

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

RISD MUSEUM

**GORHAM SILVER
DESIGNING BRILLIANCE 1850-1970
ON VIEW MAY 3 - DECEMBER 1, 2019**



Above Image: Gorham Manufacturing Company, Epergne and Plateau, 1872 and 1876.
The Gorham Collection. Gift of Textron Inc.

PROVIDENCE, RI, FEBRUARY 21, 2019 - The **Rhode Island School of Design Museum** is pleased to present ***Gorham Silver: Designing Brilliance 1850–1970*** on view May 3, 2019 through December 1, 2019. Curated by the RISD Museum’s David and Peggy Rockefeller Curator of Decorative Art and Design, **Elizabeth A. Williams**, the exhibition casts new light on the legacy of this distinctive company. Creating everything from commissioned monumental presentation pieces to functionally elegant wares for the country’s dining rooms, Gorham responded to the era’s desire to celebrate, feast, socialize, honor and simply enjoy the everyday in style.

Drawn mainly from RISD’s collection of Gorham, the largest of its kind, with the addition of nearly forty loans from major institutions and private collections, the more than 600 exceptional silver and mixed-metal wares reflect the industry, artistry, innovation, and technology of the manufactory over 120 years, as Gorham put uniquely American design on the international stage.

Founded in 1831 by Jabez Gorham as a small shop in the heart of Providence, Rhode Island, Gorham boldly rose to become the largest silver manufactory in the world. Under the second-generation leadership of John Gorham, the company embraced modern mechanization while maintaining a commitment to hand craftsmanship. With works chosen by prominent patrons, such as a tea service purchased by Mary Todd Lincoln for the White House, and award winning creations, such as a solid-silver dressing table and bench shown at the 1900 World’s Fair in Paris, Gorham cemented their reputation as an industry leader. Ample supplies of silver from

newly discovered American mines spurred a robust market for silver wares among the rising middle class. As noted in an 1868 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, "The appearance of a dinner table set with silver for a large party is so exceedingly splendid that we can hardly wonder that fashion has adopted this metal for her own."

An Unrivalled Display

Home to more than 2,500 Gorham metalworks and nearly 2,300 design drawings, the RISD Museum is uniquely qualified to tell this story. From these holdings, Elizabeth Williams selected a wide range of the company's creations for this exhibition, from popular designs such as the space-age *Circa '70* tea and coffee service, to show stoppers such as the Furber Collection, an 816-piece service made to serve 24 diners—the company's largest single commission—that undoubtedly made for a grand dining spectacle. Recalling the awe and splendor of world's fair displays, the Furber Service will be shown in a pavilion based on Gorham's 1904 St. Louis World's Fair model.

A team of 80 trained volunteers spent three years cleaning this unparalleled selection of silver and mixed-metal works to their original grandeur. A variety of supporting materials including design drawings, historical tools and equipment, vintage films of Gorham silversmiths, and newly created videos of local silversmiths further illuminate the company's inner workings and silversmithing processes.

An American Story of Creativity and Industry

The exhibition is organized in five sections that explore diverse aspects of Gorham's impact in the fields of manufacturing, design, and marketing, as well as its response to and influence on societal and cultural change. At its peak, the vertically-integrated company employed over 3,000 men and women to work in all phases of design, production, and marketing. Gorham opened a state-of-the-art plant in 1890, taking over more than 35 acres in south Providence. The manufactory's scale, modernity, scope, and self-sufficiency was a physical reflection of Gorham's far-reaching goals, ambitions and aspirations, with unalloyed recognition and respect for their employees' knowledge, capabilities and needs.

Gorham did not adhere to a single design aesthetic but sought to stay abreast of trends to satisfy and respond to the desires of their customers. Full of volumes ranging from Italian Renaissance art to the Japanese designs found in Katsushika Hokusai's *Manga*, the expansive design library was a key resource that allowed designers to adopt and adapt motifs and styles from myriad eras and far-flung cultural sources. Gorham also influenced silver styles with designs emanating from within the company, such as those of Erik Magnussen. The silversmith introduced radical concepts of modern design to Gorham with such works as his *Cubic Coffee Service*. This one-of-a-kind creation will be shown together with its newly discovered design drawing, making its first exhibition appearance.

From early in its history, a hallmark of Gorham was the importance placed on the presentation of its goods to the public, as well as nurturing direct connections with their clients. Ever quick to implement new marketing techniques, the company was the first silver firm to photograph its products, providing their network of salespersons and showrooms accurate images of the most up-to-date products to share with clients. The firm produced spectacular creations for popular attractions such as international expositions and fairs, thus forging an association with innovation and elegance in the public mind, which was simultaneously reinforced in their prolific advertising campaigns.

Throughout the Gorham Manufacturing Company's existence, the dual respect for what came before and what was possible for the future was the foundation for their development and dominance of the silver industry. Gorham was an industry leader and the epitome of the manufactory, a site where marketable and useful merchandise was produced through human labor and machines. As recognized by *Harper's*, what the word manufactory often obscures, however, is that it "is not an easy thing to make a design which shall be at once delightful to the eye and convenient to the hand. . . . no talent is rarer than this, and without it, all the mechanical skill, the perfect integrity, and the courageous enterprise of the Company would not have sufficed to rear so vast . . . an establishment."

The exhibition is accompanied by a 288-page catalogue published by Rizzoli (May 2019), edited by Elizabeth A. Williams, and featuring contributions by Emily Banas, David L. Barquist, Gerald M. Carbone, Amy Miller Dehan, Jeannine Falino, Catherine L. Futter, Erik Gould, Ingrid A. Neuman, John W. Smith, Holly Snyder, and Elizabeth Williams. The exhibition will also travel to the **Cincinnati Art Museum** and **The Mint Museum** in 2020.

Exhibition Support

Gorham Silver: Designing Brilliance 1850–1970 is made possible by a sponsoring grant from the Henry Luce Foundation with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the RISD Museum Associates, Textron Inc., the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, Joseph A. Chazan, MD, Virginia and Alan Nathan, Cindy and Scott Burns, and a generous in-kind gift from Spencer Marks, Ltd. Educational programming associated with the exhibition is made possible by a lead sponsorship from the Zennovation Fund and generous additional support from Victoria Veh.

About the RISD Museum

The RISD Museum was founded on the belief that art, artists, and the institutions that support them play pivotal roles in promoting broad civic engagement and creating more open societies.

Established in 1877 as part of a vibrant creative community, the RISD Museum stewards works of art representing cultures from ancient times to the present from around the globe. We interpret our collection with the focus on the maker and we deeply engage with art and artists, presenting ideas and perspectives that can be inspiring and complex. We aspire to create an accessible and inclusive environment that builds meaningful relationships across all communities.

The RISD Museum is supported by a grant from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, through an appropriation by the Rhode Island General Assembly and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and with the generous partnership of the Rhode Island School of Design, its Board of Trustees, and the RISD Museum Board of Governors.

Gorham Silver: Designing Brilliance (1850-1970)

Rhode Island School of Design Museum

May 3 – December 1, 2019

Tuesday – Sunday, 10am – 5pm

Cincinnati Art Museum

March 13, 2020 – June 7, 2020

The Mint Museum
July 25, 2020 – November 1, 2020

Opening Reception

May 3, 2019
5:30 – 7:30pm

Symposium

May 3, 2010
Critical Encounters: Design Innovation
10 am-5:30 pm

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For further information, interview or images, please refer to:

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