DESIGN FOR LIVING

A NEW EXHIBITION REEXAMINES THE IDEALS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF FURNITURE-MAKER GUSTAV STICKLEY, A KEY FIGURE IN THE AMERICAN ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT.

BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

"As a condition of life, production by machine is wholly an evil."

So observed the writer, lecturer and designer William Morris, the central figure in Britain's Arts and Crafts movement. Along with the designer and illustrator Walter Crane, the artist and bookbinder Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson and other artisan-aesthetes in the late 19th century, Morris championed high-reaching artistic values that overlapped with social and economic concerns to inspire a strain of idealistic, reformist thinking and the making of a wide range of decorative-arts objects, including textiles, books and home furnishings. Their creations in the Arts and Crafts style looked back admiringly to a fading era of cottage industries, even as they presaged the spare lines and simplified forms of the modernist age.

In the United States, the Wisconsin-born businessman and furniture-maker Gustav Stickley (1858–1942), became one of the best-known exponents of the Arts and Crafts movement's aesthetic agenda, which celebrated craft labor and urged craftsmen to be true to their materials. Still, in late 19th- and the early 20th-century America, many observers saw automated production and the resulting mass availability of affordable goods as a positive, democratic development. It was against this backdrop that the middle-class home became the focus of Arts and Crafts designers' taste-making and spirit-lifting efforts.

Gustav Stickley, reclining chair, 1901-1902, oak with leather upholstery. This spread, from left: Gustav Stickley; corner cupboard, 1902-1903, oak, iron, and glass.

How their values and aspirations found tangible, attractive form in the extensive body of work of one of the movement's leading figures in the U.S. is the subject of "Gustav Stickley and the American Arts and Crafts Movement," an exhibition that will open at the Newark Museum in New Jersey on September 15. Featuring more than 100 objects from Stickley's oeuvre, this examination of the designer's ideas and the artistic language through which he translated them into tables, lamps, cupboards, candlesticks and whole houses will focus on the most creative period of his multifaceted career, from 1900 to 1913. (The exhibition will remain on view through January 2, 2011, then reopen on February 13 at the Dallas Museum of Art and on June 18 at the San Diego Museum of Art.)

"We've been working on this exhibition for more than a decade," says Kevin W. Tucker, the curator of decora-

GUSTAV STICKLEY MUSEUM; DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

design for living

"There are aspects of Stickley's vision that, as audiences will see, are very relevant to some of the growing concerns people have today about design and the way they can or do or should live."

tive arts and design at the Dallas Museum of Art, the show's organizing institution. "There are aspects of Stickley's vision that, as audiences will see, are very relevant to some of the growing concerns people have today about design and the way they can or do or should live." Tucker points out, for example, that Stickley designed houses with the landscape in mind and encouraged the use of indigenous building materials.

In addition, Arts and Crafts home interiors stressed what modernist designers call an "open plan," in which spaces such as dining and living rooms spill into each other to allow for and promote interaction among their users. Tucker notes that "this exhibition calls attention to an evolving definition of 'craft,' since, after all, Stickley ran a furniture factory. What he promoted, in effect, was 'factory craft,' combining hand-craftsmanship and machine-based methods to make artistic products of high quality." Stickley's wares were reasonably priced and available through retailers across the U.S.

In Britain, William Morris had been influenced by the 19th-century critic John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, a group of painters, poets and critics who had established a "brotherhood" of like-minded aesthetes in the mid-1800s (See Art & Antiques February 2009). In 1861, Morris and his associates founded a company to design and produce furniture, textiles, wallpaper and other home furnishings in ways that would showcase fine craftsmanship and, they hoped, unite all the arts.

During the latter half of the 19th century, other British designers and artists also found inspiration in rural-handicraft and vernacular-architecture traditions and set up crafts communities or artists' associations. In 1887, a group of them came together to establish the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, which held its first presentation at a London gallery the following year. In a publication that accompanied that exhibition, Morris articulated some

DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

Clockwise from left: electric lamp, 1909, oak, copper, and glass; three-fold screen, 1905, oak, linen, burlap, and silk; sideboard, 1908, oak, plywood, and iron.

design for living

"Stickley and his employees not only produced his original designs, they also promoted the philosophy of the Arts and Crafts movement by emphasizing that these beautiful, useful, simple objects were integral to a better way of living."

From left: side chair, 1903-1904, oak, pewter, copper, various woods, and rush; linen chest, 1902-1903, oak and iron.

of the basic principles he and his collaborators believed in and sought to promote. In a typical pronouncement, he wrote: "Never forget the material you are working with and try always to use it for doing what it can do best: If you feel yourself hampered by the material in which you are working instead of being helped by it, you have ... not learned your business."

Almost instinctively, it seems, Stickley understood that kind of admonition. The son of German immigrants, he earned a journeyman's license as a stonemason when he was 12 years old. In his teens, he became his family's main breadwinner after his father abandoned their home. Eventually, Stickley's uncle hired him to work in his chair-making factory. It was a job the youth enjoyed, and it allowed him to find his calling in the hands-on crafting of wood. By the mid-1880s, Stickley and his brothers had started their own furniture company. (Still later, Gustav would set up a firm of his own.)

So it was that, unlike his Arts and Crafts predecessors across the Atlantic, Stickley had begun his career as the co-owner of a furniture factory—as a businessman, that is, not primarily as an aesthete. It was not until the late 1890s that he began to learn about and assimilate the ideas and approaches to design and styling that had originated in Britain. In 1901, he founded a magazine, *The Craftsman*, to promote the Arts and Crafts movement's ideals in an American context. Over the next 15 years, his publication featured more than 200 original house plans that gave readers vivid examples to examine and emulate of what became known as domestic organic architecture. This kind of design emphasized a sense of harmony between built structures and the natural environments in which they were constructed. Similarly, in 1903, Stickley founded the Craftsman Home Builders Club, another outlet through which to promote his ideas about design and the use of materials.

DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

design for living

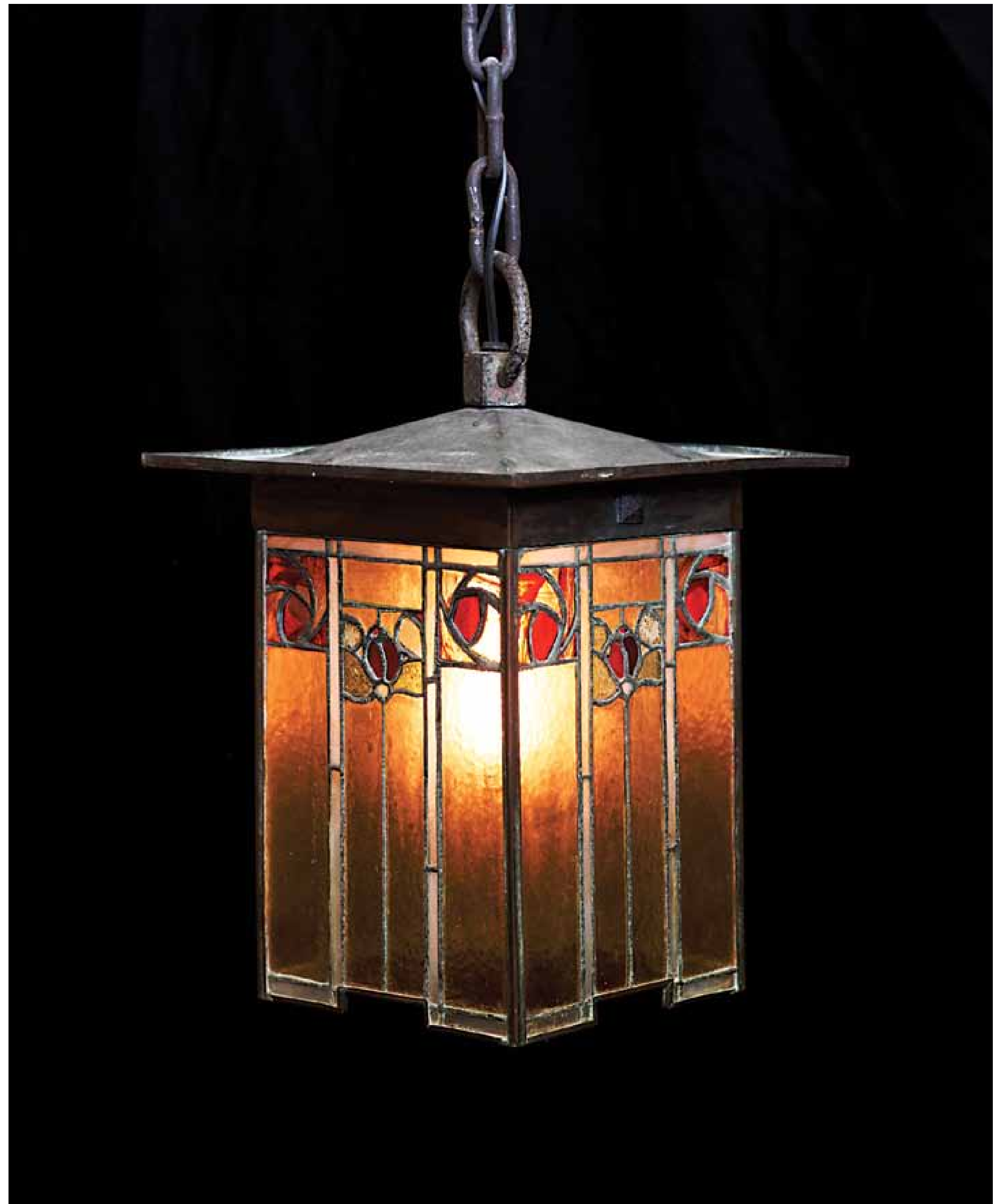
By 1905, Stickley had moved his company's headquarters from Syracuse, N.Y., to New York City. A few years later, on the edge of what is now Parsippany-Troy Hills, in northern New Jersey, he began buying up what would become a property of more than 600 acres. For that piece of land, Stickley had a dream—the creation of a farm school for boys, to be named "Craftsman Farms." The proposed boarding school, which never materialized, was to have been a self-sufficient enterprise with its own vegetable gardens, orchards, dairy cows and chickens. A large structure made with logs and stones gathered locally was erected on the property in 1911. Originally intended to serve as a central clubhouse for the proposed school, it became the Stickley family's own residence instead.

Despite his earlier successes, by 1915 Stickley's ventures were failing—in part because American consumers had begun turning away from his furniture's simple lines to those of more elaborate, historical-revival styles—and the influential businessman-designer was compelled to file for bankruptcy. Two years later, he sold Craftsman Farms. (Today, the site's buildings and a 30-acre portion of the original property have become a National Historic Landmark.)

"Stickley and his employees not only produced his original designs," says Tucker, "they also promoted the philosophy of the Arts and Crafts movement by emphasizing that these beautiful, useful, simple objects were integral to a better way of living." The exhibition he has organized, he says, "examines how relatively successful Stickley's designs were in different ways." When considered from today's vantage points, he notes, "we can see that they were often both romantic and proto-modern, or they reflected Stickley's character as both an idealistic visionary and a practical businessman, or they attempted to respond to the public's demands even as they sought to shape popular taste." These inherent tensions in Stickley's work, which, in retrospect, may be seen as having looked back to the 19th century even as they anticipated nascent style trends of the 20th century, are among the exhibition's most provocative themes.

Ulysses G. Dietz, the curator of decorative arts at the Newark Museum, notes that one of his institution's founders was Frederick Keer, the retail representative of Stickley's Craftsman brand products in Newark. While the Stickley exhibition is on view in that city, Dietz says, one of the furniture maker's inlaid-maple side chairs dating from around 1910 will be on display in the museum's permanent collection, "along with pieces of Arts and Crafts sil-

From left: five-light electrolier, 1904, iron, copper, and glass; electric lantern, 1908, copper and glass.



DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

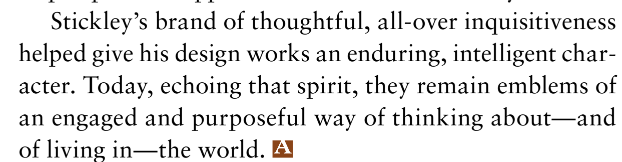
Clockwise from left: serving table, 1902-1903, oak; candlestick, 1905, copper; table scarf, *Ginkgo* design, 1904, linen.

ver, glass and ceramics, and, on loan to us, a three-fold oak room-divider screen that was originally at Craftsman Farms." Also on view, as always, will be the 1885 Ballantine House, the former residence of a wealthy, ale-brewing family in Newark that has long been an integral part of the museum's decorative-arts department. Featuring several period rooms that have been restored in a décor typical of 1891, the house, Dietz points out, "will be linked to the Stickley exhibition because it represents the opposite of what he promoted, while at the same time exemplifying the sort of careful craftsmanship he wanted to make available to everyone."

Among other emblematic examples of Stickley's designs, the Newark exhibition will feature architectural drawings of his Craftsman houses; an armoire (circa 1907–12) that he had used himself; a chalet table (circa 1900) whose simple lines clearly illustrate its maker's break with the ornamental style of the past (Ruskin had inveighed against ornamentation unless it was essential and "honest"); and a rare armchair from around 1903, with copper and wood inlay. It will also include the complete recreation of a model dining room Stickley assembled and first displayed in 1903. In that year, the fully outfitted room was showcased in an Arts and Crafts exhibition Stickley presented at his Craftsman Building in Syracuse. At the time, the stylish dining room created a stir with its oak-and-burlap wall coverings, Grueby Pottery vessels and low, massive linen chest with wrought-iron fittings (the latter is now in the Dallas Museum of Art's collection).

Could it be that Stickley's optimism about the transformative power of good design and fine craftsmanship was mirrored by the enthusiasm with which he seemed to pursue a remarkably wide range of interests? Certainly it influenced his research, his artistic activity and the fervent way in which he spread his message—it shaped, that is, the totality of his teachings.

In a single issue of the Craftsman in 1904, for example, Stickley and his collaborators discussed the virtues and varied pleasures of bookplates, saddles (embossed in a Californian style), children's clothing, "the democratic city," several compact-house designs and the "refinement of line and harmony of color" that homeowners should aim for in their interior décor. Elsewhere in this same issue, another writer declaimed that art "should be independent of all claptrap" and "appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear."



Stickley's brand of thoughtful, all-over inquisitiveness helped give his design works an enduring, intelligent character. Today, echoing that spirit, they remain emblems of an engaged and purposeful way of thinking about—and of living in—the world.

DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART