

Why is it called the Jade Parlor? Questions on Transnational Asian America and Vassar

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1. Introduction

In light of Vassar's sesquicentennial and the Asian Studies Program's new correlate sequence in Asian American Studies, we explored "tokens of Asia" on the Vassar campus landscape. We studied past and present spaces on the campus that evoke ties with, or representations of Asia. We were interested in tracking transformations of things, space and knowing at Vassar. Our questions drew on theories of power and representation, ranging from critiques of "orientalism," to the history of decoration, to political and economic histories of Asian and American interconnections, to recent literature on the relationships expressed by and through objects, what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has called "the social life of things".

During our research, we were drawn to the uniquely decorated Jade Parlor because of the mystery that surrounds its origins. Of the some fifty interviews we conducted about impressions, and memories of the Parlor, none answered our questions about when and why the Parlor is decorated with 'Asian' themed furnishings. So, we spent much of our summer looking at architect's plans and renovation records at Buildings and Grounds, and combing these with the records in Special Collections, searching through information relating to Vassar's first students from Asia, gift records in Trustee's Minutes, Miscellany News issues, yearbooks and photograph files. Happily, we were able to use our findings to piece together a possible history of the Jade Parlor.



2. Orientalism?

Orientalism:

Orientalism, defined by Edward Said, is a school of Western thought that is built upon the notion that the Orient is inherently inferior to the West. Said uncovered a trend in 19th century Western literature that portrayed the East as an exotic, romanticized, and passive Other. Their representations of the Orient, European writers partook in a long-standing tradition of Western dominance over the East - they denied the East any agency of its own, and converted it into a fantastical space that existed within the imagination of the West.



The Jade Parlor as an orientalist space:

If this room originated during the early 20th century, it would be part of a larger trend in Europe and America, where elite households had rooms decorated with Asian objects and furnishings. These rooms diminished the vibrant histories, political and economic involvements of Asian countries into homogenized exotic objects that existed to serve the elite inhabitants of these Western homes. In the Jade Parlor, the Asian objects were never displayed in connection to their origins and lives in Asia. Rather they were decontextualized, and their purpose was solely to provide pleasure for Vassar ladies.

Wall screen in the Jade Parlor with popular Asian motifs - lotus, lillies, cranes, humming birds and others

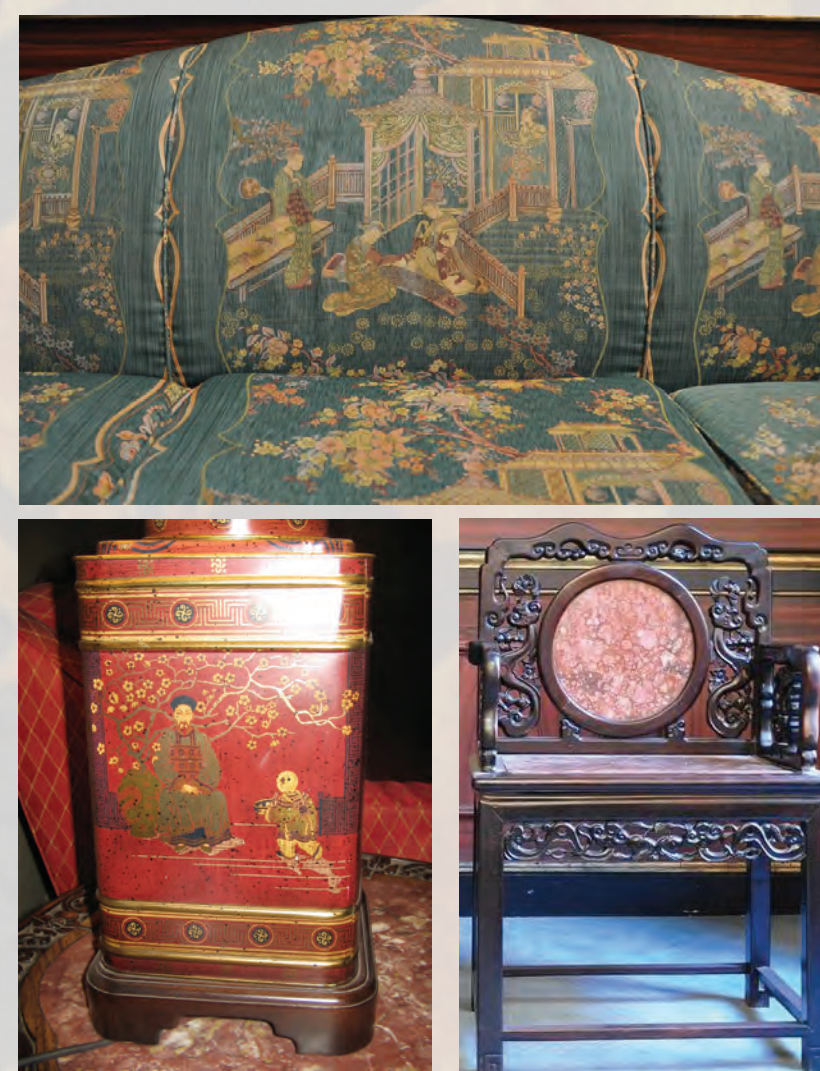
Positioning the Jade Parlor Vassar's campus:

The campus is vibrant, lively and experiences international and cross-cultural interactions every day. In contrast, the Jade Parlor is a dark, passive space in one corner of Main Building, locked away from the rest of the campus, accessed for meetings and rehearsals that are not related to its Asian furnishings. In this way, the Jade Parlor becomes decontextualized, and exists on the Vassar campus as a forgotten token of Asia.

Further questions:

Considering the Jade Parlor as an orientalist room has serious consequences, given that it is housed in an institution that is educational, liberal and international. However, as we discovered hidden stories about the room, we realized that the Jade Parlor cannot be confined solely within the discourse of orientalism.

Thinking about the work of anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Bruno Latour on the powers of objects in social life, we found that studying the objects in this parlor uncovered a history of connections and relationships that we did not originally anticipate.



Clockwise: detail of couch upholstery, chair and lamp in the Jade Parlor

3. World Interconnections?

History of world interconnections:

Janet Abu-Lughod, in her book *Before European Hegemony*, argues that contrary to the perception of the East as a passive land, there have existed global interconnections that predate the advent of colonialism. Often overlooked, are the extensive Old World networks that formed between 1250 and 1350 A.D. which facilitated trade between Asia and Europe. Even before Abu-Lughod's 13th century world system, the silk route established a trade connection between East, South, South-East regions in Asia, the Middle-East, and Europe. In this sense the notion of 'world interconnections' is not recent: it actually makes up a large historical component of the relationship between the East and the West.

The China trade:

The China trade (18th-19th c.) represented a political and economic relationship between the Qing dynasty and America. In her novel *Eight Cousins*, Louisa May Alcott weaves the China trade into her story of a young girl's journey into adulthood. Rose, the protagonist, lives with her Uncle Alec, a ship's doctor in the China trade. In one incident, Rose meets the son of a Chinese trader, Fun See. This encounter evinces a widespread network of trade and commerce. Also, when Rose is given her own room, Uncle Alec decorates the room with Asian furnishings. Thus, the connection between merchants and East Asia during this time was both business-related and personal. In *Eight Cousins* and its sequel, Rose's life becomes even more deeply connected with Asia, as her friend Annabelle marries Fun See.



Rose meets Fun See from *Eight Cousins*

Symbolism of Jade Parlor:

Jade Parlor could be seen as symbol of these world connections during the 19th century. Perhaps some Vassar students came from families who were involved in the China trade, and so for them, the Jade Parlor represented not a far-off exotic land, but a very real economic and personal relationship. The Jade Parlor could also stand for Poughkeepsie's link with East Asia, as it was then an international port along the Hudson. In this sense, the Jade Parlor is not a passive space, but rather a room that symbolizes the vibrant connections that Asia had with America, and more locally, with Poughkeepsie.

Vassar and Japan:

In the late 19th century, as Meiji Japan looked to America as an example for social advancements like women's education. In 1871, the Japanese government sent five young girls to America in order to experience American primary and higher education. Two of them, Stematz Yamakawa and Shige Nagai, attended Vassar College. After Vassar, both returned to Japan and spearheaded several women's education initiatives. These women were Vassar's first international students. Given this connection with Asia, the Jade Parlor could reflect Vassar's political relationship, and many Vassar students' personal relationship with Japan.

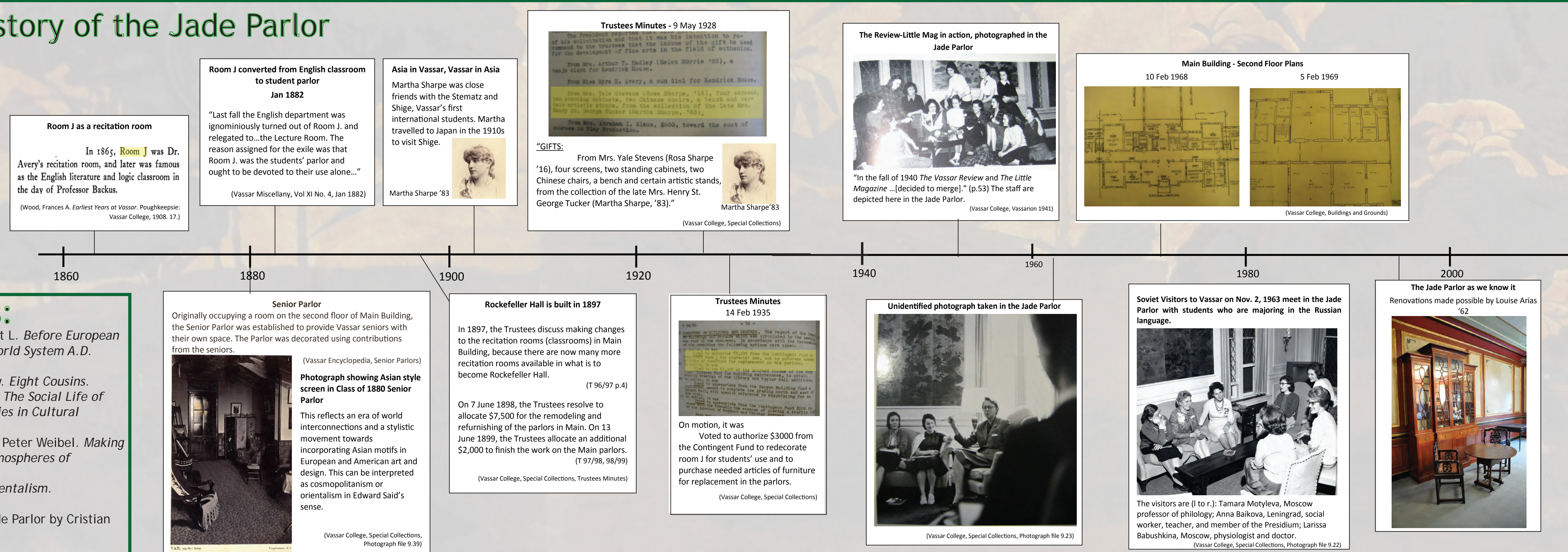


Stematz Yamakawa
Class of 1882



Shige Nagai
Class of 1885

4. A History of the Jade Parlor



5. Embedded Representations

During our research, our perception of the Jade Parlor continuously transformed. We began wondering if we would find a case of orientalism, displaying objects from Asia while excluding the people and their histories. At the same time, we also wondered about the interconnections and relationships the decorative objects would lead us to.

We discovered that Vassar's first Asian students created opportunities for many of their American friends to visit Japan, and bring back objects from Japan that held personal significance for them. Some of these objects may have ended up at Vassar, perhaps in the Jade Parlor, through gifts and donations. If the objects in the Jade Parlor belonged to Vassar students who had connections with Asia, these objects bring the Japanese women, the people we had thought the Parlor excluded, into the Parlor in a tangible way. Thus, we discovered an intricate interconnection between people and things, Vassar and Asia.



A cabinet in the Jade Parlor displays Vassar memorabilia. This image provokes us to reflect on past, present and future connections between Vassar and Asia. The Jade Parlor is a representation of Asia embedded within the Vassar campus. And inside the Jade Parlor is a cabinet that holds a representation of Vassar.