

INTERNATIONAL ARTS AND CRAFTS at the de Young

The Victoria and Albert Museum's "International Arts and Crafts" opened at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, de Young on March 18, 2006. I did not see the exhibition at any other venue and so I do not know how the installation was changed to fit into Herzog & de Meuron and Fong & Chan's new building. It would seem though that the museum's wowie-zowie technology seriously compromised the exhibit. Everything is distorted to fit the wide rectangle of LED screens, which aside from dots is a major motif throughout the building. At the exhibit entrance one is greeted by an actual-size photographic reproduction of Greene & Greene's Blacker house front door, which is a wide rectangle. Introducing a show about international Arts and Crafts with a cutout image of an object made in California smacks of jingoism and starts the show in the wrong place at the wrong time. But things take a turn for the better after one walks down a long, low, blank corridor and into the British section that begins this version of the Arts and Crafts story.



The British part of the exhibition shines because no other museum can compete with the holdings of the Victoria and Albert where in many cases Arts and Crafts objects were deposited as soon as they were made. The choice of objects and their condition is remarkable. Although some well-known icons of the Movement are necessarily included, relatively unfamiliar (to me at any rate) pieces like the Ashbee ‘Lovelace’ escritoire or the ecclesiastical accouterments, too often ignored by American scholars, give a depth not found in flashy shows like the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s copycat “Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe and America”

Embroidered textiles and metalwork have been restored to revelatory brilliance. The white threads in dresses and in an altar superfrontal are now so bright that they change one’s concept of period color schemes. But the raw pink of newly cleaned copper and brass seems brutal next to age-mellowed wood on a Voysey desk.

Room settings are a feature of this exhibition. As realized in the de Young, they are problematic at best. The first one one encounters is called “A London Home” and is devoted to C. F. A. Voysey. The spare juxtaposition of six Voysey-designed objects teaches much about that particular artist’s style, but nothing about how an Arts and Crafts home in London might have looked. The next “room” is called “Sidney Barnsley’s Cottage.” Here a grid of ruled grey lines on white-painted flat plywood represents a rough stone floor and the objects are so far from the viewer that their decoration cannot be made out. It is a waste of space especially considering the other important objects that are included the catalogue, but left out of the San Francisco installation. I would much rather have seen the space used for objects like the Gimson/Powell cupboard. Even with the omission of some important artists like Walter Crane in this venue, the British section is easily (and perhaps predictably) the most comprehensive part of the exhibit.



The European section follows a video tour of a Baillie Scott country house where the distortions of the LED screen format begin to enter one’s subconscious. Heavily edited in San Francisco, the crafts of Europe and Russia get crammed together as if they were just a byway on the highway to America. France, Italy and Spain among many other parts of Europe are completely overlooked as if the Movement miraculously passed over them without leaving the slightest taint. The Netherlands get a section in the catalogue, but nothing in the show. The LED screen issue lurks in a video tour of Saarinen’s house--one is not quite sure if the oval decorative motifs are really supposed to be circular. I didn’t figure out what was wrong until I saw Frank Lloyd Wright’s photograph in the American video. There his face was stretched so wide that he looked like a Japanese Daruma. His long, low prairie-school buildings looked radically longer and lower while vertical designs were stumpy and wide. Incredibly, throughout the museum the proportions of art objects have been cavalierly distorted to fit monitor screens.





An opportunity for an objective look at the Movement in America was missed because, instead of doing their own research, the Brits obviously let American pundits reiterate a tried, (but not true) tired view. Thus the American room is a very elaborately produced ‘Craftsman Room,’ which was based on a Stickley catalogue and is unlike any room that ever existed. Every stick is Stickley, but my research indicates that few people actually put together such rooms. Middle-class homeowners more usually mixed a couple of pieces of Stickley among other furnishings of various styles and, to the modern eye, questionable taste. There’s more Stickley outside the room setting, but no Rose Valley, no Minneapolis Craftshouse and only a fernery by



Roycroft, which means no Dard Hunter. The exhibition title mandates a survey, which the British section provides. The United States section is incorrectly biased towards Gustav Stickley, Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Greene brothers. Had the work of designers like Will Price, John Scott Bradstreet, or stained-glass artists like Nicolo D’Ascenzo and John La Farge been included, the international cross fertilization of Arts and Crafts ideas, which included medievalism and aspects of Art Nouveau, would have been made clear.

As the United States (the rest of America is not represented.) gallery demonstrates, scale and proportion are crucially distorted in ways other than in the representation of geographic contribution and in the videos. While the room setting attempts to provide a domestic context, no such consideration is apparent in the rest of the installation. The monstrous Elizabeth Burton table lamp is placed on a knee-high pedestal. A huge Niedecken lamp is on such a low stand that it is hidden behind a dining table. A Prairie-style floor rug is hung on the wall and a grand Wright urn is stuck on the floor behind the dining suite. For some reason museums always hang the Blacker house breakfast room light too high. In its original position, the wooden ceiling plate was attached to a low ceiling and the fixture itself loomed just a couple of feet over the table. The wooden sides were at the eye-level of a standing person while the stained-glass bottom was visible only to a seated person. In this installation the light is way above a viewer’s head. I was surprised to read that the gigantic Gothic woodcarvings hanging on the wall were not architectural fragments off some building gable. They are gates from a Maybeck church. The gates, table lamps, and the Maher chair from “Rockledge” share a gigantism, which is nowhere explained. The emphasis on Grueby pottery and the patina on the Wright weed vases are further distortions of the American scene. A subtitle of the exhibit, “William Morris to Frank Lloyd Wright,” suggests that the Arts and Crafts story begins in England and ends in the United States. In fact, the exhibition thesis takes us from William Morris to Hamada Sōji.



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The delightful Japanese section takes up almost a third of the exhibition. Although the influence of Japan on the West has been well documented in many earlier exhibitions and books, this exhibit explores the influence of the West on Japan. The “Mikuniso” reconstruction is the most effective room setting in the exhibit. Without it, the radical changes manifested by the seating height and the tiled fireplace would not be so vividly obvious. The original Mikuniso room had Hamada Shoji tiles around the fireplace, but I cannot find any reference to the tiles used in the reproduction room.



A shop assistant told me that the de Young designed its own Arts and Crafts logo for the lurid T-shirts on sale at the end of the show. She explained that the de Young has “Arts and Crafts roots of its own so they didn’t need to rely on anything in the show for inspiration.” Indeed, a visit to the museum’s permanent collection of Arts and Crafts objects does a better job of explaining American art pottery and metalwork than the Victoria and Albert could or should.

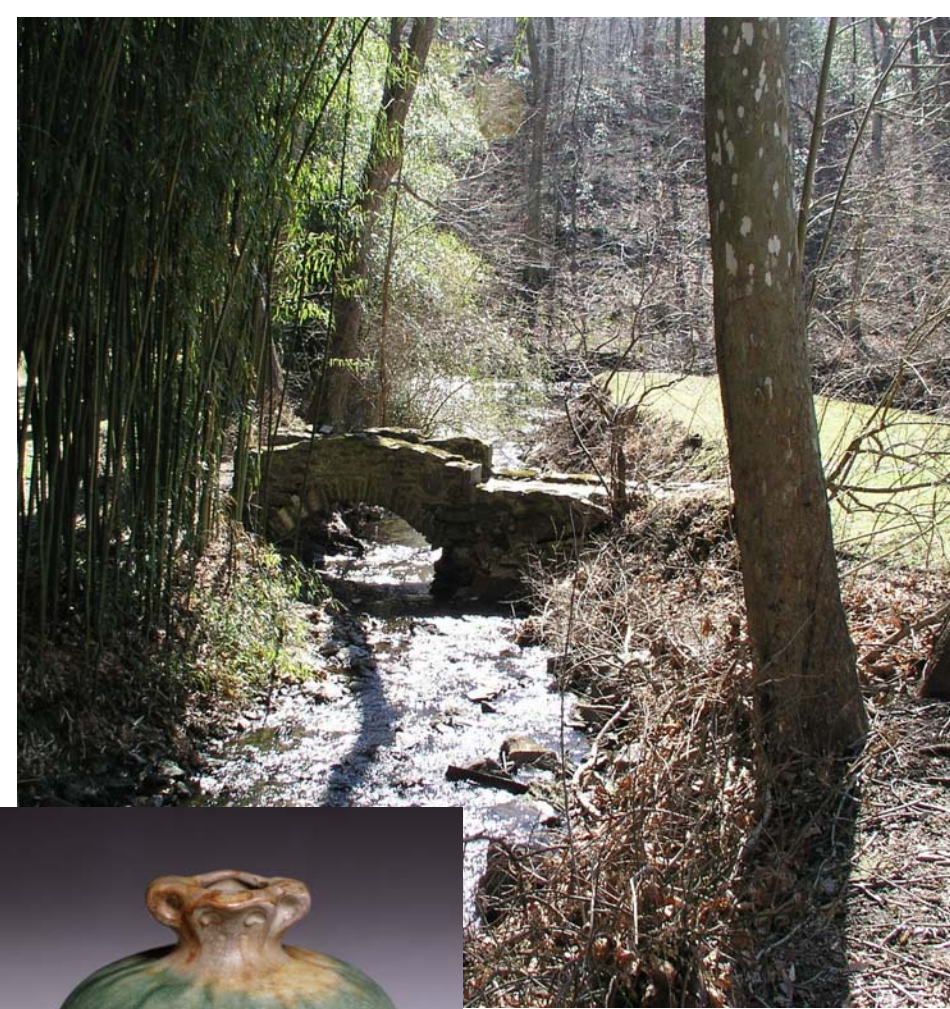
The de Young curator also has his own interpretation of the International Arts & Crafts exhibit and the American scene in particular. He claims that Arts and Crafts-style houses and furnishings “represented the aspirations of how ordinary Americans wanted to live in the period 1900 to 1920. Arts and Crafts also permeated all aspects of the furnishings. From the plain and massive oak furniture of Gustav Stickley to the decorative pottery by Rookwood and Teco, this unifying approach to home decoration was the first truly American approach to decorative arts.” Such houses represented only how marketers wanted Americans to live. Stickley furniture was only sometimes massive and art potters fancied their work to be useful and not merely decorative. But the most serious misrepresentation is the last claim. The Arts and Crafts style in America owed as much to foreign designers as the immediately preceding and overlapping Aesthetic style, which, as realized by Herter Brothers and others, was no less unified. Before the Herters, designers like Phyfe and McIntire took a cue from Brits like the Adams and designed all the furnishings for neoclassical homes. Paralleling the Arts and Crafts movement in this country, the work of H. H. Richardson; the firms of McKim, Meade and White; Tiffany; and A. H. Davenport provided grand, unified designs that arguably had more influence on the aspirations of ordinary Americans. Some furniture used by Tiffany and possibly made by Karl von Rydingsvard



would have provided support for the show's basic premise because it used Viking style in the same way Norwegian Arts and Crafts designers used it. Of course in the United States such designs are not now seen as "progressive" or "original." They must be banished from our consciousness so we can make simplistic linear statements like "Heeding the need for simplicity, integrity in design, and reverence for the hand crafted, American Arts and Crafts developed its own highly original manner." The uninitiated will probably not question these tropes, but some of us want to understand them. Where is the simplicity in Wright's Dana house? Where is the integrity in a Rookwood vase plastered with a realistic "Indian" portrait copied from a photograph? Where is the handcraft in a Maher chair? What is particularly American or original about Robineau's scarab vase?

I had hoped that the beautiful and substantial catalogue would give the show much needed continuity. But there is less organization in the book than in the exhibition. Bits about types of objects have been sprinkled in among essays about specific geographical areas. Some of the essays deal with international issues and some don't. David Cathers, who is the authority on the life and work of Gustav Stickley, writes about international influence on Stickley's designers in great detail, but his focus on this single entrepreneur supports the idea that Stickley's factory-made objects were the most significant American contribution to the international movement. Cheryl Robertson shuffles the Prairie School deck a bit to give designers other than Frank Lloyd Wright their due, which is refreshing without adding to one's understanding of how or if the Prairie School fits into the international scene.

Edward Bosley cites Elizabeth Burton as an example of an artisan whose work embodied characteristics unique to the western edge of North America. He suggests that isolation and limited resources created unique difficulties and spurred innovation. He also wants us to believe that, "The direct inspiration of nature was expressed forthrightly [in other places he substitutes "honest" for "forthrightly"] and with gusto in material, form, and decoration. Explicit links to nature abounded." Well Burton's studio was in Santa Barbara, which was a rich, sophisticated, cultured community efficiently connected to the rest of the coast and, indeed, to the world by telephone, mail, rail, auto, boat, and horse. She had "the comforts of professional association" Bosley thinks existed only in places like Boston and Chicago because she lived among many artists and artisans including Bolton Brown, Birge Harrison, Charles Eaton, and Ralph and Jane



Whitehead, who built the Byrdcliffe Arts and Crafts Colony in New York while they lived in Santa Barbara. I don't know what explicit, honest, or forthright use of nature would be, but surely the use of ocean waves and the marshes of Massachusetts; the oak, pine and maple trees of New England; the Germantown schist, apple orchards and ferns along the creeks of Pennsylvania; the Spanish moss and magnolias of Louisiana; or the prairies of the middle states by Dow and Marblehead; Byrdcliffe, Tiffany, and the Oakes; Wilson Eyre (who inspired at least one of the Greene brothers) and Rose Valley; Newcomb College and Anna Heywood Taylor; or George Elmslie and George Maher belie the notion that the explicit and "spiritual" use of nature was in any way unique to California. And I am not even

considering acorns in the Cotswolds, or poppy fields in France, or tulips in Persia, or lotus blossoms in China. Nature has been used for all time throughout all the world for all the arts. What we want to know is if and how its use was different in the Arts and Crafts movement.

The art pottery essay is filled with non-sequiturs and empty of new insights. In discussing early Doulton the author writes, "The subjects of the scraffito decoration on [Hannah Barlow's] pots stemmed from a childhood love of animals, which she enjoyed sketching, and incised lines are filled with pigments that enhance the immediacy of her marks. Salt glaze stoneware has a great advantage as an artistic medium because the artist can work directly on the surface of the soft clay and to a large extent the decoration retains the intuitiveness of personal expression after firing. Clarity of detail is maintained and subtle and intricate incised lines can be achieved." The same is true of porcelain or any other type of ceramic as one may see on Asian celadon wares and 18th century French terracotta sculptures. Later Adelaide Robineau's "Scarab" vase is characterized by the amount of time she took to make it and the incorporation of "many of the techniques she had discovered as a potter." The ceramics designs of Grueby and Thorvald Bindesbøll are said to use abstractions of nature while the Art Nouveau influences so apparent in the accompanying illustrations are ignored. Art Nouveau elements are particularly evident on the illustrated Zsolnay vase, but the text says only that Zsolnay among other European and Scandinavian ceramics manufacturers "... responded to a demand for more artistic wares and led to the development of pottery as art."



Meissen



Sevres



Robineau

Which of the earlier monumental vases from Sevres and Meissen or the figurative candlesticks from Wedgwood does not represent a most extreme development of pottery as art? There is no attempt to put design and technique into a specifically Arts and Crafts context. Editing may be the culprit here though. If my reading of Alan Crawford's graceful, lucid writing style as found in texts published elsewhere is any indication, his contribution to this catalogue suffers from inept editing. The same awkward editorial manipulations that mar Crawford's work plague the entire book from the director's forward to the last paragraph of the last chapter.