

# Uncommon Arts

Going beyond  
Stickley  
to uncover  
the riches of  
a many-faceted  
movement

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Stickley, Craftsman, Mission style: These names and the solid, rectilinear pieces they describe represent the vast majority of Arts and Crafts furniture made in America during that movement's heyday from 1895 to 1915. Hundreds of thousands of such pieces were cranked out in factories across the East and Midwest. But during the same period in a range of small shops in America and Europe, makers drew on the same Arts and Crafts philosophy to produce furniture that was far different—still solid and functional, but much more personal, adventuresome, and stylistically distinctive. Linking these diverse designs was a root system that started in England and spread around the globe. It began with the writings of the critic John Ruskin—who argued for honest designs and the importance of handwork—and with the embodiment of those ideas in the buildings,



## Arts and Crafts by Architects

**M.H. Baillie Scott was one of a circle of young English architects deeply influenced by William Morris. Like Morris, Baillie Scott designed houses and often every scrap of furnishing inside them. For his 1901 Blackwell House (above), now a museum, he designed custom furniture, hardware, and paneling for every room.**



## Many faces of the Morris chair

William Morris was an icon to members of the Arts and Crafts movement—not necessarily for the style of his furnishings, but for the ideas they represented. Arts and Crafts spanned many countries and many styles, but furniture makers across the spectrum drew inspiration from the English designer, and many paid tribute by interpreting the original “Morris” chair.

The original Morris chair, adapted by Philip Webb from a traditional English design, was introduced by Morris & Co. in 1865 and kept in production for 75 years.



Gustav Stickley's Morris chair from 1905, with its exposed joinery, clear finish, and solid, four-square construction, embodies the Craftsman aesthetic.

# & Crafts



C.F.A. Voysey was another London-trained architect inspired by Morris who went on to design houses and many of the furnishings and fittings inside. In his furniture, Voysey made prominent use of flat planes and straight lines, but blended them with carefully selected curves and rounded elements. His oak cabinet (above

right), with its slender legs and thin shelves, shows the refinement typical of Voysey's work. As with many of his pieces, its hardware is also of his own design. The dining chair (above left) shares the lightness of Voysey's designs and sports his trademark double-curve on the crest rail.



New York City manufacturer Joseph P. McHugh produced this Morris chair, whose branching elements enliven a rectilinear design.

Made by the Charles P. Limbert Co., in their Holland, Mich., factory, this Morris chair blends elements of Mission style with curves and plank construction.

Philadelphian William Price embraced the Gothic style in much of his furniture, harkening to the days of the medieval craft guilds praised by John Ruskin.

Viennese designer Josef Hoffmann's 1908 version of the Morris chair showcases his preference for pure geometry while paying homage to Morris.

# English Country Arts and Crafts

furnishings, crafts, and writing of the English designer William Morris.

I've brought together a sampling of furniture by makers in America and Europe whose work illustrates the great breadth and high quality of Arts and Crafts designs created outside the mainstream. For reasons of space, I've chosen not to include a number of superb and groundbreaking Arts and Crafts designers—like the brothers Charles and Henry Greene in California, Frank Lloyd Wright in the Midwest, and Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Scotland—in favor of makers whose work might be less familiar.

*Jonathan Binzen is the co-author, with Kevin P. Rodel, of Arts & Crafts Furniture (2005, The Taunton Press), from which this article is adapted.*

**One man's hands.** Sidney Barnsley designed and built this library table, an undecorated piece that derives its power from the purity of its form.



**An essay in exposed joinery.** Through-tenons and proud dovetails anchor Sidney Barnsley's blanket chest. The deep chamfering on the corners is a detail borrowed from farm implements.



**High and low.** Combining the proportions and rich materials of a formal sideboard with the heavy chamfers and arched framing of a farm wagon, Ernest Gimson's walnut sideboard is a prime example of his ability to blend the elegant with the utilitarian.

London was the birthplace of Arts and Crafts, but some of the most interesting work of the movement emerged in the English countryside. Ernest Gimson and the brothers Ernest and Sidney Barnsley, all city-trained architects influenced by William Morris, moved from London to the rural Cotswolds in the early 1890s to live the Arts and Crafts ideal of the designer as craftsman. Together they developed a vivid furniture style rooted in the traditional forms and techniques of the region's crafts: wagons, hay rakes, barrels, barns. They used heavy timbers and pegged, exposed joints, often decorating their pieces with the extreme chamfering they admired



**Brute force.** Most parts of Gimson's dining table are pared to essential forms; the exceptions are the hayrake-inspired angled supports above the trestle.



on farm implements. Sidney Barnsley abandoned architecture and devoted himself purely to furniture. And he built every piece he designed, working alone and using only hand tools. Ernest Gimson learned to make traditional post-and-rung chairs, but he left casework to the two or three cabinetmakers working in his shop. Some of his furniture has the raw, country flavor of Sidney Barnsley's work, but other pieces combine elements of the rural vernacular with elevated forms and rich decoration. This play of the formal and the informal, the rough and the elegant—along with an unerring eye for proportion—gives Gimson's pieces a unique spirit.

**Inlay in the outlands.** Not all of Gimson's work reflected his rural surroundings. In pieces like this small chest, he used marquetry to create an elegant geometric composition. He designed the silver hardware and had it made in his shop.

**Subtle slats.** Having learned to make ladder-backs in the traditional fashion with turned posts and rungs and flat slats, Gimson adapted the cyma-curved slat profile to this more formal chair.



## Influence of the Orient

John Scott Bradstreet, an interior designer and retailer in Minneapolis, designed furniture in a wide range of styles, but made his lasting mark with pieces that drew on his many buying trips to Japan. Inspired by William Morris's Kelmscott workshops, where a range of crafts were plied, Bradstreet created his own Craffhouse, which was both a retail space and a workshop where he employed some 80 craftsmen, most from Scandinavia and Japan. Bradstreet developed a version of the Japanese "jin-di-sugi" surface treatment for wood, scorching and wire-brushing cypress to give it an aged and eroded appearance, as seen in his tulip table (below). The 1905 cabinet with sliding panels (left) was in Bradstreet's own office.



## The Organic Element

Following in the footsteps of William Morris, who often used organic imagery in his textiles and furnishings, many Arts and Crafts makers incorporated plant forms in their designs. William Templeton Johnson, an architect in San Diego, designed this redwood blanket chest (below) around a panel of carved eucalyptus leaves. The plain box makes a deferential frame for the powerful carving.



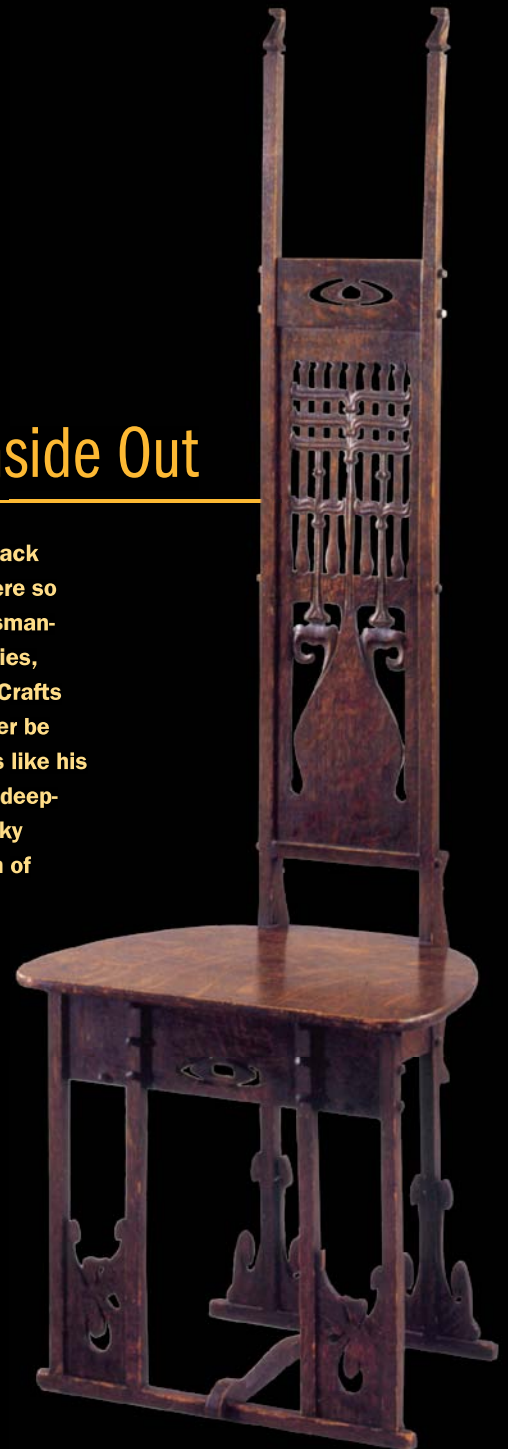
## Power of the Prairie

The Minneapolis architects William Gray Purcell and George Grant Elmslie gave the Arts and Crafts an injection of Prairie style. In pieces like these 1910 dining chairs with their pierced back splats, Purcell and Elmslie created a striking geometric version of organic ornament. Working in the style pioneered by their colleague Frank Lloyd Wright, they designed flat-roofed, open-plan houses and filled them with custom-designed furnishings.



## Turning Mission Inside Out

In his four-man workshop in Buffalo, smack in the stratum of upstate New York where so much Stickley and other copycat Craftsman-style furniture was made in large factories, Charles Rohlf adopted many Arts and Crafts ideals but built furniture that could never be mistaken for anyone else's. With pieces like his writing desk (left) he used pierced and deep-relief carving to transform a stout, plunky design into an extraordinary expression of individuality. After a first career as a Shakespearean actor, Rohlf decided to become a full-time furniture maker at age 44 in 1897. The tall-backed hall chair from 1899 (right), one of many he designed, has an almost surrealist flair.



### Online Extra

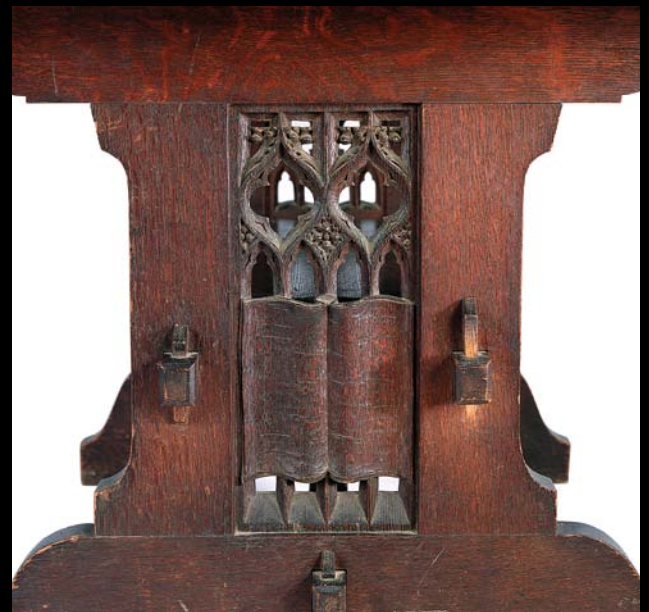
For a slide show on the origins of the Arts and Crafts movement, go to [FineWoodworking.com/extras](http://FineWoodworking.com/extras).

# Utopian Arts and Crafts

## PENNSYLVANIA GOTHIC

Philadelphia architect William Price was such a devotee of William Morris that in 1901 he set up a utopian community—Rose Valley—along the lines suggested by Morris in his writings. Price designed furniture in a neo-Gothic style, which was far out of step stylistically with most other Arts and Crafts furniture, but stemmed

directly from John Ruskin's celebration of medieval craftsmen and cathedrals. As he did in this table (right), with its tusk tenons, Price insisted on exposed joinery of the type favored by medieval makers. His twin-backed bench (left) combines complex pierced carving typical of his work with unusual spiral-fluted legs.



## CATSKILLS COLONY

Some of the finest pieces of Arts and Crafts furniture were produced at Byrdcliffe, an experimental artistic community founded in 1901 by Ralph Radcliffe Whitehead, a wealthy English protégé of John Ruskin. Built near Woodstock, N.Y., Byrdcliffe failed as a community but produced exceptional furniture during the two years its woodshop was in operation. Drawing on the talents of fine art painters in residence, the furniture pairs relatively plain, rectilinear cabinets with panels that are either painted or carved. This oak linen press (left) has poplar panels carved in a design of stylized sassafras leaves.

## CONTINENTAL ARTS AND CRAFTS

The most powerful designs of the continental branch of Arts and Crafts came from the Austrian designer Josef Hoffmann. The style he developed at his Wiener Werkstatte (Vienna Workshop) had the honesty and impeccable craftsmanship championed by the Arts and Crafts movement but utilized boldly abstract and graphic forms that still look modern a century later. Like his English counterparts, Hoffmann was opposed to using machines to imitate handwork. But he had no aversion to using machines to do what they do best: make identical parts with great precision. In Hoffmann's furniture, standardized, machine-produced parts double as decorative elements.



**Masking the material.** Like Charles Rennie Mackintosh—but unlike most Arts and Crafts makers, who preferred the honesty of wood surfaces left natural—Hoffmann often ebonized his pieces to increase the visual impact of their lines, grids, and planes.

**How many do you want?** Hoffmann did custom pieces for the wealthy, but he also frequently designed lower-cost furniture to be made in production. This Hoffmann chair was produced by Thonet, the behemoth of bentwood chair manufacturing.



**Great gridwork.** Hoffmann's limed and ebonized table with silver accents (above) expresses the sheer excitement he found in rigid gridwork. He designed a wide range of housewares and often used a punched grid of squares as ornament in his silverware.

