

The Artistry of the Gibson Family's Imari Platters

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The Gibson family was considered part of Boston's wealthy elite. They preserved much of their family history through journals and photographs, which allow us to look back and experience what life was like in Boston during the nineteenth century. The Gibson House was purchased by Catherine Hammond Gibson in 1859. It was decorated all over with valuable items, many of which were imported art pieces. These imported pieces included two Imari platters, Japanese porcelain plates decorated with intricate designs. The origin of Imari porcelain can be traced back to the nineteenth century. In the article "The Origin of Overglaze-blue Enameling in Japan: New Discoveries and a Reassessment," the authors explain that 1658 is considered the earliest period of over-glaze blue enameling on Japanese porcelain (Montanari et al. 94). Since then, the art of Imari porcelain has evolved and it has been sought after because of its impressive detail and beauty.

To find out how pieces of Japanese art ended up in the hands of an affluent Bostonian family, one must first understand the time period of the creation of the Imari platters. Prior to the latter half of the nineteenth century, Japan favored extreme isolationist policies. This xenophobia was driven by the Edo shogunate, the militaristic government that ruled Japan during the Edo period (1603-1867). The Edo shogunate saw the effects of colonialism and Christianity on the rest of the world and viewed them as a threat to the security of the nation. In 1635, the Sakoku policy was enacted. Under this new decree, foreigners were prohibited from entering the country, Japanese citizens were banned from leaving it, and trading was heavily restricted. It was not until 1858, when the United States and Japan signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, that a new era of rapid modernization would be ushered in (Magoc, Bernstein 242-243). This change

sparked quick transformation in the Japanese government, as not only was internal strife imploding it politically and economically, but the pressure of falling behind in terms of economic power and global influence worried both the common people and politicians in Japan. In her article “Contemporary Japanese Art: Between Globalization and Localization,” Eimi Tagore-Erwin explains the increased Western interest in Japanese art could have been due to Japan going out of its way to emulate dominant Western countries in the hope of becoming a powerhouse in Asia (139). The Western world saw familiar artistic styles mixed with new and unique Japanese elements. A movement known as Japonisme sprouted up, representing the Western world’s craze for Japanese artworks. Americans saw how everyday items, such as platters, could be made vibrant for decorative purposes. The Gibson family most likely purchased these pieces fascinated by their intricate designs and sheer beauty.

The first circular-shaped Imari platter is composed of a white empty space with flowers, a bird, a dog, and a butterfly (Fig. 1). The focus of the overall composition of this plate is on the left. In the center of the plate are bright blooming flowers and a bird standing on a shelf. The flowers are a brighter shade of orange, and they are interspersed with teal-toned leaves and branches to create a contrast. The most unique thing about this plate is that even the smallest pattern has very clear outlines, especially the small orange-colored leaves on the side of the branches. On the border of the platter, the saturation of the color changes from large to small. This shift emphasizes the central features of the platter and makes its surface look more layered.

The Gibson family’s second Imari platter’s shape is very interesting and unique. Its scalloped border is made of evenly distributed folds, and the border is brushed with a brown glaze (Fig. 2). Compared to the circular-shaped Imari platter, there are a large number of different features and paintings on this platter. These dark patterns are outlined with gold edging

(Fig. 3). The use of gold edging increases its overall beauty and artistic sense. In *Classic Japanese Porcelain: Imari and Kakiemon*, Takeshi Nagatake describes the features of an Imari platter. He says that it is decorated with “gold and silver” on the “[c]obalt underglaze decorated body (53). This description matches the features of the second Imari platter. Compared with the fine workmanship of the previous Imari platter, this platter highlights its own grace and splendor.



Fig. 1. The first Imari platter that the Gibsons owned. This platter has more white space, yet the designs on it are incredibly detailed. This is a more traditional Imari platter because the white porcelain is evident in the plate.



Fig. 2. The Gibson family's second Imari platter on the dining table. This platter is covered with flower decor on a porcelain Japanese plate. This Imari platter has more intricate designs.



Fig. 3. In a close-up of the second Imari platter, the intricate artwork and designs painted onto it appear clearly. There are a plethora of colors used in the design of the platter, such as gold, red, green, orange, and blue.

Materials are very important parts of an artwork. They shape, tell stories, and impact the way the artwork itself is interpreted. The Imari platters are beautiful pieces of ceramic, shaped into plates. These plates are made from porcelain, a refined clay composed of feldspar and quartz. Porcelain gives objects a smooth and glossy texture; however, it is very susceptible to cracks and scratches. The Imari platters are still perfectly intact, which shows the continuation of their history. The type of porcelain used is called Kutani porcelain and it was widely employed during the Edo era in Japan (1603-1867), and it prompted the creation of the Imari style (Shatz 26-27).

The second platter we see above, located in the dining room, is decorated in underglaze with blue, red, gold, and green outlines (Figs. 2 and 3). And, of course, the paint was precisely brushed so that it blended effortlessly with the underglaze. To add onto the design, another coating of overglaze is used to provide durability. The transparent overglaze is applied gently so that the decorated design is protected with a second layer (Pollard 135). The careful integration of materials allows for the preservation of delicate porcelain pieces like the second Imari platter. The colors, including blue, red, green, yellow, and purple, represent Kutani ware. Or simply, painted Japanese porcelain (Shatz 27). These decorative pieces consist of cobalt blue, which plays an important part in ceramic production in Japan. These new and precious materials represent Imari-style artwork. By using porcelain, Imari platters were elegantly crafted with the highest quality ceramics during Japan's Edo era.

Imari platters, very prevalent pieces of art during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, had significant influence on the periods that followed. The Meiji Restoration (1868-1912), which began in the late nineteenth century, was a period when Japan returned to a new centralized government. During this time, much art appeared to have been heavily influenced by

arts from the Edo period, the era when the Imari platters were made. Not only that, but Japanese porcelain also greatly impacted Western and European art in the following years.

The Imari platters have very intricate designs of floral aspects. These platters were seen as delicacies and later, during the Meiji period, Japanese art still maintained similar styles of painting. In the Meiji period, Japanese porcelain art and lacquerware were often designed for importation to Western countries. Westerners would often place these pieces of Asian art in prominent parts of their homes, trying to showcase “the exotic and luxurious nature of the wares” (Irvine 22). Porcelain art from Japan became a major commodity for Westerners, since they designed specific rooms to dedicate to these fine ceramics. For instance, the design of the first Imari platter on display at the Gibson House is very simple, yet so delicate. The plate is not too busy; however, the minimal designs that are on the platter hold so much detail (Fig. 1).

During the Meiji period, new art contained similar aspects to Imari platters from the seventeenth century; however, they held even more intricacies and detail. The creation of porcelain Imari platters created a lasting effect on Japanese and Western art that followed shortly after. Japanese porcelain art became highly coveted pieces that Westerners sought to display in their homes. Even more, the impact that Japanese porcelain had on the Western world returned its influence back to Japanese art. Through Western technology and materials used to develop transported Japanese art, it continued to shape “Japanese art during the isolation period” and many periods thereafter (Montanari et al. “European Ceramic Technology” 1).

The Imari platters found in the Gibson House are symbols of the Gibsons’ wealth and affluence in the city of Boston. They display the Gibsons’ interest in valuable art, as well as their interest in Asian culture. In his article “Japanese Art in Boston,” Paul Chaflin observes that “[t]he collection in Boston has served...to define the figures and the movements that have so far

been signalled in the history of Japanese art” (221). Charles Hammond Gibson Jr, or Charlie, was responsible for preserving the Gibson family’s house. His devotion to keeping the spirit of his youth intact allows people of today to look back and recognize what life was like in Boston for the wealthy elite. Their interest in obtaining Asian art, especially Japanese art like the Imari platters, allows for the people who visit the Gibson House to learn more about the history of these pieces and their origins.

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