

Gustav Stickley

The rebel craftsman of his time

by Carol L. Bohdan and Todd M. Volpe

One of the last great designer-craftsmen to come out of the 19th century was Gustav Stickley. Today, this cabinetmaker and entrepreneur is almost forgotten. But for 15 brief years before World War I, Stickley's "Craftsman" furniture and furnishings enjoyed great popularity. A change in popular taste and the onslaught of mass-produced goods spelled the end of his success. Now, however, Stickley's work is being re-discovered in attics, barns and secondhand thrift shops and appearing on the more prestigious (and expensive) antiques circuit.

Born in 1857 in Wisconsin, Stickley was trained by his father as a stonemason, but soon left to learn cabinetmaking from an uncle in Pennsylvania. After working in furniture factories and stores, he formed a distaste for the gaudy pieces generally popular at the time and developed instead an admiration for the simple and sturdy forms of the Shaker furniture he had seen.

Stickley was also influenced by the decorative arts coming out of Chicago in the 1870's, one of the pulse centers of the arts and crafts movement in this country. A trip abroad to see "art nouveau" and English arts and crafts designs convinced him further to purify furniture forms. He became determined to create a personal, streamlined construction that would eliminate most needless decoration, with each article free from pretense, and in his own words, "fitted for the place it was to occupy and the work it had to do." He thus, for the most part, avoided the "tortured and fantastic lines" based on the organic plant forms of which the art nouveau enthusiasts were so fond, preferring to omit "intrusive" inlay, artificial "affectation," and those forms that evoked the past in a "quaint" or historical way.

In his quest to develop a distinctive style, he took the medieval joiner's compass as his symbol and borrowed the motto "Als ik Kan" ("As I can," or, more broadly, "All I



Perhaps best known of Stickley's furniture is the Morris chair named after the British philosopher and spokesman for the arts and crafts movement, William Morris. Plant stand is 26 inches high.





can") from Jan van Eyck because it was "brief, modest and not always easy to fulfill."

In turning to earlier craft traditions, he created a mystique around his furniture that would prove most appealing to a public jaded by ornate forms. There was, however, nothing mystical about Stickley's esthetic goals. Furniture, according to him, was to be made "first of all for daily use and wear . . . comfortable, durable and easy to take care of." It was Stickley's desire to escape the growing influence of the machine over the manufacture of domestic goods, and to address the needs of his time by directing the public toward "an art that shall strike its roots deep into the life of the people," emphasizing the ideals of simple hand-craftsmanship, functionalism, easy care and, above all, comfort.

Stickley preferred to work with oak (although he also used chestnut, ash and elm), explaining: "When I first began to use the severely plain, structural forms, I chose oak as the



Oak lamp (22 inches high) has pale yellow and green stained-glass shade. Bookcase (56 inches high) bears Stickley's label and signature (above). Stickley-designed writing desk (30 inches high, below) has copper hardware and was made in Grand Rapids. Pieces are from author Volpe's collection.



wood that, above all others, was adapted to massive simplicity of construction. The strong, straight lines and plain surfaces of the furniture follow and emphasize the grain and growth of the wood, drawing attention to, instead of destroying, the natural character that belonged to the growing tree."

In keeping with his emphasis on natural materials, Stickley lined the drawers of desks and library tables with split calf, and covered his chairs and settles with rush, thick canvas, cow or calf-hide in soft earth tones of brown and tan. These were often fastened in place by iron or copper studs, one of the maker's few concessions to ornament. Pulls and hinges on cabinets, sideboards and tables were of wrought iron or hammered copper, with a warm glow obtained by means of an old process of firing which gives a surface that mellowes with age and exposure.

Eventually Stickley branched out into the limited production of copper lamps, candlesticks, desk pieces, fire-place equipment and other accessories which lent "delightful gleams of color" to a room.

He formed the Gustav Stickley Company in 1898 near Syracuse, New York. Two years later he showed a small number of his pieces at the furniture exhibition in Grand Rapids, causing *The House Beautiful* of that year to cheer: "The day of cheap veneer, of jig-saw ornament, of poor imitations of French periods, is happily over."

Capitalizing on the sudden commercial success of Craftsman furniture, two of Stickley's brothers, Leopold and J. George, left the workshop in 1900 to form the L. & J. G. Stickley Company in nearby Fayetteville, New York. Other professional imitators vied for success, most notably the Roycroft Workshop of Elbert Hubbard in East Aurora, New York. Although these workshops turned out fine products, they were not always loyal to the purist philosophy espoused by Stickley. Most distressing were the hundreds of crude copies made in Grand Rapids.

Nevertheless, Stickley prospered. In 1901, he brought out the first issue of the *Craftsman* magazine, a monthly vehicle for the arts and crafts movement in general, and the ideas of Stickley in particular. It contained his views on furniture, with practical home-training instruction for copying Stickley designs, architecture, needlecraft, gardening and all details of general home improvement, with the "Craftsman Home" as the resultant ideal. The publication also offered articles on historic preservation, major artists and woman's work.

By 1905, his enterprises had grown so that he moved his executive and editorial headquarters to the large Craftsman Building in New York City. This center for Craftsman teaching contained a lecture hall, library, restaurant and show rooms with exhibits of furniture, textiles and gardens. In addition, he set up the Craftsman Farms, a small family community in Morris Plains, New Jersey.

All this was short-lived, however. Competition from more cheaply produced Grand Rapids furniture, as well as the growing influence of the Colonial Revival movement, which glorified forms from the American past, eroded the appeal of Craftsman esthetics. By World War I, even L. & J. G. Stickley was producing furniture in the Colonial Revival mode, adapting to current public taste to remain commercially successful. But Gustav Stickley would not change. He stopped manufacturing oak furniture and declared bankruptcy in 1915. He died in total obscurity in 1942.