

The Arts and Crafts Movement and New Hampshire

A Background for Teachers

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Introduction

Leaders of the Arts and Crafts Movement sought to reform industrial society by celebrating the genius of the individual craftsman. Celebrating excellence in design, solid construction, and the honest use of materials, the craft revival began in Britain in the mid 1800s and crossed the Atlantic later that century. The movement, though falling short of its goal to redeem society, would help reform and unify architecture, interior design, and the fine and decorative arts.

Origins of the Arts and Crafts Movement

The Arts and Crafts Movement began as a reaction to the British Industrial Revolution. The demands of mass production placed efficiency and economy over the artisan's unique vision. Craft revivalists lamented the demise of the small workshop in which an artisan exercised complete control over the pace and quality of production. Conversely, industrial societies, noted historian Robert Judson Clark, are based upon a "division of labor [that] deprived the worker of the pleasures of guiding his product from conception to completion; machines had replaced the traditional standards of beauty with those of economy and profit."¹

Champions of England's Arts and Crafts Movement, including John Ruskin and William Morris, sought to revitalize society by revolutionizing the work process. Underlying their attitudes was a profound mistrust of modernity. Ruskin and Morris believed that poor quality products were symptoms of a sick society, maintaining that industrial economies dehumanized people by treating workers like parts in a machine. British reformers found inspiration in the pre-industrial age and believed that resurrecting the small workshop model would help rejuvenate society.

¹ Robert Judson Clark, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1876-1916* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), p.9.

The Arts and Crafts Revival in America

By the late 1800s, many parts of America had industrialized. As in England, a growing number of social critics felt that pride in craftsmanship had been sacrificed in the process. Indeed, advances in mass production techniques were making it harder for artisans to remain economically viable. Touring America in the early 1880s, Oscar Wilde quipped, “Your people love art, but do not sufficiently honor the handicraftsmen.”²

At the same time, Americans were gaining confidence in their own aesthetic traditions. For much of the nineteenth century, Americans defined artistic excellence in terms of Old World models. The Centennial Exposition of 1876, however, marked a turning point in the way that many Americans perceived their cultural self-worth.

Americans began to feel that their traditions needn't be shunned but were worth celebrating. The 1893 Columbian World Exposition in Chicago further bolstered this nascent artistic nationalism.

This heightened self-confidence coincided with Americans' growing appreciation for natural beauty. As urban centers grew, more and more people sought to escape the summer congestion, noise, and filth of Victorian-Era cities. Grand resort hotels sprang up to cater to this growing enjoyment of Northern New England's much-publicized natural beauty. A confluence of factors, including the rise of a wealthy professional class, improved transportation, and



aggressive marketing all led to increased White Mountain tourism. By the 1890s, New Hampshire's 200 grand resort hotels could house 12,000 visitors at a given time.³

² Quoted in Clark, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1876-1916*, p.9.

³ See *Historical New Hampshire: The Grand Resort Hotels and Tourism in the White Mountains*, 50 (Spring/Summer 1995).

First Stirrings in New Hampshire

At the same time, many American artists fell under the influence of the Romantic Movement, which encouraged its adherents to find inspiration in nature. An outgrowth of the strengthened bond between art and nature was the founding of remote artist colonies, which often coalesced around talented and charismatic figures who were themselves attracted to spectacular features of the rural landscape. New Hampshire's best-known summer colonies drew artists and writers to Cornish, Dublin, Peterborough, and North Conway.

Celia Loughton Thaxter was among the first to attract artists to spend summers in New Hampshire. In the 1880s, Thaxter was the state's best-known poet and could boast a



veritable salon of luminaries at her summer home on the Isles of Shoals. Painter Childe Hassam and poet John Greenleaf Whittier were attracted to Appledore Island's severe landscape and found inspiration in their host's ability to bring art into every facet of her life. Although best known for her poetry and her vibrant island gardens, Thaxter was also an accomplished watercolorist who illustrated her manuscripts and even the china that she and her guests used for dining. Although the American Arts and Crafts Movement would not swing into full force until after her death in 1895, Thaxter's lifestyle was very much in keeping with Ruskin's ideal of the good life, which sought to infuse every aspect of a person's surroundings with beauty.

The impulse to reconnect with nature and the desire to instill life with beauty were prominent features of the craft revival. The movement's leaders satisfied both of these

impulses by establishing their workshops outside of major cities.⁴ Upstate New York proved to be exceptionally fertile ground for leaders of the American crafts movement. Gustav Stickley, the outstanding designer of America's "mission-style" furniture, located his workshop in Fayetteville, and later Eastwood, N.Y.⁵ This region, home of the Chautauqua movement, became a major crafts center and boasted several leading workshops including the Roycrofters and the Tookay Shop, both of East Aurora, N.Y.

⁴ While there was an abundance of rural workshops, many important contributions also originated in cities, most notably Chicago, which was the center of the Prairie School of architecture, of which Frank Lloyd Wright was an outstanding proponent.

⁵ When Stickley moved executive operations to New York City in 1905, he compensated for his removal from the countryside by establishing a model farm near Morris Plains, N.J.

The Crafts Revival in New Hampshire

The New Hampshire movement was even further removed from the metropolis. Interest in traditional crafts in communities like Tamworth was part of a larger desire to rediscover a simpler time and to reconnect with New England's rural traditions. Unlike the British movement, which attempted to resurrect the traditions of past centuries, New Hampshire's cottage industries encouraged the perpetuation of existing traditional crafts. Historian Barbara Austen noted, "In New Hampshire... as in other states with a long tradition of handicrafts, the Arts and Crafts ideal found a different expression: the focus in these places was on preserving the crafts."⁶

This interest in rural life and culture occurred at a propitious time for New Hampshire's farmers. The state's agricultural economy, which had been in decline for decades, left many rural communities destitute. Farmwomen—unlike their urban counterparts who could find factory work—were often unable to supplement their families' income because of legal and traditional restrictions on the kinds of jobs that were open to them.

Well-educated city women who owned summer homes in the country led the New Hampshire movement. Many of these "summer people" were sensitive to the relative poverty that surrounded them in their adopted communities. Knowing that many neighborhood women practiced traditional crafts, they convinced local women to use their domestic skills to enrich themselves economically and aesthetically. Indeed, what made the New Hampshire movement extraordinary was the fact that it "was initiated and led by women for the *benefit* of women."⁷

Leaders of the New Hampshire Crafts Revival

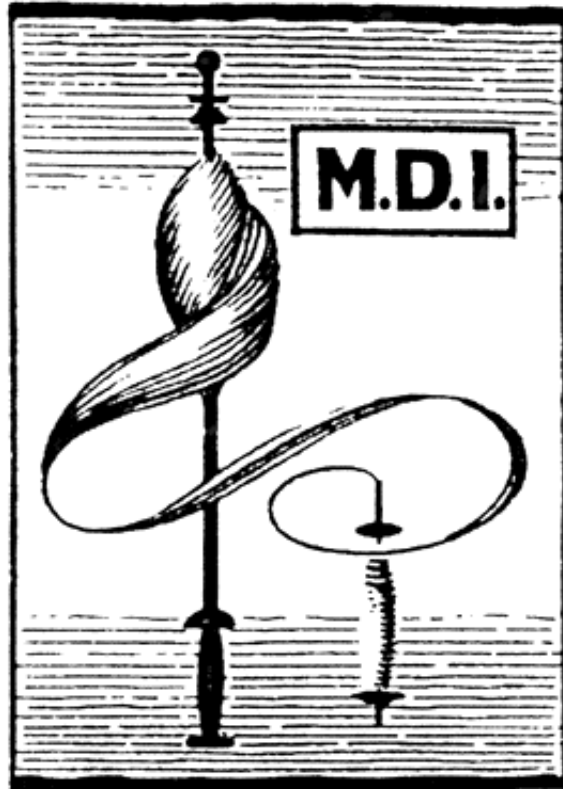
New York-trained designer Helen Rickey Albee and her husband, John, bought an abandoned farm in Tamworth in 1894 and spent their summers in the shadow of Mount Chocorua. Knowing that farm wives hooked rugs to cover the bare wood floors of their homes, Albee used her artistic training, capital, and Boston contacts to create the Abnákee Rug Industry in 1897. She designed boldly geometric Native American-inspired rug patterns that were a departure from the derivative, commercially available designs that farmwomen used. Albee also sought to instill personal pride in each of the women, and their rugs were featured in national periodicals such as *Country Life* and Stickley's *The Craftsman*. Albee's successful marketing of these cottage crafts to summer visitors, Boston customers, and a national market allowed her to pay her employees high wages that reinforced for them the value of their work.

⁶ "For the Sake of Others': The Role of Women in the New Hampshire Crafts Revival, 1897-1931," Barbara Austen, *Historical New Hampshire*, 56 (Winter 2001): 3.

⁷ Austen, *Historical New Hampshire*, 56 (Winter 2001): 3.

In the Connecticut River Valley, women from the Cornish art colony, under the leadership of Laura Walker and Frances Houston, helped organize the Mothers' and Daughters' Industry in 1901. Walker and Houston created floral patterns for the Plainfield women to weave into cotton flannel rugs, which they dyed with colorfast natural materials. MDI provided rural women who had few employment opportunities with a source of income and gave its participants a broader appreciation for the arts. As one contemporary put it, "The farmers' wives from far and near belong, and women who were old before their time and for whom life stretched before as a dreary round of uninteresting toil have discovered new joys in existence, in making money for themselves and families, and having the most delightful intercourse with intellectual and charming women from the city."⁸

Much of the success that New Hampshire women had with handcrafts was "linked to the domestic nature of the objects they produced." In addition to the rugmaking that occupied farmwomen, china painting provided employment to women of all classes working as painters and designers at several highly regarded pottery studios, including Keene's Hampshire Pottery.⁹



Conclusion

The lofty goals of the Arts and Crafts Movement were met to a large degree on a small scale in New Hampshire. Although none of the women who sponsored cottage industries in New Hampshire avowedly hoped to transform society, they did hope to improve the lot of the women living in their adopted summer communities. By giving farmwomen a sense of pride in their work, the art objects they made transformed these women from unrecognized domestic laborers to producers of handiwork of distinctive artistic merit. The business savvy and connections that city women brought to the state's hill towns enabled rural women to apply their skills to a creative, marketable, and rewarding endeavor.

⁸ Elizabeth Van Horne, "Pleasure and Profit for Farmers' Wives," *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly Newspaper*, November 7, 1912, p.470, quoted in Austen.

⁹ Donna-Belle Garvin, "Back to Nature: Summer Communities and the Craft Revival in New Hampshire," *Historical New Hampshire*, 56 (Winter 2001): 70.