

*THEIR OBJECTS,
THEIR STORIES*

The Nichols Women as Collectors, 1870-1960



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“The importance of our environment and its influence on our lives can hardly be overestimated” wrote Rose Standish Nichols in her January 1911 article for *The House Beautiful*, “How to Simplify Interior Decoration.” With this exhibition, the Nichols House Museum explores two generations of art collecting at 55 Mount Vernon Street and the treasured objects which tell stories both familiar and unique. Founded on new research, *Their Objects, Their Stories* celebrates Elizabeth and Rose Nichols for their autonomy and individualism in what they chose to collect, and how their respective collecting practices were in-step with the aspirations of the Gilded Age and the women’s rights movement of the early twentieth century. From a sixteenth-century Flemish tapestry to twentieth-century bronzeworks by sculptor Paul Manship, this exhibition spans nearly 400 years of art across three continents. Letters, account books, and other ephemera shed light on this mother-daughter relationship and their individual careers as Boston’s lesser known tastemakers.

THE CULTURE OF COLLECTORSHIP

The widespread changes that took place after the Civil War ushered in a new era of American consumerism in which art collecting represented both financial and intellectual wealth. America’s “merchant princes,” which included John Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913), Henry Clay Frick (1849-1919) and Andrew Mellon (1855-1937), as well as wealthy society women like Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924) and Louisine Havemeyer (1855-1929), amassed grand collections with their grand fortunes. Bernard Berenson (1865-1959), a connoisseur of the Italian Renaissance, referred to this cast as “America’s squillionaires,” and according to the twentieth-century art historian, Remy Saisselin, they “needed art only as a nineteenth century bourgeois could need it—as only a glutton can require food—quantitatively” [1]. These men and women brought art to America in the interest of its new cultural institutions, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, both founded in 1870. Unhappy with the “robber baron” image, art collecting also provided the ultra-wealthy with an opportunity to develop more philanthropic reputations [2].

Lavish spending on fine art collections à la Isabella Stewart Gardner’s motto, “C’est mon plaisir,” or, “it is my pleasure,” subverted the strict rules Victorian society had imposed on women. However,

women were rarely afforded roles in managing museums, and their access to institutional power was limited [3]. Although there were noteworthy exceptions like Gardner, women on every level of society tended to collect for the home and family rather than museums.

There were also regional differences in art collecting. Bostonians, with their lingering Puritan views, were perhaps more discretionary than New Yorkers. Although not part of Boston’s elite Brahmin class, both Arthur Nichols (1840-1922) and Elizabeth Nichols (1844-1929) could boast a Boston pedigree dating back to the seventeenth century, which—especially on Beacon Hill—served as a different kind of currency. Indeed, a central aspect of this exhibition is the fact that the Nichols family collected art on a far more modest scale. The carefully preserved period rooms at the Nichols House Museum exist as a foil to the grand collections and interiors observed elsewhere. *Their Objects, Their Stories* aims to temper the predominant impression that each and every resident of Beacon Hill in the late nineteenth century lived extravagantly.

THE TASTEMAKERS

“I do wish you and Rose were going to be here to help us out with your practical and her ornamental and artistic suggestions”
—Marian Nichols to Elizabeth Nichols, 1897 [4].

In the late nineteenth century, women often walked a tightrope between appealing to traditional values and seizing upon the new possibilities that came with society's changing gender roles. Elizabeth Nichols and other women of her generation parlayed their nurturing roles into civic engagement and their responsibilities as housekeepers into purchasing art for the home.

In addition to helping her husband collect rent on the various properties they owned in the neighboring town of Roxbury, Elizabeth Nichols oversaw purchases made for her family's home, especially its furnishings. In 1869, the first year of her marriage, Elizabeth was already attending auctions to bid on furniture. Her sister, Augusta (Homer) Saint-Gaudens (1848-1926), wife of the American Renaissance sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848-1907), was also exceptionally business savvy, managing her husband's career even after his death.

As businesslike as she was, Elizabeth was a woman of the Victorian period. As such, she often deferred to her husband, Arthur, before establishing an opinion. In 1913, Elizabeth wrote to Arthur from Mastlands, the family's summer home in Cornish, New Hampshire, to describe a painting of First Lady Ellen Axson Wilson and her three daughters by the Impressionist artist Robert Vonnoh (1858-1933) (Figure 1). Elizabeth writes:



Figure 1. Robert Vonnoh (American, 1858-1933), *Mrs. Wilson and Her Three Daughters*, 1913. President Woodrow Wilson House Collection. Photo: Google Arts & Culture.

Mr. Vonnoh is painting a group, Mrs. Wilson and her three daughters. Mrs. Wilson is sitting at a small table pouring tea and one daughter, the oldest, is sitting, the others standing. Through a large window is seen the pool and white columns around it making an attractive background. I think the color scheme is harmonious and I like the scale which is quite small. As to the merits of the painting, I don't understand enough to judge...[5]

Today, this painting hangs in the collection of the President Woodrow Wilson House in Washington, DC.

The furniture pieces that Elizabeth purchased were often contemporary, fashionable objects designed for the thriving middle class. An example is the Rococo Revival card table (Figure 2) listed in an 1870 inventory of the Nichols' Roxbury home and which is now on view in the Nichols House Museum library. Where Elizabeth took a sensible, uncomplicated approach in collecting art and buying furnishings for the home, her daughter Rose was more intrepid.

Representative of the New Woman that came with the turn-of-the-century, Rose Nichols (1872-1960) forwent marriage in favor of a career in landscape design. Rose possessed a strong personality with which she ruled on social issues and art alike. An accomplished writer on interior design concepts, Rose



Figure 2. Rococo Revival style card table, American, ca. 1850-1865. Walnut, 30 x 32 x 18 in. Nichols House Museum Collection, 1961.77.

valued her own opinion above all others and kowtowed to none. For example, after attending a performance at the Havemeyer's New York mansion in 1896, Rose reported back to her sister Marian, writing, "The house was very splendid and magnificent but rather over-decorated by Tiffany. I thought there is a wonderful collection of Rembrandts" [6]. Like Louisine Havemeyer, Rose Nichols was on the front lines of women's suffrage and hosted meetings in her family's parlor prior to the passage of the nineteenth amendment [7]. However, it was perhaps the apolitical Gardner who inspired Nichols to found a museum in her own self-image, a uniquely feminist act, whereas Havemeyer eventually donated her collection to the Metropolitan Museum in her deceased husband's name. To be sure, there are a number of parallels to be drawn between Rose Nichols' Beacon Hill townhouse and Isabella Stewart Gardner's Fenway Court.

Rose Nichols was part of a younger generation of collectors who regarded American antiques as being morally and aesthetically superior to the machine-made contemporary furnishings that had become the norm. American antiques also became status symbols, especially for Bostonians who, like Nichols, could trace their ancestry back to the Puritans [8]. Over the course of her lifetime, Nichols amassed an impressive collection of American decorative arts that demonstrated the "good taste" outlined in Charles Locke Eastlake's enormously influential 1872 publication, *Hints on Household Taste*. In contrast with



Figure 3. Card table attributed to Thomas Seymour, ca. 1812-17. Mahogany and veneer, 28 x 34 x 18 in. Nichols House Museum Collection, 1961.149.

the card table owned by her mother, a second card table in the Nichols House Museum collection (Figure 3), designed by the important Boston cabinetmaker of the Federal Period, Thomas Seymour, represents Rose's primary interests in collecting.

RENAISSANCE OR BUST

"We have seen larger picture galleries, but no paintings as beautiful as the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and those of Raphael, called his Stanze..."—Rose Nichols to Arthur Nichols, November 1891 [9].

By the 1890s, the Italian Renaissance had become extremely popular in the United States, ushering in a buying craze among wealthy collectors. The trend reached its zenith in 1897 when Isabella Stewart Gardner became the first American to acquire a Raphael, the most sought-after Renaissance artist during this period of collecting.

Given their relatively modest budget for buying art, the Nichols women were not able to collect Old Master paintings. Instead, they brought home Renaissance-adjacent works from their European travels. Abroad in France in 1900, Elizabeth Nichols purchased the sixteenth-century Flemish tapestry that now hangs in Nichols House Museum parlor, where it is much admired by visitors (Figure 4). Writing from Paris, Elizabeth described the tapestry as "gothic and very interesting" and when met with discouragement from Arthur, she replied:

...it will not take long to pay for this from a new source of income of my own, which should not add to the drain upon yours; not that I mean to disseminate between the two [10].

The new source of income Elizabeth referred to was the sale of her mother's estate. Even heiress collectors like Isabella Stewart Gardner and Louisine Havemeyer were beholden to the financial interests of their husbands and could not acquire art with the same ease their male counterparts enjoyed. In a shining moment of autonomy, Elizabeth disregarded her husband's opinion and purchased the tapestry with her own money.

The Nichols family certainly did not have deep enough pockets to outfit their summer home with a second set of tapestries and as a result took pains to transport them to Cornish each summer. There, in 1903, Elizabeth oversaw the addition of a new wing that was ultimately referred to as "the tapestry room" (Figure 5) [11]. In the same year, Isabella



Figure 4. Tapestry, Flemish, sixteenth century. Wool and silk wefts with linen warps, 120 x 144 in. Nichols House Museum Collection, 1961.192.



Figure 5. The Nichols family's tapestry room at Mastlands in Cornish New Hampshire, ca. 1920. Photo: Nichols Family Photograph Collection, Nichols House Museum.



Figure 6. Tapestry Room at Fenway Court, 1915. Photo: Digital Commonwealth.

Stewart Gardner unveiled Fenway Court with its Flemish Tapestry Room (Figure 6), which suggests the Nichols family was consciously mirroring Gardner's installation.

Let us not forget that the United States was experiencing its own renaissance at this time. As nineteenth century art historians rediscovered the Italian Renaissance, American society drew parallels between it and the scientific, industrial, commercial, and artistic innovation happening at home. After a planning meeting for the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, Elizabeth's brother-in-law and Rose's beloved uncle, sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, proclaimed "this is the greatest meeting of artists since the fifteenth century!" [12]. The City Beautiful Movement embodied a new sense of civic-grandeur, and architecture such as the Boston Public Library, which opened its doors in 1895, crystallized the ambitions of the period now referred to as the American Renaissance [13]. The Nichols House Museum owns three works by Saint-Gaudens, including a parlor-sized bust of *Victory* that was personalized for Rose Nichols by her uncle (Figure 7). Elizabeth Nichols' Renaissance Revival sideboard, which she described as "nicely finished with elegant carving," epitomizes this era of home decorating among upper-middle class consumers [14].

Bernard Berenson was the foremost scholar of the Italian Renaissance at this time, and he greatly influenced late nineteenth-century society and its culture. With his Harvard beginnings under the tutelage of Charles Eliot Norton and his devotion to Isabella Stewart Gardner, Boston was perhaps the city most affected by Berenson [15]. Rose Nichols maintained a friendship with Berenson, visiting him and his wife Mary on numerous occasions at their Italian villa, I Tatti [16]. According to Nichols, Berenson had on one occasion proclaimed that "at last America could boast of two saints—Saint Rose of Lima and Saint Rose of Beacon Hill" [17].

The reliquary bust in the Nichols House Museum collection (Figure 8) bears the inscription *Santa Rosa*, and Saint Rose of Lima (1586-1617) is a likely candidate for the bust's seventeenth-century attribution. Befitting Rose Nichols, Saint Rose of Lima is the patron saint of embroiderers and gardeners—two of Nichols' life passions. In post-Reformation Europe, these formerly religious objects were repurposed as sculptural art once emptied of their grisly contents. The trend of collecting reliquaries, at least among Americans, was well underway by the 1890s, when



Figure 7. Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *Victory*, 1902. Bronze, 14 x 7 1/4 x 6 1/8 in. Nichols House Museum Collection, 1961.173.



Figure 8. Reliquary bust, Italian, seventeenth century. Hardwood, 17 1/2 x 16 x 7 in. Nichols House Museum Collection, 1961.190.



Figure 9. Painting of a boy eating meat, German or Eastern European, nineteenth century. Oil on canvas, 21 1/2 x 24 in. Nichols House Museum Collection, 1961.367.

collectors began to bring them home from Europe (mainly from Flanders and Germany). For example, by 1918, Boston collector J. Templeman Coolidge had acquired a Spanish example which he ultimately bestowed on the Museum of Fine Arts in 1929 [18].

Throughout her life, Rose leveraged her network of well-connected people to her advantage. In addition to Saint-Gaudens and Berenson, Nichols corresponded with Elizabeth Robinson, wife of Edward Robinson, who was the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1910 until 1931. In addition, the provenance of at least one painting in the Nichols House Museum collection (Figure 9) can be traced to Lydia N. Raymond, a donor of Renaissance art to the Museum of Fine Arts and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Nichols famously was friends with Queen Margherita of Italy, Queen Sophie of Greece, and Queen Alexandria of Yugoslavia. When Berenson—who had once told Rose Nichols that, as a poor immigrant boy, he had delivered papers door-to-door on Mount Vernon Street—denied her company one afternoon, she is said to have put a calling card in the hands of Berenson’s servant with the message “I have three queens” [19]. Soon after Berenson was immediately at the door to greet Miss Nichols and her royal company.

AN AMERICAN PASTIME

In 1876, the United States celebrated its 100th anniversary with the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. The exposition honored an American past, conjuring up nostalgic feelings for things as they once were. It also celebrated a bright American future by showcasing advancements in technology, manufacturing, and design. Figure 10 shows the Nichols family’s Roxbury home bedecked for the 1876 Fourth of July festivities.

The 1870s and 1880s, however, were a time of economic depression and political corruption, and the same industrial inventions on display in Machinery Hall, the most popular attraction at the Centennial Exposition, threatened agrarian lifestyles [20]. Further, an influx of Irish, German, Italian, and Chinese immigrants were met with xenophobic prejudice, and in June of 1876, just weeks before the Centennial Exposition opened, Lt. Colonel George Custer had his Last Stand at Little Bighorn following the U.S. Army’s forced removal of Native Americans from their lands. Both unsettled by the times and inspired by the Centennial, Anglo-Americans looked to an “idyllic,” colonial past.



Figure 10 (Left). The Nichols family's first home in Roxbury, MA on July 4, 1876. Photo: Digital Commonwealth.

Figure 11 (Right). High chest of drawers, Eastern Massachusetts, ca. 1745-1765. Walnut, 85 x 41 1/4 x 21 3/4 in. Nichols House Museum Collection, 1961.369.

Both a social and stylistic movement, the Colonial Revival found its biggest proponents in those who could trace their ancestry back to the days of the founding fathers (or even earlier). Boston, which considered its inception to be the 1630 establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, played a unique role in popularizing the Colonial Revival. In 1910, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA, now Historic New England) was founded by William Sumner Appleton (1874-1947) of Beacon Hill, with whose family the Nichols were friendly. Preservation of historic structures and artifacts was at the core of the Colonial Revival. It also sparked an interest in American objects among collectors like Boston's H. Eugene Bolles, who amassed a 600-piece collection of American furniture which he appreciated for their "associations with customs, surroundings, and life of a provincial and colonial history" [21]. Bolles' collection was donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1909.

As Rose Nichols' collecting interests evolved and matured, she began to focus her efforts on American decorative arts, with the plan to establish her Bulfinch townhouse as a museum. In 1939, Nichols purchased a high chest of drawers (Figure 11) for \$325 (roughly \$5,700 today) from a Beacon Hill antique dealer, who had the piece on consignment from a Mary Cabot Wheelwright. The Queen Anne style high chest, which dates to the mid-eighteenth century, is a highlight of the Nichols House Museum collection.

Painted at age four by Frank Duveneck (1848-1919) (Figure 12), Mary Cabot Wheelwright (1878-

1958) was the privileged only child of a Brahmin marriage. Her father, Andrew Cunningham Wheelwright (1824-1908) was a friend and neighbor to Arthur Nichols on Mount Vernon Street, and his family had made their money in the China trade a century earlier. Likewise, Sarah "Sadie" Perkins Cabot (1835-1917), Mary's mother, was descended from one of Boston's most prominent families, which had acquired both riches and reputations through shipping and foreign trade.

Like Rose Nichols, Wheelwright (Figure 13) embarked on an independent, unmarried life. Also much like Nichols, she is remembered for being sure of herself and her opinions to the extent that she sometimes "irritated and alienated those who crossed her path" [22]. Wheelwright travelled the world and studied anthropology. An advocate for the preservation of Navajo culture, she founded what is now known as the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in 1937. Her collaborator in this endeavor was Hastiin Klah, an esteemed and influential Navajo singer who had lived through decades of unrelenting violence against his community at the hands of the United States government.

Both Rose Nichols and Mary Wheelwright maintained a correspondence with William Sumner Appleton and in the 1930s, they individually approached SPNEA about purchasing their Mount Vernon Street homes [23]. The organization formally declined both women's offers. In order to raise funds for her museum, Wheelwright not only sold her family's home at 73 Mount Vernon Street, but also its

furnishings [24]. This high chest was presumably among the objects divested. At the same time, Rose Nichols was actively acquiring objects to buttress what would become her museum’s collection. Thus, the sale of this high chest helped two women, who had lived parallel lives, found museums at opposite ends of the country.

A seventeenth-century chair (Figure 14) in the Nichols House Museum collection was gifted to Rose Standish Nichols by her godmother and namesake, Rose Standish Whiting. Rose Whiting traced an elite Massachusetts lineage back to the Mayflower Standish family, and Rose Nichols was likely pleased to have had the name bestowed upon her. Although English in origin and dating to roughly 1680—of which both women were well aware—they referred to the chair as the “Governor Winthrop chair” after Governor John Winthrop (1587-1649), a leading figure in the 1630 founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Especially curious given Nichols’ literacy in historic furniture styles, the appellation suggests the women were projecting their respective Puritan ancestries onto this piece of furniture, romanticizing its provenance. Nichols ordered replicas of this chair from Irving & Casson, one of the leading producers of Colonial Revival furniture in Boston. A skilled craftswoman, Nichols requested that the chairs be left uncarved, so

that she could apply the Mannerist relief work herself. Similarly, the Nichols House Museum recently acquired an oak chest carved by Rose Standish Nichols that copies a seventeenth century chest that came from Bolles’ collection.

In addition to her three highly influential books on garden design, Rose drafted a manuscript on American decorative arts, *New England Baroque* [25]. In a chapter titled *Colonial Baroque*, Rose writes:

...despised and rejected for over a half-century by arbiters of good taste, including Ruskin, Charles Eliot Norton and even Bernard Berenson, only recently has this style come to be understood and appreciated at its true worth.

In writing this book, as well as a lifetime of articles on interior design, Nichols, it seems, considered herself an “arbiter of good taste” and a guardian of a lasting set of communal values that she referred to as the “Puritan point of view” [26].

NEW VIEWS

With contributions by Shlomit Heering

The Nichols family had an intimate connection with the American art world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through Saint-Gaudens and their summers spent alongside the Cornish Art Colony.



Figure 12. Frank Duveneek (American, 1848-1919), *Mary Cabot Wheelwright*, 1882. Oil on canvas, 50 3/16 x 33 1/16 in. Brooklyn Museum. Photo: Brooklyn Museum.



Figure 13. Mary Cabot Wheelwright in the library of her family’s home in Northeast Harbor, Maine, 1912. Photo: Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian.



Figure 14. Side chair, English, late-seventeenth century. Beech, 43 1/2 x 19 3/4 x 15 in. Nichols House Museum Collection, 1961.279.

Beginning with Saint-Gaudens' arrival there in 1885, the Cornish Art Colony attracted artists, writers, designers, and other creative types through the early years of WWI. In addition to her family's Cornish summer home, Mastlands (Figure 16), which was purchased in 1893, Roses spent much of her time in the estate's nearby "studio," where she herself labored over easels and sketchbooks [27].

Henry Fitch Taylor (1853-1925) was one of the regulars at Cornish in the early 1900s. Taylor had studied in France in the 1880s and became friendly with Claude Monet whose Impressionist style of painting Taylor adapted in his earlier works. A painting of Mount Ascutney (Figure 17) in the Nichols House Museum collection is attributed to Henry Fitch Taylor, fitting in with his Impressionist landscape works. The painting is dated 1908, making it a unique piece from a ten-year period during which Taylor is not known to have exhibited any works [28]. Mount Ascutney, situated across the state border in Vermont, dominated the views from Cornish, and this painting would have reminded the Nichols family of the view from their piazza at Mastlands. In fact, Rose had this painting hanging in her bedroom at the time of her death.

Another visitor to Cornish in the early 1900s was the sculptor Paulanship (1885-1966). During the early stage of his popularity, Manship created two bronze sculptures, *Adam* and *Eve* (Figure 18). Made in 1922, only a few copies of these versions of the sculptures exist, including the pair owned by the Nichols House Museum. It seems likely that these sculptures were gifted to the Nichols family, who, given Manship's success, would not have been able to afford the bronzes at market price.

Whether the Nichols family patronized these artists or were given these artworks as gifts, the contemporary art they did own was on the conservative end of the stylistic spectrum. Taylor's landscape had personal resonance for them, and more importantly was executed pre-Armory Show, after which Taylor adopted a cubist approach. Meanwhile, Manship's biblical bronzeworks straddled the line between new and old. While many women of both Elizabeth and Rose Nichols' generations were artists or patrons in Modern art circles, they decidedly were not.

In her letters, Elizabeth often refers to Modern art as "uninteresting" and in August of 1895, Elizabeth wrote to Arthur with an endorsement of Max Nordau's highly influential 1892 publication, *Degeneration*, which argued that culture had degenerated and likened the



Figure 16. Mastlands, ca. 1920. Photo: Nichols Family Photograph Collection, Nichols House Museum.



Figure 17. Painting of Mount Ascutney attributed to Henry Fitch Taylor (American, 1853-1935), 1908. Oil on canvas, 11 3/5 x 14 in. Nichols House Museum Collection, 1961.125.



Figure 18. Paulanship (American, 1885-1966), *Adam* and *Eve*, ca.1922. Bronze, 7 1/4 x 2 x 2 in. Nichols House Museum Collection, 1961.344.1-2.

authors and artists of the era to criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and lunatics. Its targets included Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Zola, and Walt Whitman. She writes:

I have been reading ‘Degeneration’ by a German writer, Max Nordan [sic]. I am sure you will find a great deal in it to like and it will be quite worth reading. It has raised some opposition and discussion as you may have noticed, but it seems to me based upon good principles and sound common-sense [29].

Following in the footsteps of her mother in at least one way, Rose Nichols wrote in 1900 to her sister Marian that she felt “the end of art is coming and coming soon” [30].

Berenson, too, was critical of modern art and in 1954 he published a treatise inveighing against what he saw as a degradation and abasement of the visual arts. Over a half-century after her letter to her sister Marian, Rose Nichols had not altered her opinion, writing to Berenson, “[I] enjoyed reading your program in regard to ‘Decline and Recovery in the Arts’ that I wish you would bring the subject to life in more detail” [31].

There is, however, one exciting exception to Rose Nichols’ distaste for the avant-garde. In a 1927 letter to Katherine Dreier, a prominent patron of modern arts, co-founder of the Society of Independent Artists and the Société Anonyme, and close friend of Marcel Duchamp, Nichols recommends the work of a young Bavarian artist she met abroad in Munich, whose name was Riki Hallgarten. She writes:

[His work is] very modern and shows his admiration for Picasso in some of his aspects. I think that you and this young man would have many ideas in common and that perhaps you might like to have him exhibit one of his pictures in your gallery when he has something to show [32].

Nichols may not have had the funds or the taste to financially support Modernist art, but she did patronize this particular artist, in a sense, by putting him in touch with a colleague who did. Rose Nichols considered herself a purveyor of Boston’s old vanguard but with her socialist leanings and desire to be in-the-know, her relationship with the contemporary art of her day was perhaps far more nuanced than it has been recognized as up to this point.

A CITIZEN OF THE WORLD

Rosemary Foy

Our charade party went off very well last evening. We had some dancing on the large piazza which was lighted by Japanese lanterns and much admired.—Elizabeth Nichols to Arthur Nichols from Cornish, 1893 [33].

At first, the presence of paper lanterns halfway around the world on a porch in rural New England might not seem that significant. Yet it is, as this small detail demonstrates the full extent to which Eastern art and culture had captured the imagination of Europe and America in the late nineteenth century, when the world was a much bigger place.

Mother and daughter show subtle differences in the way they seem to have thought about Asian art. Elizabeth Nichols, who came of age during the Japonisme of the Aesthetic Movement of the 1870s, treated Asian crafts as diverting decoration. For example, she chose Japanese wallpaper for at least two rooms in this house—the embossed “leather” paper in the dining room (Figure 19) and straw matting for the third floor bedrooms (a fire in 1909 prompted its removal)—which served as a backdrop for the art she collected, mostly European prints and Christian subjects. Elizabeth’s decorating decisions might have been guided by businesses like A.H. Davenport & Co. (where she bought several pieces of furniture) that sold Asian inspired fabrics and wallpaper from their Boston showroom. She likely purchased the paper Japanese lanterns at an “Oriental store” in Boston, or from A. A. Vantine, a New York emporium of inexpensive “Oriental” bric-a-brac that had an extensive mail order catalogue. In at least one letter from Europe, Elizabeth describes a room furnished with Japanese items in an Amsterdam palace as “charming.” For her, Asian goods were fashionable and spoke of the “exotic.”



Figure 19. Japanese “leather” paper installed in the Nichols House Museum dining room.



Figure 20. Hiroshige (1840-1858), *Cherry Blossoms on the Bank of the Sumida River*, ca. 1847-1852. Woodblock print, 17 5/8 x 31 5/8 in. Nichols House Museum Collection, 1961.474.

Rose Nichols, on the other hand, benefitted from the West's dawning understanding of world cultures and approached Asian art with a deep, perceptive interest. Rose's 1927 article in *The House Beautiful* entitled "Some Old Chinese Gardens" deconstructs the religious symbolism in Chinese landscape architecture, contrasting it with the Western concept of "a thing of beauty and nothing more" [34]. With her international circle of friends, Nichols used her keen mind to more fully appreciate the cultures that created the artifacts collected by her mother's generation. Her Japanese friend, R. Kita, gifted her the triptych of woodblock prints (Figure 20) by the famed artist Hiroshige (1840-1858) that now hang on her bedroom wall.

Moreover, Rose Nichols purchased items from Yamanaka & Co., a Japanese import firm with showrooms in New York, Boston, London, Beijing and Paris. Yamanaka catered to upper middle class women and wealthy collectors, as well as museums. Founded by Sadajiro Yamanaka from Osaka, Japan, this influential firm's hallmark were authentic crafts and antiques that attracted the significant circle of "Japanophile" collectors and cognoscenti based in Boston. By virtue of radically different languages and artistic conventions, connoisseurship in the material culture of Asia set a higher bar than that for the products of America or Europe, so its collectors were

viewed as erudite and sophisticated. This was a role, no doubt, that Rose Nichols relished.

The objects kept in Rose Nichols' bedroom, such as rugs from West Asia, woodblock prints, and a gilt fragment of Japanese woodcarving, are touchstones of universality in an otherwise Anglophile room and house. These objects must have been deeply meaningful to her as a citizen of the world and an outspoken pacifist, perhaps serving as a reminder that the human experience transcends cultures across the globe. In short, these objects were part and parcel of her interest in the life of the mind and bringing about world peace.

"Now while you are abroad do let yourself go, first feel beauty and take it straight. Find out its meaning for you, and don't try to know how it affected other people's minds as they will unconsciously influence you or force you to struggle to resist their influence. You have thought enough now feel!"—Rose Nichols to her sister Marian Nichols, July, 1, 1898 [35].

NOTES

1. Remy G. Saisselin, *The Bourgeois and the Bibelot* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 30.
2. Manfield J. Holler and Barbra Klose-Ullman, "Art Goes America" *Journal of Economic Issues*, 44, no. 1 (2010): 92.
3. Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 150.
4. Nichols-Shurtleff family Papers, 1780-1953; Marian Clarke Nichols to Elizabeth Fisher (Homer) Nichols, February, 1897. A-170, folder 151. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
5. Nichols-Shurtleff family Additional papers, 1758-2006; Elizabeth Fisher (Homer) Nichols to Arthur Howard Nichols, September, 24, 1913. MC766 box 19, folder 8. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
6. Nichols-Shurtleff family Papers, 1780-1953; Rose Standish Nichols to Marian Clarke Nichols, 1897. A-170, folder 85. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
7. Arthur Howard Nichols papers; Diary entry, February, 1912. Dairies 1894-1913. Massachusetts Historical Society.
8. Elizabeth Stillinger, *The Antiquers* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1980), 50.
9. Nichols-Shurtleff family Papers, 1780-1953; Rose Standish Nichols to Arthur Howard Nichols, November 18, 1891. A-170, folder 83. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
10. Nichols-Shurtleff family Papers, 1780-1953; Elizabeth Fisher (Homer) Nichols to Arthur Howard Nichols, May 23, 1900. A-170, folder 40. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
11. B. June Hutchinson, *At Home on Beacon Hill: Rose Standish Nichols and Her Family* (Nichols House Museum Board of Governors: Boston, 2011), 95.
12. Richard Guy Wilson, *Part I: The Great Civilization* in "The American Renaissance: 1876-1917," exh. cat., The Brooklyn Museum, New York (Pantheon: New York, 1979), 12.
13. Ibid, 21.
14. B. June Hutchinson, *At Home on Beacon Hill: Rose Standish Nichols and Her Family* (Nichols House Museum Board of Governors: Boston, 2011), 12.
15. Inge Jackson Reist, forward to *A Market for Merchant Princes: Collecting Italian Renaissance Paintings in America*, (The Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, Pennsylvania, 2015) 15.
16. It's thought that Mary Berenson had a hand in a significant percentage of Berenson's writings.
17. Bernard and Mary Berenson Papers (1880-2002); Rose Standish Nichols to Bernard Berenson, May 5, 1949. Biblioteca Berenson, Villa I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies.
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