



## Exhibition Review

### **A Spirit of Simplicity: American Arts and Crafts from the Two Red Roses Foundation**

The Flagler Museum, Palm Beach, Florida,  
October 6, 2009–January 2, 2010

**Reviewed by Daniella Ohad Smith**

Daniella Ohad Smith is a design historian, writer, an educator in design history and theory, and a private consultant for design collections and collectors, specializing in twentieth-century design.

Ever since the ground-breaking exhibition *The Arts and Crafts Movement in America, 1876–1916* at the Art Museum of Princeton University pioneered the study of that American Movement in 1972, the movement has captured the imagination of collectors, the interest of scholars, and the awareness of museum curators.

The small, yet tasteful and exquisite exhibition, *A Spirit of Simplicity: American Arts and Crafts from the Two Red Roses Foundation*, which opened last October at the Palm Beach Flagler Museum, Florida, is the latest in a sequence of ambitious shows that survey and revisit the American Arts and Crafts, which sought to reform society through lifestyle and design. With an array of objects made to the highest standard of craftsmanship that spans the full range of the decorative arts from a Florida-based private collection, the show, co-curated by Marin Eidelberg of Rutgers University and Tracey Kamerer, Chief Curator of the Flagler Museum, provides a greater understanding of the short-lived movement that came to play a dominant role in the lives of many

Americans during the first decade-and-a-half of the twentieth century (Arts and Crafts products reached a greater audience in America than in any other country), and to shape fundamental concepts of modern design.

The theorist and writer John Ruskin, the father of the Movement, helped transform the Victorian notion that the value of an object came from its ornaments and function. He argued that value stands on the joy and happiness of the craftsmen producing those objects, thus formulating one of the most significant principles of the Arts and Crafts Movement. With its pristine objects, demonstrating the “look” of the style produced by the Movement through a singular collection, *A Spirit of Simplicity* comes to affirm that concept.

Recent years have witnessed a revival of interest in the Arts and Crafts Movement with a wealth of notable exhibitions and scholarly catalogs that explore and define this chapter of modern design. The two ambitious shows, *The Arts & Crafts Movement in Europe and America, 1880–1920: Design for the Modern World* at the Los Angeles Country Museum (2004–6), and the *International Arts & Crafts* at the Victorian and Albert Museum (2005–6), exploring the Movement as a global phenomenon, focused on the notion that it cannot be defined in stylistic terms and that what is known as a “movement,” is in fact a collection of impulses. The other two major shows focused on singular chapters in the American branch of the Movement. *The Artistic Furniture of Charles Rohlf*s, still traveling in various museums, documented and examined the work of the most expressive of all Arts and Crafts artists, and *Byrdcliffe: An American Arts and Crafts Colony* (see Figure 1) explored the venture of the Woodstock-based colony.



**Figure 1**

Cabine, Byrdcliffe Arts and Crafts Colony, Woodstock, NY. Designed by Zulma Steele. Chest with Sweet Chestnut, 1904. Carved and painted cherry wood; 27 in. x 38¼ in. x 14½ in. Credit: Image from The Two Red Roses Foundation, courtesy Flagler Museum.

Through the display of 150 objects of Arts and Crafts production, including furniture, woodblock prints, stained glass, tiles, pottery, textiles, and metalwork made in the various geographical centers of the Movement in the USA, *The Spirit of Simplicity* provides a comprehensive look at the Movement through a large private collection that was assembled by Florida businessman Rudy Ciccarello and on loan to the Flagler from the Two Red Roses Foundation, a private not-for-profit educational foundation in Palm Harbor, Florida.

The most distinctive feature of the exhibition, aside from the fact that it brings together so many objects of rare and superb quality, is the juxtaposition of the objects within the Flagler Museum, which provided a unique way of looking at principles that characterized the American Arts and Crafts. A Beaux Arts, dramatic, and lavish mansion, built by the railroad magnate Henry Flagler as a wedding gift for his third wife in what would become the heart of Palm Beach, represents the Gilded Age and a style that has become associated with wealthy Americans of the turn of the twentieth century, particularly in homes of the Vanderbilts, the Rockefellers, and others. Completed in 1902, the mansion was also contemporary to the Arts and Crafts Movement. With its historicism, grandeur, and lavish scale, it provides for the viewer everything to which the practitioners of the Movement were opposed. The year 1902 was extraordinarily rich in Arts and Crafts production as the display of objects attests. Gustav Stickley produced the best of his furniture. Charles Rohlf's was given membership to the Royal Society of Arts in London and was subsequently commissioned to produce furniture for Buckingham Palace, and the Rookwood pottery moved into the Arts and Crafts style, introducing the most important of its glazes. Those two realities juxtaposed in the exhibition, the palatial grand mansion of the mega-wealthy and the unpretentious oak furniture, unadorned cooper objects, and modest mat-glazed vases that grew from the Movement's ideology to make design democratic, represent the two spectrums in American taste at the time.

While the exhibition was illuminating in demonstrating the quality of the best produced in America, it lacked several important chapters to make a comprehensive picture of the Movement. One of the most distinctive aspects of the American Movement is its regional expressions that make it so much more fascinating than its British counterpart, but that aspect was not fully explored in the exhibition. The last section was devoted to art pottery, one of the most inspiring mediums of the American Arts and Crafts Movement. It was represented with some extraordinary examples by Van Briggles Pottery, Grueby Faience Co., Marblehead Potteries, Paul Revere Pottery, Rookwood Pottery, and one of the best examples of Newcomb Pottery in existence. That section, however, ignores the work of the potter George E. Ohr, whose phenomenal abstract pieces that challenged the craft of pottery represent the artistic and forward-looking spirit of the Movement. Similarly, the furniture collection had no

representation of the brothers Charles Summer and Henry Mather Greene, whose work in exotic woods manifested the special characteristics of the California region, where the Movement flourished. This all suggests that the collection still has a place to grow or that the collection was not sufficiently represented in this show.

## Aspirational Sustainability? A Review of *Eco Home*

Geffrye Museum, London, October 13, 2009–February 7, 2010

**Reviewed by Paul Micklethwaite**

Paul Micklethwaite focuses on where design and “sustainability” meet. He likes big questions; his PhD asked (and tried to answer) “what is design?” He teaches, supervises research students, and undertakes research projects and knowledge transfer activities across a wide range of areas within the emerging field of Design for Sustainability.

The sustainability agenda is becoming increasingly important, both culturally and politically. As such it is beginning to influence the programs and exhibitions of our major galleries and museums. With *Eco Home*, the Geffrye, London’s self-styled “museum of the home,” has trumped the same city’s Design Museum by reacting more quickly to the implications of the sustainability agenda for its particular museological focus. (The London Design Museum’s *Sustainable Futures – Can Design Save the World?* runs from March 31 to September 5, 2010.)

The rhetoric of sustainable architecture is now commonplace, reflecting the considerable ecological impacts of the built environment. We know the environmental and social consequences of getting buildings wrong. Sustainability in architecture is also driven by legislation such as the UK Code for Sustainable Homes, and environmental impact assessment schemes such as LEED and BREEAM, all of which consider impacts during both the construction and occupancy of a building. Yet the architectural *interior* is often neglected in this context. *Eco Home* is a timely consideration of ways in which the contemporary home, and specifically how we inhabit it, relate to our increasing collective awareness of climate change and other human ecological impacts.

Sustainable architecture is often exhibited at, for example, New London Architecture at the Building Centre, London, and every public architectural competition highlights sustainability as a category of particular consideration. Yet *Eco Home*’s closest forbear is perhaps re[design]’s *Good and Gorgeous* exhibition of sustainable home design during the London Design Festival of September 2006. Several designers selected by [re]design also feature in *Eco Home*. The earlier show was more experimental and reliant on new graduate designers. That many of the exhibitors in *Eco Home* are now more established perhaps reflects the movement of sustainability

considerations into the design mainstream in the intervening three-year period.

The theme of *Eco Home*, as we would expect from its guest curator and designer Oliver Heath, is “aspirational sustainability.” A clear attempt is made throughout to normalize sustainable lifestyle choices, and to reassure us that “sustainable” need not mean an abandonment of luxury.

The Geffrye explores the home from 1600 to the present day. The museum’s focus is on the living rooms of the urban middle classes in England, particularly London. A chronological sequence of period rooms shows how homes have been used and furnished over the past 400 years, reflecting changes in society and patterns of behavior as well as style, fashion, and taste. How does this exhibition sit within the rest of the museum? Sustainability is often portrayed, at least in the UK, as a predominantly white middle-class concern. The museological shrine of the urban middle classes therefore seems a perfect setting for *Eco Home*, in which context it represents an idealized present and hopeful near future for the “sustainable” interior.

*Eco Home* occupies the Geffrye’s basement space for temporary exhibitions, located at the end of the chronological tour of historical interiors that comprises the museum’s permanent display. The exhibition is laid out in four walk-through sections, respectively devoted to: (1) reducing energy and water consumption and adapting our homes and behavior to conserve these resources; (2) the life cycle of a chair and its impact on the environment, from materials used and provenance, through to its repair and biodegradability potential; (3) recycling and the diverse ways now available to recycle all types of household waste; and (4) eco-friendly materials and how they can be transformed into desirable new products for the home.

Many of the exhibits within these four areas are familiar to those with an interest in eco-design. Particularly successful are the prominence given to Pli Design’s REEE chair, with its credible consideration of whole-life-cycle impacts, and a gallery of chairs each with its own particular credentials for inclusion in an “eco” exhibition. The perfectly sustainable product does not, perhaps *can* not, exist. Different aspects of sustainability often compete within the same product, as when a lightweight composite material can not be easily recycled. The gallery of eco-chairs (Figure 1) makes this point very well, as we are left to reflect on which is the most sustainable, and why? Other exhibits prompt similar debate; for example the Tord Boonje-designed vases made from recycled bottles in Guatemala by local artisans, before being shipped overseas to markets such as the UK.

Exhibits in *Eco Home* range from the very pragmatic in the first area (a personal ecological footprint calculator; a gray-water-reuse washbasin and toilet system) to the overtly luxurious in the final section. The latter represent a design and marketing strategy, which aims at producing “modern heirlooms,” encouraging greater

**Figure 1**

Gallery of “eco-chairs,” each with its own particular environmental credentials.  
Credit: Image from the Geffrye Museum, photograph Jayne Lloyd.

emotional durability in our relationships with our products (see for example the Squint armchair in Figure 2). For the exhibition’s curator this represents a unity of the technological and aesthetic aspects of sustainable lifestyle, which for him can be gendered as masculine and feminine respectively.

*Eco Home* advocates frugality and “make do and mend” on the one hand, and sustainable luxury on the other. Uniquely, for an “eco”-themed exhibition, consumerism is not itself overtly problematized. *Eco Home* suggests that we can make our lifestyles sufficiently more sustainable simply by consuming differently, by being more aware of the decisions we make as consumers of materials and resources. Yet might some of the artful and witty reuses of waste material exhibited here be considered novelties, rather than exemplars of a sustainable future? Perhaps their role as prompters of debate and reflection is enough. Is there a further risk that *Eco Home* might contribute to a commodification of “green,” such that sustainability briefly becomes just another trend for the consuming middle classes, quickly forgotten? The exhibition is after all supported by a leading middle-market UK department store. Our view on this perhaps depends on our attitude towards the capitalist-consumerist model.

*Eco Home* represents a serious and thoughtful engagement with the implications of the sustainability agenda for the contemporary interior. It would be a notable next step to apply the same mode of critique to the Geffrye’s main museological focus on various examples of the historical interior.



**Figure 2**  
Armchair, designed and made by Squint Ltd. Made in the UK using traditional joinery and upholstery skills. Each component part is sustainably sourced and it is made to last for generations. Credit: Squint, London.

