

RISD Museum

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An upcoming exhibition *Gorham Silver* (May to September 2019) will cover silver ware produced from 1840 to 1940. It will present Gorham's work, organized by stylistic movement, examined within social and cultural contexts, and enriched by numerous photographs, elaborate drawings, casting patterns, and company records. It will detail Gorham craftsmen's remarkable command of traditional hand-worked techniques, plied in tandem with the company's early adoption of innovative new technologies. The exhibition will discuss Gorham Company as a model and considers its impact then and now in the practice of metalwork and industrial design and in regard to economic, labor, and environmental issues.

Additional resources on RISD Museum web site. Search for "Gorham" on Search button for information and images of

For example:

[Lady's Writing Table and Chair](http://risdmuseum.org/art_design/objects/1029_ladys_writing_table_and_chair)

http://risdmuseum.org/art_design/objects/1029_ladys_writing_table_and_chair

[Surprise Endings: Gorham Silver's Mythologique by Elizabeth Williams, curator](http://risdmuseum.org/manual/126_surprise_endings_gorham_silvers_mythologique)

http://risdmuseum.org/manual/126_surprise_endings_gorham_silvers_mythologique

Visit the RISD Museum

Guided docent-led visits are \$3 per student.

Lead you own group: Self-guided visits are \$3 per person.

Guided museum-educator visits for Providence Public School students are free if teachers schedule and plan visit. Transportation and admission are covered.

Gorham Manufacturing Company history

The Providence-based Gorham Manufacturing Company started as a very small, provincial maker of coin silver spoons in the early 19th-century. Founded by Jabez Gorham in 1831, the company specialized in products made from silver, and manufactured small household-wares such as spoons, forks, thimbles, and combs for the first 20 years of its existence.

Jabez Gorham was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1792. After apprenticing as a silversmith for several years during his youth, Jabez opened a small jewelry store in downtown Providence. After forming a partnership with Henry L. Webster of Boston, the two silver industrialists began manufacturing silver spoons.

The company experienced great success and expansion in the decades that followed its inception. Technological innovations and the subsequent growth of the silver market in New England, the U.S. and beyond fueled the company's great progress. It was under the leadership of Jabez's son John that Gorham became the largest maker of sterling silverwares in the world.

When taking over the family business, John Gorham had the critical insight to acquire the first steam-powered drop press from England, and incorporated it into the manufacturing processes of his company. The new machinery not only greatly increased the company's production rate of flatware, but such an innovation radically altered the 20th-century silver market. A steam-powered drop press machine could stamp out a spoon in a single blow, while up until its invention such flatware was manufactured only by hand. Furthermore, the machine also improved the quality of the product as the resulting spoons were much sturdier and more uniform. In this way, the mechanization of the process did not lead to a loss in quality.

Although the exact date is unknown, the steam-powered drop-press was installed in Gorham's plant in Providence in 1853 or 1854. As the advanced technology brought down the manufacturing cost of silverware, more and more people in New England and other parts of America found themselves in a position to affordably purchase silver for regular use in their homes. Gorham and other silver company flatware that had previously been luxury items for the wealthy became more commonplace through the innovative incorporation of the machine.

As the market for silver expanded, so did the Gorham Manufacturing Company. The art of silver working was thus very closely connected with economic development in New England and America.

The success of the Gorham Manufacturing Company under the guidance of John Gorham, a true silversmith entrepreneur, is important in the history of silver manufacturing in Rhode Island, and in the world. For example, in the nine years between 1850 and 1859, the company sales increased fourteen times, improving from \$29,000 to \$397,000. During the same time period, the number of employees went from fourteen to two hundred staff members. By the end of the 1860s, Gorham employed over four hundred workers. Gorham sales in the late-20th-century approached a million dollars, and the Providence-based company became recognized as the largest maker of silverware in the world. During 1850-1940, the heyday of American silver

manufacturing, the local Gorham Company was the incontestable leader in the industry. Under John Gorham's leadership, the company went from manufacturing silver flatware, thimbles, combs and children's cups all made by hand, to becoming a company that redefined the use of silverware in the United States.

History of the Gorham factory buildings

The Gorham Manufacturing Company Headquarters was located at No. 12 Steeple Street in Providence, Rhode Island, while the company's manufacturing plants were located in the southern part of the city. The original Gorham workshop spaces were housed in a two-story wooden building on Steeple Street until in 1890, the small downtown location could no longer support the growing company's manufacturing needs. Providence's Elmwood district thus provided the quickly expanding company and its employees with the space it needed in order to continue its manufacturing of silver flatware, jewelry and other goods.

Gorham's industrial complex was a 37-acre site which was made up of over 30 buildings located between Mashapaug Pond and Adelaide Avenue. The area referred to as the Elmwood district today, in 1890, was known as the Reservoir Triangle. Elmwood was deemed an ideal site for the new manufacturing plant for several reasons. As it was located on the edge of the city, the new Gorham plant was much more accessible by road and railroad in comparison to the company's downtown location. The factory buildings, constructed specifically for the manufacturing of silverwares and bronzes were very modern, and designed with great sensitivity to the fact that the plants would need to fully support Gorham's needs as the leading maker of silverware in the U.S. and the world.



The Elmwood Factory in 1892, from Gorham's 1892 publication, Views Exterior and Interior

The factory complex not only had its own water supply that was independent from the city of Providence, but a fire department, an electricity plant, a photographic studio, and a facility for the manufacturing of wood cases for silverware. The center buildings housed design rooms, a library, office spaces and even a museum that showcased American and European silverware.



From Left to Right: Designing and Modeling room, Case department, Fire department, in 1892.

The Gorham complex was in continuous operation from its opening in 1890 to 1986, when the Textron Corporation which acquired Gorham and its silver-making operations, closed the plant

Impact of the Gorham industrial complex on its surrounding environment

In 2001, the City of Providence reclaimed the former Gorham factory site, a 37-acre plot of land surrounding the Mashapaug Pond. The Gorham Manufacturing Company operated one of the world's largest silver factories in South Providence for over a century. After being exposed to industrial wastes for such an extended period of time, the Mashapaug Pond and its surrounding area are highly contaminated. Large traces of toxic compounds, heavy metals and asbestos can be found in the pond, soil and groundwater to this day.

Textron is currently committed to cleaning up the polluted manufacturing site.



Search for historic photographs of the Gorham Manufacturing Company Plant on the Art in Ruins website:

<http://www.artinruins.com/>

Find a broadside published by the State of Rhode Island informing the public of Textron's cleanup efforts:

<http://www.dem.ri.gov/programs/benviron/waste/gorham/d70620d1.pdf>

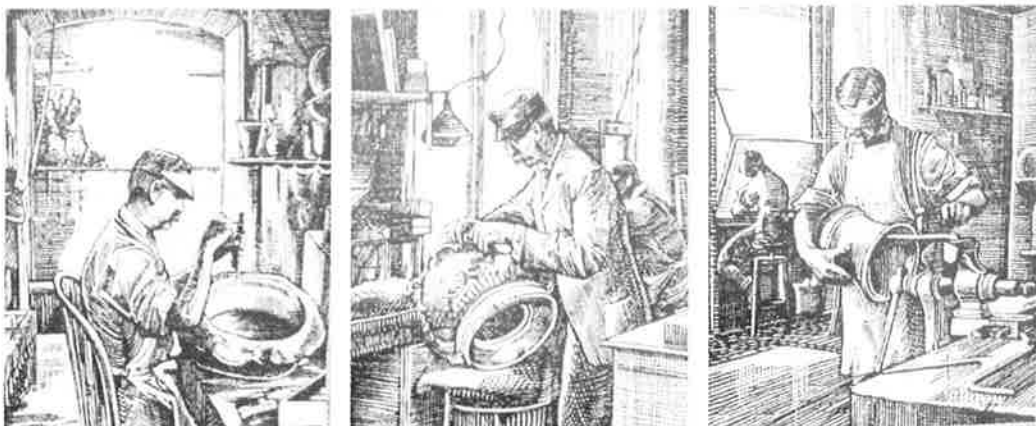
Making the Lady's Writing Table and Chair



The Lady's Writing Table and Chair required the combined skills of a team of the most highly trained craftsmen in Rhode Island. While each element of the table and chair would have been made separately, the designer William C. Codman, had to balance a strong sense of vision with meticulous attention to detail throughout the process to ensure a seamless product – no doubt an incredibly sophisticated undertaking. Codman worked alongside silversmith Joseph E. Straker, modeler and leather-carver Frank Ziegler, the cabinetmakers of Potter and Company, as well as innumerable unnamed craftsmen to create the finished product. Gorham's records show that silversmithing for the table and chair combined required 2253 hours of labor; chasing (the process of hammering metal into a mold to create a design in relief) for the table and chair took 3559 hours; and modeling for the two items took 19 weeks, totalling a combined 7000 hours of work.

How long did it take to make?

	Table	Chair
Silversmithing	1695 hours	558 hours
Chasing	2709 hours	850 hours
Modeling	12 weeks	7 weeks



From left to right: Chasing, engraving, and raising a vase. These images are from a 1917 publication by Gorham.

What was it like to be a silver worker at the Gorham Manufacturing Company?

A silver worker in the 19th-century worked long days, most often six days a week. In the 1840s, an eleven-hour work day was standard for a Gorham factory employee. In the summertime, the

*Terms from the Silversmithing
Process*

Silversmithing- is the art of turning silver and gold sheet metal into hollowware (dishes, bowls, cups, vases, etc), flatware (forks, knives, spoons), and other articles.

Casting/Modeling- A craftsman creates a mock version of the final product out of wax or clay, which is placed in a canister and filled with plaster. When the wax or clay is removed, it leaves a cavity, or mold, for hot metal to be poured in.

Chasing and Repousse – The process of shaping metal using a blunt tool, either by hammering it from the front or back to bring out specific forms.

day began at 5am and would not end until six in the evening. During the winter, the hours were from seven in the morning until seven at night. Aside from the four regular holidays of Thanksgiving, Christmas, the Fourth of July and Commencement Day at Brown University, vacations were unheard of.

More about the Environmental Impact of Manufacturing Sites (brownfields)

Brown University Environmental Studies website

http://www.brown.edu/Research/EnvStudies_Theses/summit/Briefing_Papers/Brownfields/index.html

More about the Gorham Manufacturing Company

Carpenter, Charles H. Jr., *Gorham Silver 1831-1981*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1982.

Brown University Gorham Manufacturing Company Archive

http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/University_Library/test/bbuzzell/gorham/

Gorham Archive blog

<http://gorham.wordpress.com/>

Providence Journal reporter Bob Wyss' article on the Gorham Manufacturing Company

<http://www.projo.com/words/st061302a.htm>

Primary Sources on Gorham and the Lady's Writing Desk, Available at John Hay Library, Brown University

Gorham Manufacturing Company, *Views, Exterior and Interior of the Works of the Gorham Manufacturing Company Silversmiths*. Providence, R. I. 1892.

Townsend, Horace. *A Touchstone for Silver*. The Gorham Company: New York, 1917.

Louisiana Purchase Exposition. *Sights, Scenes and Wonders at the World's Fair*. St. Louis, Official Photographic Company. 1904.

Yow Tong, Chang. *To Universal Peace These Poems are Dedicated*. Louisiana Purchase Exposition. St. Louis. 1904.

More about the history of silver in America

Fales, Martha Gandy. *Early American Silver*. New York: Dutton, 1973.

Flynt, Henry N. and Fales, Martha Gandy. *The Heritage Foundation Collection of Silver: with Biographical Sketches of New England Silversmiths, 1625-1825*. Old Deerfield, Mass: The Foundation, 1968.

Rainwater, Dorothy T., *Encyclopedia of American Silver Manufacturers*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1975.

Venable, Charles L., *Silver in America, 1840-1940: A Century of Splendor*. Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1995.

Online Encyclopedia of American Silver Marks

<http://www.silvercollecting.com/>

Online Encyclopedia of Silver Marks, Hallmarks and Maker's Marks

<http://www.925-1000.com/index.html>

Society of American Silversmiths

<http://www.silversmithing.com/>

More about Rhode Island and Providence History

Rhode Island Natural History Survey

<http://www.rinhs.org/>

The Rhode Island Historical Society

<http://www.rihs.org/>

LADY'S WRITING TABLE AND CHAIR, 1903
William C. Codman (1839–1912),
designer

Providence, Rhode Island (b. England)
Frank (or Franz) Ziegler, modeler and
leather carver

Providence, Rhode Island

Charles R. Yandell & Co., upholsterer
New York City

Gorham Co. (1831–), manufacturer
Providence, Rhode Island

Ebony, with ivory and silver mounts, gilt
embossed leather seat and back, and
marquetry panels composed of boxwood,
redwood, thuyawood, ivory, mother-of-
pearl, and silver; mahogany. Table: 50 x
50 x 28; chair: 30 x 14 x 19 x 16½ (seat
height)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick B.

Thurber. 58.095

Provenance:

Gorham Company; sold about 1915 to
August Heckscher; given to his daughter
Antoinette Heckscher, who became the
Viscountess Esher; Christy's of Kent,
Ltd., London, 1953, from whom
purchased by the donors

Publications:

"Some Recent Examples of Gorham
Silver," *The Craftsman*, v. 7 (January
1905), p. 449; Gorham promotional
booklet for *Panama-Pacific Exposition*, San
Francisco, 1915; Frederick B. Thurber,
The Memoirs of An Ancient Mariner (Provi-
dence, 1965), pp. 34–37; Davidson
1969, pp. 262–63; Bishop 1972, p. 461;
Robert Bishop, *How to Know American
Antique Furniture* (New York: E.P. Dutton,
1973), p. 194; Charles H. Carpenter, Jr.,
Gorham Silver 1831–1981 (New York:
Dodd, Mead, 1983), pp. 207–9; *Museum
Handbook*, RISD, 1985, p. 327.

Exhibitions:

St. Louis Universal Exposition, 1904;
Panama-Pacific Universal Exposition, 1915;
The New England Silversmith, RISD 1965,
cat. 279; *Gorham: Masterpieces in Metal*,
RISD, 1983.

Condition:

Restored at Gorham in August 1983 by
Werner Leyh, through the generosity of
Gorham/Textron.

Only in the context of competition for
gold medals at world's fairs is it pos-
sible to comprehend fully how the Art
Nouveau lady's writing table and chair
William C. Codman created for Gorham
came into existence.¹ Made and signed
(fig. a) in 1903, and originally *en suite*
with a now lost seventeen-piece desk set
in repoussé (fig. b), the pieces were ini-



Fig. 47a

tially intended for display in the Ameri-
can section of the Department of Art at
the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904.² Aside
from 10,000 or more man-hours
expended on the design and execution
of the set, the table and chair incorpo-
rated an incredible variety of materials,
ranging from redwood, boxwood, thuya-
wood, and ebony to ivory, mother-of-
pearl, and tooled leather with gilt deco-
ration. For sources of design, Codman
drew inspiration from diverse cultures
and historical traditions, including
luxury furniture created by André-
Charles Boulle in late 17th-century
France, Rococo designs for furniture and
decoration published by Thomas Chip-
pendale in mid-18th-century England,
and Art Nouveau objects in silver and
ceramics designed by Félix Bracquemond
in late 19th-century France. Codman also
relied heavily on Hispano-Moorish
design sources, especially for the sinuous
floral inlays of daisies, morning glories
and clematis which enhance the surfaces
of the writing table. The floral theme
extended to the silver gallery below the
mirror with its poppies and an owl
symbolizing night, while the decoration
of the four legs included flowers emble-
matic of the four seasons: the lily for
spring; wild rose for summer; chrysan-
themum for autumn; and pine cone for
winter. For Codman's efforts, the lady's
writing table, chair, and desk set won the
grand prize at the World's Fair for beauty
and excellence of craftsmanship in their
particular field.

Before creating the St. Louis lady's

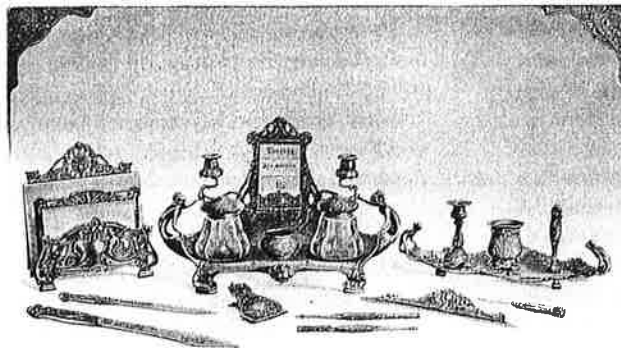


Fig. 47b

Illustration of desk
set which originally
accompanied writing
table, from booklet
prepared for the
*Panama-Pacific Inter-
national Exposition*,
1915. (RISD Museum
archives)

writing table and chair, Codman had
designed and made a solid silver dressing
table and stool as the centerpiece of
Gorham's prize-winning display of Art
Nouveau-inspired Martelé (or hand-
hammered) silver at the Paris Exposition
of 1900 (fig. c). Not surprisingly, the two
sets of silver furniture had many design
features in common, including attached
mirrors, cabriole legs, and part ivory
feet. Perhaps even more significant in
Codman's career was an earlier suite of
music-room furniture for the New York
art collector Henry G. Marquand. While
designed by the English artist Sir
Lawrence Alma-Tadema, it was Codman
who actually oversaw its execution
between 1884 and 1886 in England,
before he came to work as chief designer
for Gorham in 1891.³ Like the RISD
writing table and chair, the suite incorpo-
rated a rich medley of materials and
stylistic sources. Certain of the armchairs
from the suite included swans' heads at
the bases of their arms, and twenty years
later similar swans' heads would appear
in the same location on the RISD chair.⁴
Indeed, no single experience could have
better prepared Codman for the creation
of great exhibition pieces on behalf of
Gorham, culminating in the design of
the St. Louis writing table and chair.

As Louis Comfort Tiffany was on the
selection committee for applied arts at
the St. Louis Fair, he would have been
familiar with the lady's writing table and
chair now at RISD, not to mention the
earlier version in solid silver shown in
Paris. In order not to let the great rival
firm of Gorham have the last word, in
1905 Tiffany created his own version of a
silver dressing table, now at Maymont, a
large house on the outskirts of Rich-
mond, Virginia.⁵ In the name of "one-
upmanship," he substituted not only the
more exotic Celtic style, but also legs
made out of silver-encrusted narwhal
tusks, producing a highly original –
although less aesthetically successful –
composition (fig. d).

Despite Tiffany, Gorham felt sufficiently pleased with the lady's writing table and chair to let them speak again for the firm at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915. On that occasion Gorham produced a small illustrated booklet extolling the virtues of the pieces and suggesting to prospective purchasers with \$25,000 to spare that they "would make most beautiful and desirable adornments for milady's boudoir or library." The New York financier August Heckscher must have thought so as well, because he purchased them as a gift for his daughter, the Viscountess Esher, at which time the pieces went to live with her in England. Upon her death in the early 1950s, they came into the possession of the London antique dealers, Christy's of Kent, Ltd. (not to be confused with the auction house of a similar name). By then having fallen hopelessly out of fashion, largely because of the difficulty of maintaining such pieces in a servantless age, they were offered for sale by that firm at a fraction of their original cost. Undeterred by the thought of upkeep, especially as he intended to give them to the RISD Museum, Frederick Thurber, then president of the Providence jewelry store of Tilden-Thurber (and a descendant of John Gorham's partner, Gorham Thurber), arranged for them to come home after forty years in order to serve as a reminder of Gorham's "golden age."⁶

CPM

1. In a similar quest for a "show stopper" at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in New York in 1853, the German-trained cabinetmaker John Henry Belter produced a table which anticipated Codman's in its use of ebony, along with extensive detailing in ivory, including busts of Washington, Franklin, Jefferson and Pierce (Schwartz 1981, p. 73).
2. According to the official catalogue, they were exhibit no. 65.
3. For an early description, see J. Moyr Smith, *Ornamental Interiors* (London, 1887), pp. 95-96.
4. For an illustration of one of the armchairs now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, see Clive Wainwright, "A Neoclassical Chair," *Antiques*, v. 188 (September 1980), p. 450.
5. The dressing table is on view in the house, which is a public museum. Richard Check kindly brought it to the author's attention.
6. Frederick B. Thurber, *The Memoirs of an Ancient Mariner* (Providence, 1965), pp. 34-37.



Fig. 47c
Gorham dressing table and stool, 1900.
(Private collection)

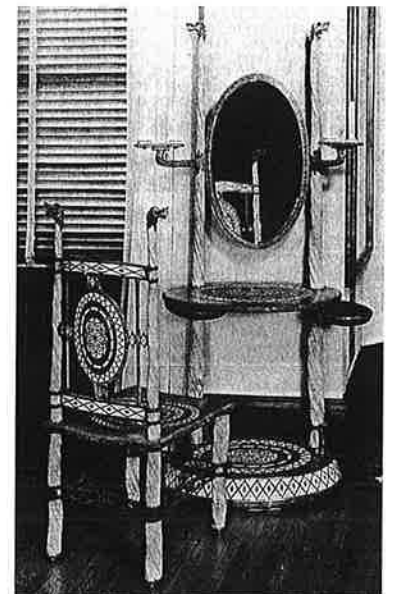


Fig. 47d
Tiffany dressing table and chair, 1905.
(Maymont Foundation, Richmond)