



Cultivating Our Gardens: Nature, Materiality, Form and Function in the Decorative Arts

Class 9: Monday, November 16, 2009

Outline for Hal Nelson, Curator of American Decorative Arts

This presentation looks at objects produced in this country during the Arts & Crafts period. Many of these objects reflect a collective desire to formulate a closer relationship with nature. In the last decade of the nineteenth century, as cities grew and began to overtake this formerly agrarian nation, Americans yearned to escape to a more peaceful and healthier natural setting. This desire to exist in harmony with nature is captured in the subjects and motifs artists chose to depict as well as in the very nature of the materials they used in their work.

- Communities Amidst Nature (Room 5)
 - o Discuss *Cabinet with Tulip Poplar Panels*, 1904 as representative of the ideals of the Byrdcliffe Colony, a community of like-minded artists and artisans
 - o Discuss *Arequipa Pottery Vase*, 1912 in relation to Arequipa's mission to provide a place of healing for women convalescing from tuberculosis
- The Role of Women (Room 5)
 - o Talk about Newcomb Pottery, *Pitcher*, 1903 in relation to Newcomb College's mission to provide practical skills for newly independent urban women
- 'Tis a Gift to Be Simple (Room 5)
 - o Talk about the desk implements and the desire to bring beauty – along with elements of the natural world – to all aspects of daily life
- Let There Be Light (Room 5)
 - o Lighting: discuss Tiffany Studios *Eighteen-Light Lily Lamp*, ca. 1905 as a means of imaginatively bringing nature to the domestic environment
 - o Glass: Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company's *Fern Vase*, ca. 1900 as another example of bringing elements of nature into the home
- The Grain of Truth (Room 5)
 - o Frank Lloyd Wright *Husser House Dining Room Table and Chairs*, ca. 1899 as an example of Wright's cultivation of a natural aesthetic, evident in the fundamental beauty and pure materiality of wood

Moving through Room 6 and 7 to Room 10, talk about how some of these issues apply to decorative arts objects in both earlier and later periods.



Byrdcliffe Colony, Woodstock, New York (1902 – 1915)

Cabinet with Poplar Panels, 1904

Polychromed poplar with brass hardware

- Colony was founded in 1902 by the British-born visionary Ralph Radcliffe Whitehead (1854 – 1929) and his American wife Jane Byrd McCall (1861 – 1955)
- Whitehead was a follower of John Ruskin and William Morris
- Believed in dignity of hand labor and the virtues of a simple, rural life
- Wanted to escape the “slavery of our too artificial and too complex life, to return to some way of living which requires less of material apparatus.”
- Furniture shop produced 50 pieces of furniture in its two years of operation (1902 – 1904)
- Edna Walker (born 1880; death date not known) who designed the poplar panels was a student of Arthur Wesley Dow at the Pratt Institute
- In using poplar wood for the cabinet and depicting poplar leaves and blossoms in the panels, the artist has cleverly melded form and content in this monumental piece
- The goal of the Colony’s becoming self-sustaining through sale of work produced by resident artists was never achieved

Arequipa Pottery, Fairfax, California

Frederick Hurten Rhead (1880 – 1942)

Vase, 1912 and Bowl, 1912

Glazed earthenware

- Arequipa Pottery was founded in 1911 in Fairfax, California, north of San Francisco
- Established by Dr. Philip King Brown, a physician, as a sanatorium where young working women could recuperate from tuberculosis
- Brown invited one of the premier potters to Arequipa to run the program
- During his two year stay at Arequipa, Rhead designed pottery and the women implemented his designs
- Rhead often finished the work, himself, after others had roughed out the forms
- Rhead left in 1913 to establish his own pottery in Santa Barbara

Newcomb Pottery, New Orleans, Louisiana

Pitcher, 1903

Designed and decorated by Harriet Coulter Joor (1875 – 1965)

Potted by Joseph Fortune Meyer (1848 – 1931)

Glazed earthenware

- Newcomb Pottery was founded in 1894 at Newcomb College, the women’s division of Tulane University
- Its goal was to provide young women with vocational instruction, preparing them for meaningful and financially rewarding future employment
- Based on a model from Rookwood Pottery, there was a division of labor at Newcomb Pottery based on gender: women designed and decorated the pottery and men handled the potting, firing and glazing of the ware
- As at Rookwood, the designers – including the many superb women designers – signed their work with their initials



Arts and Crafts Metalwork

Inkwell and Various Other Desk Implements, ca. 1910 - 1925

Tiffany Studios, Corona, New York (1902 – 1932)

The Copper Shop of the Roycrofters, East Aurora, New York (ca. 1903 – 1938)

Albert Berry (1878 – 1949), Berry's Arts & Craft Shop, Seattle, Washington

Fred Brosi, Ye Olde Copper Shoppe, San Francisco, California

Samuel Yellin (1885 – 1940)

- Metalwork in all forms was a central part of the design reform movement
- Copper, pewter, bronze and iron (metals less precious than silver and gold) had special appeal to craftspersons of this period because of their interest in restraint, simplicity, forthrightness, truth to materials, and the "appropriate relationship between design and function."
- Motifs from nature were often used to decorate this ware, creating a bridge between the domestic and natural spheres

Tiffany Studios, Corona, New York (1902 – 1932)

Eighteen Light Lily Lamp, ca. 1905

Designed by Mrs. Curtis Freschel

Patinated bronze and Favrite glass

- Tiffany Studios was founded by Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848 – 1933), the son of Charles L. Tiffany, the prominent New York merchant and silver manufacturer
- This lamp combines two different kinds of lilies – field lilies in the golden iridescent bowl glass shades and water lilies in the richly patinated bronze base
- Tiffany believed women had more acute color sense than men and often hired them to work in the lamp, window, and enameling departments of Tiffany Studios
- This lamp was designed by Mr. Curtis Freschel, one of Tiffany's finest designers
- The original version was shown in the Prima Exposizione d'Arte Decorativa Moderna in Turin, Italy in 1902
- Tiffany Studios designs are considered among the foremost expressions of Art Nouveau design in America

Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company (1892 – 1900)

Fern Vase, ca. 1900

Designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany

Favrite glass

- Tiffany developed an iridescent glass with a metallic luster he called Favrite glass in 1893
- It was based on his studies of ancient Egyptian, Roman, and Syrian glass
- This piece with its broad fern leaves gracefully curving up the body of the vessel, this vase underscores Tiffany's reverence for nature
- This piece was part of Tiffany's own personal collection
- It was installed in his 84-room mansion called "Laurelton Hall" in Oyster Bay, Long Island until 1946 when the home was sold and the collection dispersed

Dining Room Table and Eight Chairs for the Joseph W. Husser House, Chicago, Illinois, ca. 1899

Frank Lloyd Wright (1867 – 1959)

Oak



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- One of the most influential architects and designers of the first half of the 20th century
 - Worked in Chicago with architects Dankmar Adler (1844 – 1900) and Louis Sullivan (1856 – 1924)
 - Left in 1893 to establish his own practice in Oak Park, Illinois
 - His architectural designs are characterized by their expansive rectilinear structure, formal clarity, gently sloping roofs with broad overhangs, and sensitivity to orientation and site
 - Wright created his first tall-back dining chair for his own home in 1895
 - Arrangement around a table creates the feeling of a room within a room
 - Wright's work also accentuates the natural beauty and grain of the wood
 - This respect for nature and natural materials was consistent with Wright's Art & Crafts influenced design philosophy

Selected Bibliography

Bates, Elizabeth Bidwell and Johathan Fairbanks. *American Furniture: 1620 to the Present*. New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1981.

General book on American furniture.

Kaplan, Wendy. *The Art That Is Life: The Arts & Crafts Movement in America, 1875 – 1920*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1987.

Wonderful survey of the decorative arts in the Arts & Crafts period with brief essays on each piece featured in the exhibition.

Ward, Gerald. W.R., ed. *MFA Highlights: American Decorative Arts and Sculpture*. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts Publications, 2006.

While this is a handbook for another museum's collection, there are a number of pieces related to the Huntington's collection and everything is discussed in clear, understandable terms.