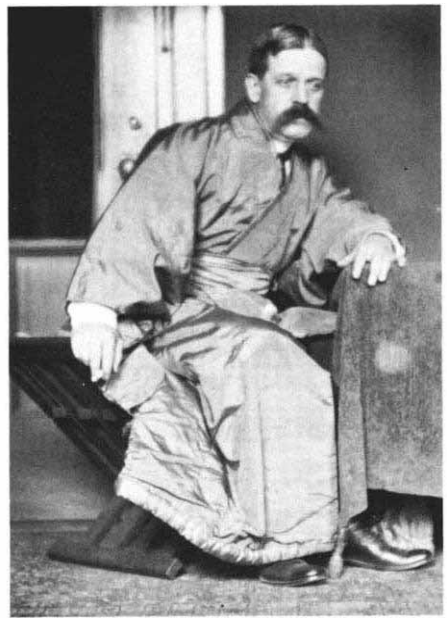
Refining the Craftsman Style

The legacy of Harvey Ellis

by David Cathers

Harvey Ellis signed on with Gustav Stickley's renowned Craftsman Workshops as a designer in May, 1903. An aesthete and a dissipated romantic, Ellis could not have been more unlike the robust, moralizing Stickley, the leading American exponent of the Arts and Crafts style and philosophy. Yet Ellis' impact on Craftsman furniture was immediate, drastic and lasting. Where Stickley's designs employed massive, powerful oak members, bristling with through tenons, unrelenting rectilinear forms and heavy wrought-iron hardware, Ellis' furniture was delicate, light and colorful. Stickley preached against the dishonesty of applied ornament. True decoration, he insisted, developed naturally from materials, structure and methods. His furniture showed exactly how it was put together. Ellis, on the other hand, subordinated structure to form, introduced abstract decorative inlays and relied upon discrete, hidden joinery as the typical elements of his designs.



Harvey Ellis.

Ellis trained as an architect in the 1870s, and while still a young man he produced several notable commercial buildings in his home city of Rochester, N.Y. During the 1880s and 1890s, as a journeyman designer and draftsman working for midwestern architectural firms, he created brilliant architectural designs—for small wages and no recognition.

Ellis' talent for design did not spill over into other areas of his life. He had no talent for success. By his early twenties he was drinking heavily, establishing the pattern of drunkenness and dissolution that marred most of his life. He was as careless with his money as with his own well-being. "He was," wrote his friend Hugh Garden, "an artist and romanticist who loved to indulge his peculiar taste for life in the nearest and readiest direction, careless of the result and apparently without any marked ambition." In January, 1904, nine months after he had joined Stickley, Ellis died. Years of heavy drinking had taken their toll. He was 52.

It is the inlay which draws today's admirers to Ellis' work. The pewter, copper and stained woods added color to Craftsman furniture and it added expense—fine inlay is difficult and time-consuming to produce. Ellis' most characteristic inlay patterns are abstracted floral and plant forms. Other patterns show the influence of Japanese and American Indian designs. He delighted in fairy tales, and he adapted sailing ships, woodland scenes and other motifs from those stories for his inlay. His patterns are whimsical or abstract, usually symmetrical, and always prominent in the furniture. Ellis, like Stickley, designed for oak, but he either fumed it nearly black or avoided quartersawn stock—the flashing patterns would have been at odds with his delicate inlay.

In January, 1904, Stickley introduced Ellis' inlaid oak furniture in *The Craftsman,* the magazine he founded to publicize Arts and Crafts ideals. Stickley, the scourge of applied ornament, stretched himself, and the language, to avoid being criticized on this front. Inlay, Stickley said, added interest to otherwise plain, flat surfaces, accented vertical structure and gave a slenderness to heavy members. Ellis' inlay, he wrote, "bears no trace of having been applied. It consists of fine markings, discs and other figures of pewter and copper, which, like stems of plants and obscured, simplified forms, seem to pierce the surface from underneath."

Ellis' inlays grab our attention. But they shouldn't be allowed to overshadow his other innovations which radically altered the stolid Craftsman style. Ellis added bowed sides, paneled backs and deeply arched aprons to Craftsman casework. He produced several versions of an attenuated tall-back chair, close relatives of chairs by the British architects C.R. Mackintosh and C.F.A. Voysey, designers Ellis much admired. And, finally, Ellis introduced veneered panels to Craftsman furniture.

The inlay quickly disappeared from the line after Ellis' death, but all of his structural elements became standard Stickley features from 1904 onward. Though his life was tragically cut short, Ellis exerted a long-lived influence on Stickley and on his contemporaries. Ellis' subordination of structure to form led to an ever-increasing purity in Craftsman designs, and eased Stickley into one of the main currents of 20th-century design: unadorned, geometric and sophisticated form. "Harvey Ellis was a genius," said his friend and fellow architect, Claude Bragdon. "Had it not been for the evil fairy which presided at his birth and ruled his destiny, he might have been a prominent, instead of obscure, figure in the aesthetic awakening of America."

David Cathers is the author of Furniture of the American Arts and Crafts Movement, *published by the New American Library. For more on Gustav Stickley and Craftsman furniture, see "Gustav Stickley,"* FWW #2, Spring '76. *A collection of reprints from* The Craftsman *magazine, edited by Barry Sanders, is published by Peregrine Smith, Inc.*

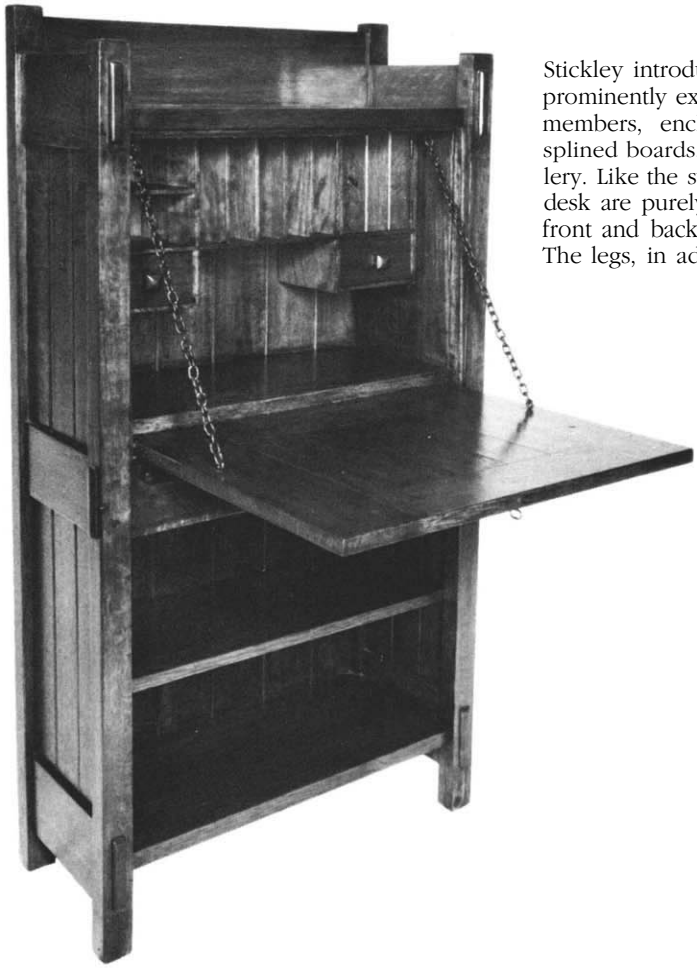
Photo: courtesy the Strong Museum, Rochester, NY

Stickley's 1901 armchair, left, is straightforward, with practically no decoration. Stiles, rails and stretchers are pinned mortise-and-tenon, the tenons carried through in the larger members. The arms of the chair are little more than stretchers, evidence of Stickley's commitment to expressed structure, sometimes to the detriment of comfort.

Ellis' chair, below, designed two years later, is also straightforward. But the scaling down of the members and the elimination of through tenons permits our attention to focus on the chair's form, a cube. Its severity is relieved by the comfortable cushion and the graceful, abstract inlays, set off by a grain-obscuring ebonized finish.

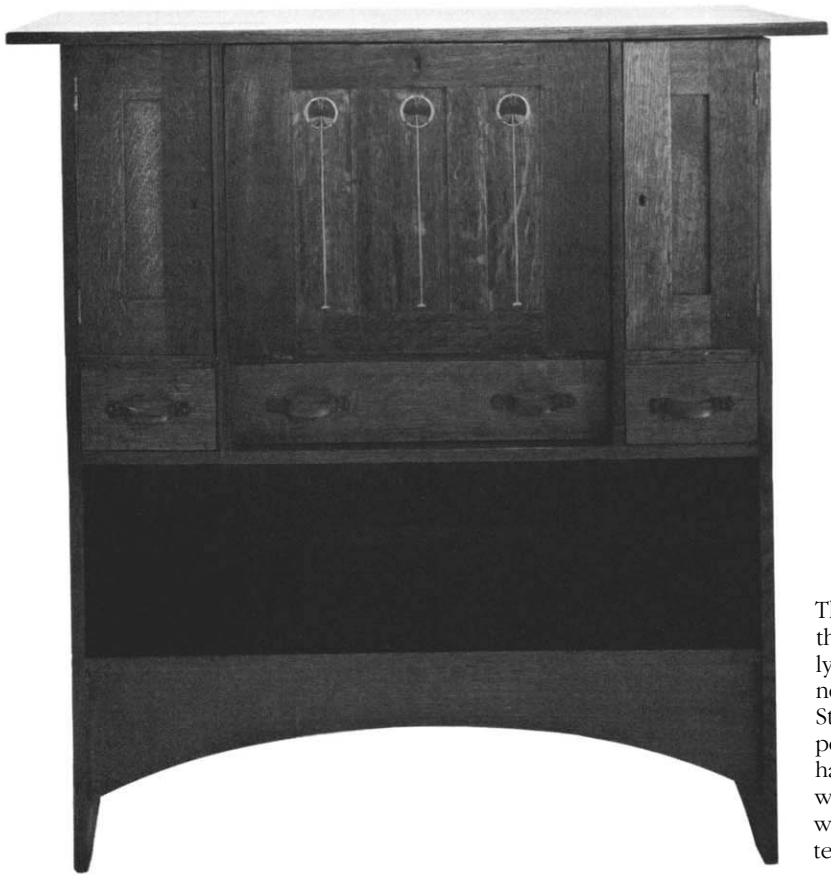
The Ellis sidechair, above, exhibits all the characteristics associated with Ellis' designs— graceful and delicate lines, a curved apron, tapering legs and a high back. Ellis had a superb eye for line, as his inlay shows. The pattern, a favorite, shows Mackintosh's influence. It is probably abstracted from floral or human form, and its termination, a torii, the Japanese gate form, reflects Ellis' love for Japanese art. After Ellis' death Stickley altered the stretchers, removed the top rail and sold this version as a standard item until he declared bankruptcy in 1915. *(continued next page)*

Photos: courtesy the Jordan-Volpe Gallery



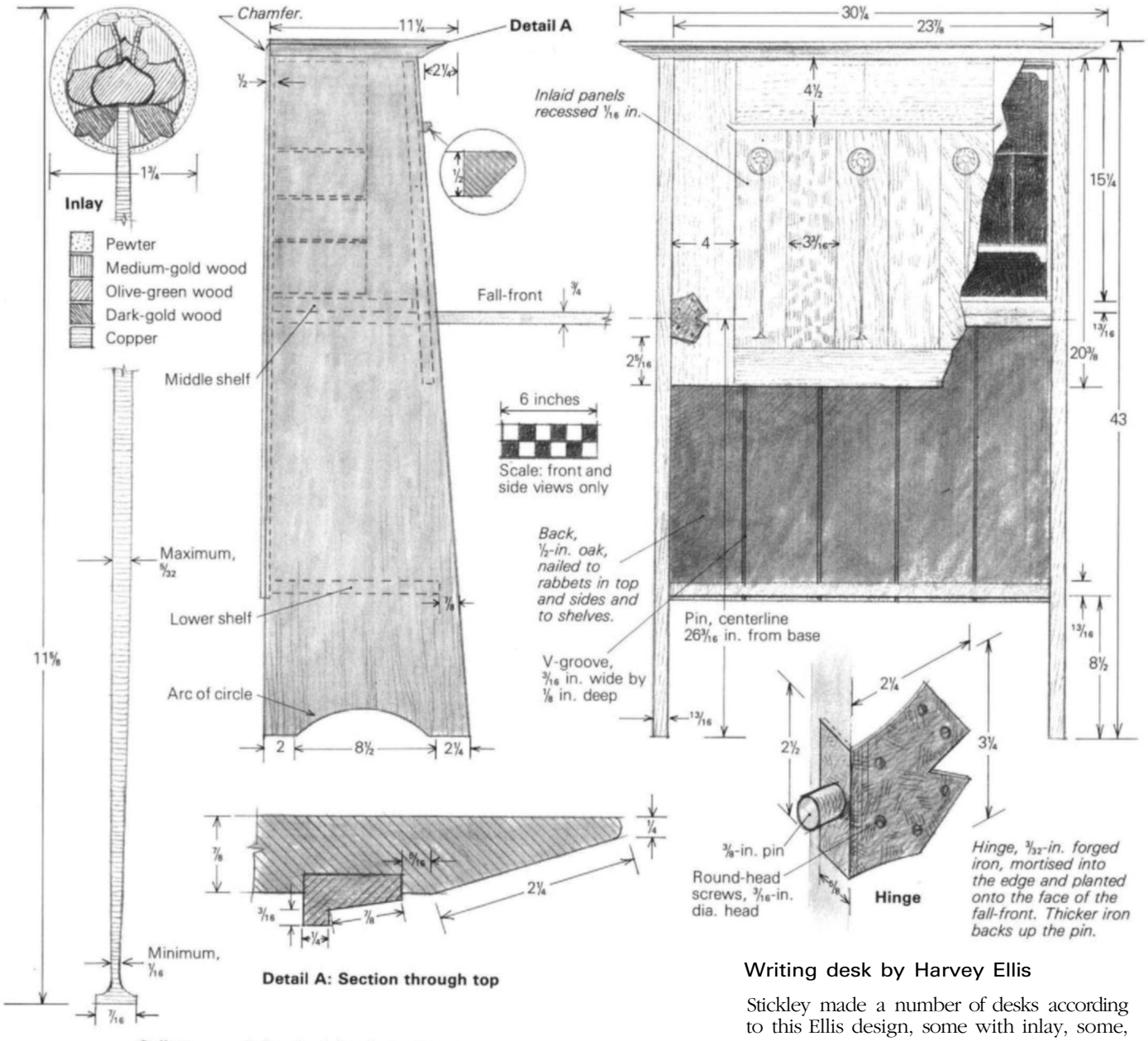
Stickley introduced this desk, left, in 1901. It is absolutely rectilinear, with prominently expressed structural features. It is framed of massively overscaled members, enclosing panels assembled from chamfered, butt-joined and splined boards. The chamfering is echoed in the small door in the desk's gallery. Like the strap hinges and the chamfering, the decorative elements of the desk are purely structural, Large, double-pinned through tenons pierce the front and back legs, and stand slightly proud of the otherwise flat surfaces. The legs, in addition, rise decoratively above the line of the top rails.

Ellis's desk, above, a 1903 design, is a marked contrast to Stickley's. Ellis has followed Stickley's dictate of simplicity, but has subordinated the structure to a refined, pure form with gently tapering sides and a wide overhanging top. The horizontal lip attached to the fall-front, which breaks up this flat plane and reiterates the shape of the overhanging top, might be said to violate Stickley's proscription against applied ornament. But it functions as a handle as well as decoration.



The fall-front desk, left, shows many of the features that Ellis introduced to Craftsman furniture. The deeply arching underrail gives this wide desk a sense of lightness that contrasts with the conscious sturdiness of Stickley's earlier designs. Gently rounded cutouts repeat this curve at the bottom of the plank sides. Ellis has replaced Stickley's expressed structural decoration with his own stylistic signature: the arching curves, the wide overhanging top, a paneled oak back and the attenuated inlay pattern.

Photos: H. Peter Curran, courtesy the Jordan-Volpe Gallery



Writing desk by Harvey Ellis

Stickley made a number of desks according to this Ellis design, some with inlay, some, like the one at left, without. This small, simple desk is solid oak throughout, quarter or rift sawn for stability. The sides are tenoned (or sliding dovetailed) into a shallow dado running the width of the top, and stopped at the front. The shelves are similarly joined to the sides. The back, glued-up and nailed in place, makes the carcase rigid. The rails of the fall-front are mortised and tenoned to the stiles. The fall-front panels, glued to each other, are fitted tight and dry into grooves. The panels are flush with the rails and stiles on the inside writing surface.

Drawing: Roger Barnes