The Art of Philadelphia

Cover page of a souvenir booklet for the Centennial of the United States Exhibition, 1876 "The Building of the World." The text said "Little Excursion to Philadelphia." September 26, 1926

In the years leading up to the Sesquicentennial celebration, Philadelphia was "Rediscovered" and, as proof, the City gathered, under the leadership of Mr. Frederick Lewis Gates, a committee of 100 prominent citizens to produce a "Pageant of Philadelphia" in 1926.

The centennial and pageant are the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts contribution to the Sesquicentennial celebration. The Academy's exhibition of American Art, 1876-1926, is a pageant of American art, from the Centennial to the Sesquicentennial, and a pageant of Philadelphia's contribution to American art.

Many of the Academy's pieces are works of beauty in itself, which means that we make the Pennsylvania Academy's contribution to the Sesquicentennial celebration, a pageant of beauty, as well as a pageant. The pageant of beauty, in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, will be a pleasant place to visit, and it will be a place where people will see the work of Philadelphia artists, and the work of the world's best artists, in a beautiful setting. Nowhere else in the world will there be such a pageant of beauty, and nowhere else in the world will there be such a pleasant place to visit, and see the pageant of beauty, than in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, the City of Beauty, the City of Art.

Consider the presentation to be an open-mouth salute from a discoverer, an artist, a village idiot, a philosopher, a lover, a fool, a mother, a father, a child, a dog, a cat, a mouse, a bird, a fish, a tree, a flower, a rock, a star, a cloud, a rainbow, a sunset, a sunrise, a dream, a day, a night, a life, a death, a life after death, a life after life.

Vessel in Japanese materials, in imitation of a porcelain by Ho, Ho-Kuo-Pi Period, Sung Dynasty, 960-1279 A.D. Lent by Mr. Stephen Ongpin, New York City

Vase in Chinese porcelain, Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644

Thursday's lecture, Curiosity Unlocked, was hosted by the Gallaudeth of Artificial Natural Science Society. Dr. Jeffrey Gallaudeth, Curator of Natural Science, gave a tour of the collection, pointing out a few of the curiosities.

Colonel Mayne, who is Chief Secretary, says that, very late in September, he, his wife and a friend, Mr. Hamilton, were in the Lower Bay of Philadelphia, when a boat came alongside, and the captain, who had a cutting of a Philadelphia yellow fever, carried aboard and carried ashore with him, and died of the fever in Philadelphia. Colonel Mayne, his wife and Mr. Hamilton, suppose he was the first person to contract the fever. Mr. Hamilton, who is a Philadelphian, says that, when he was in Philadelphia, he was told that the fever was brought there by a vessel from Africa. Mr. Hamilton, who is a Philadelphian, says that, when he was in Philadelphia, he was told that the fever was brought there by a vessel from Africa. Mr. Hamilton, who is a Philadelphian, says that, when he was in Philadelphia, he was told that the fever was brought there by a vessel from Africa.

In her talk about Quakers and the Arts and Crafts movement, Anne Verplanck focused on the late work of one Quaker, architect Walter Price. Walter was the brother of Will Price and they and their extended Quaker family formed the core of Rose Valley. Eventually Walter designed and built an Italianate house just up Rose Valley Road in Moylan. Anne characterized the detailing inside Walter's house as "Arts and Crafts-inflected Colonial Revival." But Arts and Crafts movement style has always been a huge, hand-hewn crate with poorly fitted joints, which let in other styles and leaked out any globs of stylistic purity. To my eye, the tripartite, vaguely Palladian, built-in, glazed cabinet doors in Walter's dining room look like the same window configuration as both Walter and Will used in so many other houses they designed--no matter if the style on the outside is Italianate, Cotswold, Colonial (American, Spanish, or Dutch,) Queen Anne, Gothic, Tudor, Jacobean or a mixture of all of the preceding--that it can be used as their identifying trademark. The mash up cannot be neatly dissected and can only be called Arts and Crafts.

These are houses Walter and Will designed during the Arts and Crafts era. Will died in 1916 so, while he had already moved into a fanciful sort of modernism, stylistically he didn't move on beyond inflecting Arts and Crafts style on a grab bag of earlier architectural modes that I would argue were not revivals in his mind; instead his extensive research of antique buildings and objects would have led him to reference and interpret (not revive) the real thing. Walter didn't die until 1945 and his later career was devoted in a large part to designing Quaker meetinghouses. Anne placed these meetinghouses firmly into the Colonial Revival-style file box and slammed the lid against any connection between them and the Arts and Crafts movement or the Quakers other than the simplistic fact that Walter was and the buildings he designed late in his career were Quaker. Her categorical restraints led me to tidy up my own thinking.

I had observed the sterilization of historical styles during the 1930s and 1940s, but didn't think about it. As I looked at Anne's images of Walter's late meetinghouses, I found myself thinking, "These are not Colonial Revival; these are just copies of 18th-century American buildings." Then I remembered the mimetic dreariness of Colonial Williamsburg, stale "stockbroker Tudor," and parochial-school Gothic; these styles are devoid of any Arts and Crafts inflection, which to my mind means freedom to interpret historic styles in a vibrant, creative way that is neither revivalist nor reproduction.

As for the Quaker in Arts and Crafts, the number of artists and art teachers I found who were either practicing Friends or who had deep Quaker roots and who were also participating in the Movement either in their style of living or in their style of art and craft making goes far beyond mere statistical inference. As well, many industrialists who patronized or hired these artists were Quakers. There has to be some relevance to the fact that many early WASPs were Episcopalians who converted from the Society of Friends.

Maybe the Arts and Crafts movement in Pennsylvania was unique for a simplistic reason after all. Maybe just being Quaker was enough to make a difference.

AEON (born "Starfire") 1994-2012