

Kinkarakawa:

The Gibsons' Exquisite Wallpaper

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Japanese leather wallpaper, also known as Kinkarakawa, was a unique and expensive fabrication produced during the nineteenth century. The Dutch East India Company created the wallpaper in Japan, then imported it and popularized it in Europe (Piacenza et al.). The wallpaper premiered in 1862 at the London International Exhibition, and, soon after, many prominent architects began to use it for design purposes ("Kinkarakami: Takashi"). The importation of Kinkarakawa is representative of the East introducing goods to the West. There are three primary production periods of Kinkarakawa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the Japanese Enlightenment (1873-1884), when the wallpapers were hand-crafted; the industrial production period (1882-1889), when the wallpaper was beginning to be produced more quickly and efficiently due to the establishment of British factories; and the "mass-produced commodity period" (1890-1905), when British architects and designers chose the patterns for the wallpaper (Piacenza et al.). Leather wallpaper became especially popular in 1873, after it was exhibited at shows such as the Vienna Exhibition ("Kinkarakami: Takashi").

Under the Japanese government, the first factory in the Imperial Printing Works in Yokohama produced Japanese wallpaper around 1883 (Leung 37). Due to increased demand, Japanese craftsmen would utilize retailers such as Liberty's as a tool to help increase efficiency in producing and exporting the wallpaper. Japanese leather wallpaper became prominent within European culture throughout these periods and was eventually found in buildings such as Buckingham Palace in the UK ("Kinkarakami: Takashi"). Although these wallpapers were

popular in Europe, they were expensive, meaning only a few people could afford to install them in their homes. In addition to the exportation of Japanese leather wallpaper throughout Europe, other parts of the world were also importing Kinkarakami; for instance, it was transported throughout Canada on the Canadian Pacific Railway (Leung 39). This importation allowed the wallpaper to reach more expansive areas of the globe, enhancing its overall influence. Despite the wallpaper's prominence, it eventually declined in popularity due to changes in the fashion industry ("Kinkarakami: Takashi").

Although Japan imported Kinkarakawa, the country and the United States were not continually trading. For a long time, Japan took a pause from dealing with the world, except for China and Amsterdam (LaFeber 8). The United States became interested in trading with Japan because the country was en route to China. Conveniently, Japan housed coal, which Americans needed for their ships to make it to China. Commodore Matthew C. Perry arrived in Japan in 1852 to convince Japan to open trade with the United States under President Milliard Fillmore, but he failed to do so (12-13). So, Perry visited again in February 1852, when The Treaty of Kanagawa was signed. This treaty declared perpetual peace between Japan and the United States and the ports that the Americans could use. Unfortunately, trade was not fully decided upon yet (14-15). President Franklin Pierce appointed Townsend Harris as the United States consul, who left for the job in 1855 (18-19). In a few years, Harris convinced Japan to sign a treaty in 1858 to open up five trade ports between it and the United States. From then onward, the United States and, soon after, Britain, would have access to Japanese goods (21-22).

During the early nineteenth century, Boston was a leading city in North America due to its economic, social, and cultural influence, contributing to why affluent families were inclined to reside there (Kiem 79). The Gibsons lived in a house in the Back Bay area of Boston for three

generations, from 1859 to 1954, before it became a museum. Charlie Gibson Jr. had a vision of turning the family home into a museum in 1936. After visiting family in Delaware, he found that his cousin Henry Francis du Pont was making his family home a museum. Charlie wanted to honor his family and the Boston of his youth and opened the doors to the public in 1957. As a family, the Gibsons became prominent Brahmins, also known as the Boston elite (“The Gibson Family”). At the time, Back Bay was the newest up-and-coming neighborhood for the upper classes and housed people who ran the city and its businesses (Clarke Chapter 2). As Boston Brahmins, the Gibsons influenced many aspects of society, such as the arts, culture, science, politics, trade, and education (Clarke Chapter 1). Fortunes and financial growth depended on these families, as trade heavily impacted their living standards (Clarke Chapter 1).

The Victorian home was essential to middle-class families because it reflected their financial position in society (Tange 6). Economically, the term “middle class” encompassed many people, and people further defined it as having “good taste,” which they could show through their home decor (8). The Gibson family most likely used the Kinkarakawa in their home to reflect their taste in extravagant decoration with this unique and popular wallpaper.

In Boston, the Gibson family covered their grand entryway in Japanese leather wallpaper that caught visitors’ attention (Schinabeck). The golden fruits and flowers pressed on top of the muted-green background highlight the three-dimensional aspect of the wallpaper. The golden sheen from the paneling lightens up the otherwise dark colors in the Gibson House and pairs well with the artworks in the entryway (see Figs. 2 and 3). Despite the ambiguous plants on the paper, they remain recognizable alongside similar Japanese fabrics. In close reading the elements on the wallpaper shown in Fig. 1, one can see that there are grapes on vines interwoven with flowers identifiable as oxalis and carnations. The carnations on the wallpaper are a representation of

maternal love. The grapes on vines symbolize fertility in offspring and prosperity, and the oxalis is also a portrayal of everlasting fortune, including progeny (Couture). The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has a fragment of paper that resembles Japanese leather wallpaper. There are fruit vines and flowers on top of the dark red background in this piece, just like the one at the Gibson House. There are also butterflies in both wallpapers, but the Gibson House's Japanese leather wallpaper lacks other animals such as snakes and dragons. Despite the slight differences between the two wallpapers, they require the same technique and showcase the same effects. To produce insects, fruit, and foliage on top of rich colors requires costly intricacy, which is why Japanese leather wallpaper was one of the most expensive types of wallpaper (Leung 38). Therefore, it would be essential for the Gibson family to liven up their entry hall and coordinate their other Japanese furniture pieces with this high-class wallpaper.

Although the use of leather in the materials for Japanese wallpapers is commonly assumed, "leather" as a descriptor for the wallpaper is severely misleading. Before 1890, when Japanese wallpaper became mass-produced by British factories and thus lost its authenticity, traditional Japanese wallpaper, including the one observed in the Gibson House, was typically created through the embossment of paper. The four main steps followed to complete this technique were making the base paper, forming a pattern on the base, covering the design with metals, and finalizing the paper's decor (Piacenza 2). As a part of this process, artisans would use local Japanese plants as materials for the wallpaper's base. Then, they would cover the base layer with a "lacquer mordant and a metal foil (i.e., silver, gold or tin)" (4).

Upon examining the chemical and microbiological analysis of materials used to create Japanese wallpaper, Piacenza, Presentato, and their other associates found that the wallpaper had two distinct layers: the base sheet and the coating containing samples of pigments and tin (4).

The tin material does not serve as an intriguing discovery, since its use to emulate silver and gold on the wallpaper's embossing was a known fact (24). However, the pigments found in the analysis proved to be more complex than previously imagined. The experiment found two different kinds of pigments artisans could choose from to decorate their wallpaper: organic and inorganic (8). There was no difference in the periods when using both pigments, and artisans commonly mixed the organic and inorganic pigments on a singular wallpaper. This mix makes the distinction between the two pigments virtually impossible to find unless studied through a microbiological lens. Most importantly, Japanese leather wallpaper centers around the organic qualities of the materials used by artisans to create the decor.

The Kinkarakawa in the Gibson House is a beautiful representation of the middle-class's attempt to showcase their status during the Victorian era. The Gibson family showed their appreciation for Japonisme by using Japanese leather wallpaper and other Asian objects. Reflecting upon the Gibson House among other museums, it is evident that Japanese art and design have had an enormous influence on Western aesthetics, culture, and consumerism, something we can still see within our culture today.



Fig. 1. Up-close image of the Japanese leather wallpaper. The wallpaper contains hues of gold and light blue, with designs of various flowers and plants.



Fig. 2. Japanese leather wallpaper in the Gibson House Museum. A crease towards the left side of the photo shows how the panels of the wallpaper come together. A framed painting was also placed on top of the wallpaper.



Fig. 3. Kinkarakawa wallpaper at the Gibson House Museum. The wallpaper has been layered onto both walls, with a similar floral design being depicted throughout.

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