed beyond currency and grew to become beautiful, delicate, and functional pieces in dining sets (Nickisher 67-68). In the dining set seen at the Gibson House, each object is accented with intricate gold, blue, and red designs. These paintings on the porcelain dinnerware convey scenes of Chinese culture and ceremony. The appealing delicacy of the Chinese porcelain dining sets encouraged many craft makers in Europe and in the West to recreate porcelain goods (Nickisher 67). The reproduced goods were not made from the same exact material as the Chinese originals, but they still attracted many consumers, especially those who desired a way to access favorable dining sets more easily. If they wanted to, the Gibsons could likely have obtained replicas of Chinese

goods and not ones from overseas like the dining set. The loss of original value did not just persist through duplicated artistic skills, but also through the use of the dining set objects. Stacey Pierson's article "The Movement of Chinese Ceramics: Appropriation in Global History" follows the journey of Chinese ceramics and the influence of art throughout global regions, and how the "exotic" artifacts often had unknown usages (21). Collectors like the Gibsons tended to display their porcelain for appreciation versus using the objects in the way they were intended. The dining set was therefore likely used as a projection of their wealth and admiration of global arts.

The Asian-American trade in decorative objects became a staple to the wealthy aristocratic families of Boston, also known as the Boston Brahmins. These families helped launch a cultural shift through their copious amount of imports from Asian countries. But who were these families, and how did they afford the importation of these goods? In their respective studies, Ronald Story and Keith George Ross show the Brahmins' influence. The Boston Brahmins were the wealthiest and most powerful families who helped drive the cultural vehicle in Boston (Ross 2). These aristocrats possessed one object in abundance over the rest of the population: money. Many of the social elites had accumulated their wealth from the brutal action of the African slave trade, artifacts, and universities. With the median income in 1860 being \$157,000, many of the Boston Brahmins invested large amounts of money, sometimes even double a person's average salary (Story 8, 5). The wealth that had been accumulated eventually bled into the society of Boston, and helped grow the economic, educational, and cultural sphere of the city (Ross 6). Since the global events during the time allowed for a new trade between China and America, many porcelain ceramics came to the Brahmins' notice, becoming new additions to their collections. These new ceramics became so important to the Boston Brahmins

(they even had exclusive clubs like the “Porcelain Club” (Ross 34)) that many had their homes filled with ceramics and other goods from these Asian countries. What looked like an excessive spending spree of the rich slowly started to transform Boston into a mecca of cultural fusion between America and Asia.

By way of culture, art, trade, and wealth, the Gibsons’ dinnerware collection tells a significant historical story. From cowrie shells to porcelain plates dressed in delicate paint work, the overseas interest in Asian collector items grew immensely. New trade routes across the Pacific and global relations between America and China allowed for wealthy socialites to embellish their tables with porcelain dining sets in a grand gesture of luxury. Exotic dining sets became the centerpiece of Victorian households, which were put on display to highlight status and wealth in the presence of guests. Thus, the purchasing of extravagant foreign goods, such as the Gibson House dining set, supplemented the materialistic ideology of Victorian society.



Dinnerware, such as the plate pictured, would have been staple items at the Gibsons' dinner table when they hosted other wealthy elites. Throughout dinner, food was served on these items in order to display the family's affluence and lavishness.

Fig. 1. Lonergan, Margi. Gibson House Dining Set: Dinner Plate, 25 Mar. 2022.



The details on this lid emulate the delicate painting done to enhance the beauty of this porcelain dining piece. The gold highlights each stroke of paint and the immaculate Chinese design patterns. With a complex border, the white negative space allows the main image in the center of the lid to stand out.

Fig. 2. Lonergan, Margi. Gibson House Dining Set: Dinnerware, 25 Mar. 2022.



The detail on this bowl was a sign of the Brahmins “showing-off” their wealth and art to their guests. In this example, we can see the intricate detail on the inner sides of the bowl. During an event, guests would be attracted to the outside details. The bowl would be used to hold food, which would usually go below the art. The number of details present in a simple bowl indicated to the guests that the owners were well-off.

Fig. 3. Lonergan, Margi. Gibson House Dining Set: Bowl, 25 Mar. 2022.

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