

Imported Chinese Dinnerware in a New England Family

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The Gibson House was home to a very prominent, wealthy, and well-known family in Boston called the Gibsons. Naturally, as most wealthy families did in the nineteenth century, they were also active participants in what was known as conspicuous consumption, which theorizes that the use of goods by consumers of high quality and in mass amounts rises above what is considered “necessary” in practicality. America, in this period, transformed the individual desire as well as the need for goods into individual civic worth. As Joanna Cohen notes, “Americans regarded luxury goods with a deep ambivalence, and imports did not simply enter through customshouses weighed down by local tariffs; they arrived freighted with a wide range of meanings that were as diverse as they were contentious” (18). The aesthetic nature of such imports created an increase in demand for them, and they became a luxury for those who could afford it. Families such as the Gibsons would participate in this industry by purchasing, via trade porcelain, Asian and foreign pieces. Although unnecessary, this trade formed the basis of America’s curiosity about foreign objects and the interpretation of them as status symbols. After all, if you were not wealthy, you could not import sets such as the dining set that this write-up will explore.

During that time, wealthy Americans often viewed dining as a “social arena,” which would particularly mean that specific behavior and table manners were required, as it also helped maintain status. An example of etiquette is greeting the guests and introducing them to family, seating them by an index of rank, and serving oneself from the serving bowl to dish or plate with a knife and fork. The innate ability to provide guests with lavish and exquisite food as well as drinks “signified power, wealth and status” (William 22).

The Gibsons' dining set consists of plates, tea cups, and a serving dish; all of the pieces have similar imagery painted on them and a similar color scheme. Looking at the symbols that recur throughout the dining set, there are dragons present throughout (Fig. 1). Drawn in red or blue, the dragons, or *ch'i-lin*, are said to represent, "grandeur and wise administration and [are] often used as the emblem of a Confucious-like administrator or a good king" (Chow 22).



Fig. 1. Photo of Gibson House Serving Dish (Hailee Helfrick, 2022)

On the plates and serving dish, there are small rectangles, outlined in gold, which each have a small bird sitting on a branch (Fig. 2). This bird can possibly be identified as a pheasant, which is said to be a "sign of good fortune" (Chow 22). The consistency of floral paintings throughout the dining set also add a sense of spring and summertime due to their coloring and liveliness. While it may seem like they are placed there to simply take up space and add design, they do play an important role in creating a mood and setting the season.



Fig. 2. Photo of Gibson House Serving Platter Bird (Hailee Helfrick, 2022)

The people painted on the dining set do not necessarily represent anyone specific; they simply show the depiction of people in Chinese art at this time (Figs. 3 and 4). The coloring helps create a story as well. Red is shown in the dragons, flowers, and people's robes, as "[r]ed is the ultimate Chinese symbol of joy" (Welch 221). Interestingly, blue and green are typically not distinguished between; they both are said to represent the idea of tranquility, a home to heavenly figures (deities), and growing. Blue is present mainly in the people and their activities, and the green can be found here too, on the border, as the greenery surrounding the blue dragons. The excess of gold is used to flaunt wealth and show power.



Fig. 3. Photo of Gibson House Dining Plate (Hailee Helfrick, 2022) and **Fig. 4.** Photo of Gibson House Serving Lid (Hailee Helfrick, 2022)

Many pieces of dishware and decorative ornaments were highly sought after in the cobalt-rich country of China. Neighboring countries across Central Asia to westward countries throughout Europe desired these objects of great rarity and luxury. This fascination with Chinese porcelain eventually made its way to America. East Asian countries, particularly China, were able to strengthen their political and commercial ties with Western countries by offering their distinctive designs of vivid cobalt blue hues over a pure white ceramic thanks to the influential Silk Road. The extensive network of paths on the Silk Road provided direct routes from the East to the West, which helped to establish trade relations between the two hemispheres. Starting from Jingdezhen, ceramic production began spreading throughout the Chinese kingdom, soon extending to empires across the world. Specifically, during the fifteenth century, the “Ming empire extended its...power and ventured into new territories. ... Each expedition brought a fleet of hundreds of ships, laden with goods,” spreading the knowledge of China and its luxurious porcelain (Gerritsen 118). Every journey “develop[ed] and strengthen[ed]...existing interactions

between the Ming empire” and other countries (Gerritsen 118). For the purpose of this write-up, we will focus on America, which was introduced to the porcelain trade in 1785. Due to their boycotting of British goods and desire for independence from England, Americans began trading directly with China. The original purpose of the expedition was to get tea, but as a result of the “prestigious and cheap porcelain,” sailors returned with these fascinating pieces of dishware along with the tea (del Sesto T34). Porcelain cups were used to serve drinks like coffee and tea. However, “unlike coffee, tea was...a respectable drink for both sexes—with women particularly targeted” (Belk 1). As the taste for tea increased in America, the desire for lavish designer porcelain grew as well.

During the visit to the Gibson House, we noticed that there was plenty of Asian art and decor in practically every room, which prompted us to wonder, “What drove the Gibson family to have so much Asian design?” The tour guide proceeded by noting that the United States and China had trade relations. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, access to China was restricted and only specific sorts of merchandise were permitted; porcelain was perhaps the most commonly exported material. Due to the fact that there was limited access to inland China and the goods produced therein, individuals perceived the country as foreign and enigmatic. With that being said, individuals grew intrigued by the exotic aesthetic and the distinctive ornateness of the porcelain. In “Chinese Imports,” Mildred Jailer-Chamberlain indicates that the wealthy wanted “to make an exotic ‘fashion statement’ in their homes” (57), which reveals why they were attracted to Chinese imports. At that time, Westerners were unfamiliar with porcelain. They perceived the material as elegant and ethereal, yet it is also incredibly durable and has unique translucency. These qualities and distinctions of porcelain contributed to its prominence in the Western world.

In addition, Jailer-Chamberlain states that “after the War of 1812, the wealthy were eager to order porcelain, silver, and wallpaper that was considerably cheaper than similar objects made at home” (55). This cheapness became another lure to Westerners, since they were able to purchase such valuable and unique items that would complete their longing for exotic fashion statements at their preferred price. In the following years, China began to customize and design porcelain tailored to the wealthy’s preferences as well as exported porcelains that accommodated the financial constraints on the middle classes.

There were many families in New England like the Gibsons who took advantage of America’s overseas trade by collecting china. During the Gibson house tours, we saw the original china that they collected, and it was evident that the family took great care of their items because collecting was so prevalent at that time. As the imports were collected and saved, some pieces were kept in the family for tradition and legacy, while others were preserved in local museums. In 1800, the East India Marine Society established a museum that “locals claimed was the most comprehensive collection of Asian artifacts in the United States (Lockwood 66). According to James Lindgren, the china featured there set the standard for what women should have imported via the emerging trade with China (Lockwood 66).

When merchants began to travel to China to obtain the porcelain that Americans desired, it was difficult for American merchants to export goods to neutralize the trade “because of China’s self-sufficient economy” (He 89). American traders struggled to find items to offset their many imports, including porcelain and dinner sets (He 90). This fact, along with the other mediums of exchange with China, is what made china dinnerware so exclusive. The Gibsons, as well as the other wealthy families in New England, had the means to afford these luxurious objects. Samaine J. Lockwood’s observation that “China was more than just dinnerware... [it

symbolized] social and ethnic privilege that had been carefully handled and passed down from former generations” shows the influence and importance of Chinese trade with America during the nineteenth century (12). The serving dish, serving platter, and dining plate in the Gibson House highlight the imports and exports between America and China, which allows us to see the influence of Asian objects and decorations in Americans’ homes.

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