

**The Gibsons and Imari Platters:  
Japonisme Ceramics in a Victorian Household**

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In this write-up, we will delve into the historical importance of the artistic renaissance that moved specifically from Japan to Western nations in the late nineteenth century named Japonisme. Going further, we will examine a family from Victorian-era New England named the Gibsons and some of their specific possessions gained from the Japonisme movement. The Gibsons were a wealthy Bostonian family who lived in Back Bay, and their immense affluence was used in a variety of different ways. In particular, the family invested in foreign works of art. In order to understand the Gibson family and their aforementioned valued possessions and works of art, many of which came from East Asia, it is important to gain a perspective on what the Japonisme movement truly was, how it began, and what resulted from it.

Western expansion into East Asia began as all territorial expansion in the nineteenth century did, with political, economic, and religious motivations. Western merchants traveled across the world in search of economic prosperity, and long-distance trade started to be encouraged, as it was believed to strengthen the nation-state. As the Victorian era began in the United States, large domestic economic growth allowed for integration and expansion into the world economy. New American trade settlements and subsidiaries were established in Mexico, Central and South America, and Africa. This integration into the world economy and simultaneous mass trade efforts began the introduction of new foreign products to the American market—which Americans could not get enough of. Chinese trading ports began to open in 1842 after the end of the First Opium War (1839-1842), allowing for the beginning of a Western expansion into East Asia. Westerners established banking systems and subsidiaries in China,

which made for an extremely easy transition into Japan for expansion. Various events would eventually begin the push of Western merchants into Japan, and Westerners were about to become absolutely enamored with what they discovered (Murphy 17-25).

The Western discovery of Japanese culture began because of the simple fascination with a style so full of exoticism. This unique culture was unheard of and unfamiliar, and was therefore coveted. Japonisme objects first appeared in the West at the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris, where books, paintings, wood carvings, kimonos, fans, and all sorts of memorabilia were put into circulation for trade for the first time. Many more fairs like this would emerge across the United States and would spark a newfound interest in this newly-discovered culture. *The Mikado* (1885), for example, was a British play that was inspired by one of these fairs and went on to be immensely popular, showing us just how sought-after Japanese and Japanese-inspired works were. Yoko Chiba, author of “Japonisme: East-West Renaissance in the Late 19th Century,” defines Japonisme as “the influence of Japan on late 19th-century European art and life,” which came from this influx of East Asian art, architecture, and literature into Western culture (6). Victorian America became obsessed with these Japanese items, and they turned into prized possessions in the collections of upper-class citizens. Chiba assumes the root of this Western fascination with Japanese art is the “asymmetry, irregularity of the composition, diagonal design, off-centered arrangement, decorativeness, empty space, lack of perspective, light with no shadows, brilliant colors on bright surfaces, and the rhythmic use of varied patterns and depth” (6). Whatever the cause of the obsession with Japonisme, upper-class Victorian-era Americans could not get enough, and this artistic revolution spread throughout the nation, and the reason why is clear.



**Fig. 1.** A picture of an Arita porcelain platter that was taken at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, MA from: Silva, Jason. “Artists in Arita.” 2022. HEIC. Author’s personal collection.

Before we can talk about the Gibson family and the porcelain that they owned, which is meticulously maintained by the Gibson House Museum, we must analyze and note other types of Imari art so as to better understand the significance of what the Gibsons owned. Jenny Holt, a professor of English Literature at the Meiji University in Tokyo, writes in “A Lesson to ‘The Western Barbarian,’” that Japanese art is “too subtle [and] too refined for the Westerner to understand” (2). Divert your attention to Fig. 1, and now back to the quote by Professor Holt. At first, one questions Holt’s credibility, as Western art is often seen as sophisticated and complex, but when looking at the platter in Fig. 1, one can clearly see its intrinsic beauty; it speaks volumes, despite the two-toned color and floral simplicity. This platter is one of the hundreds exported from Japan to the United States, and the beauty in its restraint, while objective, is understandable and gives a good basis as to why the Gibsons were so enticed by this so-called platter of “white gold.”



**Fig. 2.** A picture of a hanging Imari platter, which was owned by the Gibsons, from: Szniewajs, Olivia. “Hanging Platter.” 2022. HEIC. Author’s personal collection.

The first specific platter belonging to the Gibsons, as seen in Fig. 2, exhibits many classic characteristics of Japanese art. This dish is decorated with flowers, animals, and landscapes, all of which are popular motifs throughout the art style. The most prevalent features are the branches of peony trees painted in stark red and blue. Peonies were commonly a symbol of “many pleasant connotations—love, spring, happiness and affection” (R. S. C. 71). This symbolism shows that the plate was made to represent good fortune, reflecting the social status of the Gibsons. Additionally, perched on one of the branches is a bird, likely a pheasant, which is held in the “highest esteem by imperial tradition and remains today a symbol of spring,” further emphasizing the theme of grandeur and new beginnings (“Nuance in Nature”). The righthand edge of the plate shows a dog standing on a simple rocky landscape, leaning towards a butterfly. Overall, the depiction of life and nature in this piece evokes a lighthearted yet powerful message about the family’s stature.

Continuing on, the figures themselves are not the only matter of visual significance on the platter. The Imari art style is made through the formation of porcelain “overglaze[d] [in] polychrome enamel” for its distinctive sleek surface (R. S. C. 70). In addition to its beauty, the material itself contains cultural significance, as “Japanese porcelain is also presented as a

physical translation of place, a proximate experience of Japan's foreign terrain," further proving its cultural importance (Brink 34). As we can see in the Gibson family's platter, the contrasting, and beautiful, reds and blues allow for a very simple yet engaging image against its eggshell-colored backdrop. When one looks closely, one notices some of the leaves are lined with gold, as well as the entire rim. This design further exemplifies the significance of the plate from an artistic standpoint. Not only is it visually pleasing, but the composition also transforms the piece from just a simple dish to a valuable work of art through the sheer detail and complexity of the process. Rather than being used for practical purposes, this plate is utilized as decoration to reflect positively on the Gibson family.

The Japonisme movement in Boston was prevalent and widespread, even going so far as to span most of the East Coast of the United States. At the same time, we see the rise of Chinoiserie porcelain art, which Robert Leath, a moderator and curator at the Charleston Heritage Symposium, describes as the craze for Chinese porcelain, similar to the fascination with Japanese porcelain detailed before (1). This paper, which Leath wrote, is eye-opening for several reasons. While it talks of Chinoiserie art, it also discusses the art scene in Charleston, South Carolina, which is eerily similar to the scene in Boston, especially at the time of the Gibson family. Noting the spread of this art craze nationwide, it is important to observe the differences between Chinoiserie and Japonisme, but describing the two is not enough to talk about the differences between them (see Figs. 3 and 4).



**Fig. 3.** A picture of a Chinese platter taken at the Peabody Essex Museum from: Silva, Jason. “Salem Chinese Platter.” 2022. HEIC. Author’s personal collection.



**Fig. 4.** A picture of a second Imari platter taken at the Gibson House, from: Baron, Rosie. “Gibson House Imari Platter.” 2022. HEIC. Author’s personal collection.

There are a few immediate differences that pop out to one’s eye. The border of the Imari platter in Fig. 4 is ruffled (known as scalloped), and more enticing. Said platter also shows many beautiful flowers, set upon a cream background. Contrast this with the platter of Chinese origin in Fig. 3, which depicts insects alongside flowers on a pearl white background. Both platters are outlined by a seemingly gold-colored metal and are elegant works of art. It is apparent why said art appealed so strongly to the Gibsons, and others of the time, as it did not even compare to the Western art that was common then.

While the Imari art style originated in Asia, its artistic and cultural importance is made even more obvious by its popularity in America. Beautiful and elegant dishes, such as the Gibson family's Imari platters, have a far larger impact than it seems, at first glance. These seemingly mundane objects are simply rife with history, and, thankfully, there are ongoing efforts to teach the public about items of such importance. The presence of these piece in the Gibson House allows visitors to witness the crucial impact that cultures can have on one another and the importance of cultivating those relationships in the future. The prevalent cross-cultural fascination with art connects people on opposite sides of the world, promoting curiosity and admiration.

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