THE CRAFTSMAN DESIGNS: WHY WE DO NOT PUT OUT NEW THINGS MERELY FOR THE SAKE OF VARIETY

We frequently receive letters from those of our readers who are specially interested in handicrafts of one sort or another, asking us to give them more of the Craftsman designs for furniture, metal work or needlework, for the reason that they, as craftsmen who pursue these various occupations either for the sake of amusement or because they like to have a hand in making their own belongings, wish to have a larger variety of models for use in their own work. Our answer to these letters has always been the same: that we are vitally interested,—perhaps even more so than they are,—in the discovery and production of good original designs and models that have at once a definite usefulness and that indefinable quantity which is known as art.

Were it possible for us to produce such designs and models to order or in quantity, without feeling that in doing so we sacrificed the essential principles which form the foundation of the Craftsman style, we would be only too glad to give our readers a fresh set of designs each month, but from the very first we have tried to make clear to those who are in sympathy with us and who have some understanding of what we are trying to do, that these fundamental principles to which we have referred express just one thing,—sincerity, and that any product made strictly in accordance with them is necessarily limited as regards variety for variety’s sake.

When we began to make the Craftsman furniture, it was with the idea of getting the minds of the people away from the bad habit of demanding a ceaseless stream of “novelties” in the way of personal belongings and household furnishings. It seemed to us that these belongings were essentially a part of our lives and must needs bear an important share in the creation of that environment which psychologists tell us has so much to do with the formation of character. Therefore, it seemed clear that we could hardly spend too much thought or care in the designing and making of the things we were to live with and use every day, seeing to it that these things were first of all truthful; that is, that they were made in the shape which would give them the greatest usefulness and durability combined with the utmost simplicity. If this principle were sincerely carried out, they must inevitably be beautiful because, in the very nature of things, there could be nothing vulgar or artificial about them.

With this idea clearly in mind, we endeavored to put it into form. It was not an easy task, for the idea of getting back to the first principles of construction and making things that are for the most part absolutely plain and unadorned implies a certain degree of crudeness. Also, it is very hard sometimes not to yield to the temptation to depart just far enough from the principle of truthfulness in everything we make to produce something that is defi-
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CRAFTSMAN LIBRARY TABLE.

ninely and intentionally picturesque. But because we have felt that the application of this principle to the making of furniture, embroidery, metal work and the like was only the beginning of our effort to express it in everything, we have gone very carefully, producing nothing from our workshops that has not grown, through much thought and repeated modifications, to be as near to the perfect thing of its kind as we could make it. The same principle naturally applies to the models we publish for the benefit of home craftworkers who care for the simple things and wish to make them for their own use, or for sale, as the case may be. If we were to depart from this basic principle of sincerity in order to add novelties of one sort or another,—not because anything new or different is really needed, but because people are so used to the idea of perpetually getting something new that they expect it as a matter of course,—we would inevitably lose sight of the meaning of an idea that stretches so far beyond the making of furniture and other household belongings and the building of houses, that there is nothing in life to which it does not apply. Also, if we were to do this, the Craftsman designs in the several crafts would long ago have degenerated into the mere production of unnecessary, and therefore artificial and meaningless, forms, so that instead of becoming a style expressive of perhaps the strongest underlying quality of the American people, they would have provided just one more outlet for the extravagance that is always seeking something new.

Perfect simplicity is perhaps the hardest thing to attain, especially in the present age, for the reason that people seldom think into the matter sincerely or deeply enough to realize just what simplicity means. Any form which is simple enough to appear primitive contains at first to the average man or woman a suggestion of crudeness, merely because people have not trained themselves to see the difference between the simplicity which is groping for the beginnings of knowledge, and that truer and higher simplicity which, having gained much knowledge and tested many things, returns to fundamental principles because there it finds the truth. If we make a pose of simplicity it does mean merely crudeness,—worst of all, an artificial and intentional crudeness that has in it no leaven of honesty,—but when we come to it with a fineness of taste and a breadth of experience that has grown from trying and rejecting all lesser and cheaper things, we find in it a quality so satisfying to all that is best in our nature, that noth-
ing else is tolerable. When this is the case, we are very apt to spend our energy upon developing a good thing to the last essence of fineness, rather than in hunting round for a chance to do something different.

We believed at first that the Craftsman style of household furnishing was merely the forerunner of some better and truer style that would develop from it,—perhaps with the added graces of a form of ornament so essentially right as to be inevitable, perhaps with a yet more exquisite plainness and fineness of line and surface,—but now after ten years we have come to see that this style is the full expression of itself. It may possibly suggest development along one line or another to some creative mind which will come closer to the truth than we have been able to do, but in itself it cannot be changed in any one of its essential features. What is good in it is inherently good, without respect to anything that preceded it or anything which is to come after it, and it is good only because each thing has a definite purpose and fulfills that purpose just as completely and honestly as it can. We have been so deeply concerned with the development along natural lines of the style itself that we are always seeking opportunities to better it wherever we can, yet in ten years we have seen very little opportunity for change. This being the case, it would hardly be possible for us to have either the desire or the ability to put forth different designs merely for the sake of doing something new. Every design, whether it be for a footstool or a house, an ash tray or a complete set of fireplace fittings, a table scarf or hangings for an entire room, is made because we feel that, so far as we know, it is a thoroughly good design. As rapidly as we make these, we give them freely to our readers, but where we have no new ones that seem to us worth offering to workers as sincere as ourselves, we refrain from offering anything that falls below the standard, merely for the sake
of filling up a department in the magazine or of having our readers feel that they have a wealth of material to choose from for their craft work.

We find that most changes in style are the result of commercialism pure and simple, and we believe that the right and beautiful thing is as independent of commercialism as an honest man is independent of fear or favor. The Craftsman designs have never been made with any reference to the prevailing style or to what the department stores would like to handle, but because we believe that such things would be useful and good to have around, and that so far as we could make them, they were right. We take it for granted that our readers agree with us in this matter and that they will see the advantage of taking an idea, which may possibly have originated with us, and making it serve as a basis for designs of their own that will meet their own needs and express their own individuality, instead of feeling that they should be furnished each month with "something new." Even to those craftsmen who wish to make a regular business of selling their products, we give the same advice, for we have found in our own experience that the most successful things are those which are held to and developed to the utmost of their possibilities. If the design is good to begin with, it does no harm to keep on making the same thing again and again. In fact, the longer a worker keeps on in a certain chosen line of work, the more sure he is of success in the end, because he is taking the surest way to win the confidence of the public in what he is doing and so to insure a safe and steady market for his wares.

Therefore the designs we publish this month for the benefit of home cabinetmakers and metal workers are of the simplest character and adhere closely to the style of which we have already given so many examples. The models differ in
detail from similar Craftsman pieces, for even the most conscientious adherence to a fixed principle allows for such legitimate variety as may be suggested by the use of an article or the surroundings in which it is to be placed. The library table, for example, while distinctively Craftsman in style, differs from our other tables in the formation of the ends, which are made of two broad, flat posts sloped at the outside edge, and have three wide slats, about half the thickness of the posts, that fill the space between. The broad lower shelf of the table acts as a support, and the end slats are pinned to it with round-headed wooden pins, the heads forming a structural decoration similar to the projecting tenon. We have often described the proper way of making the top of a table like this, for much of the beauty and usefulness of the piece depends upon the selection of the wood for the table top and the care given to making and finishing it. The details of construction are clearly shown by the detail drawing.

The piano bench and the jardinière stand are intended to serve as companion pieces for the table. They both show the same general characteristics in style, the ends being wide and flat and sloped from the bottom to the top. Naturally, in designing the smaller pieces, the ends are made solid instead of being slatted as in the case of the table, and the staunch mortise-and-tenon construction is used for every piece, as will be observed by careful examination of the detail drawings.

For metal workers we give designs for three simple candle sconces and a candlestick, to be made in brass or copper as preferred. We assume that in the majority of cases copper will be selected, as it is not only easy to work, but is admirably effective when used in relation to oak furniture and the autumn colorings that prevail in most houses furnished according
to the Craftsman ideas. Sconce No. 1 is made of No. 18 gauge copper, which is cut out in the shape shown by the drawing. After the back is shaped, a border about \( \frac{3}{8} \) an inch in width is made all around the edge, by hammering a line into the metal with the blunt edge of a chisel. The base is also made of No. 18 gauge copper and is cut as shown in the diagram. A band about \( \frac{5}{8} \) of an inch in width is soldered to the edge of this base all around, producing the effect shown in the drawing of the finished piece. The whole base is then riveted firmly to the back. As will be seen in the profile view of the piece, the middle of the back is hammered in so that the surface is curved instead of flat. The cup and cup-holder are made in the shape of a cylinder, with the bottom edge flared out and riveted to the base of the sconce.

We have several times described the method of making these cups, but if they are found to be too hard for any amateur worker in metal, we will be glad to supply them from the Craftsman Workshops at 60 cents each.

The second sconce, although more elaborate in appearance, is in reality quite as simple as the first. The back plate is made of No. 16 gauge copper. The ends are hammered thin and widened, and then the scroll is formed. The arm that supports the cup is made of copper \( \frac{3}{8} \) of an inch in thickness and about \( \frac{3}{4} \) of an inch wide. The design of this arm and the way it is fastened to the back are explained in the detail drawings of the piece.

The third sconce is made of heavier metal and requires a greater degree of skill than the other two. No. 20 gauge copper is used. The back is shaped in a long oval, of which the embossed center is first raised. The piece is then turned over and laid on an iron with a ball or oval surface, which is clamped into a vise. Then the surface is hammered smooth. The wide border is slightly curved upward, and the edge is turned over a wire. The arms that support the candle cups are made of rods or tubes about \( \frac{5}{16} \) or \( \frac{3}{8} \) of an inch in diameter. These are
braided together and filed to fit into a socket which is riveted to the back of the scnode. Detail drawing No. 4 gives an idea of the way the candle cups are shaped and how they are screwed to the ends of the arms.

The candlestick is made of four tapered strips of No. 16 gauge copper, riveted to the bottom plate and also to the top. The cup is a husk, shaped as shown in the detail drawing No. 6, and the ends are bent up at the dotted lines. The bottom plate or base is made of No. 18 gauge copper, and is formed as shown in detail drawing No. 7. It is hammered into a square band until the right depth is gained, then the edge should be hammered around, leaving a flat margin about \(1\frac{1}{2}\) inches wide.

We take special care to make these designs as simple as possible, not only because simplicity in household surroundings has a definite artistic value, but because it does not require any great skill with hand or tools to make at home such little household belongings as may be needed from time to time. The work itself is interesting, and the best possible training for young people. But we hold that it does but little good unless the articles made are required for some definite purpose. If things needed at home are made in the home workshop, it will not be long before the house has an individuality and charm that would never come from the stereotyped, ready-made furnishings.

For this reason the work now being done in the manual training departments of the public schools has a very vital bearing upon the development of home handicrafts. While the students may never become expert craftsmen and may never utilize their knowledge of manual training in the way of gaining a livelihood by it, they will nevertheless possess knowledge that will add much to the usefulness and also to the joy of life, and make the furnishing of a home a never-ending pleasure.