

Simple Elegance: Gustav Stickley and the American Arts & Crafts Movement

Written by Terry Mathews

Friday, 25 February 2011 10:07



Perhaps the most striking thing about the Gustav Stickley (1858-1942) exhibit at the Dallas Museum of Art is its simplicity.

The exhibit features more than 100 items, including furniture, lamps and linens inspired by the German immigrant who was a leading figure in the Arts & Crafts movement.

Situated on the first floor of the museum, the exhibit begins with a simple chair – a chair that tells the complete arts and crafts story.

Subsequent scenes are set with equal elegance, leading visitors on a journey through Stickley's creations, while offering background information on his life, inspirations, successes and failures.

Curated by Kevin W. Tucker, The Margot B. Perot Curator of Decorative Arts and Design at the Dallas Museum of Art, *Gustav Stickley and the American Arts & Crafts Movement* premiered in September 2010 to critical acclaim at the Newark Museum in conjunction with the centennial celebration of the designer's New Jersey home, Craftsman Farms.

"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," praised *Art & Antiques* magazine. "A handsome show, comprehensive without being overwhelming," wrote the *Wall Street Journal*, noting that Stickley's designs reveal the hand of "a superbly refined craftsman responding to the artistic Zeitgeist."

The exhibition will be on view at the museum through May 8.

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“Stickley’s firm produced works that embodied a bold new simplicity, forthrightness and stability in the face of tumultuous times,” Tucker said. “Not content simply to create these items, Stickley and his employees shaped and promoted the ideological framework of the Arts and Crafts movement, where these beautiful, useful and simple objects were presented as integral to a better way of living.”

Between 1901 and 1916, Stickley also published *The Craftsman* magazine, which became a leading national journal of the movement’s ideas, according to a press release from the DMA.



One of the exhibition’s highlights is the re-creation of the dining room first displayed in the 1903 Arts and Crafts Exhibition organized by Stickley and presented in his Syracuse Craftsman Building.

The model dining room was a sensation, attracting the attention and admiration of many visitors and critics. A period photograph of the original room corroborates the acclaim, showing a beautifully orchestrated setting that includes oak and fabric wall coverings, a Donegal carpet with stylized floral motifs, and richly modeled Grueby Pottery vessels on the table and sideboard.

One of the masterpieces on display in the re-creation is a unique linen chest, now part of the DMA’s collections, made especially for the room, along with a selection of related furnishings that have not been reunited since 1903. The massive linen chest with its low profile, refined lines and bold wrought-iron hinges and lock fittings is a stunning example of the work of Stickley’s designers at the height of their creative powers.

While the tour offers audio assistance at no charge via an iPod – no charge, save giving your driver’s license to the nice people behind the counter – we found the iPod’s connectivity sketchy at best, especially in some of the interior rooms. Navigating through the exhibit’s app was also a major distraction. If I make a repeat visit, I’ll skip the iPod.

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If the arts and crafts era appeals to you, this exhibit will certainly enhance your knowledge and appreciation for the beauty and elegance of a simpler time and place.



Gustav Stickley and the American Arts & Crafts Movement runs through May 8 at the Dallas Museum of Art. Tickets are \$10, with discounts for students, military and seniors. Children under 12 are free. Parking is \$10. Museum hours are 11 a.m. until 5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday; Friday through Sunday, 11 a.m. until 9 p.m. and 11 a.m. until midnight on the third Friday of the month.

Call 214-922-1200 or visit www.dallasmuseumofart.org for more information.