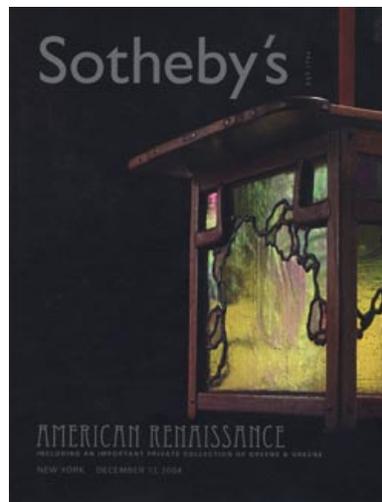


Notes

1/30/05

SOTHEBY'S "AMERICAN RENAISSANCE"
DECEMBER 17, 2004



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The Arts and Crafts Movement in 2004: The More Things Change, The More They Stay The Same.

Prologue:

I always think the fervor over the American Arts and Crafts movement is about to die out, but I'm always wrong. A steadfast group of prestidigitators keeps finding more smoke and mirrors to make objects and information that haven't been new since seventy-two seem interesting. During the ensuing thirty-two years, few if any decorative arts scholars have dared build on a foundation different from the hegemony established by Robert Judson Clark's exhibition at Princeton. Gustav Stickley is still treated as the paramount producer and proselytizer. Frank Lloyd Wright is still the blazing star of progressive design and indeed progressive design itself is still the most admired aspect of the movement even though it was supposed to be more about the process of living than about designing a modern product.

I think this has much more to do with making a market than with writing history. Back in the mid-nineteen seventies, Stickley could be ferreted out of attics and barns with relative ease and little expense. Since there was no internet or "Antiques Roadshow" then, few people knew what it was supposed to look like so it could be shined up and put on offer in a fancy (and now notorious) New York City gallery where trendy collectors flocked to be fleeced. It didn't hurt that media stars like Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe, and, later, Barbra, were among the private collectors.

Back then rural auction services ran sales like the Louise Stickley estate auction or the legendary Maine winter-storm auction in which objects turned up that are still iconic. The big two New York City auction houses recognized potential in the trend and began running specialized sales. Early on, Sotheby's dominated the market, but with the rise of Christie's Nancy McClelland to worldwide power, which culminated in marriage to Stephen Gray; Sotheby's dropped out of the race. Rago was then still a picker, Skinner's was just starting to build a reputation for Arts & Crafts, and Treadway had a long way to tread.

More Hollywood types hopped on the bandwagon: Max Palevsky (who once told me how much he liked the shiny new finish Jordan-Volpe put on their offerings,) Steven Spielberg, Joel Silver; and, eventually, Brad Pitt and Clint Eastwood. Apparently they and a bunch of in and out NYC queers found the macho, somewhat S & M aspects of Stickley's mission furniture appealing. Cutting-edge gays gave collecting Craftsman furniture, hammered copper, and tough, grubby Grueby pottery a cachet that colonial American objects never had. Queenly art museum design mavens from New York to Philadelphia to Atlanta quickly put Stickley on parade. From there, copy-cat museums like Houston got the requisite catalogue #814 sideboard and soon every museum from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon was displaying an example of Craftsman furniture. Some of the camp followers were actually female. Wendy



Detail of Mapplethorpe photograph showing Stickley pedestal



Ebonized Gustav Stickley settle brought \$3000. at the January 1979 Oliver sale in Maine.

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Gustav Stickley settle
ex Kaufman collection

Kaplan was reaching for the brass ring and Leslie Bowman became Palevsky's handmaiden. Of course, Beth Cathers had always been there, but I can't bring myself to contemplate that as a gender issue.

A feverish pitch peaked in the late '80s when Striesand paid around \$500,000 for a sideboard that was said to have come from one of Gustav Stickley's houses and Phillips set record prices when they sold my collection. After that the art market in general crashed. Arts and Crafts quietly held its own largely because of a few big-spending private collectors who realized that the best of Arts and Crafts still cost a fraction of what the best of most other American art cost.



Clock designed by George Washington Maher for "Rockledge" in the collection of Tazio Nuvolari

A new generation of collectors began buying goods recycled from the first wave. The Domino Pizza man sold off his Frank Lloyd Wright collection. Mickey Wolfson more or less abandoned his Miami museum. Dealer Michael Carey died and his collection was dispersed. Wives don't seem to like this stuff as much as the guys--Charles Kaufman died and his wife got rid of his collection. Edgar Smith's new wife made him sell most of his collection. Striesand auctioned off her horde (including the sideboard) at Christie's.

In my opinion, the most important collection to get broken up was Jovin Lombardo's, parts of which were often hidden behind the name "Tazio Nuvolari." Lombardo has a mind of his own and was never swayed by the marketing strategies of Beth Cathers or Jordan-Volpe or Stephen and Nancy. He avoided making a formulaic Arts and Crafts collection based on the work of Gustav Stickley. Among the very few who had confidence in their own taste and the knowledge to form their own version of Arts and Crafts history, Lombardo put together the good, the bad, and the ugly. It's a shame that his collection was never exhibited in its entirety before the Sara Lee guy bought a big chunk of the more conventional objects for his Stickley theme park, Crab Tree Farms. Maybe Lombardo's imprimatur will stay with the parts of his collection and someday it will be brought back together for exhibition as was the seminal 1929 "Girl Scouts Loan Exhibition."



Karl von Rydingsvard lecturn
ex Lombardo collection

High second-time-around prices insured that these core objects would sail on, cutting through a sea of philosophers, designers, and artisans whose contributions to the movement was no less meritorious than Stickley's, but whose work was more difficult to find and market. Clark's writing, enforced by market hype, established a linear history based on a star system that couldn't allow John Scott Bradstreet, Ralph Radcliffe-Whitehead or George Washington Maher to get equal billing with Gustav Stickley, the Greene brothers, or Frank Lloyd Wright. The flashy shows of those decades like "The Art That is Life" or "American Arts and Crafts: Virtue in Design" were little more than Clark's Princeton exhibition on steroids. They served to showcase individual collections and not to expand knowledge of the movement.



The view from here and now:

For most of the 1990s the Dakota Boys (a.k.a. Dr. Bruce Barnes and Dr. Joe Cunningham) were Beth Cathers' secret. I first met them at the first NYU Arts and Crafts conference when Catherine Voorsanger and I happened (or, knowing Catherine, perhaps not by accident) to sit behind the billing and cooing couple. Even as relatively unknown factors, their willingness to pay unheard of prices was having an effect on the market. As almost everybody in the field eventually does, they had a nasty falling out with Beth and began to do their own legwork. By then a new figure appeared and began throwing around even more money than the boys were willing to spend.

Rudy Ciccarello hid behind representatives like Cathers until he too became disenchanted with her and all other dealers and auctioneers (this from his lips to my ears). Before he came out, he bought Barbra's sideboard and he bought a Byrdcliffe cabinet for a record price from Christies. Then he bought more Byrdcliffe including a refinished lily stand with replaced parts and a cherry "chiffonier" with heavily restored blue landscapes, which were expensive relative to their condition. By the time he was run up to a bid of some \$300,000 for a Stickley lantern that would have been expensive at \$60,000, he was sticking his own hand in the air at auctions. I think his method of paying any price to get anything he fancies threw a wrench in the price structure of Arts and Crafts objects.

For example, John Scott Bradstreet's work jumped from the low five figures to over \$300,000 (see lot # 6 in Sotheby's June 17, 2004 20th century design sale.) Sotheby's lotus table had a later, heavy varnish laid over Bradstreet's fragile, signature "jin-di-sugi" finish, which means that the intended appearance could never be restored. Lombardo owned a similar table that retained the original surface and he sold it soon after the auction in a private sale for a price reportedly near what the Sotheby table had brought. Does this mean Bradstreet's reputation has recently experienced a dramatic rise or does it mean only that two people with a lot of money to spend thought they needed the same rare object? I think the answer is the latter.

We published an article about Bradstreet's Minneapolis Craftshouse in a 1983 TILLER, the Prindle house lotus table was included in the 1987 "The Art That is Life" show and again in the 1994 "Art and Life on the Upper Mississippi" show. The Lombardo table had been in the 1993 American Craft Museum "Ideal Home" show. Thus the lotus table was made to seem iconic. The Sotheby's catalogue touted their table as, "...widely recognized as Bradstreet's signature masterwork in the sugi style." Just because there are enough surviving examples of the table kicking around to make a mini-market doesn't make it a masterpiece on the order of his very important cabinet now owned by the Minneapolis Historical Society. The fact is that there are not enough examples of Bradstreet's work known at the moment to make such hyperbole credible outside the marketplace. Most of Bradstreet's work is difficult to love and certainly



Record breaking Byrdcliffe cabinet now in Ciccarello collection



Byrdcliffe Chiffonier, \$75,000. from Treadway, Ciccarello Collection



Victor Anderson panel before and after restoration

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Bradstreet pedestal lot #365
Sotheby's

way beyond the comprehension of even advanced Stickley collectors. Witness lot # 365 in Sotheby's December 17, 2004 "American Renaissance" sale, which was a very important pedestal that brought a modest \$16,800. If I were a player, I would have snapped it up!

That sale warrants further analysis, but where to start? McClelland left Christie's and petite Peggy Gilges had a hard time filling Nancy's big shoes. Since Christie's was the only Arts and Crafts game in town, enough rarified objects ended up there to keep a now internet savvy audience focused on New York. But Gilges got pregnant and when she left, Christie's didn't replace her. That opened a niche for Sotheby's.

Sotheby's June 2004 sale was a motley assemblage of shopworn goods from all decades of the 20th century including Barbra's worked over Frank Lloyd Wright desk that was consigned by Beth and some of Marc Newson's 1995 "Bucky" chairs with dirty upholstery. The 196 lots of damaged Tiffany and '60s kitsch looked forlorn in the vast, high-ceilinged galleries. There was a single catalogue with fold-out pages for the Wright desk and a Herbert Matter mural and multiple pages given over to a pile of lumber that once formed Wright's 1951 San Francisco office. None of these featured lots sold, but the unexpected success of the Bradstreet table suggested a way to forge a path different from the one Christie's had given up on.

When I first saw the title of their December sale, "American Renaissance," I thought Sotheby's was going to recognize the fact that there was a lot more going on at the beginning of the twentieth century than mission style and prairie school. The term "American Renaissance" had been coined way back in 1979 by the Brooklyn Museum to describe the ferment that happened between 1876 and 1917, which gave America its own design vocabulary. Arts and Crafts was just one aspect of a phenomenon, which also included Beaux Arts and Colonial Revival. We would today be so much better off if this scholar-driven view of the era had taken hold. Instead, the dealer-driven view prevailed and we now try to cram many essentially dissimilar modes into the Arts and Crafts rubric—it doesn't work. Of course Sotheby's job is not to rewrite art history, it is to sell other people's stuff so I shouldn't have been disappointed when I saw what was inside the catalogue covers.

Oddly, the catalogue opened with a condescending description of the Arts and Crafts movement by Martin Eidelberg. Not that Eidelberg's entertaining writing is condescending. It isn't, but its inclusion was—does anyone willing and able to spend what even the cheapest lot in this sale cost really need one more take on the over-analyzed movement? The roster of modern pundits included David Hanks and Nancy McClelland... wait a minute, Nancy McClelland?

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Bradstreet suite with Met settee, Houston lotus table, and Barnes/Cunningham side chairs as found in the mountains of Pennsylvania



Bradstreet cabinet, the Minneapolis Historical Society Collection



1904 Tichenor desk, Sotheby's #312



1907 Blacker drybar with jin-di-sugi finished panels

Yep. With Christie's out of the picture, the old junta had to camp out somewhere so they moved, lock, stock, and barrel, to Sotheby's. McClelland had wrenched much of Randell Makinson's Greene and Greene collection out of the Huntington and needed a stage for her production. Makinson's collection dominates the catalogue and, as McClelland is not known to be an expert on Greene and Greene, one assumes that Makinson ghostwrote the extensive entries. McClelland probably did write, "With the broadening interest in late 19th-century furniture of the Aesthetic period, one suspects that the work of Greene & Greene with its overtones of Japonism, is a natural area to be considered anew by a wider group of collectors." Oh, come on, Nancy, how much did you get paid for this tripe? There is nothing new here!

Randell Makinson, as everyone knows, has been the primary chronicler of the Greene brothers since 1977, long before their spectacular Blacker house furniture hit the secondary market. As many people did who did the kind of research Makinson did back then, he was able to acquire many examples of the brothers' work for his own collection. Aside from aesthetically and historically important works like the Culbertson house lighting fixtures, he collected and preserved quirky things like a section of a teak beam from Charles Greene's studio and stenciled linen curtains from the Van Rossem house. Such bits and pieces are significant when one is trying to tell a complete story that goes beyond the recognized masterpieces.

The story of the Greene brothers would not be complete without a discussion of the furniture they designed in 1904 for the Adelaide Tichenor house. Their earlier designs owed much to the mass-produced, Arts and Crafts-style designs of entrepreneurs like Gustav Stickley. While the grain in the ash used in the Tichenor suite recalls the oak of Craftsman furniture, the details of construction show the distinctive elaboration that would later characterize the Greenes' unique style. The desk (lot #312) made for Tichenor has long been used to illustrate the Greenes' transition from a relatively plain and generic "mission" style to exotic, precious, gem and silver-inlaid furniture like that made for the Gamble house. As important as the Tichenor furniture is, it did not survive in good condition. The fragile chairs had marks indicating that they had once been used as saw horses as well as screw holes where angle irons had once braced the backs and seats. The desk showed obvious scraping and gouging around the protruding details on the sides where the wood had been skinned and refinished. Department expert Jodi Pollack told me that she brought in an outside consultant who claimed that the desk had only a layer of wax over the original finish. Indeed, Sotheby's condition report suggested the same.

Pollack may not yet be an expert on early 20th century design, but she is certainly an expert on New York City spin, which is far more important when it comes to successful marketing. The wording of the condition report, which went out the day of the sale, is an exemplar of the art of spin: "The surface of the desk appears to have been waxed and shows minor surface scratches and abrasions throughout as well as a few



stress fractures and minor separations to glue joints from natural expansion of the wood...Overall in very good condition.” You had to see the desk to appreciate the report’s equivocation. She went further out on a limb with lot # 372.



Sotheby’s lot # 372

Lot # 372 was the Byrdcliffe blanket chest that had been auctioned to Michael Carey in my 1987 sale and at some later date ended up with the eponymous Beth Cathers. The condition report I got states that the piece “Appears to be retained (sic) the original finish. There is corrosion, surface wear and soiling to the wrought-iron hardware.” The report ends with the paranoid statement that “All of the surface wear and edge losses visible in the Phillips New York 1987 Auction catalogue illustration are visible and consistent with the chest’s current condition, nothing has been altered on the piece.” Although we had had a professional color transparency made back before 1987, Phillips used a small black and white photograph in the catalogue. Of course all parts of the chest did not show: two sides could not be seen at all and the top was angled sharply away from the camera. When we sold the chest, it had a dark but definite green finish through which the wood grain showed quite clearly. When we sold the chest, the corner mounts were brass not “wrought iron” and the yellow metal did not show through the cruddy patina. When we sold the chest, the lid did not have any of the many scratches that now march along the front edge. Whatever happened during the time since 1987, it is not accurate to state that “nothing has been altered on the piece.” The piece did not sell.



The Drs. Barnes and Cunningham chest as displayed in the Cornell show in Milwaukee

I was fascinated to find out why from antiques journalist Lita Solis-Cohen. She called me to get the scoop even though she once opined that I never get anything important anymore. According to Lita, who is famous for the way she quotes people, Cathers is claiming that her chest didn’t sell because I trashed its finish on my web site. The genesis of her claim is as amusing as it is tedious to recount.



The lily chest from “White Pines”

I don’t know how much experience with Byrdcliffe furniture the consultant Pollack hired has had. She told me she was considering asking somebody from the Met, which would seem to me to be something of a conflict of interest. Even that person would have only the Met’s example to guide him. I, on the other hand, have been working since 1976 with 99% of the known examples. After taking my cabinetmaker, who also has extensive experience with Byrdcliffe furniture, to the auction preview; I had written my own assessment of the present condition of the chest. I was taking into account not only my cabinetmaker’s opinions but also a rumor about damage that had supposedly occurred while Carey owned the piece. I sent an email copy of my report to James Zemaitis the head of Sotheby’s 20th century department. He chided me thus:

“I am forwarding this email to our Legal department, and I must say I really don’t understand why you’re so willing to get into fights over everything. If this is because of a longstanding feud with Cathers & Dembrosky, it really doesn’t do you any good to involve us in the mix. The more Byrdcliffe pieces you damn because you no longer own them, the lower the prices will go in the long-run for pieces you do have control over. It’s silly, especially since there’s absolutely nothing wrong with this chest.”

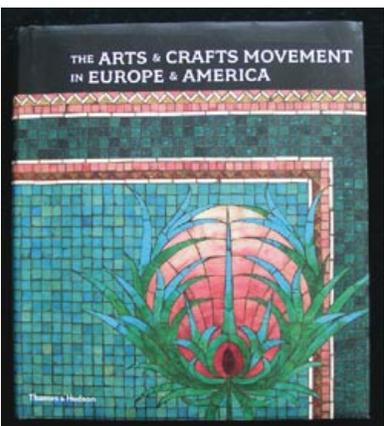
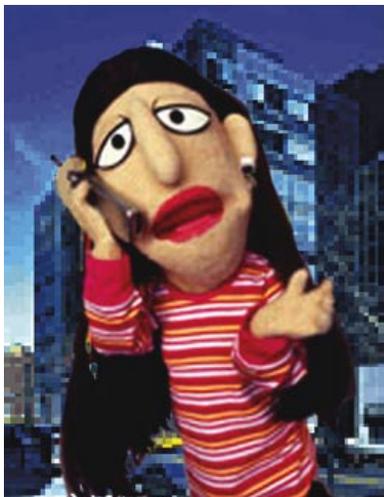
Now I never knew Dembrosky, but I will admit to a longstanding abhorrence of Cathers and we have had run-ins about Byrdcliffe before, which stemmed from similar mistaken assumptions about who said what and when about the cabinet that now belongs to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. But the reason I disagreed about the condition of this chest was not because I no longer own it. Over the years since Christie’s publicly put the value of major pieces of Byrdcliffe furniture over the \$250,000 mark, other auction houses have been offering examples that have had major but undocumented restorations. Even the Boston example now has a completely modified surface. Some of these pieces are in a traveling exhibit called “Byrdcliffe: An American Arts & Crafts Colony” with no comment on condition in the labels. There is nothing to establish a standard. I had offered a listing of the condition of all known Byrdcliffe furniture for publication in Maine Antique Digest, but I was turned down because they said they didn’t want to interfere with advertiser Treadway’s auction of the above-mentioned chiffonier with painted landscape panels that were more than 75% new paint.

Since Sotheby’s puts a disclaimer at the end of their condition reports, I can’t guess why my assertions would be forwarded to their legal department—perhaps because I said I would be posting my report on my web site. Zemaitis must have told Pollack, Pollack must have told Cathers, Cathers told at least Lita and Lita told me. None of them bothered to check my site. If they had, they would have seen that the only thing I put up was 1987 photos of the chest without comment other than the sale date and lot number (You can still see the posting if you don’t have pop-up blockers.) I am pleased to think my site could have such an effect. Could I also be why Cathers’ Rohlf’s office chair and Revere pottery bowl (estimate: \$20,000/30,000) didn’t sell? Happily most of the Greene & Greene was bought by a one person, who intends to give it back to California institutions, where their significance will be appreciated and their condition will not be an issue.

So 2004 went out with the publication of LACMA/Kaplan’s The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and America: Design for the Modern World, but that’s another story...



“Manhattan Arts and Crafts mogul dealer”



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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