



*Craftsman room from “International Arts and Crafts,” the Victoria and Albert Museum*

Room settings in art museums are crowd pleasers. They are also crowd deceivers. Three recent Arts and Crafts exhibits tell my story: “The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and America” expensively put on by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, “International Arts and Crafts” from the Victoria and Albert Museum, and “The American Arts and Crafts Home” assembled by the Two Red Roses Foundation. Most of the elements in LACMA’s recreation of Peter Behrens’ department store display were reproductions custom made for the exhibition. The V&A’s Craftsman room is an eight-sided box that was dropped into the exhibition space. The Two Red Roses setting is the least elaborate and uses a wallpaper border to establish scale within the cavernous spaces of a modern gallery.



*Two Red Roses Foundation Arts and Crafts room at the Leepa-Rattner Museum of Art*

Even though the LACMA room is based on a 1902 photograph and the V&A room is based on an illustration from Stickley's *Craftsman* magazine, all three rooms are fantasy, fallacy and fabrication. The original rooms that inspired them were little more than marketing aids like those in today's Pottery Barn catalogues or Ethan Allen showrooms. Since accurate color photography did not exist when these ensembles were first set up and wood finishes have changed radically with age, such rooms can do no more than suggest scale and the proportional relationship of one object to another. The LACMA catalog asserts that the now age darkened but natural wood of the flat-fronted sideboard they used in their set up is the one from the original department store suite. A glance at the 1902 photograph reveals that the original had a polygonal front and a dark finish that matched the chairs. The Craftsman room has a tasteful muddy color scheme and dim lighting. Fake daylight shines through fake Craftsman curtains, but light bulbs are also turned on to display the Tiffany art-glass shades. At least the Red Roses room, which is washed in natural light and high-wattage spotlights, leaves the Arts and Crafts lamplight off.



1902 photograph of Peter Behrens store display



Sideboard purported to be shown in 1902 photograph

I thought places like Colonial Williamsburg long ago taught museum people about the vicissitudes of research and the dangers of entombing the results of research in period reconstructions. To keep Williamsburg more of a museum than a theme park, curators have had to change the way the “rooms” look over and over again—each time the changes are based on the best scientific analyses of the moment. If President Bush really wanted to question scientific truth, he would do well to cite Williamsburg where tests of old paint have changed walls and woodwork from subtle celadon grey/green to a brighter viridian green to a violent, shiny Mt. Vernon thalo green. Curators began to realize that very few interiors were furnished with objects made at the exact same moment in the exact same part of one country as H. F. du Pont's 1950s rooms at Winterthur suggest. After all, if the intention is to represent the way real people lived; one must take into consideration objects of sentimental value as well as functional objects with no aesthetic merit. Rich folks (one had to be rich to furnish a “democratic” Arts and Crafts house) whose rooms and lives most interest most of us were able to drag much foreign finery into their homes. Gustav Stickley himself used luxurious velvets and Art Nouveau, Colonna-designed porcelain in the suburban New Jersey log cabin he called Craftsman Farms.

Like du Pont at Winterthur or John D. Rockefeller, Jr. at Williamsburg, rich men Max Palevsky, John Bryan, and Rudy Ciccarello have laid out a lot of money to have their particular version of the Arts and Crafts movement promulgated in museum exhibitions.