

BEYOND 17th - 18th CENTURY PERIOD FURNITURE

THE ARTS & CRAFTS MOVEMENT

A Medieval Gothic Revival

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From four centuries of period furniture styles¹ I developed an interest in the beginnings and current rebirth of the furniture of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Thinking about *how and why we make things* led to an appreciation that the furniture craftsmen and artisans of our times are the true beneficiaries of the work and writings of A.W.N. Pugin (1812-1852), John Ruskin (1819-1900) and William Morris (1834-1896).

The Arts and Crafts Movement started in England as a socio-economic and political reformation against the industrial age of machine made decorative arts. Dismayed by the lack of quality in the objects presented and cheap ornamentation overused in these pieces at the 'Great Exhibition' of 1851, the Exhibit organizers Henry Cole (1808-1882), Owen Jones (1809-1874), Matthew Digby Wyatt (1820-1877) and Richard Redgrave (1804-1888), set about creating their correct principals of design.² Englishmen; Pugin, architectural leader in the Gothic revival; Ruskin, art critic, socialist reformer; and Morris, poet and designer of furniture and interior decoration, became the leading proponents of the Movements advocacy of Gothic and Medieval design and handicraft methods.

The Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 19th century was not a furniture style.³ The craftsmen ideal was a reaction to the industrialization of the artists and the artisans place in the making of things. Prior to the industrial revolution the artists or artisan was a person that had the special skills to

make something. Machines had relegated art as a part of our culture for non-utilitarian activities and goods. The Arts and Crafts movement sought to change the Industrial Revolutions division of labor and design, and the mental from the manual for the factory worker. At its best the movement was a contradiction, looking back to the medieval, colonial past to create a vernacular future.⁴

The Arts and Crafts Movement had its beginnings in the early 19th century with the work of A.W. N. Pugin. John Ruskin continued in midcentury with lectures and writings on hand craftsmanship. By the late 19th century, William Morris (England), Joseph Marie Olbrich (Germany/Austria), and Gustav Stickley (America) were producing furniture pieces in the Gothic/Medieval revival. In America Stickley termed his style the **Craftsman** tradition for marketing promotion.

The beginning of the 20th century was the high point of the Arts and Crafts Movement furniture production from the Englishmen Charles Eastlake, Barnsley's brothers, Ernest Gimson, C.R. Ashbee, C.F.A. Voysey, and Harris Lebus; German-Austrian cabinetmakers Moser, Otto Wagner; and America's Stickley brothers and Harvey Ellis, Charles Limbert, Louis Sullivan, Charles Rohlfs, and John S. Bradstreet. Prior to WWI as the popularity of the style was waning, the works of Scottish A.H. MacKmuendo, Charles Mackintosh; German Josef Hoffman; and American's Frank Lloyd Wright, George Elmslie, and the Greene brothers were the period style and fashion. While continuing with Craftsman label, Wright popularized the **Prairie Style**. **Mission** Style developed in California, as the Greene's incorporated oriental cloud forms into the Mission style for their unique **Greene n' Greene**

1 *Period Furniture-What Period?*, The Journal of the Guild of New Hampshire Woodworkers, Winter 2017/Spring 2018

2 Arts and Crafts Movement, Wikipedia, ed. 26/Sep/17

3 Schwarz, Christopher, *Arts & Crafts Furniture Projects*, 2nd Edition, Popular Woodworking, Cincinnati, Oh.: Popular Woodworking Books, 2014, pg.8

4 Boris, Eileen, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris and the Craftsman Ideal in America.*: Temple University Press, Philadelphia, Pa. 1986

style.



A.W.N. Pugin Oak Desk, circa 1850

http://www.artvalue.com/image.aspx?PHOTO_ID=2034881

The desk pictured above is a classic example of the medieval Gothic revival, large corner post legs, frame and panel sides with Gothic column and arch detail, large brass hardware, and symmetrically balanced horizontal and vertical lines of the drawers and panels.

Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852) was a prolific building and interior design architect of more than 100 commissions, and best known for the interior design of rebuilding the Palace of Westminster in 1834. Pugin's book "*Contrasts*" published in that year initiated the beginnings for the revival of the medieval Gothic style, and sought a return of the social working structures of the Middle Ages. Pugin called for a return to the tenants of the Christian values of the craftsman that the paternalism of medieval faith was better than the early 19th century Victorian efficiencies of factory production.⁵ His philosophical writings in "*Contrasts*" and second book; "*An Apology for the Present Revival of Christian Architecture in England*", ushered in the beginnings of the Arts and Crafts Movement in England.

Pugin's architectural work and decoration of

⁵ Hiller, Nancy R., *English Arts & Crafts Furniture*, Popular Woodworking, Cincinnati, Oh.: Popular Woodworking Books, 2018.

church's and cathedral's in the British Isles and colonies at that time was prolific. His furniture designs carried over the Gothic aspect of church design with; X-frame supports, bevelled edges, and carvings.



Oak Table, circa 1852⁶

<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O15936/table-a-w-pugin/>

John Ruskin (1819-1900), an art critic that couldn't draw nor paint, a architectural critic that couldn't design, a social critic who lived off his family affluence; but whose distaste for what he determined to be the oppressive standardisation of Laissez-faire capitalism in the forms of mass-produced *faux* Gothic work that did not exemplify the purity of his principles was well documented. In Gothic style he saw a reverence for nature and natural forms, the unfettered expression of artisans constructing and decorating, a continuity of worker and guilds, worker and community, and worker and God.⁷ But nowhere does the worker rise to the status of the critic himself!

The more I read on the man the less I think of his musings on the downtrodden workers. He is credited with the inspiration of bringing the Arts and Crafts Movement into the mainstream and that is an injustice to A.W.N. Pugin.

⁶ Copied with permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum

⁷ John Ruskin, Wikipedia, ed. 11/Oct/17

William Morris (1834-1896) became the leading figure of the Arts and Crafts movement developed in his youth at the University of Oxford. In the late 1850's he began experimenting with designing furniture and other crafts in the medieval Gothic revival style. His greatest achievement, the Morris style chair is still in production today.



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Morris-Chair-Ironwood.jpg>

While a supporter and promoter of the Arts and Crafts ethic; that the worker should have control of the design and build process, Morris would not allow the making of any of his product designs before he worked out every detail of it's design, construction, and finish. His workers were to follow the instructions and techniques he developed. Further he was ambivalent on the role that machines should have in the manufacture of his crafts. He recognized the capability of machines in reducing repetitive work and early on advocated for better machines that could produce work to his standards.

When his designs became popular at the 1862 International Exhibition the fortunes of his company grew and won significant interior design commissions for St. James Palace and the now Victoria and Albert Museum. Through the later half of the 19th century these designs in houses, interior decoration and furniture became the dominant style in British middle and upper class homes.

The early 20th century was the European high point for the Medieval Gothic revival in decorative arts, buildings and furniture. The most noted architects and cabinetmakers included; C.R. Ashbee, Charles Eastlake, the Barnsley brothers, Sidney and Ernest; Ernest Gimson; C.F.A. Voysey; E.G. Punnett; Harris Lebus; M.H. Bailey Scott; A.H. MacKmuado; C.R. Mackintosh from the U.K. From Germany/Austria-Hungary: Joseph Maria Olbrich; Koloman Moser; Otto Wagner; Josef Hoffman; Richard Riemerschmid.

At the turn of the century America, artists and intellectuals also lamented the degradation of labor by industrialism. However, the socialist followers of their English counterparts never were as an integral part of the crafts revival and socialist programs. As a movement American Arts and Crafts never espoused the Medieval Gothic but paved the way for modernism without being modern, The Gothic revival style was "inorganic" and foreign to the new American progressiveness. We had much grander ideals, pushing the teaching of arts and crafts into the public school systems, and local Guilds for all men, women and children. The most notable groups from Boston and Chicago where active Arts and Crafts Societies still exist.

The furniture styles of William Morris, Charles Eastlake (1836-1906) and revivals of Medieval Gothic, or Rustic styles received little acceptance in America. The following bears repeating;

"Contrary to many writings and beliefs that Arts and Crafts was a style, it was and is a movement of philosophy on how and why we should; and do work."⁸

"The terms Craftsman, Mission, and Arts and Crafts are often mistakenly used interchangeably. In fact, they have quite distinct meanings. Arts and Crafts is the umbrella term that applies generally to all crafts – from tiles and textiles to ceramics, furniture and illuminated manuscripts,

⁸ Period Furniture-What Period?, The Journal of the Guild of New Hampshire Woodworkers, Winter 2017/Spring 2018

produced under the influence of anti-industrialist ideas for social reform. The ideas were first articulated by John Ruskin and William Morris. The term Arts and Craft was coined after the Arts and Crafts Exhibition of 1888 in London. The movement which emphasized hand craftsmanship, honest design, and local materials began in England, then spread to continental Europe and America.”⁹

After travels to the shops of the English leaders of the Arts and Crafts Movement, Gustav Stickley learned of the Medieval Gothic tenets for his work in America. The labels Craftsman and Mission are both attributed to the designs of Gustav Stickley. He did reject the term Mission in favor of Craftsman, the name of his newly published magazine journal, but recognizing the popularity of the Mission title used it to promote his furniture.



<https://images.trocadero.com/stores/craftsman/items/766211/catphoto.jpg>

Stickley's Craftsman style was a formulation of Shaker simplicity, Frank Lloyd Wright's angularity, with influences of 17th century rectilinear shapes; through tenons and mortised frame and center panels, exposed dovetails, and quartersawn white oak. From his metal shop he produced hand wrought copper, brass, and iron hardware. The style, except for the brief period with Harvey Ellis during 1903-1904 were severe and rectilinear with no decoration. Harvey Ellis, briefly brought many of

⁹ Rodel, Kevin P & Bineen, Johathan; Arts and Crafts Furniture: From Classic to Contemporary (Newtown, CT. : The Taunton Press, 2003), pg.9

the design elements of the European designers with thinner and lighter pieces and curved aprons and bowed stiles, veneers and lamination. Ellis died in 1904, but his designs continued to influence Stickley's especially in changes to proportion, inlay's and arches.

“Mission refers generally to rectilinear American furniture of the Arts and Crafts Movement. The term was apparently coined with reference to the simple, solid furniture of some Spanish missions in California.”

Craftsman is the trade name Stickley chose for his line of Arts and Crafts furniture. Although much American manufactured furniture was made in imitation of Stickley's Craftsman line, none but Stickley's is properly called Craftsman furniture”¹⁰

The Stickley brothers; Leopold (1869-1957) and John George (1871-1921) started making Mission style furniture in 1901. Their designs were based on Gustav's early pieces. The L.& J.G. Stickley company maintained the attention to quality standards of the Arts and Crafts Movement. The backs of casework and cabinets remained vertical chamfered boards, rectangular wooden pulls, and case stiles pinned to the top of cases for structural reinforcement. Many of their pieces incorporated structural details as decoration from corbels, pegs, through tenons. The brothers are also credited with the method for post glue-ups of thin stock for quartersawn figure on four sides.

The Stickley brothers ceased production of the Mission style line in 1923, by 1926 their designs were based upon colonial revivals. After Lee's death in 1957 the company was sold to Alfred Audi, and in 1989 the A.J. Audi Company reintroduced Mission style furniture, contributing to a rebirth of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Prairie style started in Chicago after the fire in 1871. Frank Lloud Wright was one of several architects at the time who emphasized the unity of exterior and interior design that architects had control over. Wright rejected the movements

¹⁰ Rodel & Bineen, Arts and Crafts Furniture: From Classic to Contemporary, pg.9

premise that only hand craftsmanship was essential to good design. Good designs made with the use of time saving machines and attention to detail made for good end products. At his lecture at Hull House in Chicago titled "The Art and Craft of the Machine" he called machines;

*"the metamorphosis of ancient art and craft...the modern Sphinx-whose riddle the artist must solve if he would that art live – for his nature holds the key."*¹¹



<http://www.steinerag.com/flw/Artifact%20Images/Atelier605-1986.jpg>

The Prairie school architects drew design concepts from the Japanese pavilion at the 1893 World Exhibition in Chicago. Adopting the use of horizontal and cantilevered lines blended with the vast prairies of the Midwest. Table and chest tops reflected the roof overhang on their houses, tall slat backed dining chairs created a sense of enclosure in open floor plans, or served as screens to divide a space were to compliment the house design. Wright used built-in furniture pieces to insure his designs of a unified exterior and interior did not get changed by his clients. Wright's houses were ahead of their time modern, with open floor plans, spaces for intimate conversations, vast cantilevered roofs over veranda's and grand entrances, and window walls to bring the outdoors inside.

¹¹ Royka, Paul A., Mission Furniture, Furniture of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, (Atgden, PA.:Schiffer Publishing, Ltd.,1997), pg 24

Charles S. Greene (1868-1957) and Henry M. Greene (1870-1954), MIT Beaux-Arts trained Architects established their firm in Pasadena, CA in 1893. They experimented with a variety of styles over the following years, prior to the influence of Gustav Stickley's, *The Craftsman* magazine published from 1901 to 1916, and their introduction to the arts of the Orient from the Japanese pavillion at the Chicago World Exhibition.

C.R. Ashbee on tour in America admired their work, compared it favourably to the work of Wright, as among the best at the time, more refined and having more repose for the west coast region. The Greene and Greene ultimate bungalow style was the result of incorporation of the Oriental aesthetic of space, asymmetrical designs and craftsmanship from Japan. Their broad overhangs in the Prairie style offered relief and protection from the strong southwest sun, encouraging open air living and shaded terraces. Following in the footsteps of the English Arts and Crafts architects, and Prairie school Wright, the Greene's designs would highlight wood grains, floor coverings, fixtures, and furniture. All of these were unified by their repetition of geometric motifs.

The Greene brother used cabinet makers Peter and John Hall for all of their custom made furniture.



http://www.dorsetcustomfurniture.com/images/catalog/sideboards/343/images/343_1_large.jpg

Their furniture design was closer to Art Nouveau combining the oriental cloud forms, rounded edges and corners. The original design popularity was brief and ended by 1915.

Other notable American designers and cabinet makers from the Arts and Crafts Movement era

include; Charles P. Limbert, Grand Rapids, MI; Elbert Hubbard, the Roycroft Shops, East Aurora, NY; J.M Young, Camden, NY; Frank Harden, McConnellsville, NY; John Phail, Wayland, NY; A.A. Barber, Hastings, MI; C.C. Brooks, Saginaw, MI; Oscar Onken, The Shop of the Crafters, Cincinnati, OH; and William Leavens, Boston, MA. These represent the best of the companies producing furniture from the turn of the 20th century up to the beginning of WWII when all production and sale of the furniture style generated by the movement ceased.

So here we are today in the early 21st century with so many style variations to choose from, with not much new having been created since the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans gave us, dovetail joints, Windsor chairs, and Column/Arch proportions from which to base design and build decisions on, and we still insist on labelling the Arts and Crafts Movement a style! Thankfully, I have yet to hear it labelled as Period Furniture, but that no doubt is coming.

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