MODERN ENGLISH FURNITURE

MODERN FURNITURE, THE WORK OF ENGLISH CRAFTSMEN: BY EDWARD W. GREGORY

In reviewing the condition of English craftsmen’s work in furniture as it exhibits itself today, it is necessary to remember at least a little of the history of the Arts and Crafts movement during the past twenty years. It was in the autumn of 1888 that the first exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Society was held in the New Gallery, Regent Street, London. Since then the Society has had a show about every three years, the ninth (perhaps the last) being held in 1910. Most observers of the movement date the commencement of public interest in craftsmanship to the time of the first Exhibition when the influence of William Morris was still a living and vital force. Since that time there have been the most violent changes in taste. The pendulum has swung in extraordinary fashion from one extreme to another. We have had a volatile epidemic of Art Nouveau spreading itself over all European countries, and even now showing itself alive in many of the art centers of France, Germany and Austria. Side by side with this manifestation, but developing a trifle later, has been a remarkable increase of interest in old and historic furniture, which shows no present sign of dying out. For a short time there was a mannerism in modern furniture (which some authorities dignify into a distinct style), consisting for the most part in a denial of every legitimate form of enrichment whether constructional or applied, permitting only the use of the barest boards put together in the rudest and most elementary fashion. This, no doubt, arose as a reaction from the strange decorative contortions of Art Nouveau.

These new developments had, however, the effect of putting a much needed lesson into the stiff conservatism of the British furniture trade which has had to revise its methods pretty considerably from time to time in order to meet the demands of the public taste. Another most important influence which should be noted has been the change from art to craft shown by the work of the principal schools of art and technical colleges. There is scarcely a school of art in England today which does not look upon its craft work as at least as important as its art.

Even as late as ten years ago the only attempt in many schools at recognition of anything outside purely historical art was
an interest in making patterns. The reason for this will easily be understood if one remembers what the English Government established art schools and museums for in the first instance. The idea was to improve the appearance of British manufactures by educating designers to make patterns good enough to compete with those turned out by other countries. The British Government knew nothing whatever about hand work and craftsmanship and cared less. But it was keenly alive to trade, and it knew that many of its greatest manufactures depended largely upon pattern design for a position in the world’s market. Hence it was that the study of ornament as a subject in itself was taken up by nearly all the Government schools. Only within the last generation has craftsmanship and a realization of the educational value of hand work been recognized by the education authorities, and this has been through pressure from outside, chiefly from the group of craftsmen associated with the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society.

Now there can be not the slightest doubt that the best furniture made in England today is that which depends for its character upon the evidence it can show of having been made by hand. Even though machinery may be brought into play, in the cutting of large veneers for instance, the vital form, the usefulness, the constructive qualities, which go to make character are determined largely by the handling of the wood by the craftsman. The best furniture is not thought out in a drawing office and then transmitted to a factory to be executed. It is designed by the man at the bench. This results in at least one very useful safeguard. A man who works in wood and originates his own ideas instinctively thinks according to the limitations of his material. The forms he makes, whether they be beautiful or ugly, will always at any rate look as if they were intended to be executed in wood. He could not be guilty, as so many drawing office designers are, of inventing shapes for woodwork which would be more suitable for metal or stone. In connection with this point, notwithstanding the debt which modern furniture owes to architects, it is a fact that cabinets, sideboards, piano cases and so on have been designed by architects as though they were designing houses; the architectural basis is apparent. There was a walnut sideboard shown at a public exhibition of arts and crafts in London in July of this year, which indicated in its lines such features as door and window openings, lintels, cornice molding, and pilasters. The main features of classical architecture had been reproduced. Now this is not woodwork. It is stone interpreted in wood. It
is true that a great deal of furniture of the Renaissance — particularly in Italy—has this characteristic, but it is none the less reprehensible and is inexcusable if copied today. The classical tradition, as far as furniture is concerned, was best used in England during the 18th century, and many—not all—English craftsmen have been brought to admit into their work a distinct flavor of Chippendale, Heppelwhite, and Sheraton. Whatever may be said against the production of these Georgian furniture designers, they at any rate were workers in wood. The more elaborate designs of Chippendale as shown in his well-known book were never made at all. Probably they were included for purposes of publicity, to advertise the name of Chippendale. Neither Heppelwhite nor Sheraton went so far in decorative enrichment as Chippendale, but in all the work of this period the classical tradition was secure. There was no hint of anything at all savoring of Gothic influence, and only in the designs of the brothers Adam—who were architects, not craftsmen in furniture—was there any sign of an architectural basis.

Among English craftsmen of today who appear to have linked themselves with this 18th-century tradition is Mr. Charles Spooner, examples of whose work are shown here. It should be recognized at once that Mr. Spooner is an originator in woodwork, not an adaptor. There is no sign whatever in his work of servile imitation. He appears to have achieved the remarkable feat of forgetting the 19th century. Picking up the threads of tradition as they were dropped by Sheraton's nerveless fingers he seems to be developing still further the art of furniture making as left before machinery came to shatter craftsmanship a hundred years ago.

Mr. Spooner is one of the group of craftsmen who established the Arts and Crafts
Holland and the Indies and China to replenish their houses with furniture, metal work, and china, conveyed both from the East and the West. Now until recently there has been very little recognition of this small legacy of old Dutch work at the Cape. But with the coming of modern prosperity to South Africa, the influence of the late Cecil Rhodes and others, attempts were made to build houses which should possess more indigenous character than is usual in a new colony. So the old Dutch farm-houses were sought out and examined, their characteristics studied and the reasons for their planning discussed. New houses have now been built at, Johannesburg, Pretoria, and other places (chiefly inspired by Mr. Herbert Baker, the designer of the new Union buildings at Pretoria), which are a modern development of the later 17th-century Dutch Colonial style.

To design furniture for such houses exactly suited Mr. Spooner’s attitude of mind, and an examination of the examples depicted here will show with what reticent charm he has accomplished the task of constructing modern craftsman’s furniture with a flavor of Dutch character. Teak, of course, is the wood chiefly employed, as being more suitable for the climate. All the old Dutch furniture and house fittings at the Cape were of teak with occasional inlays of ebony. In the cabinet of
drawers, a piece of furniture will be recognized which was fairly common at the close of the 17th century in Holland and also in England during the reign of William and Mary. Mr. Spooner’s interpretation of the idea, however, is simpler than that of the old cabinetmakers who used to delight in curvilinear forms. It will be noticed that in the writing table (made for a South African house) there are no curved lines whatever except those resulting naturally from the turning of the legs.

The tendency toward greater simplicity in furniture making in England during recent years has had the effect to some extent of ousting the carver, whose services are not now required so much. Only about six or seven years ago wood carving was the most popular of the crafts. Everybody carved. The craft was looked upon as a means of providing a fine opportunity for acquiring a sound technical training. To take chisel and wood and carve out ornamental patterns in relief was regarded as the surest way of training hand and eye. In all probability this point of view was right. But as the taste for plain, undecorated furniture grew, carving was less and less employed and there is very little carved enrichment on craftsmen’s furniture today. Even the furniture trade was affected and carvers are now employed chiefly on interior fittings. Carved furniture, on the whole, is out of favor in England. Not so long ago dealers would buy genuine old oak bureaus, chests of drawers, and dressers of the late 16th and 17th centuries, and carve their panels as an additional attraction to customers. Nowadays the more carving there is on furniture the more difficult it is to sell. No doubt this indicates an improvement in public taste, but carving is a perfectly legitimate craft for the embellishment of furniture, if very carefully used. Of course, in the formation of constructional members carved detail is still to be seen. A good and very original example of this is to be seen in the dresser by Mr. A. Romney Green shown here, the legs of which illustrate an interesting development of chamfering. The chamfer, indeed, has been exploited to the utmost by Mr. Green in a great deal of his furniture, stout material being employed in the first instance and then broadly chamfered away with the result that decorative quality is obtained without any applied enrichment. Mr. Green’s furniture is not consciously or-

namental yet it becomes ornamental through the interesting way in which supports and rails are treated. Obviously this springs straight from the work at the bench.

In the work of Mr. Ambrose Heal, who has been represented by beautiful pieces of furniture at all the important exhibitions of art and craft in England for years past, perhaps the most important quality is the sense of fitness shown in its construction. Mr. Heal’s cabinets, tables, bookcases, wardrobes and chairs always seem to have discovered just what utility requires of them. They are never too heavy and certainly never too flimsy. What one may call a knowledge of the science of furniture construction is manifest in every detail of the work. I remember no example in which there is an exaggerated feature. This shows uncommon restraint, for artists are very prone at one time or other to accentuate little mannerisms which they seem to think distinguish and single them out from their fellows. It is probable that Mr. Heal has stripped furniture making as cleanly of its encumbrances of misapplied material and ornamentation as any designer in England. He appears to have got right down to the bare essentials of the craft, and whatever he designs shows unmistakably how much value he sets upon elementary form. It is conceivable that a craftsman might make—indeed, there are many examples of this—a cabinet or other piece of furniture of outwardly charming proportions and design but whose material was actually too heavy and cumbersome for its purpose. On the other hand he might use too flimsy material and have to strengthen it in hidden places. Now, Mr. Heal appears to have the insight into furniture construction which enables him always to strike the happy medium. He seems to think that it is worth finding out exactly whether an oak board should be an inch thick or half an inch or somewhere in between, where another man would not trouble. His cornice moldings, the beadings around door panels, and other projections never seem too big, never look mean and poor. It is common enough to see inlaid ornamentation applied to furniture to relieve the effect of too heavy construction; to lighten the appearance of the piece, or to bring together the different parts of ill-proportioned “carcase” work.

A maker may have constructed, for instance, a sideboard in which the upper part,
owing to faulty proportion, looks separate and distinct from the lower. It looks foolishly like one piece of furniture on top of another, instead of all one piece. Now he can often correct this, successfully enough, by introducing lines of decoration, inlaid, carved or painted, of uniform width and ornamental character, which run through both upper and lower parts. This has the effect of gaining unity and relief. But in Mr. Heal's work this is never done. Whatever ornamentation there is appears to be the direct result of the mechanics of construction, and the satisfactory appearance of the whole is due in a very great measure to true proportions and a scrupulous regard for economy of material. Many people a few years ago learned the art of carving by copying the gouge cuts in old panels without knowing anything of construction, and their only course when they had completed their work was to send it to a joiner to be "made up." This lack of method is referred to as typifying a proceeding which is the very antithesis of the reasoned thoughtfulness of Mr. Heal's cabinetwork, in which there is not the slightest sign of casual improvisation.

Mr. Ernest W. Gimson, who is also one of the craftsmen closely associated with the history of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, holds, of course, with his fellow workers that hand-made furniture is superior in every way to that made by machinery. No one will go far in dispute of this, though there are some who still think that machinery is capable of producing pieces of work, under right direction, with which no fault can fairly be found. That this is true can be seen by the influence which the best craftsmen's work has had on commercial production which has become much less elaborate. One would naturally expect that if machinery can execute complicated cabinetwork passably well, it should be able to produce a piece of furniture on simple lines. As a matter of fact there is plenty of furniture made by machinery, the best of it in adaptation or imitation of 18th century models, which is perfectly good as far as it goes. But, of course, it lacks individuality and character. However plain and unpretentious it may be, however reticent in its ornamentation, however skilfully it may imitate hand-made pieces, it always bears the unmistakable stamp of mechanical accuracy and "slick" finish. More than this, a craftsman can turn out work from his bench by hand which would be utterly impracticable for machine construction.

When it comes to decoration in inlay or by carving, machinery can quarter the cost of production and add vulgarity to cheapness at the same time. If the constructional parts of a piece of furniture are scarcely tolerable when made by machinery the ornamental parts are clearly impossible.

It appears to the writer that Mr. Gimson's furniture, of which examples are shown, is in some cases almost exhausted the possibilities for legitimate finish which so plain and straightforward a style of design as his presents. The cabinet in burr elm and ebony shows a most careful even elaborate system of drawers and cupboards, within a case which is simply a plain rectangle. Every part of the work is constructed of selected woods, full of beautiful, varied figure, and the metal mounts are designed and made for their special purposes. In a cabinet such as this the quality of preciousness which one might criticize in a dresser or table is of value as being in harmony with the purpose of the piece, which appears to suggest the locking away of valuables or at any rate of intimate possessions, notwithstanding its obvious use for secretarial purposes. Mr. Gimson's work frequently finds expression in such pieces, and he has made many cabinets, beautifully made cases of a dozen or more small drawers and cupboards, placed for convenience of reach on stands which can scarcely be regarded as belonging to the chests they support. A characteristic feature of his work is to be observed in the raised panels of drawer and cupboard fronts, a very pleasant way of varying an inevitable constructional item. Mr. Gimson has also studied the making of simple chairs of ash, oak and elm, sometimes stained black with turned rails and rush seats.

Some architects argue that the best result in furnishing is obtained when the same mind which designs the house also originates the furniture. Several English architects have designed furniture for the houses they build, among whom may be mentioned Mr. Edwin L. Lutyens, Mr. C. F. A. Voysey, and Mr. Barry Parker. It is a debatable point whether the architect should press forward his claims so far; but where, as in the cases mentioned, the individuality of the architect is very strongly shown in the building, it certainly appears that in order to avoid incongruity the furniture should come from
the same source as the house. Looking back, however, in the history of British furniture it is easy to point out that notwithstanding the fact that the brothers Adam, who were fashionable architects in the 18th century, designed much furniture for the houses they built, it is nevertheless true that Chippendale, Hepplewhite and Sheraton, not one of whom was an architect, also contributed to the furnishing of Adam houses without the slightest appearance of incongruity. It is partly the business of the craftsman in furniture to make his productions harmonize with the environment in which they will ultimately be placed; but of course, he frequently has no information, and not all furniture makers care actually to sink their individuality in that of even the greatest architect.

A SCRAP-BOOK FOR THE HOME-BUILDER.

If you are planning to build—whether it be a barn or a cottage, a house or a bungalow, in town or suburbs, mountain or shore, you will find that a carefully posted scrap-book will prove a very material aid. In nearly every art or architectural magazine you glance at there is almost sure to be at least one or two clever and interesting features along your own particular line. You make a mental note of them perhaps, and tell yourself that you well remember this or that idea when the time comes to use it; but you won't. It will slip your memory along with a dozen other hints, suggestions and designs, or perhaps you will recall it just too late. The only way is to keep a scrap-book. After all it is not much trouble, and its undoubted usefulness will more than compensate.

And then,—the task itself is so enjoyable! What can be more delightful and encouraging than the keeping of a neat, systematic record and collection of all the pleasant thoughts that those before you have had in regard to the important and—as yet—difficult problem of building and furnishing a home?

Technical notes, advertisements of various promising materials, measurements and proportions, floor plans, perspectives, sketches of interior and exterior arrangements and furnishings, photographs, memoranda of articles and text-books on the art; even samples of wall-coverings, fabrics, color schemes for paint and paper,—anything, in short that has a direct and practical bearing on your plans may find a place within your portfolio.

By a little careful study and forethought, by a ready system and index kept up-to-date, a really valuable reference book may be compiled, one that may be easily turned to in moments of perplexity with perhaps very gratifying results. Then when the time is reached for action, instead of searching in a vague bewildered way for what you think you want, and placing yourself at the mercy of agents, architects, builders and contractors whose thoughts are more apt to be centered around their own pockets than your desires, you will be able to map out your course with some assurance and precision, with a definite object and ideal in view.

Of course, there are plenty of architects who would be only too glad to save you the trouble of planning your house, and plenty of interior decorators who would rejoice at a chance to exploit in your rooms their own ideas of color schemes, wall treatment, furnishing and ornament. But what a waste of opportunity to let other people do your thinking! How much pleasanter to plan your own home for your own convenience, to think out all those delightful details, those innumerable problems upon the right solution of which depends the successful embodiment of your ideal. Who would delegate to an outsider the loving forethought, the careful selection that might be so pleasantly expended on the planning of a future home?

And even if you have no definite plans as yet for that little home of which you sometimes dream, may it not be worth while to indulge in the pleasant pastime of outlining somewhat specifically your hopes and wishes and ideas,—incidentally adding to your fund of general information on one of the most fascinating subjects in the world? For who knows when success and a kind opportunity may reward your efforts and bring with it a chance to realize what must surely be one of the most cherished ambitions of anyone who has the “home-instinct” implanted in his heart!

Whether you are looking forward to the future building of a new house or the reorganizing of an old one, you can find a fore-taste of pleasure by gathering material in advance, by visualizing as clearly as possible the ideal on which your heart is set.