

Robert Edwards

BYRDCLIFFE: AN AMERICAN ARTS AND CRAFTS COLONY
THE CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION
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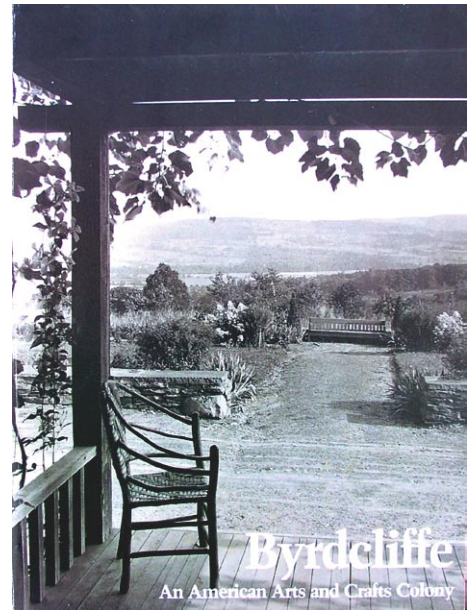
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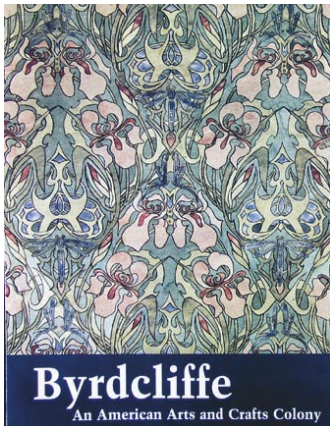


THE BYRD SOARS...again



Like the seventeen-year locusts, Byrdcliffe is having its day in the sun this year. As the last objects from the Whitehead estate leak on to the market, curators and private collectors were scrambling to get a piece of the action before the Cornell version of the Woodstock Guild's centennial exhibition starts to get noticed. Will the exhibit bestow a kiss of life on Sleeping Beauty or will it be the kiss of death?

The catalogue, *Byrdcliffe: An American Arts and Crafts Colony*, which was to have accompanied the 2003 Woodstock exhibition, came out just in time for the June 25th opening in Milwaukee. As one might have hoped, the delayed publication allowed for much needed revision in text and in the list of objects to be exhibited.



didn't make the Cut

The designer of the Woodstock centennial brochure told me that that cover with its colorful but questionable Zulma Steele "ca. 1905 wallpaper design" would be used for the finished catalogue. Instead, it is used inside the covers. The new front cover has a detail of a period black and white photograph taken from the porch of "White Pines," the Whitehead family home on the Byrdcliffe campus. The hazy, romantic view refocuses the catalogue on Byrdcliffe's founding family in a way that Steele's vibrant design did not. The vista, which includes the Ashokan River valley, cannot be seen today and it tells what words can't about why the site was chosen for the house and colony. The chosen illustration shows no human beings although their presence is implied since someone had to build the porch and tend the garden. The absence of people gives an unworldly and, to me, a melancholy air to the scene, which is appropriate because the utopian experiment existed primarily in the depressed mind of Ralph Radcliffe-Whitehead. The rough-hewn beams of the roof over the entrance to the house frame the panorama, thus introducing the biggest part of this book: the architecture. The design of Byrdcliffe buildings is the only thing in the catalogue that has not been adequately explored before.

Much work on Byrdcliffe was done years ago. I developed and produced an exhibition of the objects remaining in the Whitehead estate in 1984. Neville Thompson, who was the Winterthur librarian, and I convinced the heirs to make a gift of the huge trove of archival materials from White Pines to the Downs Collection. Later, when Leslie Bowman, an Arts and Crafts movement aficionado from Los Angeles, came to transform that great institute of learning into an "American Country Estate," the materials had already been carefully catalogued. A guide to the collection was

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compiled (<http://findingaid.winterthur.org/html/col1209.html>) and is available to the many research fellows looking for fresh thesis subjects. Even though I had placed Byrdcliffe furniture in the major American art museums, and had seen to it that it was included in landmark exhibitions like Boston's "The Art That is Life;" Nancy Green of Cornell didn't trip over it until she put together an Arthur Wesley Dow exhibit in 1999. Tom Wolf had been hired by the Woodstock Guild to prepare a centennial exhibit so he had spent years hopping about the country amassing extensive files. There was, therefor, an opportunity to build on the existing research by mining the archives, which had not been done except superficially. Instead, Green was hoping to reinvent the wheel.

When Ms Green took over the project in 2001, contributors to the catalogue were told that the show would start with the founding of Byrdcliffe and end with the founder's death in 1929. If, as the objects included in this version of the exhibition indicate, a decision was made to expand those dates by several decades, all the essayists were not informed. As a result, much of the two-dimensional art, ceramics, and metalwork displayed and illustrated in the catalogue has little to do with the activities at Byrdcliffe, an American arts and crafts colony from 1903 until 1929. Keep in mind that many objects like the Steele wallpaper design are inaccurately catalogued as having been made within that time frame. Authors were further handicapped because essays were due more than a year before the list of objects was finalized making it difficult for them to tie text to parts of the exhibition. This left a lot of leeway for the show's curators because there is no way for a reader to know that lavishly illustrated objects like the Rolfe, Thompson, Martin, and Michie metalwork were not made at Byrdcliffe and have only the most tenuous connection to the stated exhibition premise. They sure will tart up a layman's idea of what went on at Byrdcliffe though. Of course since some objects were removed after essays were finalized, the numbering is different and essay references make no sense. That will only make the authors look like assholes, not the "curators" or "editors." When the show is over and the book is separated from the exhibition, it will seem credible because it will not be merely an adjunct to the event as most "catalogues" are. For now, someone ought to be held accountable for just how grant money from N.E.A., N.E.H., The Henry Luce Foundation, The New York State Council on the Arts, The New York Council for the Humanities, The Getty Curatorial Research Program, and Winterthur Fellowships was spent on the production of a book that is supposed to describe an exhibition.

Green begins her introduction by stating that Byrdcliffe was unlike other similar Arts and Crafts colonies in America and Europe because it had a threefold mission: "to produce beautiful handmade objects that, when sold, would finance the colony; to offer classes in all the crafts so that the colony's success would go forward for future generations; and to lead a healthful life on a working farm that would help to support the inhabitants and provide the best of a rural environment in terms of beauty and simplicity of lifestyle." Which other similar colonies does she think Byrdcliffe was unlike? Roycroft? Rose Valley? Craftsmen Farms? Chipping Camden? Her description (or a less redundant, more concise version) would describe any of those accurately.

A little later she claims that Whitehead "succeeded in some ways where previous such ventures had failed." She is not clear, but I think she means to support this statement with the notion that Whitehead had an unusual attitude towards the women artisans. To be sure, one can't imagine Hubbard, Price, Stickley, or Ashbee messing around

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with women the way old Ralph did, but I don't think that's what she's writing about. She claims that he didn't "pigeonhole them into gender-oriented crafts or assign credit for their work to their male collaborators." Neither did Hubbard, Price, Stickley, or Ashbee so she must have some other ways of other similar such ventures in mind. She offers the non sequitur: "Men, too, like many of their counterparts involved with the Arts and Crafts aesthetic, worked in fields of weaving and pottery decoration." Does she think men did not weave or make pottery before the Arts and Crafts movement? Gender did take some interesting turns at Byrdcliffe. Those twists are not addressed in this catalogue perhaps because, in most of some of those ways, the colony was not unlike other such similar counterparts involved with the Arts and Crafts aesthetic.

She goes on to imply that Whitehead provided machinery at Byrdcliffe so an artist could "get on with the business of creating" and "cut the time that was spent on menial work." Actually Whitehead never intended to subject artists to menial work. He provided machines to increase the efficiency of the chumps who would churn out the artist's design as his quote proves: "Now, in order to have anything good made in stuff, or in hard material, we must seek out the artist to provide us with a design, and then a workman to carry it out as mechanically as possible, because we know that if he puts any of his coarser self to it he will spoil it." This snotty statement says a whole lot more about Whitehead than does the rest of the catalogue—it is a shocking violation of essential Arts and Crafts ideas.

Art historian Tom Wolf seems to have grazed all the essays that follow his "Byrdcliffe's History" to appropriate parts he liked. Other people's research seems to be the result of his thinking because it shows up first in the book in his essay. This adds to the redundancy, which weighs down the whole project. Although essayists were given specific subjects in their areas of expertise like architecture, furniture making, and fine art; each author felt the need to describe everyone else's subject. Wolf, Green, Evans, and Robertson all do the Ruskin dance. Wolf, Green, Evans, and Robertson describe the Sloyd school at length. Wolf, Evans, Denker, and Robertson drone on about the Mercer fireplace at White Pines. Green, Wolf and Robertson each do a spin on Bolton Brown's involvement in the founding and building of Byrdcliffe. Wolf, Evans, and Denker describe White Pines pottery. Green, Wolf, and Evans add their take on furniture making to mine. Green, Wolf, and Evans discuss the Whiteheads' interest in weaving and music. Green, Wolf, and Evans belabor Whitehead's cheating on his first wife with Byrd and his later philandering. Wolf, Evans, and Robertson review Byrd's artistic abilities. Both Evans and Wolf quote a newspaper description of Byrd's court dress. Throughout, the same long quotes are printed in full over and over again. Even a cursory editing by a mildly competent editor should have hacked the excess verbiage by a third.

Neither Green nor Wolf knows enough about the Arts and Crafts movement to perceptively deal with Byrdcliffe. Their efforts to make the colony unique among Arts and Crafts experiments have the opposite effect—in fact, if it were different in the ways they suggest, there would be no reason for this exhibit. Green and Wolf make an issue of the place women had at Byrdcliffe. Green says Ruskin addressed women in the workplace, although how he addressed them or what his view of the women workers at the Whitehead felt mills (endnote #9) might have been is not made clear. As noted above, women played a huge role in the Arts and Crafts in both Britain and

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America and had done so for decades before Byrdcliffe was founded. William Morris's straight Pre-Raphaelite brothers would not have had models and lovers and Morris himself would have been Nowhere without his wife and daughter. While Wolf is turned on by the number of women who seem to have lived as partners at Byrdcliffe, he doesn't much care for the idea that as many of the men were able to disguise some fairly suspect relationships. They searched for a location for the colony and then lived together in tiny rustic, if manly, quarters while building the campus. A double standard is at play here: some of the men got married later so they couldn't have been queer, right? Those women must have been lesbians because they never married (and so, of course, never got what was good for them.) A more accurate light will be shed on the situation if Alf Evers, who knew many of the players, gets to publish his biography of Hervey White. There is another, more subtle, double standard: Green, Wolf, and Evans don't question the idea that Whitehead was justified in taking a female lover while still married because the first wife was crazy and unsuited to Ralph's lofty interests and social milieu. Twice in two consecutive sentences, Green tells us that, unlike the first wife, Jane moved in the same circle as Ralph and shared many of his ideas. How she knows that Marie, the first wife, was beneath Whitehead is beyond me since virtually nothing is known about her or why he married her in the first place. Such stereotyping is too common. I know so many women who snagged already married men and these "other women" always describe those first wives as crazy bitches, who were holding the men back from being the great guys they were meant to be.

Evans does much to support the idea that Jane became a very important part of Ralph's personal quest for relevance, which led to the founding of Byrdcliffe. Of all the Byrdcliffe characters, we should know most about Jane because so many of her letters and journals survive at Winterthur. If the Cornell catalogue were just about the art from Byrdcliffe, one might not expect much in the way of character development. As it happens, there is a lot more space devoted to who than to what, but the information is oddly selective. There was one of those toilets with a "viewing platform" at White Pines so Jane's journal notations about "high colonics" might have been part of an obsession with physical culture that was typical of the era. More likely, she was something of a hypochondriac with constant headaches and vaporous nervous conditions that often kept her in bed. She also had a skin condition that made her face prematurely wrinkled. The condition accounts for the many photographic portraits in which her face is turned away from the camera.



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It must have been stressful for a person who was considered to be a beauty and whose husband tended to picture her as a Pre-Raphaelite goddess. Both sons had learning disabilities so discipline and education were a huge burden for their parents, particularly Jane. Much of Jane and Ralph's restless search for Utopia was really an effort to find the best environment for their sons. After years of sending the boys to one boarding school after another, Ralph Jr. got into a row in Woodstock and had to be shipped beyond the law's reach to an engineering job in South America. Jane's journal records the day they went to the pier to see him off, but oddly, I found no entry about when he died in a shipwreck. Today, we would call such a family dysfunctional. The catalogue avoids having to consider what effect the dysfunction might have had on Byrdcliffe by avoiding any mention of this dark side of the Whiteheads' lives. Wolf goes on and on trying to excuse another dark issue without succeeding: Whitehead was anti-Semitic no matter how you cut it. I don't think it matters if "most people in Whitehead's milieu" were also. There is something wrong with writing to one's three-year old son about Woodstock having "no Jews at this season and even in the summer they are confined to the railroad and the district where the big hotels are." Confined?



*Boys will be boys at
"Neroli," the Whiteheads'
home in California,
1920s*

Problematic entries in Winterthur's catalogue of the Byrdcliffe material has led Ms. Green down yet another wrong path: her "Cast of Characters" section relies heavily on what she and the Downs Collection call "the Villetta ledger." I found this ledger in White Pines in 1983, not in the Villetta. Its pages bear the printed heading: "Hotel Register." While there was little space for guests at White Pines and the Villetta was used for housing some temporary guests, there is nothing in the first part of the book to indicate where signers were staying. The Villetta is one among many buildings designated in the second part of the book, which has, for the most part, dates after 1920. Many of the most fancy and grand guests were the Whiteheads' personal friends. It is hard to believe that they would have been housed in the Villetta's modest rooms when whole houses were available to accommodate them and their servants. There is not enough room in the Villetta to house all the people Green says stayed there during 1903, the first summer. Green scrutinized the hotel register and wrote a bio for

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any person who signed it that she could find anything about. Like the many objects in the show that were included just to make Byrdcliffe glitzier, her “cast” seems to be all-star and makes the place seem more important. Jane Byrd was presented at court so I think a bio of Queen Victoria would have given the list luster, but Victoria is not among the queens who signed in.



Andre Dolmès signed the Byrdcliffe register. He also designed a gorgeous scarlet and gold clavichord especially for the Whiteheads as noted in the 1984 Delaware Art Museum catalogue (#110).

Green and Wolf draw a narrow line from Ruskin and Morris to Whitehead to America to Byrdcliffe. This linear thinking almost works for the philosophy, but it won't do as rationale for the way Byrdcliffe products look. Green uses a 1981 newspaper quote to summarize the American version of Arts and Crafts style as it was expressed in furniture. Then she states that Whitehead followed the American ideal up to a point, “but then returned to an aspect of English arts and crafts rarely found in this country: the surface decoration of the furniture, either with simple carving of naturalistic forms, or painted panels, that could be inserted into cupboard doors.” She adds, “Like his countrymen [Mackmurdo and Baillie Scott] Whitehead sought to meld simplicity with sophistication but without the overtones of Art Nouveau often seen in their work.” Whitehead was not a designer in a way that is comparable to Mackmurdo or Baillie Scott, each of whom was a trained artist with consistent, developing theories and a distinctive style. Byrdcliffe furniture is the result of collaboration. It did not spring from the genius of a single mind. At best, Whitehead cribbed a few designs from reference books and art magazines and turned over his sketchy notations to the artists and woodworkers who were at Byrdcliffe by 1903. It was Steele, Walker, Eggers, Murphy, Dawson-Watson and Anderson who established the Byrdcliffe style. They didn't just design panels for insertion into cupboard doors nor were their methods rare in this country. A quick survey of standard modern sources produces a long list of Americans who, like the Greene brothers, Arthur and Lucinda Matthews, John Scott Bradstreet, Charles Rohlf, Harold Doolittle, William Johnson, Giovanni Troccoli, Madeline Yale Winn, Candace Wheeler, Louis C. Tiffany, Sidney Burleigh, Edwin Thorn with Caleb Allen, and Margery Wheelock, designed furniture that had “surface decoration” of “simple carving of naturalistic forms,” or “painted panels that could be inserted into cupboard doors.” Along with the Byrdcliffe designers, they all “sought to

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meld simplicity with sophistication” (whatever that means) and, in fact, “overtones of Art Nouveau” are clearly evident. One might also note the number of women on the list. Byrdcliffe furniture is no less remarkable for being in the mainstream of the Arts and Crafts movement.



Dawson-Watson Art Nouveau?



poppy.jpg

Zulma Steele Art Nouveau?



A John Scott Bradstreet cabinet with surface decoration of painted panels inserted in cupboard doors, which melds simplicity with sophistication and has Art Nouveau overtones.

Wolf begins “Art at Byrdcliffe” with another faulty premise: “The Byrdcliffe colony was different from most Arts and Crafts colonies because, from its inception, the fine arts were incorporated as a central part of its identity.” Architect Will Price was an accomplished artist as were many of the early residents of Rose Valley, the Arts and Crafts colony he founded in 1901. Alice Barber and Charles Stephens, Elenore and Yarnall Abbott, Charlotte Harding, and Henry Troth were the most noted of the amateur and professional artists who lived and worked in the Valley where they produced drawings, posters, bookplates, and photographs that helped define Rose Valley society. (www.rosevalleymuseum.org) Similarly, artists like Alexis Fournier, Sandor Landeau, Dard Hunter, W.W. Denslow, and Samuel Warner not only designed graphics for Roycroft, but also made the murals and stained glass that give the East Aurora campus its distinctive look. In fact, the big Michie banner (#157) that figures so prominently in this Byrdcliffe show owes much more to Roycroft, where the same motto with the same style of graphics was often used, than it does to Byrdcliffe, where it was only exhibited during Michie’s short summer visit.



Watercolor of Rose Valley school children by Alice Barber Stephens

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Wolf suggests that the 1913 New York armory show was responsible for bringing new modernism to Byrdcliffe, which is a stretch since many Byrdcliffe artists were trained in France. They would have been aware of new styles without the armory show. People forget that that show included more conventionally impressionistic painting than radically modern art. The large daubs that signify modernism for Wolf are evident in the sky of the Leonard Lester mural, which I identified as the one made more than a decade before 1913 for the Sloyd school at Arcady. Those same daubs appear in the work of Cezanne and Van Gogh, who were dead by 1913 when their paintings were exhibited at the armory. Other armory daubists like Lawson and Prendergast were certainly not new modernists. When compared to Matisse, Braque and Picasso, no Byrdcliffe artist can be considered modern. In fact, catalogue number 78, a handsome big daub painting by Zulma Steele, is probably undated in the caption because it was done long after Steele left Byrdcliffe--it is decidedly retardataire (it belongs to James and JeanYoung.)

Wolf guesses that Hermann Dudley Murphy's experience with gilding picture frames accounts for the present condition of the panels that the artist painted for a Byrdcliffe chiffonier(cat.20). Had he or Green actually examined the objects they selected for exhibition before writing about them, they might have had a better understanding of Byrdcliffe. Green used the Murphy cabinet in her Dow show, but she didn't know that I "attributed" the panels to Murphy because they are signed with his monogram. Wolf must not have inspected catalogue #18 when Cornell had it restored. Had he done so, he would have known that all Byrdcliffe cabinets, including Murphy's, have paint that is applied directly to the panel without benefit of traditional preparations, like a gesso coat, which serve as buffers between the paint layer and the wood. Such buffers would have protected the paint from the expansion and contraction of the wood. The only exception to this is the "wild carrot" cabinet, which has a layer of varnish between the mahogany and oil paint and survives in near perfect condition. If it were an important point and I were to make a guess about why Murphy's panels survived better than others, I would say it was because he used thinned paint and broken brush strokes that leave small areas of bare wood. Coincidentally, these unpainted patches keep the paint from buckling when the wood contracts. The thinned paint daubs adhere better than the thick skin of paint on panels like Victor Anderson's (fig. 1 in "Byrdcliffe furniture: Imagination Versus Reality").



Restored Victor Anderson landscape panel



Hermann Dudley Murphy landscape panel



Wolf characterizes the Murphy cabinet as a “tour-de-force actualization of the Arts and Crafts ideal of uniting fine art with craft.” Murphy did not design the cabinet and his vista denies the limitations imposed by the doorframes. Murphy’s paintings stand out as fine art so they do not integrate with craft any more than other painted panels on Byrdcliffe pieces. The cabinet with Anderson panels sends Wolf off on another tangent. In a discussion about Dawson Dawson-Watson, Wolf uses the Anderson panels and Catalogue # 60 as a basis for a comparison to “pioneers of the modern, flat style, including Paul Gauguin, Pierre Bonnard, and Edouard Vuillard.” I never thought of these artists as having a flat style. In any case, I didn’t attribute the Anderson panels to Dawson-Watson based on #60 as Wolf claims he did. I based it on a watercolor that we included in the 1999 show at the James Bakker Gallery in Boston. At that time, I did not know about a little cherry “chiffonier” inset with panels that are almost identical to those on the cabinet (fig. 1) sold at Christie’s in 2002. The discovery proved that the panels on the cabinet we sent to Christie’s and those on the cherry chiffonier were done by someone called Anderson. This was most likely Victor Coleman Anderson (1882-1937). Anderson studied at Pratt with Birge Harrison and Hermann Dudley Murphy and belonged to several New York State Arts and Crafts societies—you read it first here!

Copy of page from
1904 sales list

No		\$
111	Anderson's panels - chiffonier - blue - cherry	80
112	Murphy's panels - chiffonier - green - oak	90
51	Fumed oak cabinet (Eggers panels)	160
52	" " " (Anderson's panels)	160
53	" " " maple leaf panel (flat)	160
54	" " " maple leaf panel (flat)	160
55	" " " Walther panels - Snow	160
113	Desk - fumed oak - wild amethyst	110
41	Cabinet - Sassafras - oak	80
114	" Shape same as sassafras but with two painted panels - Brown	50
121	Wild cannot design - mahogany cabinet	120
22	Lily - melibroad - cherry	140
23	" table "	100
24	" 8 chair "	20
25	" chest oak	90
26	" chest whitewood	80

Even though many illustrious names may be invoked, Byrdcliffe ceramics don’t deserve analysis except as Arts and Crafts busy work. Only Zulma Steele’s “Zedware” had aesthetic merit, but essayists were charged not to make pejorative comments. Ellen Denker, who has a way of cutting through a lot of BS with her sharp opinions, produced a tepid essay with no comment on the clutzy Pennman/Hardenburgh efforts or the lopsided Whitehead pots. Most of Denker’s information can be found in Jane Perkins Claney’s essay in the 1984 catalogue for the Delaware Art Museum Byrdcliffe exhibition. Claney emphasizes the process of making White Pines pottery, which was a therapeutic way for the Whiteheads to keep their dream of an Arts and Crafts life alive.



Slip cast White Pines vase with applied eucalyptus leaves.



Writing all one can may not be the same as writing all that needs to be written. Cheryl Robertson's architecture essay, with its one hundred and ninety endnotes, is twice as long as any other essay in the catalogue. Does the length relate to the importance of architecture at Byrdcliffe or the importance of Byrdcliffe architecture to worldwide architecture? More likely, Robertson just couldn't help herself and the editors were too cowed to curb her enthusiasm. The endnotes are undeniable evidence of a colossal amount of research, which is not to suggest that they make a mountain out of a molehill; all her information is accurate and interesting. In fact, the essay might stand on its own as a thesis or maybe even a separate book. It could have been better integrated with this exhibition if sections discussed by others had been cut. As it is, we have to read about the Ruskinian requirements, the search for a site, the move from Arcady, the concern for the sons' education and the Sloyd school, and Jane Byrd's role in the design of Arcady and White Pines all over again.

Robertson has a way of skewing facts. She suggests that without the influence of Hervey White and Bolton Brown, Whitehead might have looked for a site "deeper into rural America than Woodstock." Whitehead was looking at Asheville, North Carolina, a famous (and not so rural) watering hole for the rich, when Brown wired him about the Catskills.

Without looking at a floor plan of White Pines, one would credit Robertson's assertion that the Whiteheads did not house their servants in a segregated wing. She writes:

"Instead, they were quartered in the main house immediately behind the family bedrooms, and the same central hall served both ranges of rooms on the second floor. Downstairs, the servants eating and gathering place was right behind the family's dining room."



Back door leading to the cellar, kitchen, “trunk room” and back stairs of White Pines.

1983 view of the servants’ wing at White Pines

In fact, White Pines has a service wing that takes up more than half of the house. There is a service stairway in the back of the house. A lateral wall divides front family rooms from the less-finished back servants’ quarters. The only way from the family part of the house into the servants’ part is through a single door on the second floor and another one beneath the main stairs in the first floor front hall, which allowed a servant to answer the front door. The servants’ living room is indeed behind the family dining room, but it is accessible from the front of the house only through a door to the pantry that also serves the kitchen. The servants’ living room had its own wood stove and was not heated by the coal-fueled furnace that served the front of the house. It also has its own door to the outside, as does the kitchen. Only the nanny’s room is in the family part of the house. Much is written about the distinctive covered bridge to the “loom room,” but no notice is given to the fact that, without that skywalk, delivery vehicles would have had no discreet access to the service wing because the house is built into the side of a hill.

Although Robertson is fascinated by the fenestration of White Pines, she considers the windows as a pattern on the exterior of the house. She does not consider how they functioned from the inside. I lived at White Pines for month and found the inside to be, not just dark, but downright gloomy. The back catalogue cover talks of “haunting beauty;” and I think the ghosts of the unhappy family who lived there cause some of the gloom. Only the south and west (or owners’) sides are exposed to the sun—the north and east (or service) sides are darkened by house-height bankings. The age-darkened wood interior walls, ceilings, and floors don’t help. It should be noted that the desirability of rooms filled with sunlight is modern. Many late nineteenth-century books offering advice on house building advocated dark interiors so that one might appreciate the difference between outdoors and in. Whitehead miscalculated with one of his romantic touches: there is a bench built into the eaves just inside the highest window on the south façade. The idea was to provide a perfect spot from which to view the vast Ashokan Valley that spread out below White Pines. One would see the setting sun change the river to gold; the moon would change it to silver. But I discovered that,

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in summer, heat gathered in the gable, which made breathing like inhaling lamb's wool. In winter, cold permeated the unheated attic and icy winds rattled the thin windowpanes.



Even when sun streams through the windows, the White Pines stair hall is mostly dark.

While describing the great White Pines barn Robertson writes, "In late nineteenth-century America, the cupola was the prime status symbol of the sophisticated gentleman farmer." The statement may be true, but it is also true that all barns, no matter who owns them, need ventilation to keep hay from exploding. Barn cupolas are a necessity. A status symbol is not usually something everyone needs. Autos need wheels, but add white walls or, these days, rotating hubcaps and you have a status symbol.

Since the buildings can't travel with the show, Robertson's 368° view is a good a way to see them.



A professional photograph taken by Rick Echelmeyer while #35 was still in White Pines.

All the problems in this show coalesce in the catalogue listings. The photographs are really bad: number 35 is a huge, beautiful cabinet and one of the show's most important objects, but its little catalogue illustration looks like an amateur snapshot taken in a dark corner of a broom closet. Number 122 is an ugly, damaged little Byrdcliffe pot that we lent so it could be turned upside down to exhibit the mark on the bottom, but here it is, one of the show's least important objects, and it gets a fine large photo. Another big Byrdcliffe cabinet (# 18) looks like doll furniture, while the Michie bowl (# 42), which has nothing to do with Byrdcliffe, gets a grand full-page professional photograph. Of course there is no way to know why the bowl or any of the other Michie pieces are in the show. The glaze on # 135 is green, not black. Number 158 is not an intense, flaming orange color.

I was allowed to proof only the furniture entries, and my corrections were ignored so the design of number 35 is attributed to Giovanni Troccoli. Number 36 is a drawing of the same cabinet, yet there the designer is "unidentified." As I have written over and over again, no one yet knows who designed the cases into which panels are set, but we do know who designed most of the panels. Four cabinets of the same design are known: one has a landscape by Victor Anderson, another has a design of bare trees (#18) and two have identical maple leaf designs by Zulma Steele (correctly noted in the 1984 Delaware Art Museum catalogue.) One of the maple leaf cabinets is carved in the typical Byrdcliffe flat style. The other (#35) has atypical molded relief carving skillfully executed by Troccoli. Confused? So was Ms. Green. In fact, she had such a hard time understanding how more than one person could have been involved that she simply listed all the furniture as being designed by the designer of the decorations.

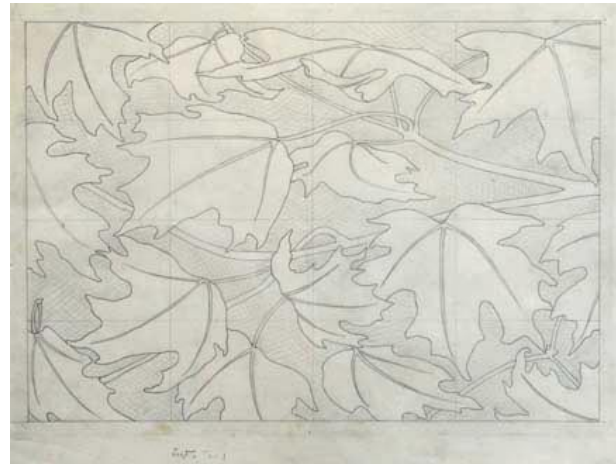
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It gets crazier; number 21 has Zulma Steele listed as the designer of panels Dawson Dawson-Watson designed for a chest (#15.)

*Template used for both
flat and molded maple leaf
panels designed by
Zulma Steele.*



Flat carved Steele maple leaves



*Molded maple leaves
carved by
Giovanni Troccoli*



Green has listed numbers 175, 176, and 177 as being by Zulma Steele and Edna Walker. Actually, Steele did number 175 and 177 all by herself and, even in a photographic reproduction, Walker's signature is very clear in the lower right corner of number 176.



I have seen more than one copy of Steele's monoprint of White Pines (#181) and they appear to me to be dated 1916. The catalogue says "1918." The monotype exhibited belongs to James and Jean Young.

Green seems to have taken the Youngs at their word and not questioned the information they gave about the objects they lent. The Youngs are known to make up convenient stories about their inventory. I asked Green why number 178 is called a 1905 wallpaper design by Zulma Steele; I never got an answer. I can see a signature, "Bush," quite clearly in the tiny catalogue photograph, although it has been deftly cropped off the catalogue's inside covers. I wonder about this because the style of the "dragonfly wallpaper" and numbers 179 and 180 are quite unlike anything else Steele did while she was at Byrdcliffe. The Youngs also own 185, which is said to be a Walker portrait of Ned Thatcher. Check out photographs of Thatcher reproduced elsewhere in the book (page 224, fig.3 and page 241, fig.15.) He looks tall and willowy with a wild shock of hair and a big nose. The man in the drawing is short, stocky, balding, and has a Bob Hope nose. Speaking of Thatcher, number 48 also belongs to the Youngs. Although not credited, Mr. and Mrs. Willcox gave the hinge next to it (#49) to the Woodstock Guild because I found it at White Pines. I don't know where the chandelier (#48) came from, but it is listed as Ned Thatcher; the hinge is only attributed to Thatcher. There is no way of knowing that he had anything to do with either piece. I haven't examined number 182 so I can't say if Thatcher's name is on this drawing of a hasp and hinge.

The Youngs don't own numbers 159 and 160. They are beautiful works that bear a monogram that looks to me like "W.B." within a circle with ears. Wolf claims that it is the mark of Vivian Bevans. When asked why he thinks so, he replied that there was no one with the initials "W. B." at Byrdcliffe and he believes the extra strokes that seem to make the "W" are just an artistic way to attach the "V" to the "B." Now I'm fairly "artistic," but I would never think of such a clever way to disguise my identity. When asked if he has been able to verify the mark by looking at other, signed Bevans art, he allowed as how he has not. But, hey, they're pretty pictures and, after all, Bevans married queer Hervey White so the monogram may stand for both "W.B." and Vivian Bevans

Evans guesses how the set of Halsey Riccardo tiles called Troytown (#125) got to Byrdcliffe. My 1984 catalogue quotes what Riccardo's letter to Whitehead had to say about it, but that was before the letter went to Winterthur. Now that someone, who was unaware of the letter's significance, has carefully indexed it, it must be hard to find and a good story has been lost. Riccardo sent these three hand-carved tiles as a sample sketch and asked Whitehead what he thought of them. I discovered the finished version, which was a fireplace surround, in an issue of *Studio*. Number 126, depicting a Sabine landscape, was once built into a wall in Whitehead's Arcady den. Robertson mentions the symbolism involved, but there is no other indication as to why the tiles are in the show.

ROBT EDWARDS

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I was not allowed to mention the restorations and alterations on numbers 18, 22, and 27. I thought it would be important for viewers to be aware of later varnishes and modern colorings. Green claimed that museums never note such things.

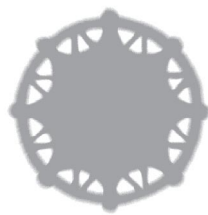


The panels on catalogue #18 in the process of restoration.

Jill and Mark Willcox got a passing nod from Green in the preface, but they are not in the list of lenders even though the show couldn't have happened without them. In addition to their "enthusiasm, recollections, and time;" they lent dozens of objects. They were not acknowledged for their gifts of figures 4 (page 94), 1 (page 92), 20a (page 87) and numbers 32, 49, and 147. Number 147 is particularly galling to me because I assembled that panel of glaze samples way back in 1983 for our Delaware Art Museum exhibit. But more to the point, the Willcox family has never been accorded the credit they are due. More than 75% of the material in the Cornell show came from White Pines, which the Willcox family inherited from Peter Whitehead. Mark Willcox is the grandson of Jane Byrd McCall Whitehead's sister Edith, who is nowhere mentioned in the catalogue. Every document and photo at Winterthur came from the attic of White Pines. Every piece of furniture in the catalogue, except for numbers 18, 28, and 37, came from White Pines. White Pines itself would not have become the focal point of the Guild's Byrdcliffe campus without Mark's passionate concern for his family's legacy. Every year (even before Willcox transferred the house to the Guild) a "gala" is held on the lawn of White Pines. Every year two people are honored for their contributions to the arts and the Guild. Mark Willcox has never been so honored. Johnny-come-lately, Doug James, is being lionized, as is ol' Carla Smith, and now Nancy Green will always come first because she is supposed to have edited this catalogue. I wish I had the power to bestow the credit Mark and Jill deserve.

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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