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Lady's Writing Table and Chair

RISD Museum

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Lady's Writing Table recorded by Ben Blanc

Hey, I'm Ben Blanc. I'm a maker and designer here in Providence. I also am an adjunct faculty here at RISD, and we are going to talk about the Gorham Lady's Writing Table. I was a grad student here at RISD ages ago, and the table was always in some form around. It's always caught my eye. As a maker, as a designer, the mystery of how this thing came to be has always been an incredible mystery to me. And as sort of my knowledge has grown of Gorham and just local manufacturing here in Providence, I sort of have come to have a better appreciation of how this thing actually landed here in the museum. As a maker, it's absolutely unbelievable. The materials jump out to me right away, the silver, the ebony, the wood inlay, the leather, the ivory that you see are just these exquisite materials. And I think that first and foremost, the piece is, like, literally dripping with material. It's, like, it's almost so much material it's hard to process. But I think, as a maker, seeing that this was how all these materials come together to form this piece is pretty exciting to me. That really jumps out when I first see the object.

Last semester I brought my students to see this piece, and we just spent some time, like, knowing—not having a skill set, not knowing actually how this piece was produced, not knowing how to do metal chasing and lost wax casting or inlay, or the leather tooling—the piece can still, like, reflect back how it was made, who made it, the personality of the makers, the personality of the users. And I truly believe that objects are...can really be those identities. If you just spend time with it, just, like, simple things like trying to understand what the materials are; like, why would they have chosen to use ivory and ebony and silver? And then you learn that it's the Gorham Table and they're rooted in the tradition of silversmithing. So, you know, you can learn a lot from the object, and if you're willing to spend time, and, as a maker, designer, you might not translate those processes exactly into objects that are, like, a direct reflection of this object. But you might take one small part of that, and it might be a drawer pull on a more modern or a contemporary piece of work that uses one of these techniques, and incorporate that into your work to sort of, you know, pay homage to the history of the piece but not necessarily...you know, take it in your own direction. So there's a lot to be learned from this type of work. And just sort of thinking about what the designers and the makers were thinking. Like, why did they create this piece? If you sort of have an understanding of what they were doing, and you fast-forward that to today, you know, if you've tuned into that, then you can have a better understanding of why you're making objects and not just sort of...not just blatantly creating things, you know, that's creating with a purpose.

I am Elizabeth Williams. I am the curator of Decorative Arts and Design at the RISD Museum, and we are looking at a *Lady's Writing Desk and Chair* made by the Gorham Manufacturing Company of Providence, Rhode Island.

These pieces were made for the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, which was the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, and the Gorham Company made this piece to show what they could do on a world stage. And the world judged very favorably: they won the Grand Prize for the Writing Desk and the Chair.

I find this an incredibly magnificent piece of work. It combines so many different materials and so many different styles, and it does it very successfully.

Over 50 pounds of silver was used to make this table. Also, you had exotic woods: there is ebony, thuya, boxwood, and many other exotic woods, into which has been inlaid silver, ivory, mother of pearl. Ivory also rings the top of the desk, and even the feet of the desk have small ivory pads under them.

When you think about how this piece went from a two-dimensional drawing from the designer to a three-dimensional realization of this fantastic creation, you must remember that many people worked on this object. There would have been someone who would have had to inlay the silver as well as the ivory, the mother of pearl, into the wood, which is ebony.

There also would have been someone who would carve the leather and emboss the leather design.

When a person looks at furniture like this today, I think it serves as a reminder of what American designers and artists can do. This is something that I feel you can readily look at and you can see the labor, you can see the incredible design, you can see these artists and designers coming together as a team and creating this object that is, quite frankly, over the top.