A SPIRIT OF SIMPLICITY

AMERICAN ARTS & CRAFTS FROM THE TWO RED ROSES FOUNDATION

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Rookwood Pottery
Thatched Cottages in a Landscape, 1907

A SPIRIT OF SIMPLICITY

At the turn of the century, Americans were infatuated with the concept of "Arts & Crafts." The term itself was newly invented, having been first formulated in London in 1888. However, many of the ideas behind this movement had been in existence for a half century, and derived from the ideas of mid-nineteenth century English writers such as Thomas Carlyle and William Morris who had praised the pleasurable quality of work and the satisfaction that was to be gained from objects that were both useful and beautiful. Beauty was measured not only by the artistry of a chair or vase but also by the personal satisfaction that the maker experienced in creating it. Additionally, this emotional benefit transferred to the person who owned it. On both sides of the Atlantic, "Joy in one's labor" became the maxim of right-minded thinkers.

Reacting against the elaborate shapes and excessive ornament prevalent in Victorian design, reformers sought a chastened approach. While nature was still championed as a major source of inspiration, it was argued that simplification and abstraction of form was necessary. Inspired both by English design manuals and by Japanese prints, Americans were guided by the ideal set forth by the Boston Arts and Crafts Society: "sobriety and restraint." As the minister and reformer Charles Wagner declared in 1901:

> We must search out, set free, restore to honor the true life, assign things to their proper places, and remember that the center of human progress is moral growth. What is a good lamp? It is not the most elaborate, the finest wrought that of the most precious metal. A good lamp is a lamp that gives good light.… My aim is to point out a direction and tell what advantage would come to each of us from ordering his life in a spirit of simplicity."

The simple, carpentered oak furniture, unadorned copper objects, and mat glazed vases favored by the Arts & Crafts movement contrast vividly with the Louis XV and XVI furniture and opulent silverware favored by Henry and Mary Lily Flagler when they built Whitehall. Their taste was typical of America's Gilded Age and represented all that the Arts & Crafts movement was opposed to. Reformers often cast the contrast as one between a moneyed society continuing the grand traditions of Old World aristocracy and a middle class who favored a simpler, more egalitarian society.

FURNITURE

American Arts & Crafts furniture was emphatically strong and sturdy, like the oak wood from which it was generally made. Hinges, rather than being skillfully hidden, were made prominent elements of the design, and their copper color contrasted against the oak. So too the pegs as well as the enlarged mortise and tenon joints conveyed with clarity the construction of the piece. The hand of a craftsman was manifest everywhere. These features emphasized the honesty and integrity of both the furniture and the furniture maker. Even the simplicity of materials—a native rather than an exotic wood, a humble metal–bestowed a sense of virtue and economy. In short, the beauty of the desk or chair was not merely visual but also moral and intellectual. It stood up defiantly against both the cheap and shoddy mass produced furniture of Grand Rapids manufacturers and expensive pieces with ormolu mounts and veneers of imported wood made for members of a privileged class.

Despite the frequently cited idea of “joy in one’s labor” and the emphasis upon a designer being able to both conceive and execute the work from start to finish, most Arts & Crafts furniture was made in factories. The most prominent of these was The United Crafts, a firm that was created in 1901 by Gustav Stickley in upstate New York, outside of Buffalo. Called “a guild of cabinetmakers, metal and leather workers,”

Charles Rohlfs
Revolving desk, 1901

Charles Rohlfs
Side chair, 1900

it was formed as a profit-sharing company, but in 1903 it was reorganized as The Craftsman Workshops without any profit sharing. Like many practical men, Stickley accepted the use of machinery because it made the laborer's work easier and reduced the cost of the product, enabling it to be sold more widely. Indeed, his wares were distributed nationally and with great success. His magazine *The Craftsman* and his many printed catalogues also helped sell his firm's products.

At the opposite end of the Arts & Crafts spectrum were small workshops like the one run by Charles Rohlfs in Buffalo. Working from his home and with a staff of no more than eight men, he offered a wide range of furniture and accessories which were produced in small quantities. They used the same basic vocabulary of forms and copper accessories, but whereas Stickley's furniture was generally unornamented, Rohlfs' was excessively decorated with carved and pierced patterns and required much more intensive handicraft. Similarly, the Byrdcliffe Colony also created furniture which had simple wooden structures but it was decorated with carved or painted panels that were one-of-a-kind. This plurality of options and the tension between the individual craftsman and industry was a pattern that was repeated in the realms of Arts & Crafts ceramics and metalware as well.

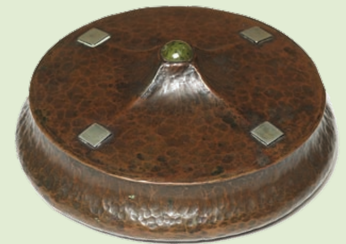
Byrdcliffe Colony
Chiffonier with Sweet Chestnut, c. 1904
Designed and executed by Zulma Parker Steele

Elbert Hubbard and the Roycroft Shop
Cellaret, c. 1905

Dirk Van Erp Studio
Table lamp, c. 1911-15

Elizabeth Copeland
Covered box, c. 1903-07

Karl Kipp
Jewelry box, c. 1912



METALWARE

Professional and amateur craftsmen and women were greatly attracted to working in metal because of the relative simplicity of processes and the direct, one-to-one relationship of the worker to the medium. Whereas working in clay called for a throwing wheel and kiln, and the handling of the material was often messy, metal work did not require much more than sheet metal, some hammers, and burins. It is small wonder, then, that individual craftsmen and communities of metalworkers abounded on the East and West coasts and in middle America. They were well known, and craft exhibitions and journals frequently featured and encouraged their work.

From Paul Revere to Tiffany & Company, silver had always been the traditional material of skilled metalworkers. In Boston and Chicago, where there was strong interest in metal among craftsmen associated with those cities' Arts & Crafts societies, silver remained a preferred medium. However, many others preferred copper because it was relatively inexpensive and thus conformed to the Arts & Crafts' middle-class aspirations for simplicity over costly opulence. Moreover because of copper's malleability it was easy to work and it could be patinated and colored.

Whereas some traditional metalworkers carefully planished their surfaces to a smooth finish, obliterating the marks of the work process, others intentionally left a residue of hammer marks to remind the public that these objects were hand made. Indeed, a hammered surface became the hallmark of Arts & Crafts metalwork. The copper objects from Elbert Hubbard and Gustav Stickley's workshops consistently use this stratagem. Other artisans found different means of expressing this aesthetic of handiwork. Elizabeth Copeland of Boston worked in an intentionally unsophisticated way with crudely repousséd designs and emphatic walls to contain the enamels. Similarly, Dirk Van Erp of San Francisco made exposed rivets a decorative feature of his lamps. The simple forms and structural clarity of such Arts & Crafts metalwares suggest parallels with Hubbard and Stickley's furniture.

WOODBLOCK PRINTS

The revival of woodblock printing in the latter part of the nineteenth century was due in large measure to the West's discovery of Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints. In France, it merged conveniently with Japonism and Post-Impressionism. In the United States, its great flowering coincided with the Arts & Crafts movement, where a new sense of abstracted design fit together with the heightened interest in craftsmanship, as manifest in the cutting of the woodblock. In 1895, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts held the first American exhibition of color woodblock prints.

The foremost American figure in the revival and popularization of woodblock printing was Arthur Wesley Dow (1857-1922). Although Dow had studied painting in Paris, he seems to have been immune to the innovations of Post-Impressionist art while there. But, while studying Japanese prints in Boston, he discovered the secret of shifting from merely representational art to decoratively reconstructed compositions. Employing asymmetry, irregular spacing, the balance of lights and darks, and the rearrangement of local colors for decorative effect, Dow created a system of composition that was fundamental for modern American art and design.

Dow was a skilled and highly influential teacher. He taught courses at various institutions in New York City and ran a summer school in his native Ipswich, Massachusetts. His book, *Composition*, first published in 1899, spread his ideas across the country. Although there were many teachers of printmaking in this country, American artists were deeply affected by Dow and his methods. Some studied with him or at schools which followed his curriculum, while others knew him personally. Their pastoral landscapes, flowers, children, and craftsmen at work are the sorts of subjects one would expect in an Arts & Crafts culture.

Dow's influence also extended to the decorative arts. Designers from various American potteries attended Dow's course or followed the lessons of his book. Similarly, his influence on the furniture made at the Byrdcliffe Colony is apparent.

Jane Berry Judson
Blossom Time, c. 1915-30

Arthur Wesley Dow
Along Ipswich River, 1893

TILES

Decorative tiles were used throughout the Arts & Crafts environment: as decoration on the exteriors of buildings, as floor paving, around hearths, lining bathrooms, as the top surfaces of tables. Tiles were made by most of the major art potteries as well as by small cooperative groups and studio potters. The tiles' soft colors, quaint subjects, and pleasing geometric designs admirably complimented the palette and décor of American Arts & Crafts interiors, and so it is no wonder that they were much in demand.

A quarter of a century earlier the situation was quite different because most tiles used in the United States were imported, primarily from English commercial establishments. The highly successful exhibits of European manufacturers at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia strengthened the resolve of American manufacturers to produce tiles domestically and thriving businesses were soon established. In the late 1890s important changes occurred and they centered around the work of William H. Grueby of Boston, who invented softly colored mat glazes. Forsaking the imitation of historic styles of the past (Renaissance, Islamic, etc.), his designers created imagery more in sympathy with the simpler, restrained aesthetic of the Arts & Crafts movement. The harmony of colors and the stateliness of his firm's designs established the new American standard for artistic tiles. Their success, especially the many commissions from architects, sustained the economic well-being of the company.

Other large firms reacted similarly to the demand for tiles. The Rookwood Pottery of Cincinnati opened a separate department of architectural faience, offering everything from fireplaces to completely tiled rooms. Smaller establishments such as the Marblehead Potteries could not compete on a grand scale but their tiles, intended as framed pictures or tea trivets, responded to the same Arts & Crafts impulses.

Marblehead Potteries
Cats in the Moonlight, c. 1910
Designed by Arthur E. Baggs

Grueby Faience Company
Pine Forest, c. 1906
Designed by Addison B. LeBoutillier

Rhead Pottery
Vase with Landscape, c. 1914-17
Designed and executed by Frederick Hurten Rhead

Marblehead Potteries
Four vases, c. 1907-15
Designed by Arthur I. Hennessey, Arthur E. Baggs, and Maude Milner
Executed by Sarah W. Tutt

POTTERY

American ceramics show lively and varied response to the social and aesthetic issues of the day. They come from across the country: in the Northeast, the Grueby and Marblehead potteries of Massachusetts, in the Midwest the Rookwood Pottery of Ohio and Gates Potteries of Illinois, from the South, the Newcomb Pottery of Louisiana, and from the West, the Van Briggle Pottery of Colorado and the Rhead Pottery of California. While each establishment had its own particular approach to style, color, and technique, they all embraced important aspects of the Arts & Crafts movement.

Compared with the elaborate art pottery created in the 1870s and 1880s, the ceramics of 1900 were simpler in form and decoration. Whereas much of the earlier pottery was decorated with realistic imagery in emulation of paintings on canvas, turn-of-the-century design manuals and schools emphasized the idea of "conventionalization," abstracting the motif to simplify it. In contrast to the glossy surfaces of earlier pottery, the use of mat glazes, especially the mat green glaze introduced by William H. Grueby, was championed not only because it was beautiful but also because it induced quietude and rest, and thus created a healthy, more tranquil environment.

Some potteries responded to the social concerns of the Reform movement. The young women who

Grueby Pottery
Vase with Narcissi, c. 1900-09

Newcomb Pottery
Jardinière with rabbits, 1902
Designed and executed by Marie de Hoa Le Blanc

Newcomb Pottery
Covered Jar with Daisies, 1903
Designed and executed by Harriet Coulter Joor

worked at the Paul Revere Pottery came from the slums of North Boston and were encouraged to decorate pottery as a means of earning tuition for summer camp. In response to the new positive value ascribed to work, the Marblehead Potteries was founded originally to provide therapy for patients with nervous conditions. At Newcomb College, there was an overriding concern to provide a means of support for genteel educated women wishing to be independent.

Most potteries maintained traditional distinctions in terms of the roles assigned to men and women, with men assuming the more physical tasks of throwing, glazing, and firing. By 1900 this situation began to change, as women finally learnt to throw on the potter's wheel. In 1880 Maria Longworth Nichols was exceptional in starting her own workshop, the Rookwood Pottery, but at the turn of the century a number of women stepped forth to do the same. Such emancipation is aligned with the democratic aspirations of the Arts & Crafts movement and, of course, parallels important developments in the Suffragette movement.

TWO RED ROSES FOUNDATION

All the works in this exhibition are from Two Red Roses Foundation of Palm Harbor, Florida, and this brochure was made possible by them. This non-profit, educational institution is dedicated to promoting an understanding of the American Arts and Crafts movement through the collection, conservation, exhibition, and interpretation of the decorative and fine arts.

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