

## **Rosamond Gibson's Writing Desk:**

### **Brahmin Women and the Obsession with Asian Culture**

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The Gibson House Museum was home to the Gibson family during the nineteenth century. Since three generations of the Gibson family lived in this house, it can be considered a primary source that we can use to truly understand and experience the life of an upper-class family of the Victorian era. Catherine Hammond Gibson, who moved in and reconstructed the house in 1859, originally owned the house. It was then passed down through the generations and opened as a museum by Charles "Charlie" Hammond Jr. in 1954. The third floor consists of two bedrooms that are joined by a bathroom in the middle. The larger of the bedrooms is the master bedroom, which belonged to Rosamond Warren Gibson ("The Gibson Family").

Upon entering Rosamond's bedroom, we noticed elements of Asian aesthetics in the furniture such as a faux bamboo style. Each item of the bedroom set was carefully carved to mimic the texture of bamboo, a significant element in Asian objects that the upper classes appreciated during the Victorian era. Rosamond's writing desk, which was a gift from her parents, is a prime example of this faux bamboo style ("Davenport"). It has a large rectangular platform, tilted in a light angle at the top. The dark red textile covering the middle part of the platform serves as the desk's writing surface. Along with having a slim rectangular shape, the lower part of the desk has four drawers for storage. The edges, covered with cylindrical maple trimmings outlined in black, are meant to resemble the texture of bamboo. The small gallery at the top and drawers in the lower section are also decorated with faux bamboo. Even though the overall structure of the desk is Western style, the maker tried to blend in Asian elements by mimicking the texture of a raw Eastern material.

The Asian elements in this bedroom set reflected the Western fashion in furniture in the late Victorian era. During the nineteenth century, Western designers and collectors felt weary of traditional designs. The existing popular patterns and designs could not satisfy them. In addition, the trend toward globalization and increased trade brought more encounters between Eastern and Western cultures. Many Asian artworks, including paintings and furniture, were transported to the West. They appeared in Western families as decorations. The myths, styles, and patterns from Eastern countries interested and inspired Western designers (Clarke 4-6). Patterns, including bamboo, sakura (cherry blossoms), and plum blossoms that reflected Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, began to appear in Western furniture and architecture. While Western cultures did not acknowledge being influenced by East Asia, the appearance of Asian designs in their commodities, furniture, and art proved otherwise and reflected Western collectors' daydreams about the "Orient" (Roth 25-26). Though Rosamond's furniture set is made of maple wood, its bamboo design illustrates the Western obsession with the Eastern world.

Using maple wood instead of real bamboo to combine Asian and Western designs was very ingenious. Much of the faux bamboo furniture of the era was made of maple. At a time when Western and Eastern art collided, designers wanted to add Asian elements to European style, while making the furniture both decorative and functional. Maple wood was the ideal choice. It had two advantages over real bamboo. First, maple has a high density and hardness. Maple furniture is not only more load-bearing, but also wear-resistant. Since bamboo is lighter and hollow, it is a less durable raw material for furniture (Parker). In the master bedroom, the furniture is still well-preserved, resisting moisture, corrosion, and wear and tear from the time Rosamond received it in 1871 until today. The main reason for its lasting preservation is the durability of maple. Secondly, maple has a uniform and fine texture. Its grain is very straight,

which makes it a suitable wood for carving fine and complex patterns. Maple can stain well, which bamboo cannot do at all (Parker). Quality and aesthetics are major elements that people consider when choosing furniture.

During the nineteenth century, when imitation bamboo furniture was prevalent, R. J. Horner, who was an outstanding researcher in the field of furniture, made a unique contribution to these pieces. His company produced faux bamboo furniture that cleverly used maple wood in different parts of its products. A co-owner of 115 Crosby Gallery, Marc Rabun, believes that Horner did not simply replace bamboo with maple wood. Instead, he retained a curved shape similar to a bamboo joint and added his own innovations to faux bamboo furniture while making refinements (Simpson 5). Therefore, faux bamboo adds diversity and cultural aesthetics to the wood used in Western furniture such as Rosamond's bedroom set. From a broader perspective, the innovation in faux bamboo furniture lies in not just improvements to the industry, but also the mixing of Eastern and Western cultures and the exchange of people's aesthetic views around the world.

The writing desk was common furniture in women's rooms for a Brahmin household during the Victorian era. The social role of Victorian women was highly domestic. Brahmin women such as Rosamond were associated with the home. However, this domestic role does not mean that they were uneducated, unimportant, or disconnected from the public society of men. Brahmin women played a crucial role in maintaining the relationships between families in order to support the well-being of the Brahmin caste as a whole. According to Eric L. Fox, Brahmin women's job was "class keeping" by "maintaining communication, cohesion, and cooperation with the class for the benefit of everyone" (2). In addition, they needed to fulfill their duties as housekeepers. Brahmin women received education in both housekeeping and the liberal arts.

They studied methods for organizing the household and managing financial affairs within the family from an early age (Fox 8). Brahmin girls were provided with education in arts, letters, and literature in an attempt to develop them into intellectual adults who “reflect the class’ positive self-image” (Fox 9). As a well-educated woman responsible for maintaining good relationships and sufficiently frequent communication with other families in her social class, Rosamond probably spent her nights at her desk writing official letters to other families, including routine greetings, invitations for dinner, and so on. She also likely wrote private letters to her friends or family members on business trips. Most of her time at the writing desk would be devoted to managing the family’s financial affairs, since it was important to keep track of the daily spending and servants’ salaries.

In Rosamond’s day, one of Boston Brahmin women’s most important duties was to preserve their family’s class status or climb the social ladder through writing letters to friends, family, and acquaintances. Morgan Graham notes “[l]etter writing was a particularly female activity at this time women engaged in to maintain their family’s class status and keep up appearances through her taste, style, and fluency in letter writing” (n.p.). Middle- and upper-class women tried to project a certain image through the type of desk, writing utensils, and stationary they chose. During the nineteenth century, advice literature on letter-writing counseled women to practice good penmanship and use correct grammar. Deirdre M. Mahoney finds that “[t]he letter represented an extension of female decorum; as a result, respectable women did not express capricious sentiment or ‘improper’ hostility, much less anger” (420). The expectation that women would suppress their true feelings in their letters reminds us that they were not equal to men during the nineteenth century.

Despite their significant intellectual ability, Victorian women were usually ignored. For centuries, they had been looked down upon, suffering greatly and having their voices oppressed by men. During this era, Queen Victoria worked tirelessly on social issues; however, she took no interest in helping women of the lower classes (Saeed et al. 1). Thomas Hardy, a feminist who revealed the undesirable conditions of and demands on Victorian women, wrote that “women [look like] weak creatures [that] would be tortured and oppressed after they were victimized by the corrupt gentry” (qtd. in Saeed et al. 5). This torture and oppression caused women to be isolated. Because of all these factors, they often channeled their feelings and repressed emotions in writing. Besides letter writing, literature was one of the main platforms for women to find self-expression. Furthermore, writing served as a getaway, since it “offer[ed] a soothing way of taking on the controversial aspects of the rising [feminist] struggle” (Manasia 113). Their works would not be socially acceptable or credible if people knew they were written by women. Therefore, many of them concealed their identities and adopted pen names to be more accepted in society. For Victorian women, this anonymity was a strategic way of being liked during the period (Manasia 119).

In conclusion, the writing desk that lies in Rosamond’s bedroom conveys extremely important messages. From her writing desk, we can glimpse the Victorian appreciation for Asian culture as well as the social issue of women being oppressed. The ultimate significance of antiques might be their potential to allow present viewers to experience the past owner’s daily life.

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