



**NOTE: This exhibit closes January 2, 2011  
so go visit it now!**

## Gustav Stickley and the American Arts & Crafts Movement

**Exhibition:**

**Gustav Stickley and the American Arts & Crafts  
Movement**

The Newark Museum

49 Washington Street

Newark, NJ 07102

Closes January 2, 2011

Tel.: 973-596-6550

Admission: \$10 adults;

Children, Seniors & Students with Valid I.D. \$6

Parking: ★★★

Kid-Friendly: ★

Handicapped Accessible: ★★★

Exhibit: ★★★★★

Review by Gordon Bond &

Stephanie M. Hoagland

Can a chair change the world?

At first blush, that might seem like a silly question. Yet, for a school of thought that emerged in England between 1880 and 1910, the philosophy behind the design of such everyday things was envisioned as the instrument of social change.

Called "The Arts & Crafts Movement," it was a reaction countering what was seen as an increasing impoverishment of the decorative arts, buried beneath the superfluous ornamentation popular to



Victorian Era sensibilities. But more than that, the movement was also a social response to the dehumanizing mechanization of industrial production methods that kept the working class in dismal poverty. As a style, it



reached back to a somewhat romanticized vision of folk art, featuring simple lines, subtle ornamentation, and natural materials. The joinery in a piece of furniture, for example, wasn't something to be hidden, but embraced as part of the design. The hammer marks in a piece of copper were badges of honor—the result of a dignified human being's honest toil. It was that celebration of craftsmanship as a social statement that imparted the broader agendas of economic and social reform. If only civilization would return to those more noble, uplifting roots, so the thinking went, the world would be a better place.

The same sorts of social changes were taking place in the United States, making it ripe to embrace the style and, to some degree, the lifestyle the movement embodied. The

American apostle of Arts & Crafts would be Gustav Stickley, the subject of an exhibition organized by the Dallas Museum of Art and nationally premiering at the Newark Museum.

Born March 9, 1858, Stickley was one of eleven children born to Leopold and Barbara Stoeckel who had come to America from Germany, settling in Osceola, Wisconsin. He dropped out of school in 1870 to follow his father as a stonemason to help support the family. When his widowed mother moved them to Brandt, Pennsylvania, in 1876, Gustav found employment in his uncle's chair factory, where he learned woodworking and cabinetry. In 1883, he formed Stickley Brothers & Company, with siblings Charles and Albert, but it dissolved five years later when he partnered with furniture salesman Elgin Simonds, creating Stickley & Simonds of Binghampton, New York. The idea of handcrafts as a tool for reform may have entered his mind when he worked on the side with brother Leopold as foreman of a furniture-making shop at Auburn State Prison.

The furniture coming from Gustav Stickley's shop was mostly in the Shaker and Windsor style. While he was at least aware of the Arts & Crafts Movement through the writings of its English founders, John Ruskin and William Morris, it was the full exposure of a trip to Europe in the late 1890s that transformed him. He returned with a dramatic shift in direction and, after dropping his association with Simonds in

## EXHIBIT PARKING RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Not enough parking.
- ★★ Not many spaces but enough for a small museum/site.
- ★★★ Plenty of parking.

## EXHIBIT KID-FRIENDLY RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Not really something young children will enjoy.
- ★★ Older children may find interesting.
- ★★★ Children of all ages will enjoy.

Some exhibits may not be for children but institutions may offer programs specifically for interpreting the displays for kids and school groups. Contact the museum or site.

## EXHIBIT HANDICAP ACCESS RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Not accessible.
- ★★ Partially accessible or requires advance arrangements.
- ★★★ Fully accessible.

## EXHIBIT RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Very amateurish; factual errors; poorly displayed.
- ★★ Factually correct but poorly displayed.
- ★★★ Interesting but nothing new or insightful.
- ★★★★ Strong scholarship, well displayed.
- ★★★★★ Excellent in scholarship and display quality.

To submit a review or suggest a book or exhibit for review, please email [gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com](mailto:gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com)



Originally envisioned as a central clubhouse for his Craftsman Farms school for boys in Parsippany, New Jersey, Stickley moved his family into the home when financial troubles forced him into bankruptcy. Today, it is home to the The Stickley Museum at Craftsman Farms. Photo courtesy Janet W. Foster

1898, created the Gustave Stickley Company. (His given name was “Gustave,” he but dropped the “e” in 1903.)

By the summer of 1900, he had begun creating experimental lines called the “New Furniture” and the following year named his business United Crafts. His use of native woods and the greenish patina of ammonia-fumed white oak became a trademark feature. He sought to combine the social philosophy of the Arts & Crafts Movement with modern business practices. His workers—who were better paid than most—merged traditional materials and methods with modern power tools. This combination of hand craft and machinery allowed his furniture to be more affordable

to the masses. He took on Irene Sargent as the author of his new catalog and by 1901 introduced the first issue of *The Craftsman* as both a magazine to promote the social movement while simultaneously promoting his. It told homemakers how to make a better life for their families through the design of their furnishings—furnishings, of course, that could be bought from Gustav Stickley—and included furniture of all types, lamps and textiles. His ideal “American style” embodied an honest simplicity. He wasn’t just selling furniture, but a lifestyle.

The next logical step would be to design the physical house itself, creating a space in which the furnishings could transform the resident. In late 1903,

Stickley announced his “Craftsman Home Builders Club,” which provided architectural plans to *The Craftsman’s* subscribers. They included everything from farmhouses to bungalows; from townhouses to cottages. All featured natural materials, stained woods that permitted the grain to come through, soft colors and simplified moldings. Built-in cabinets, fireplaces and inglenooks kept the floor plans open, facilitating an “economy of function.”

In an effort to merge a commercial enterprise with a larger social agenda, he moved his headquarters to a twelve-story building in Manhattan in 1913, featuring retail showrooms, workshops for

production, design and publishing space, craft exhibitions and a restaurant.

But Stickley envisioned a larger, progressive, social experiment. The very act of making things was restorative to the individual as well as the society as a whole. He was always passionate about education, but felt learning wasn't solely the province of books. The urban landscape was also seen as an unhealthy place to raise children—the November 1906 issue of *The Craftsman* included an article about “The value of Country Life and animal pets for children.” So, the next logical step still was the creation of a boarding school for boys out in Morris Plains, New Jersey, in what is now Parsippany. Craftsman Farms was designed to have vegetable gardens, orchards, dairy cows and chickens. The goal was what he saw as a wholesome, well-rounded education founded on, and as an extension of, the Arts & Crafts Movement. The main house, intended as a clubhouse for his students, was constructed using timber and stone already found on the property.

By 1913, however, styles had changed and the Arts & Crafts Movement began to fade. The school he planned never opened and the Craftsman Building in the New York city became an unsupportable financial burden. He moved his family into the main house at Craftsman Farms until declaring bankruptcy in 1915 and selling the Farms—along with the personal contents—in 1917. He would never be a figure in the

design world again, dying poor in 1942.

The evolution of Gustav Stickley can be traced through the things he designed and the exhibit that's finishing up at the Newark Museum follows that path, with an emphasis on the peak of his influence between 1900 and 1913. The visitor enters the exhibit space faced by a complete dining room ensemble—everything from the tables and chairs to the table scarves, from the dishes and candlesticks to sideboards and cabinets to the rug on the floor. This was all from a concept floor display his company set up as part of exhibitions in Syracuse, NY in 1903 as a sort of debut of the Craftsman form in America. It shows the Stickley ideal as it was envisioned on the cusp of his emergence as an early 20<sup>th</sup> century tastemaker.

The remainder of the exhibit primarily features individual pieces of furniture, pottery, metalwork, lighting and textiles, grouped to demonstrate the evolution of his design sense over the next decade and half. The reviewers each approached the exhibit from very different starting points. Architectural historian and conservator, Stephanie M. Hoagland, had researched Stickley as part of her conservation work with Craftsman Farms, and so was already familiar with his work. By contrast, Gordon Bond, was only peripherally aware of the Arts & Crafts Movement in general and Stickley in particular.

We both felt that the selection of items was strong. These are

not merely the archetypal examples, but include some oddities and even designs that proved commercially unsuccessful. While this exhibit specifically focuses on a particular period, Stephanie felt what came before might have been expanded on for better context in understanding why Stickley and the Arts & Crafts Movement were as important as they were. This was all a response to the manufactured conspicuous consumption by providing a simpler, more “honest” alternative—a legitimate style that would still be within reach of the middle class. Nevertheless, for the period it focuses on, we both thought the diversity of the objects presented told the story well and provided a unique opportunity to see a broad range of his designs at one place. Many of the pieces came from private collections and had not previously been on public display.

As someone with less exposure to Stickley's work, Gordon could easily see its evolution. Early pieces tended towards thick, stout wood members that used heavy hardware as ornamentation. The thick iron strap hinges on doors and heavy drawer pulls give the cabinets a ponderous, medieval feel. Later, he embraced a lighter, more subtle appearance through more delicate wood elements and less dominant hardware. Throughout, it was less about busy ornamental carving and gilding and more about simple lines and allowing the grain of the wood to shine through. Even when he later

permitted inlay decoration, they were spare touches, including an *art nouveau* style “peacock feather” motif.

Gordon had some difficulty in pinning down a “Stickley style” in that there are evocations of the medieval, Spanish Mission (a term Stickley himself hated), *art nouveau* and the organic forms of European folk art. This was due, at least in part, to the fact not all Stickley furniture was designed by Stickley himself. While he approved the final form, he employed other craftsmen as designers, who introduced their own influences. Yet, as Stephanie points out, there is a “look” that ultimately makes a Stickley a Stickley—the recurrent themes of specific woods, visible joinery, simple lines, etc.

One of the things Gordon found particularly interesting was how Stickley tried to merge two somewhat divergent worldviews. On the one hand, he was reaching back for some romantic social ideal of the noble, honest, simple craftsman whose toil would uplift the soul and, by extension, his society. On the other was the businessman, who understood in order to work on the scale he envisioned, he needed to also embrace modernity in production methods. He had his Manhattan skyscraper department store in the heart of the urban world he thought unhealthy and, at the same time, his idealistic rural school over in New Jersey. His magazines and catalogs expounded a social philosophy that required purchase of his products to

achieve. It was a curious and very American amalgamation.

Later in the exhibit, house plans are shown along with wall-sized enlargements of illustrations from *The Craftsman* demonstrating what the interiors would look like as well as a wall of “then and now” pictures from Craftsman Farms.

Overall, the layout of the exhibit works well and is just the right length. Individual displays include a number of individual items—chairs, tables, cabinets, lamps, etc. The information plaques were mounted on the foot-rail separating the display from the public. Having the plaques only a foot or so off the ground made some of them difficult to read—one woman even asked the guard if she could sit on the ground so as to be better able to read the text. More useful, however, would have been a number key. While it’s sometimes obvious which piece a plaque refers to—if there is only one chair, for example—they are not always on the same side as the description. Had there been a number by the item corresponding to a number by the description, it would have helped in several spots. There were also a few minor typos. Stephanie brought up what she considers a very minor criticism, but one which in retrospect would have been a neat touch in such an exhibit. Like Frank Lloyd Wright, Gustav Stickley had a very distinctive font he used in his publications and catalogs. While not a big deal, use of that font in some of the signs would have been a

creative nod to that aspect of his design work.

Gustav Stickley, of course, was not the sole purveyor of the Arts & Crafts Movement in America. Numerous imitations—both honest inspirations and cheap knock-offs—would follow. But he was an important pioneer and, if nothing else, this exhibit makes one think about the role of design and how it incorporates into broader social trends. Indeed, beyond simply thinking his designs were attractive or not, the larger social questions that grew from the underlying philosophies are still relevant today. We lament the often deplorable conditions of factory-workers in the Third World akin to how the Arts & Crafts Movement railed against the poverty imposed by factories in the U.S. The trend towards locally produced products—from sustainable building materials to the food on our plates—echoes the sentiments.

Yet Gustav Stickley’s quasi-Utopian vision of changing the world by changing the American aesthetic had at its roots the fatal flaw of all such dreams of social reform—and assumption that there is a universal, one-size-fits-all aesthetic to begin with. Outside of the relatively small community who embraced the overriding vision was a larger market who simply liked the design of his chairs, thinking less about social change than whether it was comfortable or not. His ambition could not outrun the fickleness of fashion.

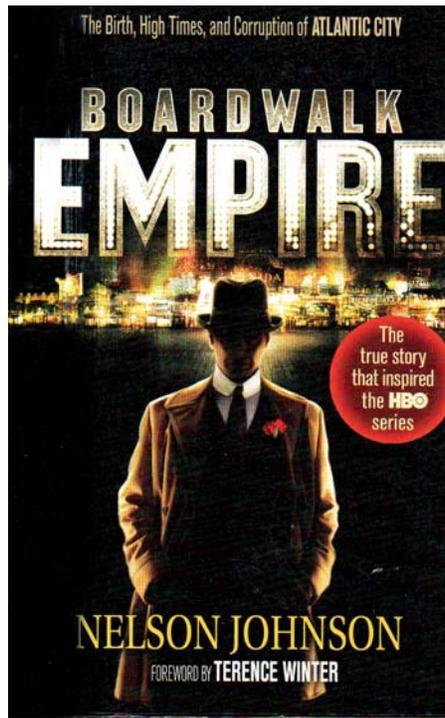
Perhaps the single most historically significant piece in the exhibit is a cabinet of

drawers near the end. This was Gustav Stickley's personal piece of furniture, which he had with him in his daughter's home, where he moved after losing his Craftsman Farms house. On the undersides of the drawers, an aging Stickley experimented with various wood stains in what would be a vain attempt at finding a "perfect stain" that would allow him to re-establish himself in the world. There was only a single photo of Gustav Stickley himself in the exhibit. Indeed, there could have been more about the man himself. This one cabinet, with the secret experiments under the drawers, imparted the only real humanity—in all its pathos and hope—behind all the design and social philosophy.

Gustav Stickley and the American Arts & Crafts Movement closes January 2, 2011, so act quickly. It's worth making time over your holiday vacatios to visit the Newark Museum to experience this unique opportunity to see artifacts from an interesting history that touches on New Jersey. For more information about the exhibit, see: [www.newarkmuseum.org/Stickley.html](http://www.newarkmuseum.org/Stickley.html) For information about The Stickley Museum at Craftsman Farms in Parsippany, NJ, see: [stickleymuseum.org/index.php](http://stickleymuseum.org/index.php)

**Book:**  
**Boardwalk Empire: The Birth, High Times and Corruption of Atlantic City**

Written by Nelson Johnson.  
 2010: A Medford Press Book, published by Plexus Publishing, Inc. Medford, New Jersey.  
 ISBN: 978—0-9666748—6-6



Soft Cover, 284 pages ★★★★★  
 Review by Stephanie M. Hoagland

If you think that the book *Boardwalk Empire* by Nelson Johnson is going to be the HBO series in book form, you may be highly disappointed. But if you are looking for a well-written history of Atlantic City you will have come to the right place. This book takes an in-depth look at Atlantic City beginning with its original incarnation as a small fishing village, through it rise as America's Playground, its fall due to the end of prohibition; and its attempted revival with legalized gambling. Originally published in 2002, this book has been re-printed as a tie-in with the HBO series, including a glossy photo inset which includes behind the scene shots and stills of the actors and director. It also differs from the original publication with the addition of a forward written by Terence Winter the Executive Producer of the series.

While there are several good histories of Atlantic City available, they generally gloss over the dirty politics and focus on the beach, sand and pretty girls in bathing suits. *Boardwalk Empire* begins with the story of Jonathan Pitney attempting to convert Absecon Island into an alternative to Cape May as a vacation destination for the wealthy. With the arrival of the railroad, came blue-collar workers from Philadelphia who brought with them their meager savings. Johnson quotes that "Atlantic City flourished because it gave its guests what they wanted—a naughty good time at an affordable price." These "naughty good times" usually require an overseer, or boss, to keep the cops away and the gambling, prostitution and liquor sales flowing. Atlantic City found this "boss" first in Louis "The Commodore" Kuehnle, then Eonch "Nucky" Johnson and finally Frank "Hap" Farley. Each of these men held a tremendous

BOOK  
 RATING SYSTEM

---

★ Poorly written, bad scholarship / factual errors.

---

★★ Factually correct but poorly written.

---

★★★ Interesting but nothing new or insightful.

---

★★★★ Strong scholarship, well written.

---

★★★★★ Excellent in scholarship writing style and / or graphics / typography.

To submit a review or suggest a book or exhibit for review, please email [gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com](mailto:gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com)

amount of power and Johnson's book fleshes out these men so that they read as the real people they were and not just characters from a television show. *Boardwalk Empire* helps the reader to understand not only how AC got to be such a hotbed of corruption, but how deep the corruption was embedded in the society, the measures required to get regular citizens on board and the effect that events in this small town in South Jersey had not only on Northern New Jersey but also the government at the State level.

In addition to corruption, Johnson's book excelled at showing how Atlantic City was built on the back of its African American citizens and Johnson likens it to a "plantation by the

sea." Between the years 1870 and 1915 thousands of African Americans fled the south for job opportunities in Atlantic City. By 1915, 95% of the hotel workforce was comprised of African Americans and in the summer months, the black population of AC would rise as high as 40%. Although these men and women were exploited and relegated to the most undesirable part of town, they were "employees" not "servants" and wages in Atlantic City were some of the best in the country for African Americans. This allowed blacks to create a "vibrant city within a city" where black culture could thrive. Johnson's research on African American's in Atlantic City lead him to write a sequel to *Boardwalk Empire* entitled *The*

*Northside: African Americans and the Creation of Atlantic City* which GSL hopes to review in a later edition of this magazine.

The writing style of *Boardwalk Empire* flows well and it is easily read. While the beginning of the book keeps the reader enthralled with personal tales and stories from residents, the last two chapters tend to feel more like a recitation of names and news stories. But even these last two chapters can make the reader react with a "What the...?" when they read anecdotes such as "The Donald" having every visible screw in his yacht removed, gold-plated and returned.

Priced at \$16.95, this book is an affordable addition to the library of any NJ history junkie.



## Index of GSL Reviews, Issues 1 to 9

### ISSUE 3: March 2009

#### Parallel Communities: The Underground Railroad in South Jersey

by Dennis Rizzo

2008: The History Press, Charlston, NC  
ISBN: 978-1-59629-542-1

Softcover, 160 pages black and white.

#### Exhibition

#### New Jersey's Gilded Age: Opulence, Struggle & Innovation

The Cornelius Low House  
1225 River Road, Piscataway, NJ  
October 19, 2008 - November 29, 2009  
Tel.: 732-745-4177

Fax.: 732-745-4507

Email: info@cultureheritage.org

Admission: Free

### ISSUE 5: September 2009

#### Images of America: Montague

by Alicia C. Batko

2009: Arcadia Publishing

\$21.99

ISBN: 978-0-7385-6454-8

Softcover, 128 pages black and white.

Review by Gordon Bond

#### Exhibition:

#### Plainfield: Lost But Not Forgotten

Plainfield Public Library

800 Park Avenue

Plainfield, NJ 07060

August 24, 2009 - October 17, 2009

Tel.: 908-757-1111

www.plainfieldlibrary.info

Admission: Free

Review by Gordon Bond

### ISSUE 7: March 2010

#### Mapping New Jersey - An Evolving Landscape

Edited by Maxine N. Lurie and Peter O. Wacker; Cartography by Michael Siegel

2009: Rivergate Books, An Imprint of Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ

ISBN: 978-0-8135-4584-1

Hardcover, 240 pages full color.

Review by Gordon Bond

#### There's More to New Jersey Than the Sopranos

by Mark Mappen

2009: Rivergate Books, An Imprint of Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ

ISBN: 978-0-8135-4586-1

Softcover, 210 pages black and white.

Review by Gordon Bond

### ISSUE 8: June 2010

#### New Jersey Goes to War: Biographies of 150 New Jerseyans Caught Up in the Struggle of the Civil War, including Soldiers, Civilians, Men, Women, Heroes, Scoundrels - and a Heroic Horse

Edited by Joseph G. Bilby

2010: New Jersey Civil War Heritage Association

ISBN: 978-0-944413-75-3

Hardcover, 166 pages black and white.

Review by Gordon Bond

#### Long Branch in the Golden Age: Tales of Fascinating and Famous People

by Sharon Hazard

2007: The History Press, Inc., Charleston, SC

ISBN: 978-1-59629-216-1

Softcover, 126 pages black and white.

Review by Gordon Bond

#### Revolutionary Bergen County: The Road to Independence

Edited by Barbara Z. Marchant

2009: The History Press, Inc., Charleston, SC

ISBN: 978-1-59629-748-7

Review by Gordon Bond

#### Fair Lawn New Jersey: Historic Tales from Settlement to Suburb

by Jane Lyle Diepeveen

2010: The History Press, Inc., Charleston, SC

ISBN: 978-1-59629-698-5

Review by Gordon Bond

### ISSUE 9: September 2010

#### Monmouth Court House: The Battle That Made the American Army

Joseph G. Bilby & Katherine Bilby Jenkins

2010: Westholme Publishing, LLC

ISBN: 978-1-59416-108-7

Hardcover, 309 pages black and white.

Review by Gordon Bond

#### Utopia, New Jersey—Travels in the Nearest Eden

by Perdita Buchan

2007: Rutgers University Press

ISBN-10: 0813541786

ISBN-13: 978-0813541785

Hardcover 253 pages black and white

Review by Virginia Troeger

#### Historic Photos of Newark

by Sharon Hazard and Elizabeth Hazard

2009: Turner Publishing Company

ISBN-10: 978-1-59652-538-2

Hardcover 206 pages black and white

Review by Gordon Bond

#### Remembering Jersey Shore

by Joe Czachowski

2010: Turner Publishing Company

ISBN-10: 978-1-59652-659-4

Softcover 134 pages black and white

Review by Gordon Bond