

**Tarnished Silver:**

**Unveiling Gorham's Environmental and Social Legacy Through Art-Activism**

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## **Introduction**

The Gorham Manufacturing Company was once a global giant in silversmithing and sculptural foundry and a leader of Rhode Island industry. Its silver products have been preserved as heirlooms, symbols of luxury, and, more recently, a part of the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Museum's collections, which were then commemorated in the museum's 2019 exhibit, *Gorham Silver: Designing Brilliance 1850–1970*. Yet, this exhibit has been heavily criticized by those who argue that Gorham's legacy ought to showcase not only its industrial success but the violence it inflicted on local communities and landscapes.

One prominent example of this includes *Unpolished Legacies*, a counter-exhibit created by local Providence artists, historians, and educators in direct response to *Designing Brilliance*. Since then, the project's organizers, Becci Davis and Holly Ewald, have developed *Unpolished Legacies Online*, transforming the original exhibit, and the histories that contextualize it, into a digital secondary education tool. Through an examination of these contemporary renegotiations of Gorham's history, this paper investigates the narrative function of history, and how art becomes a critical tool for communities to transform public memory.

## **The Many Histories of Gorham: From Soil to Silver**

While the conventional history of Gorham chiefly focuses on its economic successes, its impact extends far beyond the industrial scale. Its factory once stood on the banks of Mashapaug Pond, Providence's largest freshwater pond whose storied past has since been relegated to the fringes of public memory. Although largely hidden from sight, nestled between Dr. Jorge Alvarez High School and a Tesla dealership, Mashapaug's current relative invisibility stands in stark contrast to its historical significance.

Before Mashapaug Pond became home to the Gorham Manufacturing Company, it was, as discussed by Anne Valk, a public history specialist, and Holly Ewald, stewarded by indigenous peoples, including Mashantucket, Pequot, Narragansett, Wampanoag, and Nipmuc.<sup>1</sup> After Providence's founding, Mashapaug Pond then housed West Elmwood, Providence's first racially integrated neighborhood.<sup>2</sup> However, as the city's economy transitioned in the mid-twentieth century, several predominantly working and lower-middle class neighborhoods were designated as "slum[s]" and redesigned into a commercial and manufacturing district, displacing 3,600 people—including West Elmwood residents—throughout the city by 1960.<sup>3</sup>

Today, the land is still inaccessible to the public or its former local communities due to Gorham's extensive pollution to the landscape. Mashapaug's soil, water, and air have all been severely contaminated by industrial waste disposal; lead and other contaminants used in the manufacturing process leached into the surrounding soil and water, which is still found in the pond's sediment to this day.<sup>4</sup> Despite ongoing cleanup efforts, Mashapaug remains contaminated, its waters unsafe for human interaction and unlivable for most of its native wildlife.

Several *Unpolished Legacies* artists have lamented the resulting loss of connection and relationship between Mashapaug and the local community, using their works to restore the pond's place in Providence's collective memory. For example, Laura Brown-Lavoie and Kei Soares Cobb's *i missed your bodies at play* highlights this relationship rupture between the

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<sup>1</sup> Valk, Anne, and Holly Ewald. 2013. "Bringing a Hidden Pond to Public Attention: Increasing Impact through Digital Tools." *The Oral History Review* 40 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohr019>

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard, Jane. 2016. "What is the 21st Century Essay? Reflections on Silvered: Tracing Gorham at Mashapaug Pond." Rhode Island Humanities. <https://rihumanities.org/what-is-the-21st-century-essay-reflections-on-silvered-tracing-gorham-at-mashapaug-pond/>.

<sup>3</sup> Boltz, Lucy. 2013. "A Brief History of Urban Renewal and Displacement in Providence's former West Elmwood neighborhood." UPP Arts. [http://www.upparts.org/uploads/4/5/8/2/45820603/01-a\\_brief\\_history\\_of\\_urban\\_renewal\\_and\\_displacement\\_in\\_the\\_former\\_west\\_elmwood\\_neighborhood.pdf](http://www.upparts.org/uploads/4/5/8/2/45820603/01-a_brief_history_of_urban_renewal_and_displacement_in_the_former_west_elmwood_neighborhood.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Brittingham, Frances. n.d. "Gorham's Toxic Legacy." Rhode Tour. <https://rhodetour.org/items/show/19>.

natural landscape and local peoples. Featuring a video of their bodies immersed in the polluted waters, overlaid by a narration of Brown-Lavoie's poem written from the perspective of the pond itself, Cobb states that he and Brown-Lavoie hoped to remind their audience how "Humans used to be really involved with Mashapaug Pond," and although that connection "has been broken because the pond has become so polluted [...] the pond is a being, it's a body. It has a relationship to our body. So, that pond misses us as well."<sup>5</sup>

Beyond its destructive environmental or urban impacts, Gorham's social history is also implicated in American exploitation and enslavement. For one, silver manufacturing was a labor-intensive and dangerous process, often with inadequate health regulations despite Gorham's employee welfare policies. Descendants of former Gorham employees recall the poor conditions in which they worked, "coming home feverish and shivering from working near the fires."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Gorham's foundry was also involved in the production of slave monuments. Becci Davis investigates this connection in her piece, *From N 34° 55.2685 W 85° 15.6195 To N 41°47'42.9 W 71°25'49.6*. Davis traces the Gorham silver that was molded into public art commemorating slaveholders and Confederate military leaders. Similarly interested in the relationship between production and exploitation, fellow contributor and self-described avid environmentalist Fred Quivik juxtaposes the beauty of the silver objects with the harm caused by their manufacturing. Drawing on his work as a historian of remote mining enterprises, Quivik explains how these mining operations "produce[d] a lot of metals for the market and a lot of contaminants locally," highlighting the dichotomy between the fiscal success and local harms of this industry.<sup>7</sup> "We're barely aware of the material culture that we're relying on that's part of our

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<sup>5</sup> Kei Soares Cobb, interview by Katie Bengtson, September 28, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Shipps, Rachel. n.d. "Work, Welfare, and Resistance," Rhode Tour. <https://rhodetour.org/items/show/18>

<sup>7</sup> Fred Quivik, interview by Angie Pierre, October 27, 2022.

day-to-day life,” Quivik states, “and by and large, we’re not at all aware of the harm that’s done hundreds and thousands of miles away to produce those metals.”<sup>8</sup>

Given these complex and often contradictory legacies, Gorham’s history cannot be encapsulated in a single narrative. Gorham was, all at once, an industrial titan and a dangerous labor environment; a steward of public history and a driver of community displacement; a renowned manufacturer and a reckless pollutant. Thus, it becomes imperative to not privilege one of these faces of its history above the rest, and instead find ways to reckon with the tensions between these different historical lenses as we engage with Gorham in the present.

### **Gorham in Exhibition: Art, Activism, and a Question of Authority**

The RISD Museum exhibit, *Gorham Silver: Designing Brilliance 1850–1970*, was the most comprehensive exhibition of Gorham ever created, staged a mere 100 yards from where the company once stood. In the exhibit’s literature, RISD praised Gorham’s innovation and craftsmanship. However, *Designing Brilliance* was not meant to solely focus on the company’s industrial strength. According to its curator, Elizabeth A. Williams, RISD hoped to use the exhibit “to reach beyond the end product itself—the silver—to also focus on the people who made Gorham what it was within the contexts of social history.”<sup>9</sup> Although partially reflected in the audio tours of the exhibit, the lens of “social history” was not physically or visually represented, contributing to some of the exhibit’s criticisms.

Several contributors to *Unpolished Legacies* emphasize the failure of *Designing Brilliance* to adequately address the social and environmental ramifications of the Gorham Manufacturing Company. The exhibit presented itself as a nostalgic reflection on the company’s

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<sup>8</sup> Fred Quivik, interview by Angie Pierre, October 27, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Solondz, Simone. 2019. “Designing Brilliance at the RISD Museum | RISD.” Rhode Island School of Design. <https://www.risd.edu/news/stories/designing-brilliance-risd-museum>.

success, whose “one-of-a-kind showstoppers [...] trace a narrative arc not only of great design but also of American ambitions,”<sup>10</sup> yet lacked due representation of the company’s harms. The disparities in this rhetoric towards Gorham’s history is critiqued in graphic designer and RISD educator Lucinda Hitchcock’s piece, *Still Water*. Hitchcock contrasts the ostentatious language extracted from *Designing Brilliance*’s display—phrases such as “Exceedingly Splendid” and “Putting Silver Before the Public”—with the company’s environmental impacts by filming the dissolution of these printed phrases in Mashapaug Pond’s waters.<sup>11</sup> Janaya Kizzie, a Brown University archivist and writer, also subverts the museum’s institutional voice in *The Filigree on Your Boots*, which is written in the style of a museum’s didactic panel yet describes the insidious pollution of the natural landscape and the reader’s own body due to the remains of the Gorham Manufacturing Company. Additionally, in author and educator Mary-Kim Arnold’s *Hints on Managing Servants*, she extricates, rearranges, and overlays the language from several texts (including Textron, the corporation that eventually absorbed Gorham, and an 1860 etiquette book discussing labor and power relations) in a representation of the voice of Gorham itself. In doing so, Arnold illustrates the superficiality of a single narrative and the complexity that arises when integrating multiple voices. Taken all together, these works question the authority of a singular institution to present a historical narrative, illustrating the many perspectives they may preclude.

However, *Unpolished Legacies* was not merely a unilateral refutation of Gorham’s successes. Other contributors embraced both Gorham’s beauty and horrors at once. Jeremy Ferris, local artist and librarian, created a series of ink works entitled *A Guided Meditation on Extracting Wholeness*. This eponymous “wholeness,” refers to “an effort to hold simultaneously the emotional impact of a commodity and the extraction that inevitably occurs at some level in

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<sup>10</sup> Williams, Elizabeth A. 2019. *Gorham Silver: Designing Brilliance, 1850-1970*. Rizzoli Electa. <https://www.rizzoliusa.com/book/9780847862528/>

<sup>11</sup> Lucinda Hitchcock, interview by Samantha Ho, June 28, 2024.

its production [...] both are statements of what has happened, is happening.”<sup>12</sup> Through these reflections, Ferris broadens our understanding of how we consider a historical narrative; Gorham’s industry success and splendid craftsmanship are no less true than its devastating impacts on Mashapaug Pond and Providence communities.

These contradictory experiences are not necessarily conflictive, but rather necessary to hold a fuller grasp of history. By utilizing art, writing, and craft to elevate these alternative voices, *Unpolished Legacies* is a critical example of how art-activism allows us to explore these multiplicities beyond the dominant voice of a single institution. By engaging with art-activism and community-centered work, audiences are not presented a single narrative but guided to craft their own, moving beyond the constraints of what Kizzie describes as “capital-H History.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Conclusion: Public Memory and Recentering Community**

Initiatives like *Unpolished Legacies* center community experience to historical memory. Personal narrative was instrumental to many contributors’ approaches, including Erik Gould and Erik Carlson, who collaboratively created the multimedia piece *Silvered: Tracing Gorham at Mashapaug Pond*. When working on *Silvered*, they reflected on their previous experience documenting Gorham with the Providence Preservation Society, and approached the same subject through a new, artistic lens that created room for the humanistic dimension. Carlson credits his interest in Gorham’s site to his “wondering [about] what it felt like when it was populated, and when it was this significant space in people’s lives.”<sup>14</sup> Ferris, too, was passionate

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<sup>12</sup> Jeremy Ferris, interview by Samantha Ho. July 12, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Janaya Kizzie, interview by Samantha Ho. June 21, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Erik Carlson, interview by Samantha Ho. August 16, 2024.

about “fictional research,” or using our knowledge of Gorham to imagine the historical experiences of those connected to the site.<sup>15</sup>

Therein lies the profound value of *Unpolished Legacies*'s art-activist approach. Through these material presentations, *Unpolished Legacies*'s audience forges new connections to an otherwise immaterial history. While there is value in remembering Gorham through its tangible culture—its buildings, its industry, its products—exhibitions like *Designing Brilliance* demonstrate the pitfalls of this approach, which fixates on the material “fact” of history and consequently allows less room for personal connection or interpretation. Instead, it is through the humanistic approaches of projects like *Unpolished Legacies* that one can access, and continue to wrestle with, the “wholeness” of our histories.

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<sup>15</sup> Jeremy Ferris, interview by Samantha Ho. July 12, 2024.

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