

The Real Meaning of Arts and Crafts

by Stacie Leone

Arts and Crafts era aficionados may be willing to pay enormous prices for handcrafted furniture and other objects created around the turn of the century; and there is no doubt that the artists, crafts people and architects of the Arts and Crafts movement made a tremendous and permanent impact on the arts and architecture. But, often overlooked, is the fact that their real motivation was a deep commitment to social change.

Beginning in Europe, towards the end of the 19th century, the Arts and Crafts movement – which included William Morris, Charles Robert Ashbee, Charles Rennie Macintosh, Frank Lloyd Wright, Gustav Stickley, among others -- was largely a rebellion against industrialization and mechanization brought about by the industrial revolution. Its proponents believed in reverting back to a time when things were handcrafted and in paying a decent wage to craftsmen. In the United States, the Arts and Crafts Movement spawned a wide variety of attempts to reinterpret European Arts and Crafts ideals for Americans, most notably the "Craftsman"-style architecture, furniture, and other decorative arts, promoted by Stickley in his magazine *The Craftsman*.

“The Arts and Crafts movement was more than just backlash against mechanization. It was a reaction against industry that employed child labor; sweatshops, coal dust spewing into the atmosphere, exploitation, etc. The people who started the movement saw that what was going on was wrong and set about changing the course of their respective societies,” says Robert Jawitz, Director, Rockhouse Mountain Crafts Guild.

Based in Conway, New Hampshire, the Rockhouse Mountain Crafts Guild (RMCG) is in the process of reviving the ideals upon which the Arts and Crafts movement was based. RMCG is committed to making

crafts, preserving the knowledge of making crafts, teaching crafts, and to helping craftsmen succeed in marketing and selling their products.

“The objective of Rockhouse Mountain Crafts Guild is to promote free men and women in their own businesses in response to an economy destined to make an underemployed population,” says Jawitz.

Though laws against child labor and labor unions addressed many of the concerns of the industrial revolution in the United States, we nevertheless find ourselves in a labor crisis today, according to Jawitz. “You can manufacture in the Philippines or Mexico or China, where labor unions are useless, and you can sell in the US in stores with wages slightly above minimum because that is the standard for retail clerks. Even in some unionized businesses \$10 an hour is considered a good wage. Well, you can’t support a family on \$10 an hour,” says Jawitz.

He believes the only answer is to get away from the industrialized model by creating an economy of small businesses, which can sell a product that is exempt from the low price freefall, which is promoted by companies such as Wal-Mart and IKEA. That product, he says, is “high quality custom work.” Jawitz intends to accomplish this by integrating the philosophy underlying the Arts and Crafts movement into the RMCG.

The Arts and Crafts movement was inspired by the philosophy of a man named John Ruskin, an art critic and socialist, vehemently opposed to competition and self-interest. His influential essays on art and architecture argued against mechanization and standardization while promoting a work environment akin to the medieval style of the worker and his guild. Ruskin's distaste for oppressive standardization led to his later works attacking laissez faire capitalism, which influenced many trade union leaders of the Victorian era.

He revered the Medieval Gothic style above all for its emphasis on natural forms, while his philosophy about art was that artists should portray nature through direct observation. Ruskin's own works include collaboration on the design of the Oxford Museum of Natural History and many careful drawings and detailed paintings of natural forms, botanical, geological and architectural in nature.

Ruskin greatly influenced William Morris, one of the principal founders of the Arts and Crafts movement. An artist, a writer, a socialist and activist, Morris' guiding principal was also a return to medieval ideals, when the craftsman was valued for the works he produced. Dismayed by increasing mechanization and mass-production in the arts and the "fussiness" of late 19th century Victorian décor, he founded Morris and Company, which employed skilled craftsmen who produced high quality stained glass, wallpaper, textiles, and furniture, often with a floral or foliage motif.

Morris was a pioneer and leader of the socialist movement in Britain and took an active role in organizing guilds of designers and workmen.

Morris believed art should be affordable, hand-made, and that there should be no hierarchy of artistic mediums. His famous slogan was "by the people, for the people." Sadly, only the wealthy could afford the handcrafted works, which caused Morris great distress throughout his life.

"At RMCG we believe in raising the standard of living for everyone, which includes a living wage and quality of life. To do that, we will initially have to sell to the well-off, but eventually, we hope to develop products that can be affordable to the widest spectrum possible," says Jawitz.

Morris also founded the Kelmscott Press in London in 1891 in order to produce books, which were designed using traditional methods of printing and craftsmanship. When the Kelmscott Press closed in 1897, its craftsmen and printers were taken on by Charles Robert Ashbee, the founder of Essex House

Press, which produced more than 70 titles. Ashbee is also known for founding The Guild of Handicraft, which operated as a cooperative and specialised in metalworking, producing jewellery and enamels as well as hand-wrought copper and wrought ironwork, and furniture. The School attached to the Guild taught crafts. Ashbee himself designed complete houses, including interior furniture and decoration, as well as items such as fireplaces.

Also around the turn of the century, in Vienna -- a center of radical intellectual vitality at the time -- another movement was taking place. The Vienna Secession counted among its members the painter and illustrator Gustav Klimt, the architects and designers Josef Hoffmann, Joseph Olbrich and Koloman Moser. The Secessionists, as they became known, believed that art belongs to all and that the notion of great art vs. minor art needs to be abolished. They supported Art Nouveau, and Klimt, especially, was the preeminent exponent.

Out of the Secession evolved Wiener Werkstätte (en: Vienna Workshops), founded in 1903 by Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser. The Wiener Werkstätte Style was very distinctive. From jewelry, to fabrics for clothing, ceramics and pottery, to furniture, all were characterized by simple shapes, minimal decoration and geometric patterning. Wiener Werkstätte concentrated on good design for a more select market and was known for its slogan "Better to work 10 days on one product than to manufacture 10 products in one day."

Again, RMCg has a similar philosophy. "Today, the manufacturing of furniture, furnishings and artifacts, has lost the quality those things used to have when they were hand made. We don't cherish them. It's just another loss in the cheapening of our lives. Coupling that with the loss of proper incomes, with people working in assembly lines, we have another nail in our quality of life coffin. Coupling that with the loss of even those jobs to China and India, the coffin is closing. The way back is to reinstitute quality in our culture will be via hand made or at least personally designed artifacts," says Jawitz.

Hoffman, like his predecessors, realized that only the wealthy would be able to afford the works turned out by the Wiener Werkstätte so they concentrated on a small, select market. In architectural commissions such as the Purkersdorf Sanatorium and the lavish Palais Stoclet in Brussels, the Wiener Werkstätte was able to realize its ideal of the Gesamtkunstwerk (total artwork), a coordinated environment in which everything down to the last teaspoon was consciously designed.

Scottish architect and designer, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, was one of the most influential figures in the development of Art Nouveau and the Modern movement. Greatly admired by the Viennese Secessionists, he formed the 'Glasgow Four', which included Herbert MacNair and the Macdonald sisters.

Mackintosh took his inspiration from Scottish traditions and blended them with the flourish of Art Nouveau and the simplicity of Japanese forms, which became known as The Glasgow Style. Known for his masterful handling of light and space, many of his best-known pieces of furniture have themselves become icons. Although he is a celebrated architect, who built buildings in and around his native Glasgow, for many people, Charles Rennie Mackintosh is most closely associated with the design and manufacture of furniture. His earliest designs show a strong affinity to the arts and crafts movement while his final designs are a clear precursor to the art deco movement.

Inspired by John Ruskin and William Morris, Gustav Stickley, through his magazine *The Craftsman*, became the voice of the Arts and Crafts movement in America. He believed architecture should reflect its natural surroundings with special attention to selecting local materials. Stickley founded Craftsman Workshops in Eastwood, New York in 1904 where he began making furniture in the mission oak style, an extremely simple, functional style which emphasized the natural beauty of the wood. His furniture was entirely handmade, primarily built from native American oak, joinery was exposed, upholstery was

carried out with natural materials (canvas and leather), wood could be varnished but never painted, and there were no unnecessary lines. Stickley felt that art should be of and by the people, stemming from their everyday lives.

Stickley's simple architectural elements were originally proposed and beautifully expanded on by the architect Frank Lloyd Wright and the firm Greene and Greene in the following decades.

As the proponents of the Arts and Crafts movement well knew, Crafts have the ability to bestow the hand-made aura of quality and humanness to an otherwise mundane, uninteresting, standard, machine-made, machine-like world. In keeping with the principles which drove the Arts and Crafts movement, The Rockhouse Mountain Institute's objective is to support small business for reasons of freedom, economy and quality through craft-oriented small businesses.