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Cultural Commentary: The American Arts and Crafts Movement (c. 1880-1920)

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theory with its cost benefit analysis, the message is the same -- human beings choose always to act in their own self-interest. Capitalism, of course, rests upon the identical assumption. In fact, the market system would not work unless people acted on the basis of enlightened self-interest. Hence it serves the market to indoctrinate students with the belief that everyone acts on the basis of self-interest, and furthermore that it is virtuous to do so.

The market is served again when psychology transforms wants into needs. Most of what psychology has taught us to call needs are not necessities but rather things that we merely want or desire. By calling them needs we convince ourselves not only that we must have these things, but what is more, that we are entitled to them. Wants and desires are under voluntary control. You can decide to want something a little less if it is not immediately attainable. But needs are not to be denied. You are a passive victim of your needs. If you need something, you are condemned to suffer until you get it. Such attitudes of course play right into the hand of the advertising industry whose job it is to create in the buying public more and more needs for more and more products. They want us to believe that we have a need for their products, better still, that we have a right to their products. "You owe it to yourself," they tell us, "to use the very best." "You need this car!" Nissan Sentra blatantly announces. To the extent that psychology textbooks proclaim a scientific foundation for the notion that we are a bundle of needs, they pander for an economic system that survives by selling more and more throw away products to fewer and fewer consumers.

Finally the market is served by a psychology that takes as its aim the prediction and control of behavior. This fetish of predictability is a phenomenon of the last fifty years or so, of the second half of psychology's century-long existence. And it is a typically American phenomenon. The founders of our discipline were not concerned with prediction and control. There are many other entirely worthy goals for a science of psychology. But in America psychology has been coopted by the market system — a system that prospers or crashes depending upon the accuracy of its predictions. The business of Wall Street is prediction. Since textbooks announce the business of psychology to be the same, may we not be permitted to speculate that they are in business together, with psychology of course being a subsidiary division of Wall Street.

In America the leading exponents of Arts and Crafts design and social philosophy were Elbert Hubbard, who founded the Roycroft Community of craft workshops in East Aurora, New York, and Gustav Stickley, who established a furniture firm and architectural enterprise near Syracuse, New York. They preached an approach to design that was followed by many others, including Stickley's five brothers who also set up their own companies. The ideas and designs of Hubbard and Stickley were promulgated by their respective magazines, The Philistine and The Craftsman, as well as in other widely circulated publications. That philosophy and lifestyle remain so much a part of our present world that we scarcely think of associating them with the now historic objects of the Arts and Crafts period. For example, the movement promoted the idea of suburban living to allow city workers to stay in contact with the land and enjoy the healthier country environment. Throughout the nation, suburban homes and neighborhoods still bear witness to their origins in the realization of this ideal as well as in the design aesthetic of the

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Oval-Top Table, circa 1912
Charles P. Lambert Co., Grand Rapids and Holland Michigan
Oak - height, 29"; width, 48"; depth, 19½" - Private Collection

Vase, circa 1905
Adelaide Alsop Robineau, Syracuse, New York
Pottery, yellow with blue crystalline glaze - height 4½"
Collection by Robert Toke and Roger Wilson

Settle, circa 1910
L. & J.G. Stickley Furniture Company, Fayetteville, N.Y.
Oak with leather cushions; height, 34"; width, 76"; depth, 31" — Collection of Dennis Mitchell and Ann Sweet
Server, 1901 — Gustav Stickley, Craftsman Workshops, Eastwood (Syracuse), N.Y. Oak; height, 37”; width, 60”; depth, 16½”. Collection of Paul Fiore, Backyard Gallery

Desk, circa 1905
Roycroft Shops, East Aurora, New York
Mahogany; height, 40½”; width, 40”; depth, 26½”. Collection of Robert L. Conant Williams, Craftsmen Gallery, Inc.

"American Beauty" Vase, circa 1911
Roycroft Copper Shop, East Aurora, N.Y.
Copper; height, 12½”; diameter, 6”
Collection of Roger L. Conant Williams
Craftsmen Gallery, Inc.
movement. Further, it was believed that each family should own its own home—a situation that would contribute to the development of self-esteem, responsibility and various other desirable character traits.

Houses were designed to meet the needs of families without extravagant space and ornamentation; simplicity, economy, comfort, and “hygiene” (cleanliness achieved through ease of maintenance) were important. Innovations in house plans featured kitchens located close to dining areas, and the latter sometimes combined with the open space of the living room. In turn, the living room, with the fireplace as its focus, was the center of family activity. The Victorian parlor, associated with a stuffy formality and crusty appointments of little necessity (but voracious collectors of dust), vanished along with carved woodwork and accessories of all kinds, including smoking sets, bookends, candlesticks, and the like.

A select display of pottery by such firms as Rookwood, Marblehead or Grueby, or ceramic tiles incorporated into room decoration, particularly around the fireplace were the only reminders of the extravagant displays of diverse objects of the typical Victorian interior. Walls, usually painted in subdued or greyed hues, were often partly wainscoted and further elaborated with various kinds of built-ins, including bookcases, inglenooks, window seats, and china cabinets. Rarely wallpapered, pattern was often introduced on walls with a stenciled border near the ceiling.

The Arts and Crafts home consciously looked ahead to twentieth century living. It was clearly understood, for example, that the modern home should be designed for a household in which servants were rare, but in which the wife and mother should not become a slave to domestic chores such as dusting an assortment of useless bric-a-brac, or polishing the extravagant carvings of furniture or metalwork. It was even recognized at times that she might have responsibilities outside of the home. In any case it is notable that the improvement of the woman’s role within the home was a concern of various architects, craftsmen and writers associated with the Arts and Crafts movement who sought ways to reduce her work load and make her working environment more pleasant, lighter, and closer to family activity.

With its aim of improving the lifestyle of the ordinary individual, it is no surprise to discover that the Arts and Crafts movement considered itself a “democratic art”, a label which takes on more meaning when it is realized that art and taste were viewed as the exclusive domains of the monied classes at the turn of the century. The socialist William Morris first expounded the need for a democratic art in 1877, and the Arts and Crafts movement developed to serve the middle class. Similarly, Gustav Stickley “realized that the twentieth century, then a few years distant, was to be, like the thirteenth, distinctly an Age of the People.” His perception of who would dominate the new century affected his concept of what he called the Craftsman home, just as he hoped the Craftsman home would help to shape and reinforce the values and tastes of its inhabitants:

But they in whose interest I make my plea for a democratic household art, constitute the majority of our American people. They are the busy workers, “troubled about many things;” professional people; men and women of business; toilers who reach out after objects of beauty and refinement, as if they were the flowers of a “Paradise Lost.” They are the real Americans, deserving the dignity of this new name, since they must always provide the brawn and sinew of the nation. They are the middle classes possessed of moderate culture and moderate material resources, modest in scheme and action, average in all but virtues called upon to meet stern issues, they have remaining little leisure in which to study problems of other and milder nature. But as offering such great and constant service, these same middle classes should be the object of solicitude in all that makes for their comfort, their pleasure and mental development. For them art should not be allowed to remain as an
object of consideration for critics. It should be brought to their homes and become for them a part and parcel of their daily lives. A simple, democratic art should provide them with the material surroundings conducive to plain living and high thinking, to the development of the sense of order, symmetry and proportion. (The Craftsman, Vol. VII, No. 2, October 1904)

Stickley’s Craftsman home was the paragon of the Arts and Crafts house. Simultaneously, Frank Lloyd Wright along with various Southern California architects led a residential architecture with these same intimation of the Bungalow from its Primitive forerunner of the modern ranch house. They This book met with such success that it was in its fifth edition within three years after its publication in 1910. The bungalow was the forerunner of the modern ranch house. They share many features including a widespread expression and interior design.

Meanwhile, the ideal of the Arts and Crafts home was adapted and popularized in the “bungalow” by such men as Henry L. Wilson of Chicago, who wrote The Bungalow Book, A Short Sketch of the Evolution of the Bungalow from its Primitive Crudeness to its Present State of Artistic Beauty and Cozy Convenience, Illustrated with Drawings of Exteriors, Floor Plans, Interiors, and Cozy Corners of Bungalows Which have been built from Original Design. This book met with such success that it was in its fifth edition within three years after its publication in 1910. The bungalow was the forerunner of the modern ranch house. They share many features including a widespread role in American life. Like today’s ranch house, the bungalow was usually one-story with a low-pitched roof. Its two-story counterpart was called a “Foursquare.” Sears and Roebuck alone sold tens of thousands of both types of houses by mail-order from 1909 to 1937 under the name of “Honor Bilt.” All materials necessary for construction — including lumber, millwork, roofing, plumbing, heating systems, lighting, paints and varnishes, roofing, hardware, and (if so ordered) even the furniture and rugs — were shipped by railroad with thorough instructions for building. The bungalow and foursquare expressed the Arts and Crafts style in its simple, honest use of materials which, on the exterior, consisted of some combination of stucco, shingles, clapboard and field-stones, and the prominent features of broad porches and overhanging roofs. Affordable and easily constructed, they succeeded in realizing the Arts and Crafts goal of providing well-built, comfortable homes of honest design to the average American family.

The Arts and Crafts movement became popularized in many areas beyond house design. This was especially true toward the end of the stylistic period in the 1910s and 1920s. Virtually every furniture manufacturer began to offer their own lines of “mission” furniture, styled in the manner of Gustav Stickley’s Craftsman furniture, or that of Roycroft or other pioneers of the style. The democratic and educative tendencies of the movement resulted in the liberal dissemination of ideas, designs and technical information for virtually every area of Arts and Crafts activity: architecture, furniture construction, lamp making, fabric or leather decoration, metalwork, etc. Designs were published in The Craftsman, Popular Mechanics, and other magazines or books, or they could be purchased from some of the manufacturers. Since the designs were often simple — many were specifically created for the amateur — it was possible for a person to build and furnish his own home, or at least take on a project or two during spare time. Such handcraftsmanship was fostered within the Arts and Crafts philosophy as leading to an appreciation of good design through hands-on experience with materials and craft skills.

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Moreover, the work ethic prevailed, and manual labor was regarded as wholesome for the development and well-being of an individual. Most important in the spread of Arts and Crafts knowledge and skills were the local arts and crafts societies, schools, summer camps, and similar organizations, which provided training programs and sponsored lectures on many topics, including craft techniques and design. The Chautauqua Institutions’ Summer Assemblies form a prime example of a program developed along Arts and Crafts lines, concerned as it was with social issues, education and manual training.

In the final analysis, one of the greatest legacies of the Arts and Crafts movement was the way it contributed to breaking down the barriers that restricted art and taste. The aesthetic and moral values newly ascribed to the decorative arts had been previously reserved only for painting and sculpture. Also, because of the way the decorative arts served environmental and utilitarian needs, they were regarded as a sure way of exposing the average individual within his or her home to works of good design and sensibility representing high levels of creativity, technical skill, and use of beautiful materials.

As the Arts and Crafts movement gained momentum and the Gilded Age or “American Renaissance” came to an end, the upper classes lost their monopoly on taste since cost of materials and ornament were no longer important factors in judging the aesthetic quality of furnishings and design. Finally, creative endeavor was expanded well beyond the domain of the professional artist, architect or professional artisan. As mentioned, in many different ways the average man and woman were encouraged and enticed to participate in the aesthetic of the movement. Art was no longer believed to be separate from the vital and everyday aspects of life; instead, art — as it expressed itself in good design — offered means for the betterment of life, and contributed to an individual’s physical, mental and moral wellbeing. Boldly recognizing that the new twentieth century would be different from the old era in terms of social structure, economics, and the job and home life of men and women, the exponents of the Arts and Crafts movement set our course in lifestyle and design and, in the process, left a heritage of sturdy and proud objects that express the modern spirit.

The fundamental theories and design approach of the Arts and Crafts style were continued in the design philosophy articulated and put into practice by the influential German Bauhaus and its disciples, with important impact on American design within a few years after the decline of the Arts and Crafts movement. Indeed, though the Bauhaus is generally credited with the development and dissemination of what is regarded as a characteristically twentieth century approach to design, its principles are to be found in the earlier Arts and Crafts movement. Both believed in the honest expression of the natural beauty of materials, and in products that emphasize function over form, but in which form is carefully considered and treated in simple, well-proportioned designs without applied ornament. Above all, both advocated a coordinated approach to the decorative arts and architecture to create environments aimed at promoting a “modern” lifestyle of uncluttered efficiency, cleanliness, and beauty through design integrity. The Arts and Crafts movement shared an interchange of ideas — and at times overlapped — with the contemporaneous movements of the Vienna Secession, German Jugendstil, and the Art Nouveau of France, Belgium and Britain (including the Glasgow School). These in turn were instrumental in the realization of the Bauhaus style. Thus, with the Arts and Crafts movement we find the formulation and first expression of the modern design philosophy that has prevailed throughout the twentieth century. And today, no less than a century since their origins, these principles are more influential than ever in determining the look of our environments and furnishings, shaping our tastes, and thus determining the values we maintain and the very way we live.