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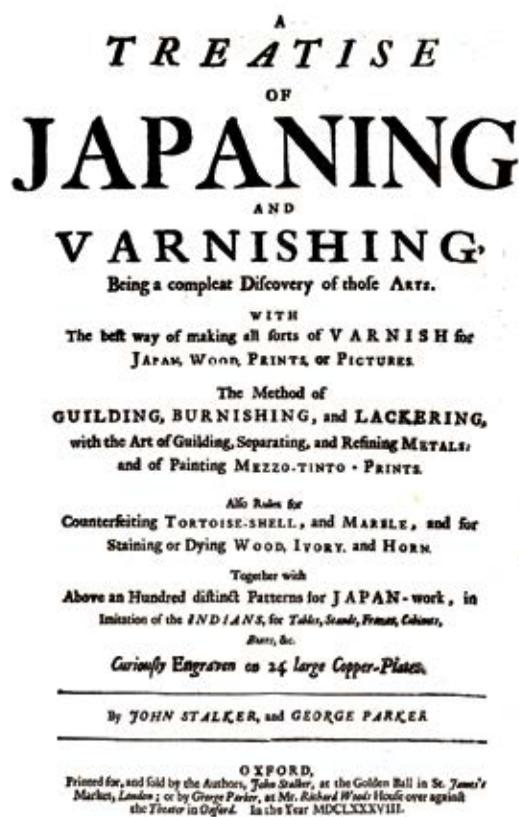


Triptych of painted panels on the North wall of the Gibbs House. Center panel either depicts death by impalement or one of many gymnast troops who toured the orient in the 17th century. Other panels feature birds, beasts, oddly shaped rocks called scholar's rocks, and flowers. Photo by Richard Walker, Courtesy Newport Restoration Foundation.

1. William Gibbs House, 1703–1708, enlarged 1758

NEWPORT

*Japanning with faux marble accents, oil on plaster,
circa 1720, attributed to William Gibbs.*



Above: Cover of A Treatise of Japaning and Varnishing by John Stalker and George Parker, published in London in 1688. It contained painting techniques, including Japaning and numerous designs appropriate for use on furniture and room accessories. The book was widely distributed and used in Great Britain and its American colonies, including Boston and Newport. The English term japanning was inspired by the superiority of Japanese lacquer. Image from author's collection. Courtesy Leigh Keno.

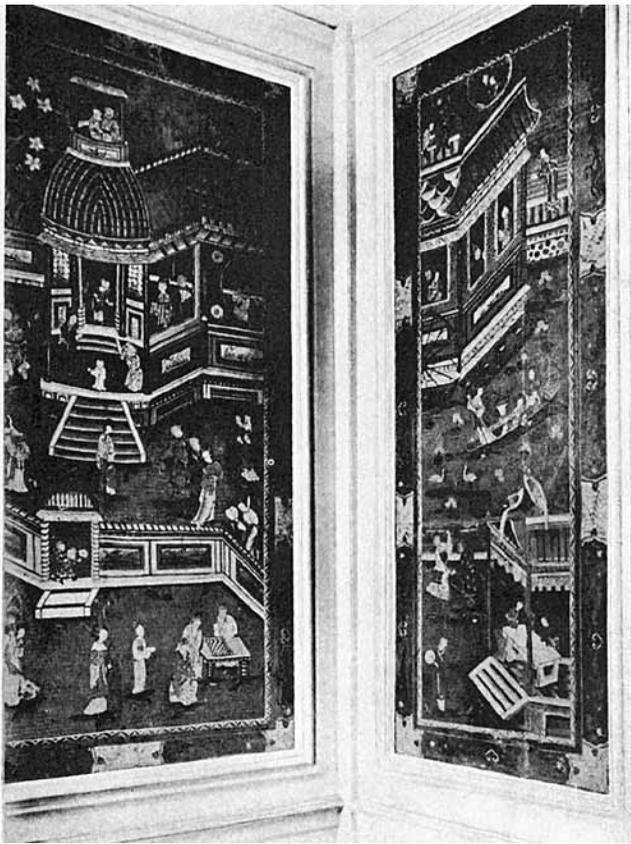
The architectural painting in the Gibbs house is significant to this study for numerous reasons. First, this work—dating to the first quarter of the eighteenth century—is quite possibly the earliest extant example of high style chinoiserie wall decoration in Rhode Island, if not in the entire county.

Second, it almost certainly was painted by one of only a handful of documented Rhode Island ornamental painters, namely the home owner himself, William Gibbs. In addition, the house, known historically as the Vernon House,¹ is one of vast historical importance on a state as well as national level, having been inhabited by Revolutionary War luminaries such as General George Washington and Comte de Rochambeau.

Even though no signature has been found, we most assuredly can assign an attribution to this early eighteenth century wall painting—seldom the case in the study of American wall painting. The likely candidate, William Gibbs, reportedly was born in Newport in 1680. The beginning of the 18th century finds him living in Boston where he married and fathered several daughters. Most likely Gibbs honed his painting skills during his decade or so in Boston as an apprentice or assistant to one of several master painters working there at the time, such as Thomas Child (*see, p. 183*), who had arrived in the Boston area some twenty years earlier after completing his training in England, or Nehemiah Partridge, a japanner,² who was selling japanning supplies in Boston in 1713.

Gibbs was in Boston, the colonies' premier furniture making center at the time when the craze for all things Oriental arrived from Europe. Also arriving in ample numbers were English trained painters who included japanning in their repertoires, the necessary paint materials, plus books containing design sources, such as *A Treatise of Japanning* written and published by Stalker and Parker in 1688 (*see title page at left*).

The technique called japanning was developed in 17th century England to imitate the very popular lacquer furniture and room accessories being imported from the Orient mostly via the



Above: Pictured are two of eleven painted gilt leather panels from late 17th century country house room in Warwickshire, Great Britain. The panels are thought to date to the period between 1725 - 1775. Japanning on leather is very possibly from a workshop in Holland where the taste for all things Oriental became popular early with the forming of the Dutch East India Company in 1662. Layout similar to upper parlor walls in Gibbs House and the throat of tall clock cases japanned in Boston starting early in the 18th century. Image from author's collection. At right: High chest of drawers attributed to Boston furniture maker John Pimm. Made around 1740, it features Japanned decoration. Purchased by Henry F. du Pont in 1929 with Ester Stevens Fraser (later Brazer) as agent. Many of the motifs seen on this piece of case furniture were also used by William Gibbs to ornament the parlor of his Newport home. Courtesy of the Winterthur Museum.



Netherlands by the Dutch East India Company,³ which was granted a monopoly on the trade in 1602. One obstacle to imitating these Asian imports was that materials necessary to make lacquer were not available so the resourceful English simulated lacquer by using numerous coats of varnish.

In 1713 William Gibbs returned to Newport and purchased a modest house with a good address, the corner of Mary and Clarke streets, adjacent to the original Trinity Church, whose wealthy members could become clients for Gibbs's decorating talent. By 1719 he was warden of the church. When he purchased his house, he was listed in the Turner Manuscript of Colonial Records as a "painter."

Judging by the quality of his work Gibbs must have achieved master painter status before leaving Boston, with a long list of decorative painting techniques and a portfolio of design sources



View of the northwest parlor of the Gibbs House, Newport, RI. This room is the north half of a four-room, two-over-two central chimney house. Painted walls have been restored honoring William Gibbs's original intent with colors and techniques appropriate to age of execution. Photo by Warren Jagger. Courtesy Newport Restoration Foundation.

either copied or remembered from work of fellow Boston painters. Upon his untimely death in 1729 his house inventory⁴ listed numerous paint materials and equipment, all of which would have been utilized by an ornamental painter capable of painting oriental style murals on the plaster walls of his "Great Hall" as it was called in the inventory. The motifs used on the Gibbs House walls compare favorably with those found on Boston japanned furniture, including the work of Robert Davis, who, after completing a seven year apprenticeship with the London Painter-Stainers Company, settled in Boston around 1717. What better way for Gibbs to impress possible clients and advertise his talents as a decorative painter than to ornament the walls of his own home and place of business with glorious samples of his work.

The extraordinary oil painted plaster walls adorning the northwest parlor are a perfect example of the very diverse and sophisticated taste of colonial Newport. The city's fine port, along with

its elevated wealth and esthetic discernment promoted an atmosphere conducive to the creation of this superb trompe l'oeil depiction of marbled raised wooden paneling framing panels ornamented in the chinoiserie style. The superior skill of the artist enabled him to create an effect so realistic that one is tempted to touch the faux raised sections in order to prove that they are a masterfully painted illusion and not wooden bolection molding framing oil painted murals on plaster or even marble itself. Since Gibbs's new home did not have the latest in high-style paneling he simply used his exceptional talent to create the illusion with paint and brush.

After Gibbs's death his house was inherited by his one living daughter and her second husband, James Martin. It remained in the Gibbs/Martin family until 1758, when Metcalf Bowler, a wealthy merchant, purchased the small but elegant residence and upgraded to its current form, a fine Georgian-style mansion house. It has long



Exterior view of the William Gibbs House built 1702–08 and enlarged around 1758 by Newport’s famous architect Peter Harrison. Known historically as the Vernon House. Painted room is to the left of the front door on the first floor. Photo by Richard Walker. Courtesy, Newport Restoration Foundation.

been thought that the expansion was designed by noted architect Peter Harrison, who is responsible for Newport’s Redwood Library, the Touro Synagogue, and the Old Brick Market. Bowler doubled the size of the house by putting an addition out back, rustivating the exterior to resemble the cut sandstone facades seen on elegant homes in Edinburgh and Bath, Great Britain, and adding elegant Georgian woodwork to interior rooms, enshrouding Gibbs’s painted plaster walls for close to 150 years.

In 1773 the house was purchased by another wealthy Newport merchant, William Vernon, who played host to many notable guests during his ownership. Comte de Rochambeau used the house as his headquarters, and during much of March 1781 George Washington stayed at the house, totally unaware of the extraordinary decoration hidden under the paneling in the very rooms where strategic decisions about the war were discussed. This remarkable work was discovered in the 1930’s during repair of a leak that had developed under