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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

**THE ARTS AND CRAFTS AESTHETIC
IN A
CONTEMPORARY SETTING**

by

Christopher Wellman Wright

Date: *Aug 2, 1988*

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Prologue

¶ *Begin at the beginning...* Lewis Carroll

The emphasis in the title, The Arts and Crafts Aesthetic in a Contemporary Setting, is on *aesthetic* and *contemporary*. I wanted to show clearly that I am not simply trying to copy old motifs and designs and forcefully imposing them on a modern world. Rather it is the aesthetic of the turn-of-the-century movement that has a direct bearing on our contemporary life as students, designers and craftspeople.

There are two ways that I could address this topic: I could write an exhaustive history of the Arts and Crafts movement and then comment on the areas where I saw parallels to the modern design environment, or I could prepare a lengthy commentary on the current trends and needs of our times, then refer to the earlier comparative calm of the turn of the century and objectively suggest learning from our predecessors. Frankly, at one time or another, I had considered basic versions of these two possibilities. As I progressed through my studies, however, I discovered several things. Complete studies of both the Arts and Crafts movement and our contemporary design situation have already been done and redone, therefore little would be accomplished by simply restating previous work. Some of these works will, of course, appear as references but only to substantiate my own conclusions. Further, I decided an objective impersonal paper might be fine for a scientific study, but a fine arts thesis should be a more personal exploration into a subject and should, therefore, contain thoughts and conclusions based as much on the writer's reactions to a subject as the generally accepted thoughts of others. My thoughts on these matters were confirmed by my thesis committee who agreed with a more subjective approach.

My final decision for an approach, then, was to discover the design sources and philosophies of the Arts and Crafts movement, show how they relate to my own design idiom and then propose to revive the earlier aesthetic in a contemporary manner. At first, the idea of using an earlier style to relate to a contemporary situation seems, at best, anachronistic. The precedent has been set before, however, that when dealt with sensitively and with care given to avoid merely copying, a revival of ideas provides an outlook that is at



once both fresh and familiar. Other designers have looked to previous designs and values for inspiration, including Alvar Aalto, whose early work was quite derivative yet gave him the insight to create his classic chair designs of the 40's and 50's; Wharton Esherick, whose experiments with rustic furniture designs in the 30's were the foundation for the American revival of woodworking and, of course, William Morris, and his version of the Gothic Revival in the 1880's.



Motivations

¶ *A man cannot be wise enough to be a great artist without being wise enough to wish to be a philosopher.* Gilbert Chesterton

The main motivation for this thesis stems from a dissatisfaction with the Modernist aesthetic that had been the rule until very recently. I, like others, found the International Style, Modernism and certainly Minimalism devoid of the warmth, human scale and, above all, the individual touch that is the hallmark of human craft. Rather, it seemed to me, that the above mentioned work glorified the machine and the ability of technology, in architecture as well as furnishings, to dominate the individual craftsman and designer. The split between the designer and engineer (or craftsman) creates the problem of loss of sensitivity and control of the design, the material and the consumer. These three areas are given separate experts and separate goals. The designer's job is to create something innovative and exciting, the manufacturer's goal is to create the design as cheaply and efficiently as possible, and the seller's task is to find, or in some cases to create, a market for the product. In this process the communication, and, therefore the effectiveness, becomes problematic as the concept of the integration of design, material and use, once difficult enough for one person to unify, is spread among a body of people each with his or her own goals and methods. James Krenov expresses this dilemma well when he says, " These everyday market products... lack any humility toward the material, or respect, or even simple practical considerations. Because most often they are very poorly designed, poorly put together, created and accepted more out of habit than awareness. They simply do not last."¹

Whether my disappointment with Modernist design drove me to seek out alternatives such as the Arts and Crafts or if in discovering these more sensitive design approaches of the past, I became disillusioned with current styles, is hard for me to determine. The desire for simple design had, since my first conscious decision about such matters, always been there. I preferred the relative simplicity of the Queen Anne style in furniture over the applied over-ornamentation of Chippendale's versions of them. Indeed, I always found it hard to understand the appeal of the ornate Georgian look, the prissy French Provincial (not to mention the series of "Louis's") or the sheer chaos of the Victorian. Certainly I shared this

attitude with the "Arts and Crafts reformers [who] firmly rejected monumental and aristocratic precedents, which they believed to be unresponsive to human needs."² Seemingly, this attitude should put me right in the camp of the Modernists. However, while I found the simplicity of line and abbreviation of ornament refreshing, there was an element missing, an element only slightly hinted at in Danish Modern. That elusive quality speaks to the human in us, the need for not just *efficient* design but *satisfying* design. It wasn't until I discovered the Mission style and eventually the whole Arts and Crafts movement, that I found what I had been looking for .

My chief interests in the artifacts of this era are not just the practical, rational reasons that I expect to set down here, they also include a positive exhilaration that I still feel when I look upon a newly discovered design by an Arts and Crafts practitioner or examine an old favorite. This exhilaration is a voice which expresses something deep inside me, something that I ascribe to the traditional, humanist part of me and, in fact, all people. The assumption that all people have this same "inner voice" is one which I make with hesitation, full well understanding the possible disappointments involved. However, it is an assumption central to the whole Arts and Crafts movement. The optimistic (some might say quixotic) view that there is an inherent nobility in all people and that that nobility is addressed and recognized by certain attitudes of design and craftsmanship is fundamentally the *raison d'être* for the phenomena of the Arts and Crafts movement.

Sources

¶ *Life without labor is guilt, labor without art is brutality* . John Ruskin

The Arts and Crafts movement was born in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. "[It] was an attitude toward humanism that flourished in an age that was becoming increasingly dominated by the machine."³ With factories taking over the tasks of quality, quantity and consistency the individual workers became mere machine minders. Products were less reflections of a time and place of individual perception and more an efficient, soulless piece of work designed with a repetitive ruthlessness.

The Arts and Crafts aesthetic, then, may be described as a physical expression of a philosophy which held that certain qualities in design: simplicity, utility, harmony and individuality, speak to similar qualities in all people and, indeed, might awaken those qualities slumbering in consumers previously placated by inferior goods. The movement's founders "...deplored the ways that the pursuit of profit crushed beauty from both the makers of everyday goods and the product that resulted from their deadening labor."⁴ Therefore, the movement was a call to design things that are not only pleasing to the eye, but also pleasing to the soul. This sense of a morality in design was possibly the most revolutionary aspect of this movement and was chiefly expressed by the earliest and most ardent Arts and Crafts disciples. Starting with John Ruskin and William Morris, the concept that an aesthetic movement in decorative arts could *affect*, not merely reflect society was the main motivation of the movement and, perhaps, the most naive aspect of it. Despite early enthusiasm, as well as generous amounts of capital from the wealthy founders, the movement never sparked the revolutionary effect on society that Ruskin and others hoped it would. Indeed, it may have perished altogether in its fledgling stages had it not made some vital changes.

It soon became apparent that (Morris's socialist forcefulness notwithstanding) in order to meet with financial success, and continued existence in the working classes they hoped to enlighten, certain compromises must be made. The first toppled pillar, originally the firmest, was the shunning of technology, specifically the factory with its twin horrors of the production line and automation. It took C. R. Ashbee and, on the American side, Frank

Lloyd Wright to show that *any* tool, hand or power, used with sensitivity could express the craftsman ethic. While some may see this as an expedient reshuffling of priorities in the face of commercial ruin, I see it as a needed maturing of the movement and a most applicable concept to our times.

This friendlier attitude towards the machine in many ways differentiated the Arts and Crafts movement in America from that in Britain. It took the truly democratic, and far more pragmatic, Yankees to realize that without the availability of products that machine production promised, the artifacts born by the movement would always stay the quaint playthings of the rich. " Here the socialist faith in the machine as a precondition for greater abundance predominated over the artisan heritage."⁵ As Anscombe and Gere put it in The Arts and Crafts in Britain and America, "It had been proved and was finally recognized by the craftsman that to produce art for the masses required mass-production."⁶

¶ *I think that to all living things there is a pleasure in the exercise of their energies... a man at work, making something which he feels will exist because he is working at it and wills it, is expressing the energies of his mind and soul as well as his body.* William Morris

With this understanding in mind, I used the philosophical characteristics of the Arts and Crafts work for inspiration rather than the political. The idea that good work promotes good thoughts (or, at least, good appreciation for the work) is one which I share with them. I think that no matter what a person's individual taste, clearly displayed craftsmanship of fine quality will elicit a strong positive response. While I don't believe, as Ruskin, Morris and Stickley did, that this kind of work *creates* a stronger, more moral character, I do feel that it can evoke a sense of well-being and comfort and that it is the ability of a craftsman to provide the feeling.

I also feel that this appreciation can be shared by all people. It does not take an art school education to understand good work, nor should only the wealthy be exposed to high quality. While the work for this thesis was all experimental and therefore of an expensive,

one-of-a-kind nature, I see no reason why properly modified versions of these designs could not be mass-produced. Unfortunately, today (and certainly in the past) good quality does cost more and I don't pretend that work of this nature would ever be inexpensive. My contention, however, is that simple, well crafted work need not be solely the property of the professional collector.

Finally, one more philosophical point that I share with the artisans of the Arts and Crafts is the belief that the process of working at a craft should be enjoyable. As Krenov puts it, "More and more people are taking up crafts because they feel a need for intimate contact with a material; it provides certain inner satisfactions."⁷ While there are many aspects of any craft that stretch the definition of the word "satisfaction" (sanding wood comes instantly to mind), by and large the total process should be one of fulfillment.

¶ *It is as if the study of being human is the ultimate craft and all the crafts reflections of it.*

Carla Needleman

It's my belief that humans are, fundamentally, adapting creatures. Our evolution as a species is based on adapting ourselves to the environment and, more recently, our environment to ourselves. In our current society this primal ability has been so blunted by our highly stressful, over-crowded artificial environments and our confining class structures, social mores, political systems, etc. that we often feel powerless to alter our way of life. Craft work offers us the ability to exercise the need to adapt materials to suit our needs. "At a time when to many of us life is so strangely complex with its problems of identity and fulfillment, work takes on new meaning: To do something we enjoy is to begin to know ourselves."⁸ Even on the small scale of individual craft work, a craftsperson gets in touch with this relationship of humans and their environment and can feel more in control and content because of this.

Ideally, this joy in the discovery of process does not stop with the craftsperson. For me, a fine piece in the Arts and Crafts tradition radiates a contentment and, it is hoped, creates a



similar contentment in the user. This vicarious experience may, at first, seem far-fetched, but anyone who has observed people in a craft show carefully examining each piece and expressing their delight in a craft well done, will know it to be a fact. Krenov tells us, "So part of my struggle... has been to try to remind people, not only about the richness of the material, but the connection between the material and how some few people, a very few people, work."⁹

¶ *The beauty of the object derives from the quality of the work that went into it, from the attention that went into it.* Carla Needleman

The aesthetic of a design is also an integral part of the creation process. All the philosophy in the world won't make a piece appealing if it's ugly. It was my goal to produce work which could attract people who knew nothing of the Arts and Crafts movement and were simply pleased with the designs. It was, after all, the look of the Arts and Crafts furniture that initially attracted me long before I knew of the underlying political and philosophical movements. Therefore, there was also a stylistic influence from this period in my thesis work.

The physical qualities of Arts and Crafts work that I found influential are hard to express. On the physical level, the movement doesn't display the universal motifs and patterns that characterize other periods. While there were pattern books of Chippendale and Sheraton there was no centralized source for Arts and Crafts designs and, hence, no common look. It was, of course, possible to copy Stickley or Macintosh, and indeed some did, but this was not typical and a specific over-all look is impossible to find.

There are, however, general traits found in most of the furniture that initially attracted me to the movement. In most Arts and Crafts woodworking there is an emphasis on straight lines. What curved lines there are are gentle and tend to subtly contrast in a subordinate role to the straight ones. This sharp linearity was not just an antidote for the plethora of fussy "gingerbread" of the Victorians. It also served as a reference to the structuralism of earlier



work, specifically the folk art of Britain.

" With its emphasis on straight lines, structuralism was perfectly suited to the economy of the machine."¹⁰ Frank Lloyd Wright in his speech The Art and Craft of the Machine even went so far as to suggest that flat, unadorned surfaces and straight, squared members should be used *because* they come from a machine. My concern is of a less pragmatic nature, I find the emphasis on simple line more restful to the eyes and serves to clarify the silhouette of a composition and let form dominate over surface ornamentation.

This interest of structure and its relationship to utility gave the movement's artifacts another widespread trait. There was an emphasis on the fact that a whole was made up of parts and, therefore each part and the way it connected to the rest was usually strongly delineated. " It was a style in which complexity was built up from elements of great simplicity.... Every member and every joint is made explicit."¹¹

Another common factor was the use of rustic materials. In sharp contrast to the gold leaf, Italian marble and exotic hardwoods of the Neo-Baroque Victorians, the Arts and Crafts designers used materials of a more common origin. Native hardwoods; ash, cherry and, most popular, oak, natural seat coverings; rushing, caning and simple upholstery, and common metals; copper, pewter and brass reflected the rural orientation of the designs. The use of these materials brought an association with not only an earlier time, but also a plainer people. It was hoped that by using simpler, more accessible materials, the finished work would directly appeal to the working classes.

My use of the rustic materials springs from my own appreciation for them. I have a personal preference for domestic woods and more common metals. I find them warmer and more approachable, they suggest use rather than merely admiration. There is a familiarity, a friendliness that appeals to me. Needless to say the economic concern is also important. Items made from less costly materials may be sold more cheaply and therefore penetrate the class barrier. Even though it seems the cost of all crafts materials has risen steadily in the last years, the simpler domestic materials still remain the cheapest.

Another consideration in the choice of materials is that the appreciation of the raw materials should never exceed that of the finished piece. When rare veneers or precious metals are used the exoticness of the materials is often appreciated over the propriety of their use. How many times have we heard the whistles of awe over the use of a quantity of gold or silver or the wonderment over the large amount of a rare wood preceding (sometimes superceding) the appreciation of the piece as a whole.

A final generalization of trends found in Arts and Crafts work is that most pieces, however abstract in design, are items of use. The concept of "craft for crafts sake," so common today, did not appeal to these designers. A piece could be decorated or even artistic but, primarily, it had to be functional. I therefore decided that my thesis pieces should reflect this utilitarianism and should each have a clear, visible function.

Of the many design sources represented by the Arts and Crafts movement, I chose two of the most inspirational to my own work for the aesthetic concerns of this thesis. The first is the Mission style, the sturdy, straight forward linear style of Gustav Stickley and the Roycrofters. The second is more of an influence than a particular style - that of the Oriental, and specifically of the Japanese on the Arts and Crafts designers.

¶ *The Missions are a part of history that should be preserved...[in them] we find a most expressive medium of retaining tradition, history and romance.* Irving Gill

The first recognizable Mission furniture was designed for Bernard Maybeck's Swedenborgian church in San Francisco in 1894 by Joseph P. McHugh. The sense of humility, asceticism and even severity of the Franciscan missions of California appealed to many of the young designers as a welcome contrast to the overly ornate and eclectic Victorian style. Gustav Stickley, an early producer of Mission furniture (although he never referred to it by that name) explained it this way, "The old mission architecture is simple, dignified, frankly adapted to its purpose, and without frills or furbelows of any kind. That is exactly

the fact in regards to my furniture."¹² While it was chiefly prized for its plain, simple lines and exposed "honest" joinery, its strong attraction was as an example of an indigenous American design style.

While a good part of the American Arts and Crafts community still looked to Britain for design sources, there was a strong faction, headed by the likes of Frank Lloyd Wright, who spoke for a distinctly American approach. "A strong feeling of nationalism prevailed in widespread interest in developing a truly American art that would not be based on European precedents. Because of this, a good deal of energy was devoted to the revival of early American crafts."¹³ Just as the Medieval era, clothed in the romantic haze of the past, gave Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites a source of a less complicated, more moral time, the American West was the inspiration for a nationalistic pride for the Americans. This comparison is even sharper when it is remembered that both Ruskin's Gothic Revival and the Spanish Mission style were mainly ecclesiastic in nature and called for a moral imperative as well as a stylistic one.

It is interesting to note, however, that even this supposed native style was, after all, imported from the Spanish. Paramount in the quest for a unique American identity, there was the inescapable fact that all of America was fundamentally a collection of foreigners. Even the Native Americans, whose design motifs showed up in the Mission style's warm hues and geometrical patterned upholstery, were, initially, immigrants. Despite this ironic twist, the Mission style (and later Wright's Prairie School) eventually developed into a fully mature and unique style.

My own interest in the search for a native style in the Arts and Crafts movement is in its combination of the warm, humanistic regard for heritage with potential for a contemporary view of composition in its emphasis on line and plane. The choice of rustic materials, such as rushing for the seats and darkened oak as well as rudimentary techniques such as hammered copper, speak of an earlier approach to crafts which displays the individual maker's mark. I strongly believe that the reference to historical styles gives a comforting point of perspective from which appreciation can start. Often we are moved by an artifact, or

even a detail of one, that reminds us of fond, early memories. The feel of an overstuffed chair like Grandmother had, the worn-to-a-polish oak surface reminiscent of a familiar church pew, or the satisfying creak of an old wooden joint as in a favorite uncle's rocker relate to our personal heritage, our own memories.

There is a longer term memory, our past as a collective people, that also stimulates our appreciation. This surfaces as a respect for "things done right," existing artifacts of an earlier, perhaps more practical, time. The expertise displayed in the joinery of a timber framed barn or the glistening obsidian-like surface of a Native American vessel earn our awe for the earlier craftspeople.

These feelings of comfort and respect are evoked by the better Mission furniture. The common misconception that all Mission is characterized by the heavy, clumsy, poor quality furniture that most of us remember from our school days, is quickly banished by observing the delicate lines, gentle curves and subtle inlay of a Harvey Ellis side chair. His lyric interpretation of the Mission motifs provided an exciting, if brief, addition to Gustav Stickley's line. The work of such people showed that there was a distinction between rustic and crude, sturdy and massive, between understated and passive. Discovering these designs proved to be a revelation and a major influence for my work.

The Oriental influence, the other main inspiration in the Arts and Crafts movement used in this thesis, displayed more of a fascination for an exotic culture than did the Mission style. With the opening of trade with Japan by Commodore Perry in 1853 and the display of Japanese pavillions in both the 1876 Centennial Exposition and the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, America was exposed to the gentle rendering of natural forms and the quiet relationship of buildings to their environment that the Orientals had mastered for centuries. Through this exposure the Orient was seen as a totally different culture (steeped in tradition and ceremony) from the now tiresome and even decadent West. Although some of the items created by the two cultures - paintings of natural surroundings, ceramic work, timber framed houses, etc.- were the same, the results of the Oriental philosophies blending with their subject matter were completely fresh. Of the Japanese Pavillion at the Columbia Exposition it was

said, "...the excellent proportions, superb craftsmanship, sensitive roof curves and structural honesty of the Hoo-den set it apart from the surrounding hulks that concealed prosaic exhibition halls behind sham marble fronts."¹⁴ While some of the Orient's decorative arts were highly ornamented, it was the simpler forms that appealed to the aesthetic of the Arts and Crafts practitioners. A Ming dynasty chair, a Sumi ink drawing or intricately glazed ceramic vessel provided models for the young designers.

A chief attraction was Japanese architecture. It had an emphasis on line, usually the horizontal and included complex interlocking wood joints that highlighted the strength of their wooden structures and created a single artistic form from a mass of individual parts. Despite the differences in culture, the East and West were not without common ground. With its graceful curves, fascinating joinery and harmony between straight and curved members, the Oriental sensitivity shares much with other American styles notably the woodwork of the Shakers and the Mission style.

It has, however, a tranquility and a gentility that the severity of the American styles doesn't often express. Where in a Mission piece an edge is left sharply squared, the Japanese edge is slightly rounded, where a Shaker dresser has stark, fundamental wooden pulls, a *tansu* might have lithe, quietly decorative metal handles. It is this gentility that I found appealing in the Oriental influenced work of the Arts and Crafts artisans. C. R. Ashbee articulated this difference well when speaking about the work of Charles Sumner Greene, "Like [Frank] Lloyd Wright, the spell of Japan is upon him, he feels the beauty and makes magic out of the horizontal line, but there is in his work more tenderness, more subtlety, more self-effacement than in Wright's work. It is more refined and has more repose."¹⁵ While certainly elegant, sometimes even opulent, a Greene and Greene interior never seems "busy" or decadent, it radiates a sense of calmness and displays a human potential for harmony with Nature.

This reflection of Nature through form is another Oriental concept that the Arts and Crafts builders and I find invigorating. In my own work, I attempt to show the grain of the wood as it relates to the form of the piece and vice versa. That is, rather than steam bending or

bent-laminating a gentle curve, I will search through dozens of boards until I find one that carries the same curve. When the furniture is finished the relationship of the structure of the wood to the structure of the piece is quietly displayed. I have found that even if a person doesn't directly notice the matching of the grain to the lines of the form, they *won't* find a contradiction of these two.

¶ *Form, for me, is not the primary thing, form is only a beginning.* James Krenov

There are sources other than the Arts and Crafts movement that describe a design aesthetic which, I feel, are totally in keeping with the ideals of Ruskin, Morris, Wright, et al. Raymond Loewy, considered by some the father of industrial design, came up with this description, " Good design does not get obsolete, it remains classic... it should be humble, it should not jump out at you,...it should blend in with its surroundings ...and lastly, it is simple, it shows the beauty of simplicity."¹⁶ It is significant (especially coming from Loewy) that this definition leaves out the concept of innovation and commercial appeal. It could be that Loewy, as I, found good design so rare that anything embodying these three characteristics *would* be innovative. More likely, he felt that these three precepts, lasting, humble and simple, transcend contemporary fads and fashion and are always appealing. Krenov reflects on this sentiment, " I have never felt that as a craftsman I could, or should, excite people in the usual sense of originality. If what I do achieves this other result, of soothing, or simply pleasing a certain kind of person, then perhaps everything is all right." ¹⁷

A more grievous absence in Loewy's definition is that of harmony. There are plenty of examples of design which while being timeless, understated and elementary can be seen as clumsy and even crude due to a lack of harmony, both in themselves and their relationships to their environments. Earlier examples of this sense of harmony in design are present in other movements besides the Arts and Crafts. Other styles that proved inspirational to my early development as a designer and hence pertain to this thesis were some of the American Colonial furniture and almost anything produced by the Shakers, because this work embodies a concept of compatibility. Compatibility falls into several categories, including

harmony of materials, parts of the finished piece, utility and an object's relationship to its surroundings.

¶ *Design is not invention, it is sensitivity.* Carla Needleman

One the most influential designers who directly addresses the first category of relating the design with its material in a harmonious manner is James Krenov. In his several books, he emphasizes the importance of not only choosing the wood for characteristics of strength, color and grain but also choosing the specific part of the wood for the way its grain pattern reflects and accentuates the composition of the total piece. He states this concept as follows, "...You must develop methods of working with wood that leads to a sort of harmony, a satisfaction that you are, with a minimum of effort, achieving the maximum of sensitivity."¹⁸ This does not mean, as some would have it, designing a piece around a specific hunk of wood, as if that board or billet "speaks" to you of one form and no other. Rather it means the careful consideration of the inherent structure of the material (in this case wood) and exhibiting it to its best potential, often examining many possibilities and choosing the most harmonious combination. Using this process, albeit a time consuming one, there is no reason why one design cannot be made over and over again, each time adapting the material's personality to the form, as, indeed, Krenov has done.

¶ *About the proper expression of beauty there is precision and balance. One part does not need to be thrust above another.* Walt Whitman

As far as harmony of parts to themselves, much has been written on the subject of the relationship and proportions of elements within a design. Suffice to say that when a piece is conceived of as a whole and not just "a summation of parts," then the result is a piece that we relate to as a whole. This idea is often ignored in the need to "showcase" a rare material, a technique or a curiosity of natural formation. "You can do mediocre work and still people want it. They will say, 'look at that wood!'"¹⁹ In this case the other parts become mere

passive support elements to an item instead of active parts in the design whole. Equally as distressing is a chaotic jumble of dominant elements each competing for our attention.

¶ *The craft aesthetic, as we have seen, was concerned with fitness and propriety; it demanded that materials and function should determine the design solution.* Gillian Naylor

The matter of utility or function is a long and involved one best left to other, more lengthy discussions. In respect to my thesis only this need be said; the concept that "form follows function" assumes that for every function there are a finite number of forms or at least clearly defined parameters in which a certain form must be constructed. By and large, of course this is nonsense, every time the "ultimate" design for a specific function, say a chair, is created it is, sooner or later, equalled if not bested by another designer's interpretations of what a form can include. On the other hand, ignoring the importance of use in a utilitarian piece (for the matter of discussion in this paper I only include objects with a concrete purpose) relegates the design to mere decorative form for which a function has to be forced and contrived.



Interpretations:***The Mission Legacy*****The Plantstand**

The first design in the Mission manner that I prepared for this thesis was the plantstand, (fig. 1) constructed of red oak and copper sheet. The concept of creating a plantstand to embrace a plant, rather than merely to support it, was developed very early on in the design process and proved to be the principle motivation. All too often plantstands are simply tiny tables that could hold a teapot or a telephone as well.

The composition of the front view was, in fact, the initial sketch from which I developed the side elevations. The front view's silhouette, with the sides leaning in and then flaring out, focuses the attention on the plant held at the apex. This effect is repeated in the side view by tapering the sides, first in and then out. The openings or slots in the sides not only visually (and physically) lighten the mass of the oak sides, they also allow the copper panels, when seen from the sides, to become more decisive elements in the composition as a whole. The subtle stepping of the sides between the long uprights and the spacers creates more interest and stresses the vertical line of the composition.

The choice of materials was also a quick decision. I desired oak's comforting familiarity and strong grain pattern. I felt that the straight lines of the sides would be emphasized by the linear quality of the oak's figure. The copper for the panels was a slightly more hesitant choice. Although I wanted the warm, tawny glow that copper gives, I was unsure of my ability to properly work the metal in the original three week time limit given for this project. As it turned out, with my adaptation of a carbide flush-trimming bit to conform each copper panel to a stencil, the metalworking aspects proved to be fairly easy, if time consuming, for the entire Mission series.

The details of the fumed stretchers and hammered copper pins evolved as the piece was built. I had wanted to try the ammonia fuming process, not only for its traditional appeal, but

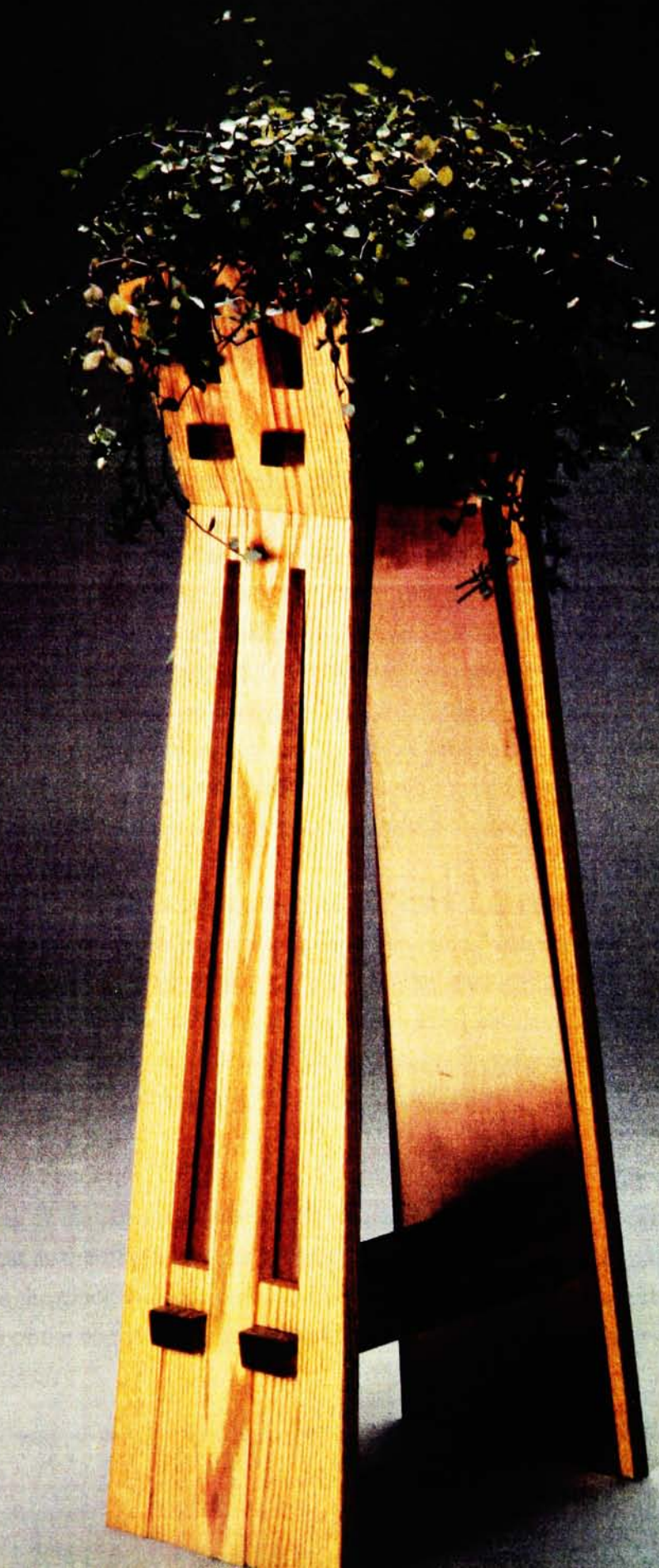


primarily for its subtle greenish brown color. Lacking any information on this rather archane process, I perused my reprint of Stickley's furniture catalogs, which contain vague (or perhaps secretive) references to it, and proceeded to experiment. With careful testing and sampling, I discovered that a twenty-six per cent aqua ammonia (the kind used in blueprint machines) was fine for my purposes. The depth of color could be controlled by limiting the exposure, usually eight to thirty-six hours.

The construction was quite standard. The uprights and spacers were simply edge glued together and the miter joints were fastened together with Lamello™ wafers. The stretchers were crosscut and doweled in place, to allow for the copper panels, then mortised into the sides and held in place with the copper pins.

With the final addition of the plant, a Bolivian Jew, two things became apparent. The combination of the deep green foliage and the warm tones of the stand are at once distinctive and compatible and, with the turned up copper holding plate and the full leafiness of the plant used, the carefully designed, custom made ceramic pot proved all but invisible. In all, however, the plantstand fulfilled my expectations of a simple, harmonious stand that would focus attention on the plant rather than itself.





The Clock

The clock (fig.2) was, needless to say, far more problematic than the plantstand. Indeed, had I known how troublesome the process of making a key wound pendulum clock would prove, I don't believe that I would have chosen it for a thesis project. It is constructed from white oak, more sensitive to the fuming process than the red oak, and, once more, copper sheet.

Obviously, the initial design was derived from the plantstand. The concept of embracing, in this case the clock housing, was still the primary one and the basic design is very similar. This derivative nature of the design, I feel, proved to be its greatest flaw. I found myself struggling to separate it visually from the plantstand and make it more than just a "big brother." Due to this fundamental similarity and despite the fact that many people found the design striking (pardon the pun), I feel it is the least fulfilling design of the series. However, there were some of the successful stylistic differences between the two including the canting of the sides outward to form an open wedge and the piercing of the copper panels. While I realized that these design features would complicate the construction of the piece, I felt they were essential to create an individual personality for the clock.

The canting of the sides serves to give the clock a definite front - an important consideration, because whereas a plant has no "best side," allowing the plantstand to be oriented in any direction, my clock has only one readable face and the rest of the clock had to relate to it. I instantly saw the merit of this conceptual decision, reached in a graduate woodworking meeting, but hesitated on the grounds of complexity. My fears proved justified and the compound angles of the sides which ensued were a constant source of irritation.

The piercing of the copper panels proved much less problematic but still involved some long nights. Just as the plantstand had its wooden sides slotted to visually lighten it, so too the openings in the clock's copper panels served the same purpose. Other considerations in the opening up of the copper were the effect of light and shadow on the now-exposed panels

and the slots allowed the kinetic interest of the pendulum to be noticed from the sides.

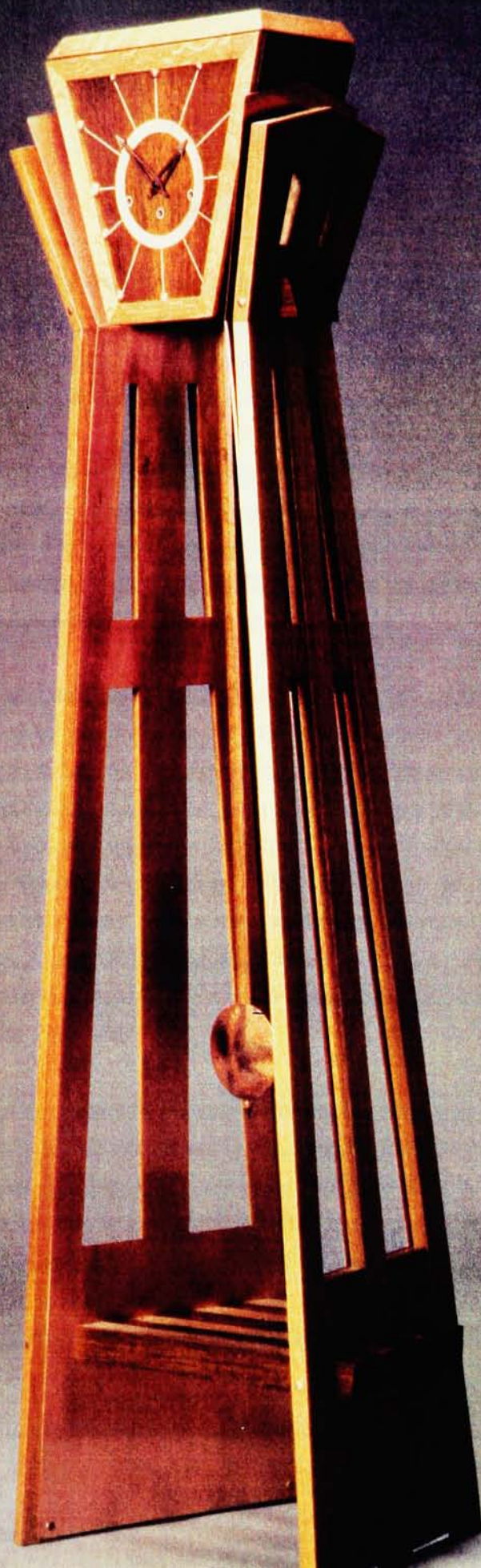
The design of the clock housing, or hood, and face were amongst the most important design considerations. The face allows the function of the clock, telling time, to be fulfilled. Keeping in mind the importance of utility in the Arts and Crafts aesthetic, this functional aspect was crucial to its success. Therefore, I wanted a face that would be interesting enough to draw attention and yet be fundamentally easy to read.

The use of the twelve orientation lines on the face and the tradition styling of the hands gives the observer an instant reference point. The use of silver inlay for these lines, each ending in a copper quarter sphere, and silver foil on the tips of the hands sets them in high contrast to the darkness of the fumed oak thereby focusing attention. The inlaid copper ring in the face and the copper bob on the pendulum are textured to likewise separate them visually from the flat polished panels of the sides. Along with the compound keystone effect of the hood, which compliments the flow of the base, these features provide the desired effect of interest and legibility.

In construction, the stand was identical to that of the plantstand, the only difference being that the clock's stretchers, two above and four below, were doweled into the oak sides rather than mortised for ease of assembly. The hood, with its compound angles, gave me the most trouble. Ideally, the clock movement needed to be totally accessible within the housing. As I also wanted thin, solid wood sides to act as an effective sound board for the chimes, this left little room for joinery. My final solution was to permanently mount the hood to the sides, via the stretchers, and have a removable top and back. Once the back is taken off, the screws holding the face and attached movement can be unfastened allowing the movement to be removed for cleaning and repair.

In all, the clock proved to be the most technically challenging piece in this series and perhaps the most restricted in design. It was a good "problem solver's" assignment, but not necessarily a good thesis project .





The Bench

After the frustrating experience with the clock, I greeted the design of the bench (fig.3) with trepidation. Whether there were lessons learned in the previous two pieces or there was a strong desire for a fresh outlook, however, the bench was exciting to design and uncomplicated to build. It remains my favorite piece in the Mission series.

Originally, I had presented the rough bench design to my thesis committee as a flattened, broader version of the plantstand. Upon re-thinking and refining the concept behind it, I developed a different approach. The idea of focusing the attention on the utility of the bench by directing the viewer's eye toward the seating platform, stayed the same as the first two; the role of the copper panels, however, differed dramatically.

In both the plantstand and clock the copper panels were simply used as a device for accentuating the lines of the sides and adding a "sparkle" to the overall appearance. In the bench they became a structural necessity. They support the seating platform and connect the sides to the top. This utilitarianism is not only more in keeping with a Mission ethic, it also uses the material in a more visually interesting role. The top seems to float above the sides while never giving the impression of weakness. The leaning out of the sides, while ostensibly matching the other pieces, now serves as an engineering consideration to distribute the weight of the load. Also, by increasing the angle of the copper to further this purpose, the panels are pulled away visually from the wooden sides, standing on their own as opposed to simply mirroring the wood.

The other important design decision was the use of rushing for the seats. Originally there had been discussions about using fabric upholstery or even leather for the seat covers. These may have been adequate choices, but they would not have added anything to the composition of the piece. The rushing, however, not only reflects the linear quality of the rest of the bench, it also gives a comforting homey feel, an important factor for me.

Technically, the bench was the easiest of the three to build. After all that practice, there



were very few surprises and the processes used were the same. Perhaps the only practical challenge was bending and then maneuvering the single sheet of eighth inch copper used. It measured over six feet long and weighed about forty pounds!

The bench, to me, is the most successful design in the Mission inspired series. It proportionally combines contemporary qualities in its composition, a clean, crisp study in line and plane, while evoking a sense of comfort and tradition. It's one of the most refined examples I made for my thesis topic.





The Oriental Influence

The Dresser

The dresser (fig. 4) was the first piece that I made with the Arts and Crafts theme in mind. As I had admired this period for a long time, it made sense to devote my first major piece here at R.I.T. to it. It is built, as are all the pieces from this grouping, from cherry and wenge.

The original design was far more elaborate, with half visible tree limbs carved in bas-relief to incorporate a Japanese flavor. Fortunately for me, Richard Tannen, one of my instructors at that time, persuaded me that the dresser could stand on its own merits without embellishment. I'm very grateful for his insight as it proved to be the seed for my thesis topic.

Perhaps the most notable feature of the design is the asymmetrical arrangement of the seven drawers. This arrangement is my interpretation of the patterning of drawers on a *tansu*, a traditional Japanese chest. While the Oriental source for this patterning was important, it was the practical concerns of a clever storage system that led to its adoption. As I wanted a traditional frame and panel format for the experience of building it, I incorporated the panels into the design. They continue the pattern of the drawer fronts around each corner so that each side is different, the left side having four panels and the right side having five.

The more subtle design themes, incorporated in the other pieces in the series include the clearly articulated joinery, the contrast of straight lines and gently curved ones and the careful matching of the wood's figure to the lines of the composition.

The first of these themes can be seen in the connection of the dresser sides to the front, the corner posts are split to allow the penetration of the front's curved rails. This connection is further emphasized by the square wenge pins which hold the joint in place. The drawer pulls carry out the theme by clearly separating the elements of the drawer fronts, the wenge

pull bars and the bronze connecting pins.

The second theme creates a harmonious interplay between the crisp verticals and horizontals and the more relaxed curves of the rails. I find this contrast not only breaks the monotony of a ninety degree orientation, but it also accentuates each member as an individual part.

The final theme was perhaps the most vital. To create the feeling of tranquility that I wanted, the figure of the cherry, subtle though it was, could not interfere with the definitive lines of the composition. This decision meant long hours would be spent carefully matching rough boards with their chosen part, but I feel it was worth it. While it may be that few will notice the gentle curving of the grain in the rails or the centering of the figure pattern in the drawer fronts, I maintain that without these considerations the grain characteristics of the wood would have proved distracting and possibly even disturbing to the rhythm of the finished piece.

The construction of the dresser, while being very difficult, was probably the most satisfying project to work on. To cut all those joints and have everything fit to close tolerances was a rewarding experience. The carcass was built with mortise and tenon joints with solid wood, floating panels in the sides. As I designed the dresser with a traditional "runner/ kicker" drawer system, the initial glue up involved over forty individual parts with approximately twice that number of joints! The drawers are built with cherry fronts and bottoms and maple sides, backs and center guides. They have half-blind dovetails in the front, through dovetails in the backs and solid cherry paneled bottoms.

The lessons that I learned and the quality I put into it made the dresser one of my fondest experiences. The success of the Oriental inspired motifs caused me to design the remaining pieces to relate to it. In all, I would say the dresser was important to me, not just for the thesis, but also for my growth as a craftsman.



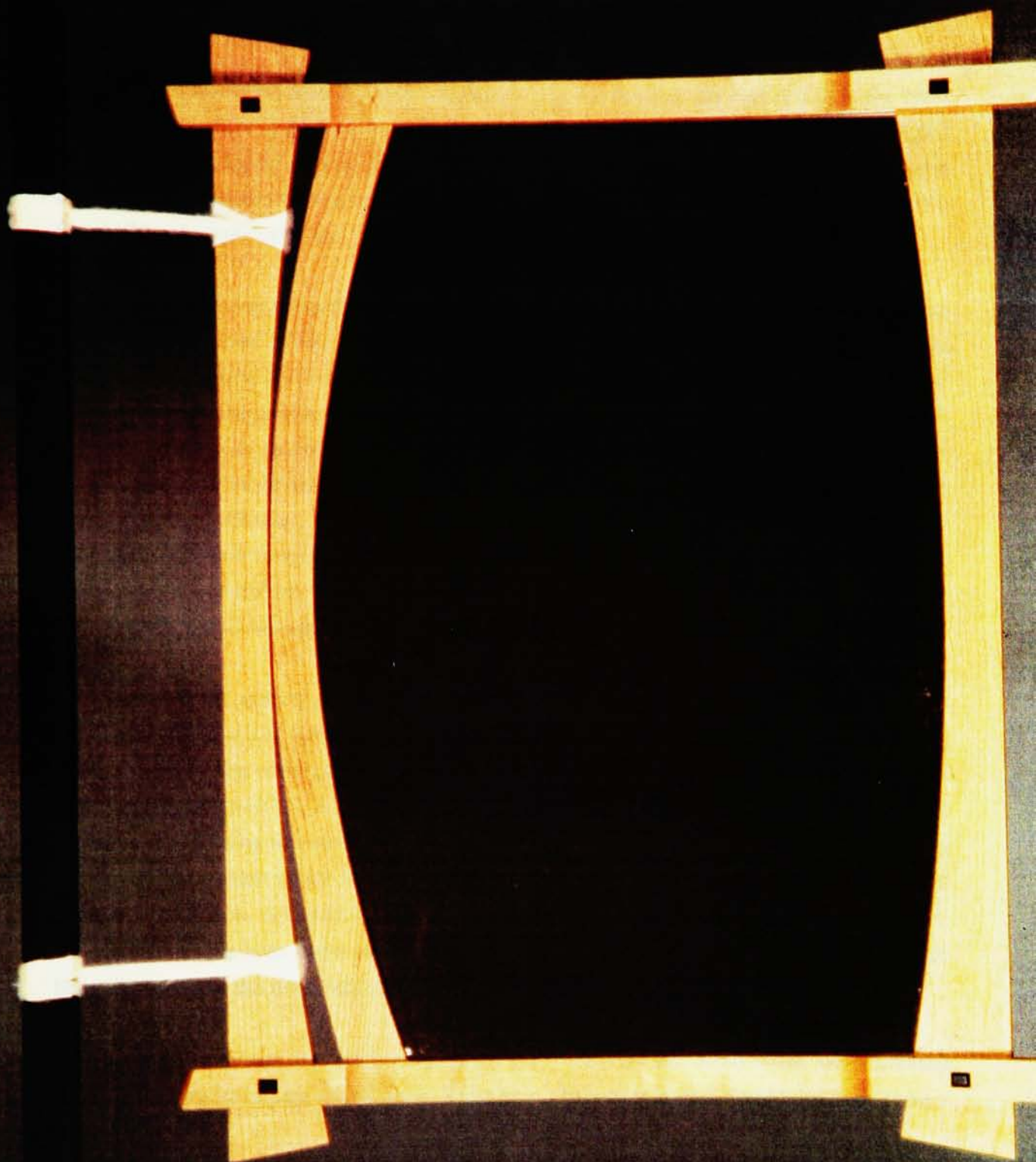


The Mirror

As the mirror (fig.5) is basically a supplementary piece for the dresser, my comments will be brief. Not that I don't feel that the piece stands on its own, indeed, my parents own a copy of it, but in terms of this thesis it requires little explanation.

The design element that strikes me as the most individual is the manner in which it is hung. The entire mirror frame is hung from silk cord connected to the wenge support bar, an allusion to a free hanging sign. The motifs of the exposed joinery and wenge pegs, accentuating the individuality of the parts, is carried over from the dresser. Finally, the use of the amber tinted glass for the mirror itself is much warmer and more flattering than the standard green toned mirror.

Technically, the mirror posed few, if any problems, although finding a board whose figure matched the relatively sharp bend of the inner top curve proved a tedious search. The construction was quite standard with the back cut with a double rabbet to allow for both the mirror and its backing material.



The Bed

Although not quite as technically challenging as the dresser, the bed (fig.6) is the most eye-catching design of the bedroom set. Its sweeping curves, offset by the wenge highlights and the radiating figure of the solid cherry panels make it a stimulating design. Its size is also a factor, it is a queen size frame and when completed with a mattress and boxspring, it is a formidable piece of furniture.

The design process was the most rewarding since it was a constant series of refinements up until the first coat of oil. Initially conceived of as a fairly ponderous simple bed frame, with each drawing it became more delicate and more graceful. The first breakthrough came with the idea of the double curve. This innovation created a dynamic negative space which lightens the mass of the headboard and footboard. Then came the idea of reversing the curve on the footboard thus making the bed a more inviting space and reflecting the headboard in a more rhythmic manner. Next, the detail of the wenge wedge and pegs, which is an adaptation of a traditional Japanese *torri* (or temple gate) joint, nicely finishes the connection of the principal members. Finally, the radial orientation of the figure patterns and glue lines of the panels was developed to emphasize the "rising sun" image of the bed frame.

The technical aspects of building the frame were fairly orthodox with a couple of fine challenges. The upper joinery on each post involved cutting an over sized mortise with an inner shoulder. The correspondingly notched crosspiece is first slipped through the mortise and then forced down (or, in the case of the footboard, up) to seat the joint. A wedge is then driven home, holding the members in place. All the other joints are machine cut mortise and tenons, utilizing loose tenons with double mortises. The layout of the radiating panels posed some consternation, but, with a little imagination, a large crude compass was made which insured that all the lines had a common starting point. The bed rails are fitted with standard bed rail cleats and the slats were glued up to form small "T" beams for extra rigidity.

The bed frame was the fastest large piece that I built for the thesis work and it created perhaps the largest impact for the least time put in. However, speed should not have to be a

factor in the experimental nature of thesis work. Despite the quickness, I feel that careful considerations were still made and the quality of the craftsmanship did not suffer. The Oriental influenced bedroom set as a whole was a little more rewarding both in the design process and the construction than the Mission series. A combination of designing each piece separately, rather than merely deriving one from the other, and wise choices in construction techniques made this so. The warmth and tranquility expressed by this grouping will always be a personal triumph.





Reflections

¶ *The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne.* Geoffrey Chaucer

In summation, the development and execution of my thesis topic and its related body of work was both mentally stimulating and physically exhausting. While already interested in the Arts and Crafts movement when I came here, my thesis work offered me the chance for a more intense examination of its underlying principles and, more importantly, gave me the chance to implement some of these aesthetic ideals by creating physical interpretations in the form of furniture.

The theme of my thesis, the contemporary use of the Arts and Crafts movement's aesthetic principles, was slowly developed in the course of my last two years here. While initially interested in the movement from a purely historical viewpoint, I began to realize that the same fundamentals of design that had seemed so refreshing and stimulating over eighty years ago still had validity in today's market. Although I studied most of the aspects of the Arts and Crafts movement, including the sociological, political, economic and even mystical, it was only the aesthetic foundations that I felt could be adequately transferred to our contemporary settings.

As I continued in my literary research, I began to get in touch with people who had made this study part of their daily life, most notably, Robert Rust and Kitty Turgeon from the Roycroft Inn and Felicity Ashbee, daughter of the progressive designer C. R. Ashbee. This living connection with the past made me more enthralled with my topic. It was the Boston Museum of Fine Arts' symposium on the Arts and Crafts movement, in conjunction with its show, "The Art that is Life, the Arts and Crafts Movement in America," that fully committed me.

For two days, I heard from expert and amateur art historians and curators about the importance of the Arts and Crafts as a major design epoch and a wistful nostalgia for its simple view of life. When it was discovered by some that I was interested in making current artifacts reflecting its philosophies the support was unanimous and exhilarating.



¶ *I don't love working - it is working well that I love.* James Krenov

On the other hand, the physical expression of this excitement was hard to come by. Due to my relative inexperience and the highly independent, self-motivated nature of the graduate woodworking program, I often found my vision nearly exceeded my capabilities. Although I demanded of myself a high level of craftsmanship, I felt the lack of an early formalized training in techniques. Thus, caught between the twin horns of a strong production orientation in the shop and my strong sense of quality control, I was often short on time and long on missed deadlines.

Toward the end, the continuing experience and Bill Keyser's structured timetable suggestions helped speed up the work a little. However, I felt a constant anxiety over my technical inadequacies and the time constraints. Offsetting this frustration was a strong feeling of pride in my work - I was realizing the complete Arts and Crafts ethic. The founding members of the movement had been clear in their criteria. It was not enough to be merely a scholar, a designer or a craftsperson: to fully appreciate the interrelationship between the arts and crafts one had to be all three. It was not enough to explore humanist philosophies - one had to create objects that express those philosophies to the public. In order to successfully bring these still applicable aesthetic standards of this earlier time into the present, I had to create modern works that embodied the past sentiments and virtues. To this end, I feel that I accomplished my goal.

¶ *To know anything well involves a profound sensation of ignorance.* John Ruskin

On a final note, the more basic aspect of the Arts and Crafts aesthetic is implied in its name. William Morris sought to destroy the separation of art and craft and to re-establish the notion that a well designed, well built piece combines both. This concept has perhaps the most importance of any of the Arts and Crafts ideals for our time. We are constantly observing, and engaging in, discussions concerning whether a certain object is "art" or "craft". Perhaps the best answer originally put forth almost a century ago is, "yes."



Epilogue

¶ *...and go on till you come to the end: then stop.* Lewis Carroll

In the process of researching the history and ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement, I began to realize that mine was not the only interest in this period. Just as there was a revival in Art Nouveau in the 1960's and Art Deco in the 1970's, it seems that in the last few years, the art world and the public at large are taking a renewed excitement in the Arts and Crafts movement.

Whereas several years ago there were few informative texts on the subject, now there is a small flood. A quick look at my bibliography will show that the majority of the books that are not primary sources were published in the last decade. This renaissance of interest includes not only general books about the movement, but also books devoted to specific contributors, such as Stickley, Wright, Macintosh and their like.

This current explosion of information is reflected by recent museum exhibitions. "The true rediscovery of mission oak furniture - indeed, of the entire American Arts and Crafts movement - really began with Robert Judson Clark and the 1972 exhibition he developed for Princeton University."²⁰ He put the Arts and Crafts movement in a broad historical perspective and made the argument that some of the design reformers of the movement can be seen as pre-Modernists. This show was followed by "The Arts and Crafts in New York State - 1872-1914," an exhibit originally shown in Albany and which traveled from 1983 to 1985. This exhibit was more provincial in nature but it demonstrated in detail the transplantation of the Arts and Crafts movement from Britain to America. The most recent one is the aforementioned "The Art that is Life" show sponsored by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and curated by Wendy Kaplan. This exhibit once again shows the Arts and Crafts movement as it relates to the over-all picture of our design history. It is still traveling around the country. These exhibitions are vital for, just as in the past, "exhibitions... brought the work of particular craftsmen to the public attention and also were effective in encouraging new audiences to engage in handicrafts."²¹

Needless to say, this exposure of the importance of the Arts and Crafts movement has led

to a rapid inflation of prices of the original items. Such designers as Frank Lloyd Wright have been specifically spotlighted for his contributions. In an article for Americana, Frank Donegan wrote, "Indeed, by 1983 Wright's work sold for ten, twenty, or even a hundred times more than it had just a few years before."²² An example of this astonishing inflation was a recent purchase of *one* of Wright's spindle chairs for \$198,000!

It's not just the small items that have found a new, appreciative audience. More and more architectural examples, such as the houses designed by the Greene brothers, are fetching astronomical prices and, more gratifyingly, are being given local and national landmark status. Just recently, a local example, the Roycroft Inn in East Aurora, was made a National Historic Landmark.

The final, and perhaps most pertinent, confidence in the revival of Arts and Crafts furnishings was the recent offering (after I chose my thesis topic) by Pennsylvania House, a major residential furniture maker, of a new line of furniture styled after some old architects. Their "Evergreene" line is essentially a rendering of some Greene and Greene's motifs into contemporary forms. It's most interesting to note that in the literature that I read describing this "new" furniture, no mention is made of its origins and its revival nature. It is promoted as a purely contemporary look, combining modern needs with warm wood tones. Thus, as if in validation of my thesis, a large commercial production company is willing to commit itself to a new trend and "gamble" that this style will appeal to the general public. If it's good enough for them...

Endnotes

1. James Krenov, A Cabinetmaker's Notebook, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co.,1979), p.24.
2. Wendy Kaplan, "The Art that is Life": The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1875 - 1920, (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1987), p.78.
3. Coy L. Ludwig, The Arts and Crafts Movement in New York State, 1890's - 1920's, (Hamilton, New York: Gallery Association of New York State, Inc.,1983), p. 1.
4. Kaplan, "The Art that is Life", p.211.
5. Ibid.,p.215.
6. Isabelle Anscombe and Charlotte Gere, Arts and Crafts in Britain and America, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1978), p.139.
7. James Krenov, The Impractical Cabinetmaker, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1979), p.9.
8. Ibid., p.14.
9. Krenov, A Cabinetmaker's Notebook, p.13.
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11. Peter Davey, Architecture of the Arts and Crafts Movement, (New York: Rizzoi, 1980), p.185.
12. David M. Cathers, Furniture of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, (New York: New American Library,1981), p.13.
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14. Clay Lancaster, The Japanese Influence in America, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), p.83.
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16. CBS, "By Design," Sixty Minutes, 1977.
17. Krenov, A Cabinetmaker's Notebook, p. 46.
18. Ibid., p.15.
19. Ibid., p.24.
20. Cathers, Furniture of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, p.2



21. Gillian Naylor, The Arts and Crafts Movement, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), p.55.
22. Frank Donegan, "In the Marketplace - Wright's Furnishings," Americana, Sept. 1986, p.16.



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