

## **Japonisme and Chinoiserie in Rosamond Warren Gibson's Bedroom**

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During the nineteenth century, the increasingly diverse makeup of America pushed the population to hold an open mindset and begin to embrace international cultures and exchange foreign goods. Americans at this time expressed interest in many Asian cultures, especially those from China and Japan. The first commercial ship to travel between America and China, the *Empress of China*, brought wallpaper, silk, porcelain, furniture, and tea from China, selling them to fashionable merchants in Boston and New York (Chou 6). As more and more Chinese and Japanese artworks and furniture arrived in the American domestic market through importation, the beauty and uniqueness of these Eastern cultures eventually inspired American artists and craftsmen to imitate these objects (Johnston 16-17). The Western imitation of these objects was known as Chinoiserie and Japonisme, respectively. This mimicry developed over centuries into a fad that has tremendously influenced product consumption in America.

The collecting habits for these goods were presented to the public in two different manners. First, the collection of expensive and exotic products was used as a tool to maintain the relationships between elites (Fahden Briceno 16). Second, Chinoiserie and Japonisme were apparent through interior decoration featuring exotic styles, eventually pushing these trends beyond the limited sharing of the elite class. The clean, elegant lines, subtle forms, and geometric shapes were incredibly appealing to Americans (Johnston 40). As the popularity of Asian goods grew stronger and the interest in and consumption of Asian products increased, a Japanese company opened a store in Boston in 1898 to meet demand within the upscale American market (Fahden Briceno 18). Elite Boston families commonly purchased Asian furniture, either for the sake of fashion or out of a desire to collect these exotic objects. Despite

the luxurious and culturally significant meaning of Asian furniture, the style and aesthetics of these pieces were mostly viewed as having unique characteristics never seen before in Western interior decoration.

The upper-class lifestyle in the nineteenth century was largely focused on retaining wealth and setting trends. The families from this era wanted to be the focal point of society, which is why they continuously switched up the fashion and architecture in their houses—knowing that the middle and even lower classes would attempt to follow in their footsteps (Wagner von Hoff 90). In the Victorian era, these architectural trends were mainly about “heavy ornamentation” and displaying the rank of the family throughout the home, which was incredibly different from the Georgian era, where the family’s home was more about functionality and practicality (Wagner von Hoff 238).

One reason for the ornamental aspects of such high-class decoration derives from the fact that, during the nineteenth century, America had increased trade with Japan after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, causing an increase of interest in Japanese art and decorative arts in the United States. Faux bamboo furniture became especially popular and was known for its “strong rectilinear lines, extensive use of panels, and galleries of spindles across the tops of bedsteads, dressers, and desks” (Simpson).

Looking at the Gibson House Museum specifically, the bedroom of Rosamond Warren Gibson provides several examples of Japonisme and Chinoiserie. The side chair, the bed, and the chest of drawers were given to Charles Hammond Gibson and his wife Rosamond Warren Gibson by her parents in 1871 as part of a wedding gift (“The Gibson Family”). All of the pieces of the bedroom set have one common feature: each one has a faux bamboo texture and is actually made of bird’s eye maple. John J. Vaughn, an upholsterer, utilized the so-called “Eastlake”

furniture style in designing these pieces (“Side Chair”). Charles Locke Eastlake was the namesake of the Eastlake style. He was a British furniture designer and the leader of “the principles of the English design reform movement” in America (Madigan *Nineteenth Century Furniture* 52). At a young age, he traveled around Europe and wrote many articles about art. During his subsequent tenure as secretary of the Royal Institute of British Architects, he continued to write about the history of art, and eventually published his famous work *Hints on Household Taste* in 1868. In this book, Eastlake shared his taste in home decoration, writing that “furniture should be functional, simple, and rectilinear in form” (Madigan *Nineteenth Century Furniture* 52). The book became exceedingly popular in the United States after being published in Boston in 1872. Simultaneously, Japanese design styles arrived in America. A collision between Eastern and Western furniture styles influenced individual American designers such as Vaughn, resulting in pieces like the side chair.

This chair shows a maple-made bamboo texture on the spindle, while the upholstery is painted with flowers that resemble the Rococo style. The structure of the chair follows the doctrine of the Eastlake style of simplicity and functionality, with each spindle and holder being rectilinear and lacking ornate carvings and curves (Madigan “The Influence of Charles” 10-13).

The second object demonstrating the Gibsons’ fascination with the Japanese furniture style found in the bedroom set is the chest of drawers. This chest was also made by John J. Vaughn. It has a “figured maple veneer...[and] painted elements made to look like bamboo” (“Chest of Drawers”). This chest is another example of the highly prevalent faux bamboo trend, as previously mentioned. The fact that it was made in Boston by an upholsterer and not a woodworker means that the chest is likely an inaccurate representation of what actual Japanese furniture looks like.



**Fig. 1.** Chest of drawers in the bedroom of Rosamond Warren Gibson: J. Vaughn, John. *Chest of Drawers*. 1871, woodworking, Gibson House Museum, Boston.

So, what is actual “Japanese” furniture? Some important context to establish is that “the Japanese have traditionally lived at floor level, as opposed to using chairs and beds” (Koizumi 10-11). This “floor-level lifestyle” is known as 室礼 (*shitsurai*), and, as a result, nearly all Japanese furniture is designed to be easily reachable from a seated position. Therefore, most furniture does not have legs (Koizumi 11). The chest of drawers in the Gibson House contradicts this design philosophy: it is elevated off of the floor and its excessive mimicry of bamboo does not maximize the space it takes up in a room. In fact, it resembles a Chinese drawer (Fig. 2) more than a traditional Japanese storage chest (Figs. 3 and 4). The handles on the drawers (Fig. 1) are unlike most Chinese or Japanese ones, and the thick columns in each corner are not flush with the individual drawers (Fig. 1). Ultimately, this piece is a combination of both Chinoiserie and



Japonisme, indicating its purpose is more for the somewhat inaccurate aesthetic of “Asian furniture” than for its actual function.



**Fig. 2.** A kitchen cabinet made of real bamboo from the Zhejiang province of China: Moss, Peter. *Asian Furniture: A Directory and Sourcebook: With 451 Colour Illustrations*. Thames & Hudson, 2007, pp. 150.



**Figs. 3 and 4.** Examples of traditional Japanese storage chests from the late nineteenth century:

Moss, Peter. *Asian Furniture: A Directory and Sourcebook: With 451 Colour Illustrations*.

Thames & Hudson, 2007, pp. 281, 293.

Finally, the last object with the most apparent Japanese-influenced design is Rosamond Warren Gibson's bed (Fig. 5). As noted above, according to Rosamond, the bed was a wedding gift from her parents and was purchased from one of the only Boston furniture makers of the time, John J. Vaughn, in 1871. The bed is made from maple wood and has been carved and engraved to mimic bamboo. The grooves are colored in with black paint and the whole structure is held together with nails. However, the secondary woods and metals used to create and hold together the rest of the bed are unidentifiable and only described as "ring porous," with the metal being "ferrous" ("Bed").



**Fig. 5.** Rosamond Warren Gibson's bed from the Gibson House Museum. J. Vaughn, John. *Bed*. 1871, woodworking, Gibson House Museum, Boston.

Bamboo is a traditional Chinese domestic plant and a well-known Asian furniture aesthetic element. Although the bed shares very similar characteristics with a Chinese bamboo bed, Rosamond's bed, in fact, is made of bird's eye maple. As the importation of bamboo requires long-distance cross-continental transportation across water, the shipping fees and the chances of damaging bamboo were extremely high. The increased costs led to a much more expensive market price, so only a few wealthy individuals would be willing to purchase genuine bamboo furniture. In this case, the use of faux-bamboo was much more economically friendly, and, eventually, it became the most popular choice. Additionally, some woods are firmer than bamboo. Bird's eye maple is one of the finest maple woods. The use of maple allowed furniture to support heavier weights. It is also more stable than typical bamboo. From the perspective of safety and longevity, faux-bamboo was simply the better choice (Chamberlain 3-4).

As shown in Figs. 5 and 6, Rosamond's bed was sized for one person. This size indicates that she did not share a bedroom with her husband Charles. In fact, it was not strange for a wealthy family who had a large house to provide each member a bedroom. Their separate bedrooms were not fully isolated, meaning they could meet via a shared bathroom. The separate bedrooms did not indicate a problematic marriage; instead, this design was meant to offer upper-class people a comfortable environment with a certain amount of privacy. This characteristic seemed to only apply to elites like the Gibsons during the Victorian era, as it was nearly impossible for people in other classes to afford such a big house with multiple bedrooms (Reid 420).



**Fig. 6.** Rosamond Warren Gibson's bed from the Gibson House Museum. J. Vaughn, *John. Bed.* 1871, woodworking, Gibson House Museum, Boston.

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