Notes

08–04

BYRDCLIFFE AT MILWAUKEE

ROBT. EDWARDS

American Decorative Arts, 1860-1960

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A WING...

Glenn Adamson, who had to pinch hit the Byrdcliffe show when Nonie Gadsden moved on up to Boston, invited me to speak about Byrdcliffe furniture at a symposium sponsored by the Milwaukee Art Museum's American Heritage Society. I can't believe that everyone involved with that museum is as nice as those who made my visit such a good experience. Liz Flaig saw to every detail of my flight and accommodations with efficiency, but, more importantly, with humor. Glenn helped me keep negative energy to a minimum and guided me past the shoals of my first computerized presentation—he was incredibly serene when, at the last minute, the proper adapter could not be found.

Barbara Fuldner is the president of the American Heritage Society. I have known Barbara and Henry Fuldner for more than thirty years, but have not seen their collection of Arts and Crafts objects before. They let a large band of symposium participants troop though their house and ogle the family Stickley. It was fun to see some objects I sold them years ago when few people knew much about what kind of Craftsman furniture was still out there waiting to be discovered—surprisingly, what seemed rare then remains so today.

Nici and Bill Tewles and Barbara and Bob Elsner entertained us handsomely even though they remember me as paddle number 49. Years ago when the contents of George Washington Maher's "Rockledge" were being auctioned, I bought by the truck load not knowing that these preservation-minded ladies were bidding against me to keep the treasures in Wisconsin. All these years later, much of the best stuff is back home. Someday it should all be reunited in an exhibition.

Unfortunately I was there to be the entertainment, not to be entertained. Since I hadn't seen the exhibition before, I had a lot of looking to do before I made my presentation. What an albatross this Byrd must have been for the museum staff to install! Even though major pieces (including ones that actually relate in important ways to the Arts and Crafts colony) were not exhibited, there were far too many things for the limited space. Precious space was given over to Cornell-produced audio/video

kiosks that were detrimental to the exhibition not just because they took up space, but because much of the information they provided was inaccurate. The first one played a new age music track while modern and period photographs of the Byrdcliffe campus floated on and off the screen. As I stood watching, it dawned on me that all the period images had been Photoshopped to look like antique hand-tinted photographs—a fairly high-handed thing to do to archival images that are the original art of some fairly famous pictorialist photographers. It brought to mind the controversy about colorizing classic black and white movies.

The second "learning aid" (Were these required to get the federal funding?) tried to put Byrdcliffe crafts into the context of the work of other American Arts and Crafts movement luminaries. It was ludicrous for people who know anything of the history of the Movement and unfortunate for the uninitiated because they would never suspect that they shouldn't believe their ears. It claimed that Roycroft was "truly American" while Byrdcliffe, because it used natural motifs, was more aligned with British Arts and Crafts. Most Arts and Crafts historians talk about the obvious references to Mackmurdo and Liberty furniture that can be found in Roycroft forms while Zulma Steele and Edna Walker, who were responsible for most of the "natural motifs" that decorated Byrdcliffe forms, were little influenced by British designs. If Dow guided them as much as Nancy Green wants us to believe, their designs might easily be seen as particularly American. Of course the name Frank Lloyd Wright had to be invoked. To pull him in, he and Ralph were said to have integrated architecture with nature. In as much as there was any similarity, Wright's theories were cerebral while Whitehead's were merely pedantic. There is no prairie around Wright's prairie houses so one must rely on imagination to understand the horizontal lines or the abstracted

sumac stained glass in his Dana house. If Whitehead can be called the architect of Byrdcliffe buildings, his architecture "integrates" with nature only because it has always been difficult for earthlings to do anything else.

The voice goes on to inform us that, unlike Stickley's Craftsman furniture, Roycroft had no consistent style. In one Craftsman catalogue one finds hefty, foursquare "mission" designs next to attenuated Ellis designs with wispy metal inlays. Elegant spindle armchairs are next to Shrek-proportioned "Eastwood" chairs. Tippy "chalet" desks are next to icebox-like fall front desks. If anything, Roycroft is consistently boring by contrast to the rich mix Stickley offered. Tom Wolf must have written this stuff since his unfounded idea that Byrdcliffe furniture was more expensive than Stickley furniture is repeated here. The voice says Greene & Greene furniture was rich while Byrdcliffe furniture was rustic—some of the furniture in this exhibit is in terrible condition, but none of it can be characterized as "rustic." I hold the copyright on many of the Echelmeyer images used in this presentation, but my permission was not obtained nor was credit given.

At the third kiosk, one may listen to Byrdcliffe denizen quotes read as if an actual dialogue were going on between the likes of Ralph, Jane, and Hervey. You won't be able to tell who is supposed to be talking, but the amateur actors' voices are hilariously inappropriate so don't miss this spot of humor. The fourth station has a small part that is actually worthwhile: it explains the process of slip casting ceramics. Each station has a couple of black box speakers dangling from the corners and the multiple sound tracks all playing at once and endlessly repeating relate this exhibition to some of the modern installation art in the upstairs gallery—a nice touch.

The Cornell-provided labels do nothing to explain why particular objects are in the show and the museum had sold out of catalogues when I was there. This is probably a good thing since the casual viewer will never know that about a third of the objects don't need to be in the exhibit. White Pines pottery is not good enough to warrant three large cases of vases and a wall panel of glaze samples—one case of three or four pots and a wooden form together with Milwaukee's impressive display of their large eucalyptus vase would have been more than enough. Two large cases were devoted to metalwork that was not made at Byrdcliffe. As I understood the situation, the exhibition was plagued with financial constrictions, which caused the catalogue to be more than a year late. Yet the Plexiglas cases were mounted on monstrous, expensive custom-built tables that tried to imitate the furniture in the show. The straight-cut oak was stained with a violent contemporary-art-furniture green and the ends were carved with lilies that must have Zulma and Edna spinning in their graves. But what do I know? More than one little old lady thought they were pretty so maybe some costs can be recouped by selling them at the end of the run.

I watched many people miss two whole galleries of Woodstock art because the entrance was hidden behind a massive concrete column. Again, they didn't miss much relevant information. The galleries were hung with paintings that must have been chosen for their splendor as most have next to nothing to do with Byrdcliffe. This is also where all those not Zulma Steele decorative designs were hung—oh and that other bit of humor: the photo of Bob Dylan.

The Milwaukee Art Museum is not to be faulted for any of the above. They did the best they could with what they were handed. The parts of the installation that the museum controlled were beautifully executed.

...AND A PRAYER.

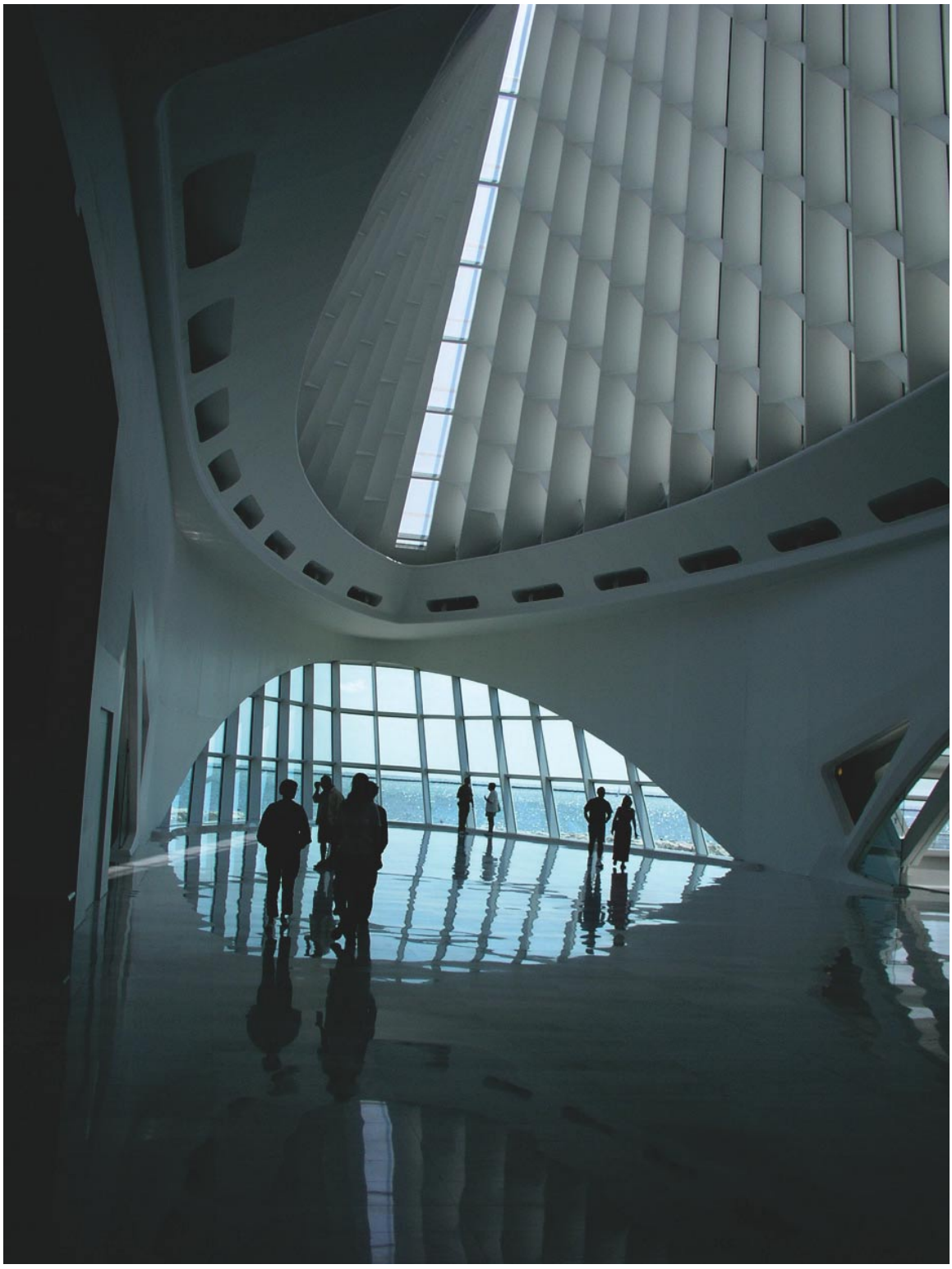
I wonder what the average visitor will take away from this show. The labels don't explain the objects, the objects don't explain Byrdcliffe, the catalogue doesn't explain the show. I based my talk on the object checklist in the catalogue only to find out that many of the objects that were supposed to be in the show were not. The Dawson Dawson-Watson settle (#14,) the "Eggers" cabinet (#18,) and the "Edward Thatcher" chandelier (#48) didn't make it to Milwaukee. The sublime iris hanging cabinet will be shown only in New York and at Winterthur.

I dunno. If you were a collector, which chest would you prefer: the sanded and varnished one or the one with the original surface?

see the next page >>>

The latter? Really? Well, you can own it—just contact us.

I wonder what the average visitor will think Byrdcliffe furniture is supposed to look like. The lily chest (#22) chosen for display is in wretched condition: the top has been heavily sanded and the whole has a glossy coat of varnish. Boston's tulip cabinet (39) looks like it has been coated with tar. Even its carved panel, which was in perfect original condition, has been washed with some muddy stain. In both cases, examples in fine original condition were available from the Willcox family. Numbers 15 and 37 are filthy. There is no explanation for the new look on Steele's iris desk (#28.) Someone swiped an uneven coat of polish over the top of the sweet little lily cricket (#32) sitting next to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's sassafras cabinet. Only the Met's cabinet (#38) has been properly cleaned. The water marks it got while at White Pines are still visible on the side and top, but all the dust has been removed from the nooks and crannies of the carving and no coating was added to the original transparent blue/green stain. It's too bad that all the beautiful related drawings did not accompany this piece.



If you can visit the museum (www.mam.org,) do so, but go for their permanent collections or, if you haven't experienced it, the Calatrava addition. Be sure to see the wings open in the morning or close at the end of the day. Even someone as jaded as I was impressed. I had thought the moving parts to be silly and wasteful before I saw them in action. I'm still not sure that they are not silly and wasteful, but I sure am glad they got built. The whole thing is spacey and fun—like me. At first I was puzzled by

what appeared to be inset panels of fake blocks of stone on the outside, but, as I got into the spirit of the place, I began to think I understood them. Could the architect have been making a retro statement by quoting 1970s station wagons that had panels with fake wood grain printed on them to refer to earlier "woody" autos? I'm not sure, but certainly the building has nothing to do with traditional building methods like laid up blocks. A docent explained how all the materials were carefully chosen for their whiteness. I would have missed this subtle detail because I was thinking how much the building looked like something out of the movie "Waterworld." I perversely longed for the silent mechanisms to creak and whine as the wings unfolded and wished for streaks of rust and grime to temper the blinding white.

Robert Edwards assembled the information on the web site AmericanDecorativeArt.com to share his interests. Important figures like Jane and Ralph Whitehead of the Byrdcliffe Arts and Crafts Colony and Will Price of Rose Valley are featured. This site also explores the work of artists and craftsmen like Daniel Pabst, Frank Furness, A. H. Davenport, John Scott Bradstreet, Wharton Esherick, Max Kuehne, Norman Arsenault, and many others who were active between 1860 and 1960.

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