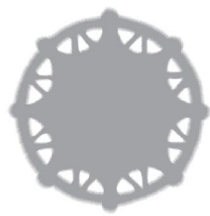


Robert Reviews

07-14-04

ARTS AND CRAFTS FURNITURE: FROM CLASSIC TO CONTEMPORARY
WRITTEN BY KEVIN P. RODEL AND JONATHAN BINZEN
PUBLISHED IN 2003, BY TAUNTON PRESS



ROBT EDWARDS

AMERICAN DECORATIVE ARTS, 1860-1960

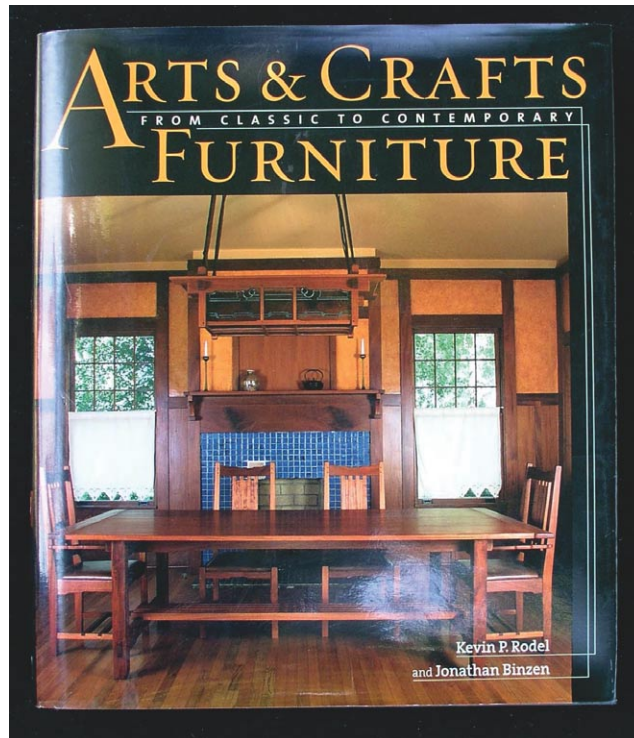
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For me, the American Arts & Crafts movement has become like an old sacred cow—no matter how much one wrings the teats of her shriveled udder, no milk comes out.

Some recent and upcoming publications can be used to illustrate my analogy:



Arts and Crafts Furniture: From Classic to Contemporary was written by Kevin P. Rodel and Jonathan Binzen and published in 2003, by Taunton Press. Although this book hit the bookstores late last year, the woman who first took on the project came to me at least a decade ago and Rodel, who took over with Binzen, contacted me several years ago. This indicates to me that Taunton generated the idea for the publication (“inspiration for hands-on living.”) and then went in search of authors a long time ago. Such a book seems superfluous now, but it might have found a place in the early 1990s when the Arts & Crafts market in general was flying high.

Whatever the original concept was, Taunton must have lost focus over time for the book is difficult to categorize. It’s about the size and slickness of a coffee-table book, yet the layout, with many small photographs sprinkled throughout, doesn’t really look like any of those vacuous style books with their lavish double-page spreads. A closer look reveals some sort of organization, but I haven’t been able to figure out where the chapters, chapterettes, asides, and captions intend to lead me. The contents page looks like one could expect a chronological sled ride through Arts & Crafts history. Instead, all of the



furniture on the front of the dust jacket is modern and the introduction begins with a full-page illustration of stools by Wharton Esherick, who worked in the mid-twentieth century when Arts & Crafts was only an influence.

The introduction states the case this way: “Our main purpose in writing this book is to present the entire spectrum of Arts & Crafts furniture so that we might better understand the movement’s diversity and its originality.” Okay but this has already been done over and over again as the authors readily acknowledge. The best that can be said for this rehash is that the breezy and sometimes irreverent style of writing is refreshing. Rodel is a cabinetmaker who obviously loves the ethos of the movement, which inspires his real work of building Arts & Crafts style furniture. He thus escapes a dry, academic approach with endless endnotes that so often burdens the writing of decorative arts scholars and curators, who often have never seen the objects they are writing about. As you can read in my previous posting about Byrdcliffe, Nancy Green of the Herbert Johnson Museum at Cornell is a prime example of this type of ivory-tower research.

The downside to a craftsman’s version of Arts & Crafts history is the tendency not to question previously published academic theories. Even the words of the evangelists ought to be taken with a grain of salt. Will Price wrote that good woodworkers were scarce in 1901 Philadelphia. Rodel uses this statement to support the old saw about the Arts & Crafts movement seeking to revive nearly dead or lost craft skills. This ignores the fact that for at least ten years before the founding of Rose Valley, Price used a stable of highly skilled wood workers to produce furniture, which is indistinguishable from the Rose Valley product. From the beginning, the movement’s messengers like Price, Elbert Hubbard, and Gustav Stickley fiddled with the truth to tart up their rather dour theories. Since then, those with an interest in putting a profitable spin on the Arts & Crafts market have been happy to perpetuate such myths.

Taunton’s book carries that tradition forward in ways too subtle for the neophyte to notice. The book is filled with half-truths, which leave me waiting for the other shoe to drop. Throughout, Gustav Stickley is made out to be the primary and predominant influence on American furniture makers. When diagramed, the theory may not prove untrue, but it looks very different to me. Stickley was certainly an important, early factor in the development of the Arts and Crafts style in the United States. He was not the only, the first, the most prescient, or the best. Yet, like Price, he is accepted at his word. It’s the old it’s-art-because-I-say-it’s-art approach. No one questions the integrity of his sudden move from churning out unimaginative and undistinguished late-Victorian rockers with lion-head arms to producing monolithic, plain oak sideboards with the look of hand craftsmanship. His sincere and humble demeanor asks that we pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. I think the huge importance of the man and his magazine to modern scholars is often conflated with their influence at the turn of the twentieth century. At that time, *The Craftsman* might well have been the most widely read American



Arts & Crafts publication. But Arts & Crafts was by no means the predominant style in this country or anywhere else. The hierarchy enforced by placing too much importance on buzz words like “progressive,” “rare,” or “first” serves the market well, but has no place in even such a basic survey. Books like this one encourage the reader to be lazy about looking or thinking—all one has to do is measure an object against a chart of keywords. The object that gets the most checkmarks wins and a personal aesthetic need not be developed.

Once Binzen and Rodell get to America, they establish Gustav Stickley as the progenitor of Craftsman style. Perforce, his brothers and others are mere camp followers, copyists, and, by implication, second rate. A discussion about L. & J. G. Stickley’s construction techniques misrepresents differences between the two Stickley companies. The authors write that L. & J. G. “filled a niche that Gustav’s higher-priced line ignored” by offering “a number of small, inexpensive items such as side tables, simple chairs, and open bookracks...” This is just plain BS. Gustav’s tiny taborets and chintzy little celadine tea table (contradictorily illustrated in this book) were only two in a panoply of “small, inexpensive items” to be found in the Craftsman catalog. Gustav offered footstools fit for a Hobbit house that are among my favorite Craftsman designs. He appealed to the market with wastebaskets, open bookracks, and, of course, “simple chairs” and none of these items were more expensive or less mass-produced than similar L. & J. G. offerings.





No. 74
BOOK RACK \$6.00
HEIGHT 31 in.
WIDTH 30 in.
DEPTH 10 in.



No. 394
DESK CHAIR, RUSH OR SOFT
LEATHER SLIP SEAT \$4.50
HEIGHT OF BACK FROM FLOOR 40 in.
HEIGHT OF SEAT FROM FLOOR 18 in.
SIZE OF SEAT 17 in. WIDE, 15 in. DEEP
SEAT TAPERED IN BACK TO 15 in.



No. 89
SMOKER'S CABINET \$12.00
HEIGHT 29 in.
WIDTH 20 in.
DEPTH 15 in.



No. 301
STOOL, RUSH SEAT \$4.50
HEIGHT 17 in.
SIZE OF SEAT 20 in. x 16 in.



No. 302
FOOT STOOL \$2.50
HEIGHT 5 in.
12 in. SQUARE

The authors go on to analyze L. & J. G. construction techniques without a similar discussion of Gustav's:

“ L.& J. G. Stickley furniture was stoutly built but not extravagant. Pieces would be joined with pegged tenons rather than the more costly through tenons that were a signature of Craftsman pieces. L. & J. G. Stickley also developed a clever method of gluing up thick legs and posts from thin stock, which cut costs while enabling them to display a quartersawn figure on all four sides of a leg rather than on only two.”



I can't figure out what that first sentence is supposed to mean. In my experience, both companies used pegged tenons and through tenons and I have seen examples of Craftsman furniture with faked through, pegged tenons. This statement is one of the places where an endnote would actually be helpful—I would like to see verification that one method was “more costly” than the other since both were done by machine. I would also like to know if the L. & J. G. method of gluing up legs cut any more costs than Gustav's who often simply laminated thin stock and slapped veneer on the sides to “display a quartersawn figure on all four sides...” From what I've seen, the L. & J. G. technique was far more durable. One L. & J. G. caption begins “Whereas Gustav Stickley, always very carefully made...” but I know of countless examples of rickety craftsmanship including the “Tom Jones” drink stand shown on page 109. One is further misled because Gustav's Craftsman factory is not included in the chapter with the pejorative title “Factory Furniture.” This chapter begins, “the furniture in this chapter shares a common thread: profit.” Are we to believe that Gustav was not concerned with profit? Is profit bad?

The books didactic assessments of Arts and Crafts designs help me to remember that all art appreciation comes down to personal taste and opinion. I happen to like “difficult” art like Marsden Hartley's heavy-handed renditions of Canadian fishermen or the clumsy stuff Gustav Stickley marketed just after he gave up his flimsy interpretations of Art Nouveau. But I also prefer L. & J. G. Stickley's refinements on Gustav Stickley's copy of a Baillie-Scott interpretation of a medieval table. I try not to place originality and innovation over aesthetics. No matter that Paul Henson's clock case designed for L. & J. G. was derived from British and European sources, it is still more beautiful than any Gustav Stickley clock.



To me, the furniture of Charles Rohlf's never shook the look of the cast-iron stoves he designed early in his career. One would think that the sublime ugliness of his tall case clock for the Automobile Club (illustrated on page 191) would appeal to me for it is most certainly difficult. It is rare if not unique, it is original if not innovative, it was made before 1901 so it is early by this book's standard for American products, it is not a factory product, and it would be very, very valuable if it ever came to market, but I don't think it is beautiful. However, swooning over concepts as mutable as beauty will get one's bank account nowhere.



Rohlf's also designed total interiors as did Frank Lloyd Wright and George Washington Maher. This book doesn't pass judgment on Rohlf's and makes the interiors of Frank Wright a standard to aspire to:

"Maher's motif-rhythm theory is analogous to Wright's practice of carrying a decorative theme throughout a house and its furnishings, but in Maher's hands the tactic was most often too literally employed, too predictable, and virtually overwhelming. In Rockledge, the house in Minnesota that was Maher's magnum opus, for example, the rampant motifs are cacophonous rather than pleasing."

Had this pronouncement been qualified by "I think..." I would have little to argue about, but God must have used a finger of lightning to carve it in stone. Is Maher literal because the hollyhocks used in his Ruben house are more realistic than those Wright used in the Barnsdall hollyhock house?

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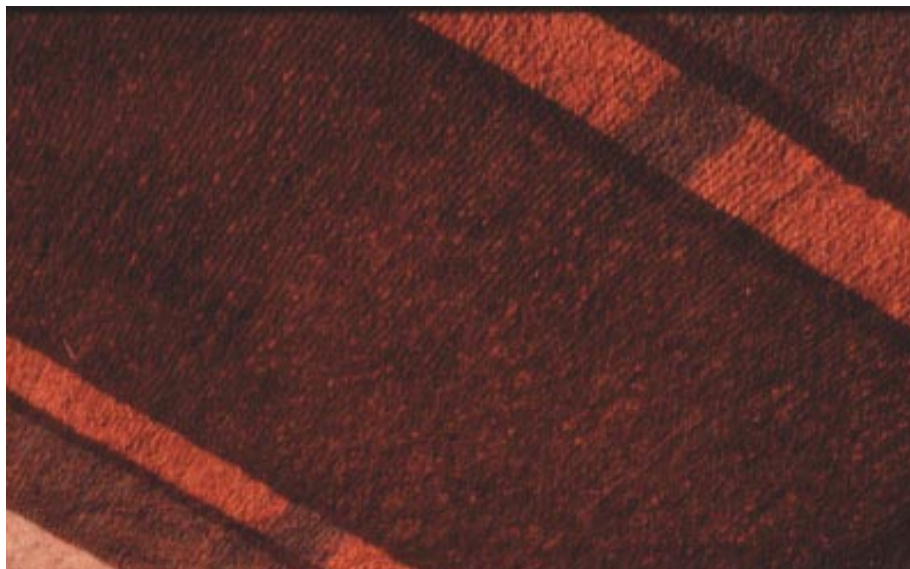


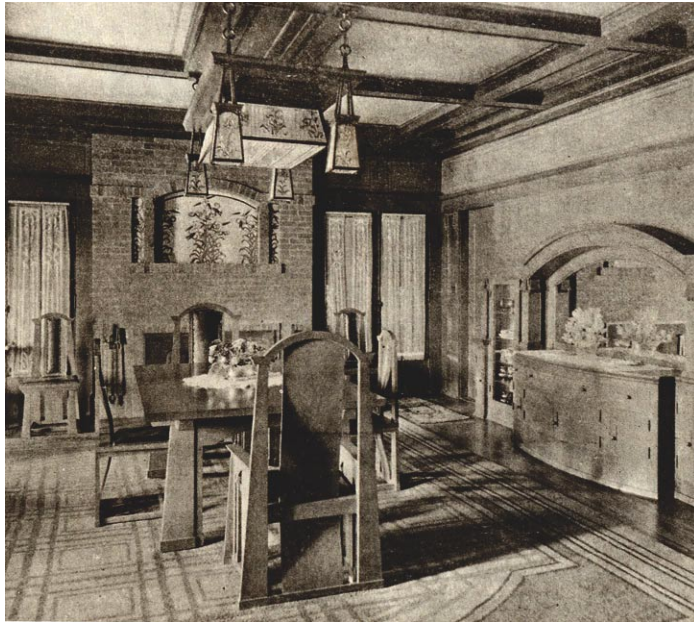
What about all those murals with naturalistic ferns and pine trees that Wright and Niedecken cooked up? I am always more surprised by Maher's eccentric combinations of segmental arches and classical motifs than I am by the predictable geometric abstractions Wright used over and over again. Overwhelming? Cacophonous? Unfortunately there are no complete Maher interiors left so we can experience them only through photographs. Still I find the muted color scheme; the subtle, solid curves; the considered and commodious proportions; and the occasional soft touch of the orange lily stained glass of Rockledge to be far more harmonious and less intrusive than the glitzy pizzazz; sharp corners; uptight proportions; and rigid, abstract, and dangerous looking sumac stained glass of Wright's Dana house.



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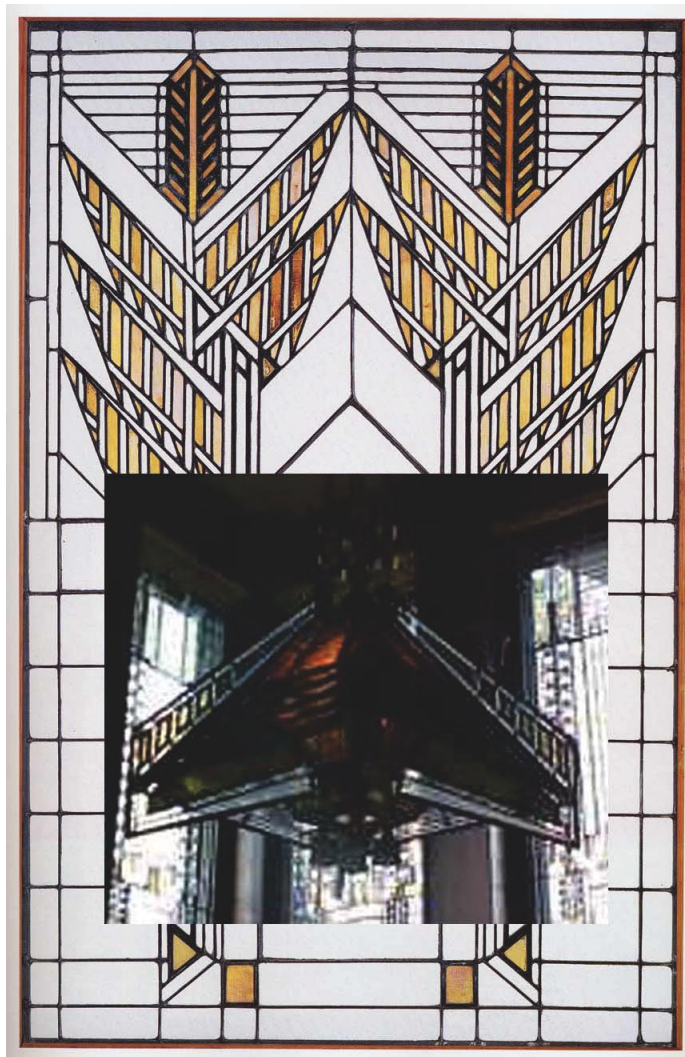
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There are many other misleading statements that a naive reader seeking to learn about the movement might accept as facts:


“What attracted so many to the [Morris] chair was not so much its aesthetic appeal as its association with Morris, the progenitor of the Arts and Crafts movement.”

Morris chairs came in every conceivable style and a good many were recognized as abominations at the time they were made so there was no inherent aesthetic appeal in the form. I have a hard time believing that a Missouri farmer’s wife looking through a department store catalog would have chosen a quartered-oak reclining chair crawling with machine carved lions and plastered with north wind faces for her front parlor because it reminded her fondly of old Billy Morris.

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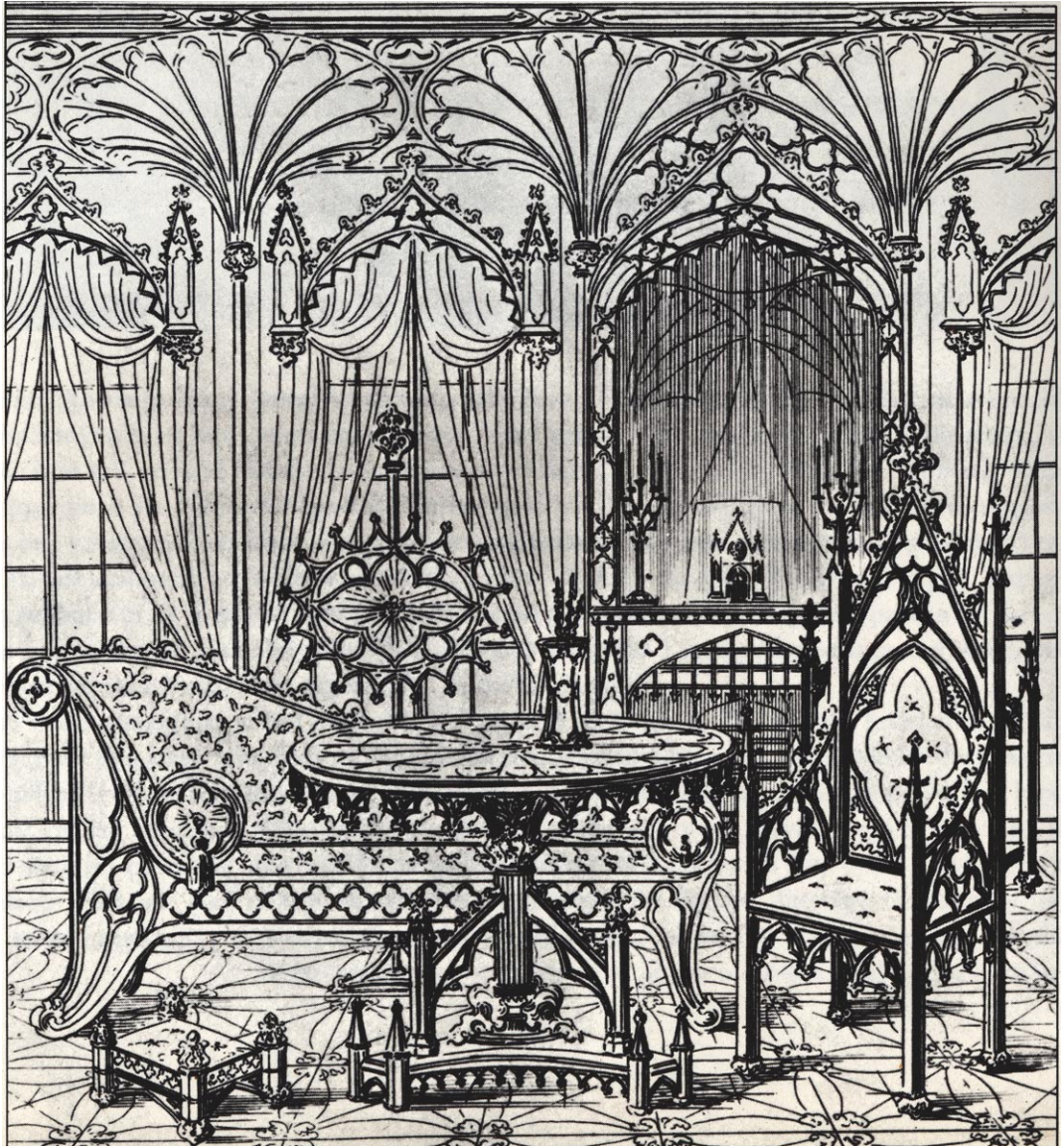
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“English architect Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin was largely responsible for the flowering of Gothic revival in the early 1800s.”

The Gothic revival was in full flower decades before Pugin began his efforts to reform what he thought to be a frivolous and inaccurate style. He wanted to replace the crocketed fantasies that were stylish in the 18th century with what he thought were designs based on historical precedents.



“One of the most influential and enduring ideas of the Arts and Crafts movement was Morris’s conviction that a house and all its contents could be a wholly integrated work of art,”

Morris was only continuing a practice already common in the homes of the very rich. Robert Adam, Thomas Chippendale, and Thomas Hope are only a few British designers who made houses that were wholly integrated works of art long before Morris made the idea a centerpiece of his Arts and Crafts theories.

“The foursquare construction of both [Voysey] pieces is a delicate version of a building’s firm stance.”



“The heft and plainly structural design of Craftsman furniture makes a visual link to house construction.”

“...Ellis also lightened the structural elements of Craftsman furniture, increased the use of pronounced curves, and gave many pieces an architectural flavor.”

A chair or table with four legs isn't always an example of “foursquare construction” and I can't see how the pieces illustrated in the book relate to a building's firm stance. Neither can I see how Stickley's hefty, plain hexagonal table relates to house construction. Of course geometry was at the heart of Wright's work, but until very recently the same could be said for any house or furniture design, even Gaudi's crazy designs. All these references to the architectural nature of Arts & Crafts furniture are not supported and some contradict each other.

The illustrations are also misleading. Most of the many Morris chairs illustrated have been photographed without back cushions and some without the seat cushions they were intended to have. This makes them fit much more easily into the book's descriptions of Arts & Crafts style because purely functional back splats that were never meant to be seen appear to be examples of plainly structural (not to say architectural) elements.

The text makes much of “opaque finishes” used by Mackintosh and Hoffmann “to obscure the wood grain” marking “a radical departure from the familiar Arts & Crafts aesthetic, which valued wood for its natural qualities.” Forgetting about the dense black paints and stains used by everyone from Godwin and Morris to Gustav Stickley and McHugh (not to mention Rohlf, Kendall, Price, Limbert, Liberty, and Gimson,) there is a full page illustration of a black-finished Hoffman table in which the grain has been whitened to emphasize the natural wood qualities.





Can it be that the authors don't realize that the "embossed floral decoration" on the top of the taboret shown on page 109 is not original? I have seen many factory-made pieces enhanced by the home craftsman with carving or, in this case, pyrography. It would have been a nifty example of how a home craftsman could make a mass-produced object more Arts & Crafts. Instead, it is used to illustrate a shaky theory about the evolution of Gustav Stickley's designs: "The powerfully rectilinear and utilitarian Craftsman pieces soon erased the memory of Stickley's curvilinear forms and decoration." Where does Harvey Ellis fit in this continuum and were the later pieces really any more utilitarian than the early ones?

Another illustration supports my belief that most modern Arts & Crafts aficionados have been blinded by worn-out rhetoric. A mid-nineteenth century sideboard is shown on page 22 with this caption:

"The Victorian appetite for ostentatious ornament was fed by manufacturers who produced poorly copied historic revival furniture and concocted designs like this server."

They could have found an example that would be exactly described by that caption. Instead, they have used a well-designed piece, which is no more of an attempt at copying than any Morris & Co. Medievalizing concoction. The quality of the carving is as high as that on a Rose Valley piece if not higher. Even the finish on the oak, if original, shows the "natural qualities of the wood." Arts & Crafts aesthetics are not right, just different.

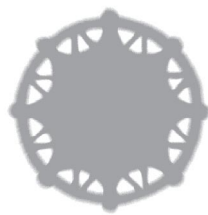
Still, a fair number of the pieces photographed are new to me, which is nice but not reason enough to make me buy the book. I got a free copy because I supplied so many of the images, which brings me back to the layout of the book. In addition to the history chapters (beginning, middle, and modern) there are chapters about the British, European, and American versions of the Arts & Crafts style. Then there are chapters about Stickley; factories; the Prairie School; American utopian communities and "innovators"; and about the Arts and Crafts revival. Each chapter is broken down further with discussions of individual craftsmen, information boxes, and "galleries". What pops up in these categories is arbitrary, subjective, and often redundant. There are quick forays into Teco (the present darling of the art-pottery market) and Mercer tiles. But, even though Grueby tiles show up prominently in several photographs of Craftsman-style furniture, there is no elaboration on that company's role in the movement. There is one box about the stylistic influence of the Far East, but none about the influence of colonial America. The authors blunder through Byrdcliffe perpetuating myths of Morris influence on the furniture's decoration, but for better or worse, they leave Biltmore, another example of an Arts & Crafts colony established by a rich man, unmentioned and unscathed.



Who knows what the criteria were for inclusion in the last sections. A select group of modern craftsmen were chosen to advertise their work in the gallery of the revival chapter and there are surprising omissions in the “selected bibliography” and “resource” lists. The latter publishes the names and addresses of “selected” dealers, museums, and craftsmen. A more inclusive list might well have been helpful to new, uninformed collectors with fat wallets, who must be the target audience for this book.

Robert Edwards has assembled the information on the web site
www.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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