

## **The Fashion of the Time:**

### **The Gibson Family's Japanese Leather Wallpaper**

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Upon setting foot in the Gibson House Museum, your attention is demanded by the intricate Japanese leather wallpaper adorning the foyer (Figs. 1 and 3). This wallpaper attests to the Japonisme craze, the Victorian-era obsession with Eastern design among Western elites. Catherine Hammond Gibson, heir to a successful merchant and widow to a sugar trader, bought 137 Beacon Street in 1859 to share with her son Charles Hammond Gibson Sr. Charles later inherited the house and lived there with his wife, Rosamond Warren Gibson, and their three children. Among them was Charles “Charlie” Gibson Jr., who grew up to be an aspiring writer and avid traveler. At the age of sixty, Charlie moved back into his childhood home to care for his dying mother, Rosamond. After her death, Charlie took on the restoration of 137 Beacon Street as his legacy to preserve the Victorian home for the public (“The Gibson Family”). Rosamond decorated the house in a style typical of the late nineteenth century, prominently displaying Japanese interior design (Sharma). The incorporation of these elements was unique at this time due to the opening of trade between Japan and the West.

Economic benefits informed American interest in trading with Japan. Western powers were keen to open more markets to sell manufactured goods, and the American whaling industry needed access to Japanese ports in order to expand across the Pacific. In addition to economic incentives, trading with Japan was motivated by “Manifest Destiny,” the belief that America had a responsibility to spread republicanism and capitalism (“The United States”). This combination of economic and ideological motivations led to Commodore Matthew Perry’s 1853 expedition to Tokyo harbor, armed with guns and gifts for the sovereign shogun. On orders from President

Millard Fillmore, Commodore Perry demanded Japan open multiple ports to trade with America. Understanding the implied threat of violence, Japan begrudgingly agreed to international trade after over two hundred years of economic isolation (“Commodore Perry and Japan”).

A flurry of treaties, starting in 1854 and going into the 1860s, opened Japan to trade with America, Britain, and France. The sudden increase in international trade flooded Japan with foreign currency, disrupting the established monetary system and plunging the country into economic instability. The Shogun’s inability to address these problems led many Japanese citizens to doubt the shogunate’s authority, leading to the collapse of Japan’s 250-year-old government structure. The shogunate was replaced by a centralized government under the authority of Emperor Meiji in 1867. The Meiji empire adopted a Western justice system, military structure, and curriculum. Japanese domestic producers, now forced to compete with Western imports, adopted the West’s modernized, industrial production techniques (Jansen et al.). These industrial transformations under the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) facilitated Japan’s ability to meet the ensuing Western craze for Japanese goods.

To market Asian imports to domestic consumers, Western countries hosted exhibitions displaying and advertising foreign goods. Touting Asian art as fashionable decoration inspired demand and promoted trade with newly-opened Asian markets. Yet, European audiences were unwilling to admit the artistic significance of non-European works. European critics at these exhibitions praised the aesthetic appeal of Japanese goods while demeaning the creativity and imagination of Asian artists, calling their art “quaint” and “curious” (Jackson 247). American critics, however, used Japanese art as evidence against European claims to cultural supremacy. Americans were also eager to take credit for the Japonisme craze, pointing out that American naval forces were responsible for opening Japan to the West (Jackson 246). By disputing

Europe's long-held claims to global artistic leadership, American critics could assert their own role as cultural authorities. Championing Asian art was not only stylish, but, more importantly, necessary for America's own reputation.

Specifically, leather wallpaper from Japan was heavily marketed and popularized in Europe, Great Britain, and America during the nineteenth century. A British diplomat named Rutherford Alcock sponsored Japanese leather wallpaper in the Great Exhibition of 1852, where many influential people, such as architects, took notice (Fraser 68). Other sources state that Japanese leather wallpapers were also presented in the 1870s at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, and this event created the demand for them. However, starting even in the 1860s, Japanese leather material was being imported into America (Leung 36). From there, it appeared in catalogs for consumers to buy (Fraser 68). Japanese leather wallpapers "gained a reputation for their rich colour and high style" in comparison to wallpapers produced in the West, making them incredibly valuable as well as solidifying the Western market for them (Leung 40). Their popularity also meant that these Japanese wallpapers were specifically made for the Western eye (Leung 36). Rosamond Warren Gibson most likely purchased this wallpaper from a catalog, thus explaining how it got into the Gibson family's hands all the way from Japan.



**Fig. 1.** The wallpaper in the Gibson family's home is a wonderfully-preserved example of Japanese leather wallpaper that was appreciated in the Western world during the nineteenth century.

By the early twentieth century, Asian artwork, including the Japanese wallpaper, was a staple in upper-class American homes (Fahden Briceno 11). Because it was so different from previous decor trends that were familiar to Americans, Asian-inspired art was considered new and exciting. Due to the high cost of exporting goods overseas, Asian art was displayed

predominantly in wealthy homes (Fahden Briceno 48). Many families opted to accentuate the front entrance of their homes with decorative wallpaper. In most cases, the decorative wallpaper would strictly be present in the front of the home, as both the cost and installation of the wallpaper were far too expensive for it to be hidden in bedrooms or other areas not easily accessible to visitors. Many families could not justify spending so much money, even with their high financial status (Latimer 23).

Wallpaper as a whole played a vital role in the design of a home (Jennings 243). It shaped the aesthetics of a home in this time almost singlehandedly, adding to the refinement of a family's space. Home economists also stressed that society at that time deemed wallpaper and the interior design of a home demonstrative of the family's reputation, as it reflected the woman of the house. The wallpaper was a "personal investment" for the woman and showed that she was in charge of the family's "character and her environment" (Jennings 245). Rosamond Warren Gibson most likely had great responsibility in redecorating the Gibson family's home, and the wallpaper was a reflection of her appreciation for foreign art as well as her power in the home.

Covering the walls of the entryway, the exquisite Japanese wallpaper that Rosamond purchased envelops visitors in its elegant depictions of gilded fruits and flowers (Fig. 2). The most eye-catching component proves to be the floral imagery. The gold pattern of swirling flowers and fruits reflects one of the common motifs used in late nineteenth-century Japanese wallpaper in wealthy American homes. Other frequently-used themes were waves, disks, and clouds (Brown 291). The wallpaper portrays the wealth and



**Fig. 2.** The intricate details of the Japanese leather wallpaper include beautiful golden flowers, fruits, and leaves on a light blue background.

sophistication displayed throughout the home and is similarly embodied in many of the Gibsons' lavish artifacts.

Despite the name, this Japanese “leather” wallpaper was actually just made out of paper. It is widely known as *Kinkarakami*, or by the original name of *Kinkarakawagami* (Fraser 68). It is simply embossed paper that closely resembles leather. Genuine leather wallpapers from the Renaissance were sent into Japan in the seventeenth century and the material became highly sought after. Of course, this meant that the Japanese wanted to create this material locally. However, because of Japanese religious sentiments, it was considered unethical to kill an animal in order to make leather material. Japanese people created “imitation leather paper” from “washi (hand-made paper)” to solve this issue (Fraser 68). The paper, as described by the Imperial Works in Yokohama in 1896, was made from a paper plant called *Edgeworthia Papyrifera*, which is found quite commonly in Japan. This exact texture was what made the imitation leather so treasured, especially by the West (Leung 36).

The process of producing Japanese leather wallpaper was time-consuming and required skillful hands. First, the paper needed to be handmade and manipulated to give off the appearance of leather (Piacenza). Once the paper was formed, the desired design had to be chosen and carved into blocks of wood. The moistened paper would be pressed on the wood blocks so that it became embossed with the selected pattern. Then, the paper would be left out to dry until it was finally gilded with metals in the form of foils or powders. During this process, materials such as vegetable oils, lacquers, and natural waxes were used as



**Fig. 3.** The meticulous creation of the wallpaper makes it easy to appreciate the beautiful details and its remarkable preservation at the entry of the Gibson House Museum.

binders for the paint. Once decorated, the wallpaper would be sealed in a waterproof coating and exported for use in wealthy homes (Piacenza).

As Japanese wallpaper is no longer prominent in Western homes, the preservation of the wallpaper in the Gibson family's home is incredibly valuable to demonstrate an era of American society that began to appreciate foreign artwork, especially from Japan. It greatly exemplifies the demand for Asian goods as well as its general acceptance in not only Boston or America, but the Western world as a whole.

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