

The final award of the day is the **Akyuz-Ozmen Award for Outstanding Achievement in Feminist Scholarship**. Initiated in 1997, the award is named for Su Akyuz and Aysegul Ozmen, RIT graduates in Computer Graphic Design, who won the 1996 Best of Show Award in the Adobe Flash Point Student Design Contest. Their feminist video, "Perception," was produced under the supervision of Prof. Tina Lent, College of Liberal Arts, and Prof. Bob Keough and Prof. Malcolm Spaul, College of Imaging Arts and Sciences. The Akyuz/Ozmen Award is funded by a grant from Adobe Systems Incorporated in recognition of their achievement.

18. Jenny Hung (Prof. Tina Lent)

Jenny Hung was a student in my Women and the Visual Arts course this past fall quarter. Her term paper, "Women of RIT during the Arts & Crafts Movement," was the outcome of a challenge I posed to a few selected art students to undertake an original research project focusing on art education for women. Specifically, working in conjunction with RIT Archivist Becky Simmons, I was interested to see what they could find in the RIT Archives about the evolution of art education for women at the Mechanics Institute in the early 20th century. None of the students had ever undertaken archival research projects before, nor were they accustomed to framing questions that could not easily be answered by published sources. In our first session in the archives, Jenny, a graphic media major, was particularly drawn to the arts and crafts influences we observed in the archival photographs of the ceramics studios, so she decided to pursue the development of that style at the Institute. The fact that most of the students shown in the studios were young women, was also a positive factor in her choice. Relying on traditional published

sources on the International Arts and Crafts movement, as well as on its development in Upstate New York, to establish a framework for her research, Jenny investigated a treasure trove of original photographs, yearbooks, promotional materials, class schedules, memoirs, newspaper articles, and art objects in the RIT Archives to develop a sophisticated narrative history of the Mechanics Institute art program in the first decade of the twentieth century. Her finished paper was thoughtful, scholarly, and well-written. More importantly, it was an original contribution to a history of women's education at RIT that has received very little attention. In addition, Jenny's focus on the role women played as teachers at the Institute, as Rochester public school art teachers, and as workers in various Rochester industries (for which their art education had prepared them), situated her paper strongly within the traditions of feminist scholarship. Jenny's paper is truly an example of the extraordinary abilities of our undergraduate students when creatively challenged in areas outside their major programs.

Jenny Hung
Women and the Visual Arts
Prof. Tina Lent
Fall–Winter 2007

Women of Rochester Institute of Technology during the Arts and Crafts movement

This paper will explore the role of Rochester Institute of Technology, then known as the Mechanics Institute, during the advent of the American Arts and Crafts movement. The focus will then shift to the position and function of women in the developments of both the Institute and the Arts and Crafts movement. Largely overlooked in the construction of art history, women were promoters and practitioners of the Arts and Crafts, and were vital to the development and success of the movement.

England: the origin of the Arts and Crafts movement

In the mid-nineteenth century the Industrial Revolution came to be seen as making English art and life increasingly commercial and ugly. Social and industrial changes threatened traditional methods of craftsmanship with low-cost, inferior-quality, and monotonous mass production; and the effect of industrialization was the cluttering of homes with cheap and superfluous objects. In a time of rapid industrial expansion, the Arts and Crafts movement emerged as an effort to counter the social consequences of industrialization by attempting to re-establish what its members perceived to be the more humanistic values of pre-industrial times. Not only was it an artistic movement that sought an authentic and meaningful style, it was also a social movement comprised of populist ideals and socialist undertones.¹

More than any other individual, it was art critic and writer John Ruskin who had the greatest influence on public taste in Victorian England. He brought to society an awareness of the welfare of the workman as well as the nature and beauty of his work. Ruskin's beliefs propelled many of the ideas behind the Arts and Crafts movement, but the critical link between Ruskin's ideology and the Arts and Crafts movement was established by the design philosophy of William Morris and his firm, which became the chief influence on the development of the movement.²

Both Ruskin and Morris distrusted machines and industrial capitalism. The repetitive nature of factory work was criticized as being dehumanizing since it alienated workers from their own nature and deprived them of any satisfaction derived from their work. They called for a return to skilled production by hand, and advocated an art that would be available for the wide public, for they believed that art was a key to improving the conditions of the lower class. This

¹ Ludwig 13

² Ludwig 2-3

populist attitude carried over to the art produced by the members of the movement. Their works shared certain stylistic tendencies. Objects were based on natural, rather than artificial, forms. Repeating designs, vertical and elongated forms, and gothic influences were common. In rebellion against the Victorian style, artists placed emphasis on the harmony of interiors, the reduction of décor, and the clarity of line. They were dedicated to producing functional objects with high aesthetic value. High quality and honesty in materials and workmanship were crucial, thus objects were often left slightly unfinished to express the beauty inherent in craft, resulting in a certain rustic effect.

As the history of the Arts and Crafts movement is customarily taught, it was mainly Ruskin and Morris who had shaped the core philosophies of the movement. Apart from the history of its leaders, however, the success of the movement depended greatly on its adoption by a large number of artists, many of whom were women, who remain largely ignored and undocumented. Reflecting the general pattern of a male-dominated view of art history, the position and function of women within the history of the Arts and Crafts movement have been left unnoticed.³

³ Callen, preface

New York: the hub of the American Arts and Crafts Movement

The movement eventually progressed across England to the United States. Americans were prompted to improve their handicrafts and applied arts instruction upon seeing the superior foreign crafts that were exhibited at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, the first official world's fair in the United States. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Arts and Crafts principles of simplicity, honesty, and craftsmanship drove American design.⁴

Although the American Arts and Crafts movement drew most of its inspiration from its English counterpart, the American style was eclectic, with regional nuances.⁵ The huge size of the country made nationwide impact difficult, and instead encouraged greater local diversity. In contrast to England, there were fewer precedents in traditional craft industries in America, and artists were much more willing to embrace the use of machinery if it aided quality and commercial viability.⁶

The movement influenced designers and craftspeople across the country, but no region made a greater contribution to the Arts and Crafts movement in America than New York State. It was home to many leaders of the movement, and was the site of numerous workshops, factories, programs, publications, and communities. Elbert Green Hubbard's Roycroft Press and the Rochester Arts and Crafts Society were among the earliest organizations to embrace the ideals the movement. Rochester Institute of Technology, known then as the Mechanics Institute, was notably one of the pioneer institutes for training in the Arts and Crafts, and one that was exceptional in its extension to women.⁷

⁴ Ludwig 9

⁵ Ludwig 10

⁶ Jeffery 44

⁷ Ludwig 9

The Mechanics Institute: an institute for the people

Not coincidentally, manual training began to grow rapidly in America soon after the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. The public became aware of the importance of developing manual skill as well as an appreciation for good design and construction. In 1885 the Mechanics Institute was established to train designers and skilled workers for local manufacturing industries that flourished in the Rochester area. In 1891, the Rochester Athenaeum merged with the Rochester Mechanics Institute to form an educational institution that combined manual training with traditional academic instruction. It was renamed Rochester Institute of Technology in 1944.⁸

The principles of the Mechanics Institute were comparable to the populist attitudes of the Arts and Crafts movement. It was viewed as the “people’s institute” that aimed to “appeal to the people of both sexes.”⁹ At the onset of its founding, the Institute proved to be remarkably adaptive to the changing needs of its locals. When the advent of the Arts and Crafts movement increased demand for professional designers and craftspeople in the art industries, the Institute responded by hiring Theodore Hanford Pond in 1902 to develop and expand the Decorative Arts and Crafts Program. Classes were offered to train students for work in art industries such as wallpaper and textile printing, carpet weaving, metalworking, furniture building, stained glass, architectural decoration, book design, pottery, and embroidery. Over the next eight years the department evolved into the Department of Applied and Fine arts, providing over ten programs of instruction. Many notable designers and craftspeople identified with the Arts and Crafts

⁸ Gordon 50; Ludwig 14–15, 19

⁹ “The Mechanics Institute.” Scrapbook 1891–1896, p. 15. RIT Archives.

movement during this era taught in the Department of Fine Arts at the Mechanics Institute, including Frederick E. Walrath, M. Louise Stowell, and Lulu Scott Backus.¹⁰

The popularization of the American Arts and Crafts movement owed in large part to the good networks of communication among its advocates and the diverse channels for disseminating information to the public.¹¹ Publications, exhibitions, competitions, workshops, discussions and lectures brought public attention to the movement, and the Mechanics Institute was an active site for such happenings.

An article in *The Athenaeum*, a monthly publication run by the students of the Mechanics Institute, acknowledged the design concerns of the time: “since the time of Ruskin and Morris it is again becoming understood that it is impossible to detach design from craft... The crafts have suffered on the one hand from the methods introduced to compete with machinery, and the lack of thought or design; and on the other hand there is a danger from elaborateness of design and poor workmanship.¹²” The same article also expressed a positive outlook for craftspeople of the Institute, claiming there was a “demand for artistic craft workers [in the county], and there is every possibility that all who will devote an earnest and sufficient study to design and workmanship will reach a measure of success.”

A local celebrity famed for his ceramic works, Frederick E. Walrath joined the faculty of the Applied Arts Course at the Mechanics Institute in 1908 as Professor of Modeling and Pottery. Photos A02-02-01, A02-02-03 and A02-02-04 show Walrath in the studio with unidentified students at the Mechanics Institute. Photos “Walrath_1” through “Walrath_5” are examples of his works dating around 1907 to 1918.

¹⁰ Ludwig 19, 25

¹¹ Ludwig 55

¹² *The Athenaeum*, Feb 1911, p. 14–15. RIT Archives.

Morris' call for the democracy of art and the simplification of interior design was remarkably progressive for his time and was very much akin to modern design concepts. He urged "we should at all events take as our maxim the less, the better; Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful."¹³ Gustav Stickley, the leading promoter of the Arts and Crafts movement in America, stated that the home "should never be encumbered with things of doubtful use, or questionable aesthetic value."¹⁴ The association of beauty and utility was a frequent topic of discussion at the Institute during the height of the Arts and Crafts movement in America.¹⁵ In a series of talks to the Ceramic Society, Eugene E. Colby, the first principal of the Mechanics Institute and first director of its art school, addressed the subject of application of ornament, asserting that the great principle of ornamentation was the adaptation to purpose, that decoration should not be considered before utility. In line with Arts and Crafts ideals, he believed that ornamentation should be truthful, not deceitful, and should be consistent with the utility of the article.¹⁶ In a similar stance, Walrath affirmed, "All good pottery should show skill, beauty, and use."¹⁷ Walrath's unpublished essay reveals a personal design philosophy that was heavily influenced by the Arts and Crafts, particularly the beliefs of Ruskin. In that essay, he warned fellow craftspeople against over-decorating as well as profiting from inferior articles made through cheap production, for he believed that every article should be carefully selected to provide utility and harmony to its surroundings.

Indeed, one objective of the Arts and Crafts movement was to harmonize the home environment in order to achieve physical and mental wellbeing. The home must be well planned.

¹³ Ludwig 3

¹⁴ Ludwig 27

¹⁵ *Times*, Nov. 26, 1907. Clifford Ulp scrapbook, Vol. I. RIT Archives.

The Athenaeum, Feb 1911, p. 15. RIT Archives.

¹⁶ "Professor Colby Talks to the Ceramic Society," *Democrat & Chronicle*, Mar. 30, 1894. Colby scrapbook. RIT Archives

¹⁷ Walrath, "Commercial and Art Pottery." Unpublished essay, 1909. Clifford Ulp scrapbook, Vol. I. RIT Archives.

Functionality and simplicity of form, honest construction, and integrity of materials were stressed.¹⁸ As an alternative way of presenting student works at the end of the year, the gallery space at the Mechanics Institute was remodeled several times into habitable rooms furnished by the works of students, who practiced the “proper restraint... necessary in the creation of a harmonious ensemble.”¹⁹ Photos A04-01-01 and A04-01-02 from 1903, and photo A04-01-04 from 1907 are examples of such exhibitions. The furnishings show influence of the Arts and Crafts style, particularly in the metalwork, such as the candleholders, and the designs of the tablecloth, folding screen, and wall border in photo A04-01-04. Particularly noteworthy is the inclusion of an illustration by M. Louis Stowell in photo A04-01-02. It is a poster for the George P. Humphrey bookstore in Rochester, New York, which depicts a man reading in a bookshop with his large hand blocking the view of his face.

The Mechanics Institute was also the site of several important Arts and Crafts exhibitions in Rochester. The Arts and Crafts Exhibition in 1903 was first held in Syracuse and then at the Mechanics Institute. It was the first decorative arts exhibition of its kind to be held in upstate New York, and was the upstate audience’s first exposure to a wide range of works produced by leading Arts and Crafts designers from both Europe and America [see “Exhibition_1903” photo of the exhibition pamphlet cover]. Exemplary of the Institute’s emphasis on practicality from its very beginning, the exhibition pamphlet describes the exhibition as a “practical demonstration” of the Arts and Crafts.²⁰

Due to the popularity of the exhibition, a second Arts and Crafts exhibition was organized in 1905 at the Institute.²¹ The Institute was also the location of the annual exhibition of

¹⁸ Ludwig 27

¹⁹ “Rochester, N.Y.” *Art Bulletin*, Apr. 6, 1907. Clifford Ulp scrapbook, Vol. I. RIT Archives.

²⁰ Exhibition pamphlet, 1903. Clifford Ulp scrapbook, Vol. I. RIT Archives.

²¹ Ludwig 57

the work of the National Society of Craftsmen of New York and the Arts and Crafts Society of Boston in 1918.²²

The movement reached its peak in the first decade of the century and is particularly evident in the student works from that period, which were the subject of frequent praise from local newspapers.²³ Each academic year concluded with an exhibition of students' works done in the various classes offered at the Institute.²⁴ Photo A04-01-09 shows an exhibition of student work held in 1910. Although photo A04-01-31 is undated, the ceramic works on display are the same as the ones in other photos dating around the same period. The metal and ceramic works in photo A03-09-03 show heavy influence of the Arts and Crafts style, especially in the curvilinear designs, the flattened forms and the peacock motifs.

Examples of metalwork in the Arts and Crafts style by students at the Mechanic Institute can be seen in photos A03-09-01 and A03-09-04. The design of Arts and Crafts metalwork enhanced the natural quality of the material, often with the embellishment of hammer marks on the surface, as evident in these student works.²⁵ Examples of Arts and Crafts jewelry by students of the Institute can be seen in photos A03-09-05 and A03-09-06. The Arts and Crafts aim to provide beautiful, well-made yet affordable, objects for the masses led to an alternative fashion in jewelry. Instead of being made from gold and precious stones, Arts and Crafts jewelry were handmade from sterling silver or brass, with hammer marks frequently visible, and with enamel and semi-precious stone accents. Jewelry designs were often based on natural leaf and floral motifs, and influenced by ornaments worn by women in Pre-Raphaelite paintings, which were based on Renaissance prototypes.²⁶

²² "Annual Exhibition of Arts and Crafts." *Democrat*, Apr. 1913. Clifford Ulp scrapbook, Vol. I. RIT Archives.

²³ Ludwig 10; Scrapbook 1891-1896. RIT Archives.

²⁴ Gordon 42

²⁵ Fidler 28

²⁶ Fidler 35

Photo A01-05-01 shows a classroom of women working on designs at the Mechanics Institute, many of which are of leaf forms. The design pieces displayed in exhibition photos A04-01-09 and A04-01-31 recall the style of Morris and his company. Photo A03-04-03 is one of the design pieces displayed in exhibition photo A04-01-09. Designs have clearly structured flat patterns, and recognizable naturalistic motifs, usually in the form of flowers and leaves, which are organized decoratively into a framework.²⁷ The Athenaeum cover design from October 1912 and border design from Jan 1912 also share these characteristics [see “Athenaeum_1” and “Athenaeum_2”].

The ceramic pieces in photos A03-03-01, A03-03-03 and A03-03-10 are representative of the Arts and Crafts style that pervaded the Mechanics Institute. Art pottery was the most prolific product of the American Arts and Crafts movement, and was an important field for craftswomen in America. Schools like the Mechanic Institute provided training as well as links to local craft industries, and are an example of the efforts made in America to find honorable work for needy women who, despite their absence from the records of history, were largely responsible for the growth and promotion of pottery in America.²⁸ According to a newspaper article written in 1894, the Institute’s art training was essential to Rochester’s ceramic art scene, such as in the achievements of the Rochester Ceramic Society.²⁹ Photo A02-02-10, dating to 1919, shows an unidentified student at work in pottery class at the Institute.

Inspired by examples at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia and the spirit of the Arts and Crafts movement, American potters created innovative, high-quality ceramics that quickly rivaled their international competitors. American pottery is characterized by variety, and reveals influences from European countries and Japan. Aesthetic concerns of the pottery, such as

²⁷ Menz 43

²⁸ Callen 46

²⁹ “News of Artists.” Dec. 19. 1894. Scrapbook 1891–1896, p. 92–93. RIT Archives.

its paint decoration, shape or glaze, grew in importance. A widely practiced technique among craftspeople in the applied arts during the Arts and Crafts era was the simplification of natural forms to emphasize their decorative features and the arrangement of these forms into a harmonious composition.³⁰ Members of the Institute produced exquisite ceramic works during this period. Photo "Ceramic_1" is of a ceramic tile attributed to a Mechanics Institute potter dating to around 1910. Here the water and fish forms are flattened and simplified into curvilinear shapes and arranged into a decorative composition. Photo "Ceramic_2" shows some of vases produced at the Institute between 1907 and 1918. The left vase is attributed to an unidentified student of Walrath, the center vase is by another member of the Institute, and the right vase is by Walrath. Note the stylized plant motifs on these vases as well as the distinctive glaze on the vase by Walrath, who was renown for his innovative glazes.

An Arts and Crafts shop was formed by the Arts Student's League, a society composed of students from the Mechanics Institute, later renamed the Rochester Art League, to serve as both workshop and sales room.³¹ Some of the items offered for sale included jewelry, tooled leather bags and book covers, basketwork, pottery, metal work, curtains, and stenciled fabrics. The Institute's constitution stated, "The object shall be to promote such practical education as may enable those persons receiving instruction to become better fitted for their occupation in life."³² Quite fitting with its emphasis on practicality, the Mechanics Institute took a very practical view of the Arts and Crafts:

[The works produced by the shop] reflect credit on the institute and are a lesson in the school's practical ideals. The idea which underlies the whole endeavor is that a craftsman also may be an artist. He was an artist in Florence, when the arts were in their prime; he was an artist at the Kelmscott with William Morris. But

³⁰ Fidler 45 and Ludwig 21

³¹ *Democrat and Chronicle*, Sept. 13, 1911. Clifford Ulp scrapbook, Vol. I. RIT Archives.

³² Course Catalog 1885-1901. RIT Archives.

there is no Roycroft make-believe and nostrum-worship here. The workers are craftsmen in the old artistic sense of the word.³³

Crafts produced by the students at the Mechanics Institute were also sold at the Henry C. Wisner Company, a local art shop that also sponsored craft exhibitions.³⁴ Photo A04-03-04 is a poster advertisement created by a member of the Institute for the company.

The image "Diploma" is of a certificate given by the Institute in the Arts and Crafts style. This was given to a student named Naomi Lilly Spindelman in 1912 for her completion of the Decorative Design course. The design of this diploma, with its heavy Gothic-inspired typeface, ornaments, and decorative border and initial, are comparable to the book designs of Morris' Kelmscott Press.

A 1908 advertisement claimed that the Department of Applied and Fine Arts of the Mechanics Institute stood at the head in the application of art to industry.³⁵ The growing reputation of the Institute and a thriving commercial art market in the early twentieth century was opportune for the former students of the Fine and Applied Art program.³⁶ The Rochester Herald reported that registration for the fine arts course was unusually heavy for the 1907 school year, for "many of the recent graduates were placed in lucrative positions, and the demand that comes from all parts of the country for teachers of domestic science and art shows how wide a reputation the local institute has."³⁷

Women during the Arts and Crafts movement

³³ "Mechanics Institute Exhibit," *Post*, Oct. 14, 1908. Clifford Ulp scrapbook, Vol. I. RIT Archives.

³⁴ Fidler 53

³⁵ Clifford Ulp scrapbook, Vol. I. RIT Archives.

³⁶ Rogers 20

³⁷ *Rochester Herald*, Sept. 4, 1907. Clifford Ulp scrapbook, Vol. I. RIT Archives.

A study of women's involvement in the Arts and Crafts movement would be incomplete without an understanding of the social and cultural position women found themselves during Victorian times. In the Victorian era, a woman's place was in the home, and marriage was her only proper vocation, for it was her only means to achieving social recognition and economic security. If success was defined by marriage, failure to do so equated to a lack of status, not to mention financial uncertainty. Little thought was given to the likelihood that a widow or even a married woman may need to support herself and her dependents, and it was inconceivable that a woman should earn her own living as a matter of achieving self-respect or independence. Paid work was considered debasing for women, yet it was the expected duty of men.³⁸ Up until 1870, when there was a gradual increase in the establishment of girls' schools, little or no formal education for women was customary when their entire lives were oriented towards their anticipated future roles as wives with only social duties and society aspirations.³⁹

By the mid-nineteenth century, the long-standing problem of untrained women with no means of support was becoming acute in England. While the number of the needy was steadily rising, paying occupations for middle-class women at the time remained strictly limited, mainly to that of governess or teacher. In view of the limited roles and characteristics imposed upon them by society, it was essential for women to find work that was considered appropriate for women. Without sure means of self-support, women needed to maintain their ability to attract a husband. The work had to reflect feminine capabilities and maintain the Victorian ideal of womanhood. Arts and crafts became recognized as a suitable area of employment for women as it could be seen as an extension of women's "instinctive taste and natural grace."⁴⁰ The arts and crafts could be seen to comply with Ruskin's ideal of the woman's place and the qualities

³⁸ Callen 8

³⁹ Callen 20

⁴⁰ Callen 22-25

essential to her being a good wife. Although there was anxiety over the encroachment of the traditional division of labor between the sexes, the arts and crafts was an area that was considered little threat to the established occupations of men since women's work was frequently seen as inferior to that of men.⁴¹ Moreover, women were often relegated to the most menial tasks and restricted to very few areas of designing, such as flower painting. Women were encouraged to take employment in subordinate positions, but excluded from all others reserved for men, thereby limiting their talents to only a small area of the craft. It was generally the designers, usually men, who receive recognition for their creativity, while the executants of the design, usually women, who remain anonymous.⁴²

The situation for American women was not dissimilar. Women were increasingly dependent on their own resources due to the drain of available men caused by emigration to the West. And as in England, art education was on the rise in America due to industries' growing demand for native designers so to cut the cost of importing foreign designs.⁴³

Handicrafts were an integral part of the Arts and Crafts movement, and were viewed as suitable work for women in America as it were in England. In an Arts and Crafts exhibition held at the Mechanics Institute in 1902, the works of craftswomen were praised for being "done by feminine hands" by "women's unique methods."⁴⁴ Women in the nineteenth century were often taught home crafts, such as needlework, in preparation for their expected roles as housewives. Not only was the development of handicraft skills encouraged as a means to earn a living, it was also a productive hobby that can be carried out at home, as it required little space and simple tools.⁴⁵ When the Arts and Crafts movement emerged with its emphasis on handicrafts,

⁴¹ Callen 26–27

⁴² Callen 42, 52–54, 162

⁴³ Callen 43–44

⁴⁴ Mar. 16, 1902. Unidentified clipping, "Stowell, M. Louise" folder. RIT Archives.

⁴⁵ Ludwig 22

numerous women took the opportunity to exert influence outside the home.⁴⁶ The movement also saw the emergence of the Progressive Era in America, which heralded the idea that economic independence was desirable for women.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ludwig 16

⁴⁷ Rogers 5

Women at the Mechanics Institute

The Mechanic Institute was co-educational from the beginning. At a time when over ninety percent of men and women who enter the public schools do not get above high school, and less than one percent of public school students attend colleges,⁴⁸ the Institute provided an opportunity that could not be found elsewhere for the local working class people, and was especially appealing to women who had very few options for post-primary education.

In sharp contrast to Victorian ideals, the population of Rochester in the early twentieth century comprised of a large percentage of unmarried women; and numerous married, widowed, or divorced women were contributing earnings to support their family. Rochester manufacturers relied on their women workforce, and in a changing industrial economy, the Mechanics Institute offered the education and training women needed.⁴⁹

Compared to similar schools of the time, the Mechanics Institute was exceptionally supportive of its women students. They were awarded scholarships, were allowed into every program, and were well represented on the faculty and the Board of Trustees.⁵⁰ In this respect, the Institute's populist attitude on education was decades ahead of its time.

Similar to art classes offered in English schools, the Mechanics Institute offered classes in china painting, relief modeling, drawing from casts, drawing from life, embroidery, metalworking and painting. And like the earliest schools that were open to women in England, the Mechanics Institute saw large numbers of women eagerly taking up that opportunity.⁵¹

Approximately 2,500 students were enrolled at the Mechanics Institute during 1898–1899, and

⁴⁸ "For the Young" Jun. 11, 1892. Scrapbook 1891–1896, p. 35. RIT Archives.

⁴⁹ Rogers 4–5

⁵⁰ Rogers 6–8

⁵¹ Callen 34

more than half of them were women.⁵² Indeed, photographs of classes offered by the Department of Fine and Applied Arts reveal that classrooms comprised mostly, if not exclusively, of women. Women often outnumber men, and were even found in classes that were generally oriented to men like furniture making. Photo A01-06-09 is of a modeling class with Walrath, photo A01-06-08 is of a clay modeling class, photo A01-06-03 is of a freehand drawing class, photos A02-03-04 and A02-03-02 are of life drawing classes from 1891 and 1918 respectively, photo A02-04-06 is a class portrait of art students from 1891–1893 with Eugene Colby at the center and Eben Rose, vice-principal, at the far right.

The ceramics industry was the first to respond to the growing demand for unique handcrafted objects. In the 1870s, art pottery decoration and china painting became an extremely popular pastime amongst women as they came to be seen as suitable outlets for feminine talents. With this social sanctioning, art pottery decoration rapidly came to be seen as a dignified means of employment for middle-class women.⁵³ China painting classes were offered at the Mechanics Institute, appearing in course catalogs as early as 1890, where three classes were offered each week.

Women were active participants at the Mechanics Institute. Some served as class president.⁵⁴ Half or more of the officers of the Art Student's League consistently comprised of women.⁵⁵ A reporter for the Evening Post newspaper, upon visiting the Institute, claimed that women of the design classes “generally exhibit more talent than do the men.”⁵⁶ (See “Evening_Post” illustrations from the same article).

⁵² Gordon 71

⁵³ Bowman 134, Callen 54

⁵⁴ *Democrat and Chronicle*, Jun. 13, 1915 and Jun. 20, 1919. Clifford Ulp scrapbook, Vol. I. RIT Archives.

⁵⁵ *Times*, April 8, 1909. Clifford Ulp scrapbook, Vol. I. RIT Archives.

⁵⁶ “Institute for Art-Artisans.” *Evening Post*, Sept. 22, 1894. Colby scrapbook. RIT Archives.

M. Louise Stowell and Lulu Scott Backus were prominent figures among the many women in New York who engaged in both the theoretical and practical aspects of the movement. They were both instructors and former students at the Mechanics Institute.

Stowell was one of the earliest students at the Mechanics Institute to take the freehand drawing class. She became a member of the faculty at the Mechanics Institute in 1890 where she taught drawing, color, composition, and Saturday classes; and arranged for an Arts and Crafts exhibition held at the Institute in 1902. She was a member of the Rochester Art Club and the American Watercolor Society, and secretary of the Rochester Arts and Crafts Society, the first Arts and Crafts society in New York State. Although known mostly for her watercolors and her influence as a teacher, she was also a practitioner of the applied arts.⁵⁷

In addition to the stylistic influence of European designers, the Arts and Crafts movement drew inspiration from Japanese art, which became very popular in Europe and America in the mid 19th Century. Elements of Japanese design, including sparseness and restraint in ornament and color, and an intimacy with nature, helped to shape the aesthetics of the Arts and Crafts movement and were evidently strong in Stowell's works.⁵⁸

Lulu Scott Backus was also a former student of the Mechanics Institute where she took teacher-training courses and did her postgraduate work with Theodore Hanford Pond. She was the director of the Department of Ceramics at the Institute and was a ceramic instructor for 34 years. She was a successful artist, head of the YWCA Arts and Crafts Hobby Shop, and member of The American Ceramic Society and New York Society of Ceramic Arts.⁵⁹ Photo "Backus" shows a decanter with a stopper made by Backus in 1925.

⁵⁷ "Stowell, M. Louise" folder. RIT Archives.

Ludwig 34, 77

⁵⁸ Ludwig 4

⁵⁹ Reprint from *The Bulletin of The American Ceramic Society*, Vol. 21, No. 5, May 15, 1942. "Backus, Lulu Scott" folder. RIT Archives.

An American success short of the ideal

Despite Morris' intention to provide beautiful art to all people, in reality only the wealthy were ever able to afford the objects produced by his firm. In contrast to England, the success of the American Arts and Crafts movement relied on artists' willingness to use machines and molds to aid quality and commercial viability. Although proponents of the movement regarded the medieval craftsman as the pre-industrial ideal, they were not entirely anti-industrial or anti-modern; they were simply opposed to the abuse of industry, which they view as when originality and integrity of an object is traded for commercial purposes. It was the extent to which machines should be incorporated into the work process that was the subject of contention. For the Americans, however, the Arts and Crafts was less a philosophy than a style of design. They were more concerned with aesthetics and commerce. The Roycroft Community, an Arts and Crafts organization founded in 1895 by Elbert Hubbard in East Aurora, New York, for example, was not a commune as the name suggests, but a business enterprise that employed over 500 workers during its most prosperous period, around 1910.⁶⁰

The craftspeople behind the artists, who were mostly women, were often not credited for their work, further veering the American movement from the Arts and Crafts ideals concerning the welfare of craftspeople and the honor of their work.⁶¹ Traditional ideas also remained rooted in the culture. Most women did not want to work, nor were they expected to have a career. One student writing for *The Athenaeum* claimed, "The study of art may serve in the case of many young ladies to fill in the period between high school and matrimony."⁶² According to H.S. Greenleaf, one of the first five women appointed to the Institute's Board of Trustees, in her

⁶⁰ Jeffery 54, Ludwig 35

⁶¹ Bowman 33

⁶² *The Athenaeum*, Jan. 1912, p. 21-22. RIT Archives.

speech during a graduation ceremony, "The days when it was improper for young ladies to be educated have passed forever. The time has come when it is recognized that a girl will make a better housewife, a better mother and a better companion, for having an education.⁶³" The Mechanics Institute was lauded for becoming a "power in the matrimonial market."⁶⁴ Furthermore, while it was acceptable for women to work, it remained taboo for mothers to do so.⁶⁵

While educational opportunities for women expanded, actually earning a satisfactory livelihood remained a difficulty, especially when women's work was constantly undervalued. Cheap labor and low wages was an accepted fact of life for women. Even the Mechanics Institute showed salary discrepancies that were clearly sex based. In addition, jobs remain scarce for women. Despite their education or training, women were not welcomed in traditionally male dominated fields.⁶⁶ Without a realistic way to make a decent living, the only way for women to be upwardly mobile continued to be to marry someone who was upwardly mobile. If they had to or chose to work, women were encouraged to take up art teaching because of the long-standing attitudes toward the profession. Teaching was considered the woman's "special" work.⁶⁷ The alumni sections of The Athenaeum showed numerous women went on to teach while a few went on to do commercial work. By 1923, almost ninety percent of the home economics teachers and half of the art teachers in Rochester public schools were graduates of the Mechanics Institute.⁶⁸ The creation of the Domestic Science program at the Mechanic Institute and its subsequent popularity also continued to separate and channel women into traditionally feminine fields.⁶⁹

⁶³ "Another Year Ended," Jun 1893. Colby Scrapbook. RIT Archives

⁶⁴ "Industry and Fine Art." Jun. 5, 1895. Scrapbook 1891-1896, p. 116. RIT Archives.

⁶⁵ Rogers 14-15

⁶⁶ Rogers 6, 12

⁶⁷ Callen 34

⁶⁸ Rogers 15

⁶⁹ Rogers 21

Women's position in the Arts and Crafts movement was limited by Victorian ideology, which discouraged women from professional work or any serious artistic pursuits. Working class women were exploited as low-wage laborers—executants of designs that were often credited to men—while society imposed the necessity for women to hide their need to earn a living. Limited by “feminine” crafts and the need to work in secret, women faced continual prejudices against their working. According to Callen, the Arts and Crafts movement had radical social and political aims, yet there was a general blindness to the oppression of women within the movement. In turn, it reinforced the traditional patriarchal structure that dominated contemporary society.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Callen 17, 219

Conclusion

With the approach of World War I, the movement began to lose its momentum. However, the effect of the movement remained with its devotees long after the societies and publications ceased to exist. The craftspeople, who were trained as a result of the movement, continued their trade into the 1920s and beyond; and for many years, American life continued to be shaped by the philosophies of the movement.⁷¹

Despite the ideological barriers women faced, the Arts and Crafts movement furthered employment and creative opportunities for large numbers of women of its time. Rochester Institute of Technology was instrumental in promoting the movement and providing an active ground for artists both men and women. By opening its doors to women at a time when few other similar institutions were doing so, RIT possessed a populist spirit akin with that of the Arts and Crafts movement. Just as the inclusion of women helped to propel the success of the Arts and Crafts movement, the participation of women at RIT became an influential force to the early growth of the institution. As much as this paper attempts to cover, much more can be said about the women of this period who contributed greatly to the developments of both the Institute and the Arts and Crafts movement, yet remain excluded from the writings of history.

⁷¹ Ludwig 10

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