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

Surprise Endings: Gorham Silver’s Mythologique by Elizabeth Williams, curator
http://risdmuseum.org/manual/126_surprise_endings_gorham_silvers_mythologique

Visit the RISD Museum

Guided docent-led visits are $3 per student.
Lead your 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 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.
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:

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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Chair</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silversmithing</td>
<td>1695 hours</td>
<td>558 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chasing</td>
<td>2709 hours</td>
<td>850 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling</td>
<td>12 weeks</td>
<td>7 weeks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 craftsperson 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


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


More about the history of silver in America


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. (1831–1960), manufacturer
Providence, Rhode Island
Ebony, with ivory and silver mounts, gilt embossed leather seat and back, and marquetry panels composed of boxwood, redwood, thuya wood, ivory, mother-of-pearl, and silver; mahogany. Table: 50 x 50 x 28; chair: 50 x 14 x 19 x 163/4 (seat height)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick B. Thurber, 38.095
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:
Exhibitions:
St. Louis Universal Exposition, 1904; Panama-Pacific Universal Exposition, 1915; The New England Silversmith, r13, 1965, cat. 279; Gorham: Masterpieces in Metal, r13, 1983.
Condition:
Restored at Gorham in August 1985 by Werner Leyh, through the generosity of Gorham/Textron.

Only in the context of competition for gold medals at world’s fairs is it possible to comprehend fully how the Art Nouveau lady’s writing table and chair designed and made by Codman for Gorham came into existence. 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 initially intended for display in the American section of the Department of Art at the St. Louis World’s Fair of 1904. Aside from 10,000 or more man-hours expended on the design and execution of the set, the table and chair incorporated an incredible variety of materials, ranging from redwood, boxwood, thuya wood, and ebony to ivory, mother-of-pearl, and tooled leather with gilt decoration. 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 Chippendale 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 emblematic of the four seasons: the lily for spring; wild rose for summer; chrysanthemum 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 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 1893. Like the r13,0 1903 writing table and chair, the suite incorporated 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 r13,0 1903 chair. 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 r13, 01905, 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 Richmond, Virginia. 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).

Fig. 47a
Illustration of desk set which originally accompanied writing table, from booklet prepared for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, 1915. (r13, 01905, Museum archives)
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 Hecksher must have thought so as well, because he purchased them as a gift for his daughter, the Viscountess Esther, 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."  

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 Godman'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. Moir 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.


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

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