

# Quintessential Arts and Crafts

An illustrated guide to the elements that define this style

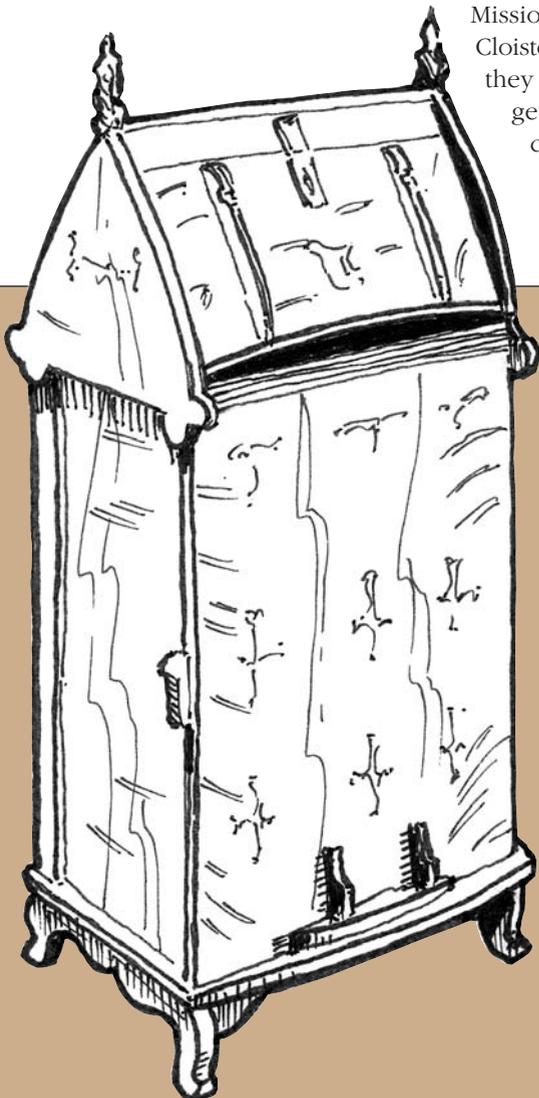
TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY GRAHAM BLACKBURN

The Arts and Crafts style has been popular for a hundred years; there are examples in every antique and second-hand furniture store; reproductions abound; and it's a perennial favorite with woodworkers—but what exactly defines Arts and Crafts? Ask anyone familiar with the style—also known as

Mission, Craftsman, Crafts, Cloister or even Quaint—how they identify it, and you'll get answers that typically contain words such as “foursquare,” “straight-forward construction,”

“exposed joinery” and “quartersawn oak.” Such elements make the Arts and Crafts style inviting to many woodworkers who are new to the craft and who are less intimidated by Arts and Crafts furniture than they are by other, more sophisticated styles. Despite its apparent simplicity, however, it's just as easy to get a piece of Arts and Crafts furniture wrong as it is to fail at your first attempt at constructing a Chippendale piece that features cabriole legs—unless you have a full understanding of what the essential design details are and how they work together.

It's true that the Arts and Crafts style originated partly in response to overdecorated and directionless 19th-century furniture, but equally important were concerns about the shoddy quality of



## Influential makers of the era

By the late 1800s, the Industrial Revolution was changing the world of furniture: The individual craftsman was being supplanted by factory production as the leading influence on style. Driven strictly by commercial concerns, mechanization was overtaking what had been a craft with an aesthetic founded on tradition, training and individual craftsmanship. The result was an abuse of style and an excess of indiscriminate decoration that took the form of a series of “revivals” produced primarily for the sake of novelty in an attempt to capture the market. The Arts and Crafts movement developed primarily in opposition to this trend, as designers, architects and furniture makers strove to produce items that placed a greater value on purer ideals of artistic honesty and craftsmanship. Initially, at least, the Arts and Crafts movement was more about what not to do than it was about a clearly defined new style. This is why there is such a broad range of pieces—spanning a long period—that can be identified as belonging to the Arts and Crafts style.

### CHARLES ROHLFS DROP-FRONT DESK, 1883

Heavily influenced by the Gothic style, Rohlf's was a leading figure in the American Arts and Crafts movement and was a friend of Elbert Hubbard (founder of the Roycroft Community at East Aurora, N.Y.). Rohlf's was influenced by modern designers such as Charles Rennie Macintosh and, as many other Arts and Crafts designers did, looked back to the Gothic Period in his use of oak, as exemplified by this desk.

mass-produced factory furniture and its effect not only on the consumer but also on the people who made it. Arts and Crafts was conceived as an essentially utilitarian style affordable by all; the idea that its manufacture should be something in which the maker could take pride was central to the philosophy underlying what became known as the Arts and Crafts movement.

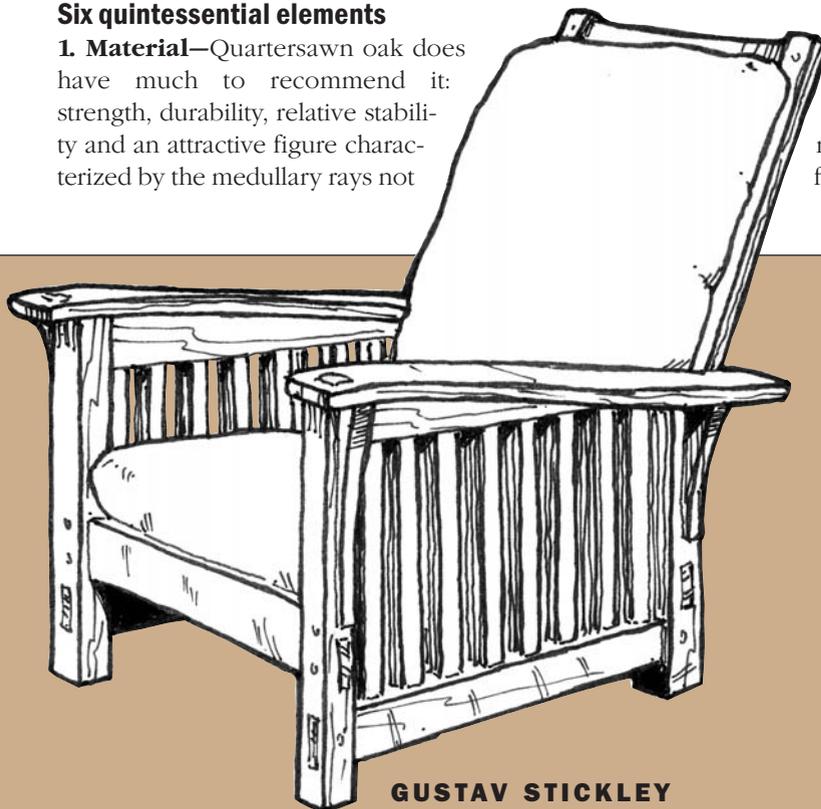
A piece of furniture built in the genuine Arts and Crafts style is therefore first and foremost completely functional. The furniture is solidly constructed with a minimum of superfluous ornament, unashamed yet not boastful of its joinery and, more often than not, made of oak—which is a supremely appropriate wood for hardwearing furniture and a species that harks back to the period in furniture-making history when craftsmanship was valued more than commercial success.

The movement embodied the writings of a variety of influential 19th-century art critics, philosophers, architects and designers such as John Ruskin and William Morris, as well as the work of 20th-century furniture makers Gustav Stickley (and his brothers), Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters. Other seminal figures included the noted California architects Charles and Henry Greene; Frank Lloyd Wright; and internationally known and influential designers and furniture makers Charles Voysey, Ernest Gimson and the Barnsley brothers.

Because the movement that resulted in this style of furniture began as far back as the middle of the 19th century, the range of design elements that belong to this style is, in fact, much broader than many people realize.

### Six quintessential elements

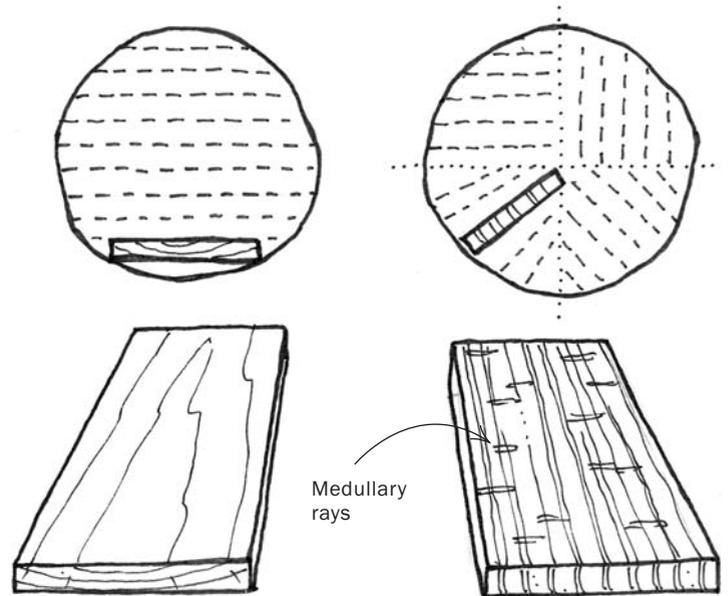
**1. Material**—Quartersawn oak does have much to recommend it: strength, durability, relative stability and an attractive figure characterized by the medullary rays not



**GUSTAV STICKLEY**  
ARMCHAIR, 1902

Regarded by many as defining the style, Stickley's mass-produced pieces made of oak were the most commercially successful manifestation of Arts and Crafts furniture. Although his are among the most simple examples of the style, Stickley drew his inspiration from more sophisticated designers, such as Charles Voysey and William Lethaby in England.

### QUARTERSAWN LUMBER SUITS THE STYLE



**FLATSAWN OAK**  
Most boards from a tree sawn in this pattern show no medullary rays and are less stable.

**QUARTERSAWN OAK**  
When a tree is first quartered, the boards cut by any of the patterns shown are less likely to warp and will show medullary rays.

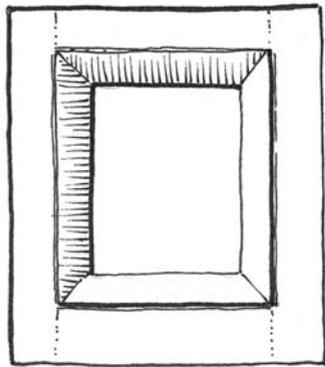
visible in flatsawn stock. Although a hardwood, oak is not excessively difficult to work—it is easier, in fact, to produce a crisp surface with a less than perfectly sharp tool on a piece of oak than on a piece of softwood. Oak is not toxic and may have a wide range of color—red, white or brown—depending on the species. The wood also takes stain well and can be fumed, a technique that can produce a wonderful aged look. Although most factory-built Arts and Crafts furniture was made of oak, many



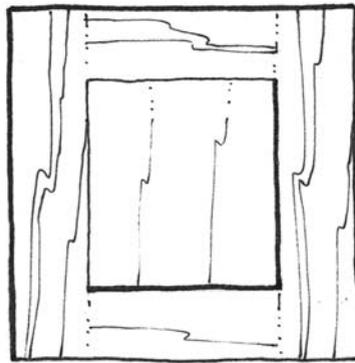
**BYRDCLIFFE**  
**ARTS COLONY**  
WALL CABINET, 1904

This stained poplar cabinet, with a carved and polychromed door panel, was a typical product of the Byrdcliffe workshops in Woodstock, N.Y., founded by the wealthy Englishman Ralph Whitehead, who had been a student of the eminent Victorian art critic John Ruskin—the generally acknowledged father of the Arts and Crafts movement. Simplicity of design as well individual craftsmanship in a communal environment inform this version of Arts and Crafts style.

## PANELING



18th- and 19th-century paneling typically has a frame consisting of stiles and rails of different widths, invariably molded on the inner edges surrounding a fielded or raised panel.



Arts and Crafts paneling is typically square, with equal-width rails and stiles. Panels are sometimes carved, but more often than not they are plain and flat in unmolded frames.

well-known designers have used other species, such as walnut, mahogany and cherry.

**2. Construction techniques**—Although cabinet construction with veneered surfaces is occasionally used for the body of an Arts and Crafts piece, the majority of authentic pieces are made using solid wood and frame-and-panel construction.

Consistent with the directness and honesty that are the hallmarks of this style is the use of slats where a solid piece or a frame-and-panel section

would be overkill. Unlike the furniture of the Gothic Period, turned elements are rare in Arts and Crafts designs. All of this is in keeping with the principle of using the simplest possible methods of work for the most honest and unpretentious result.

Simple does not, however, mean sloppy, especially in terms of the construction of a piece. In fact, because the aim of the Arts and Crafts movement was to design furniture that the maker could be proud of, a nice execution, particularly of exposed joinery, is essential when building a genuine Arts and Crafts piece.

**3. Joinery**—Without a doubt, the mortise and tenon is the king of Arts and Crafts joints (see the drawings on the facing page). Dove-tailing, doweling, lapped and housed joinery also are used where appropriate, but in keeping with the demands of strength and honesty, the mortise-and-tenon joint plays a major role in the majority of Arts and Crafts pieces.

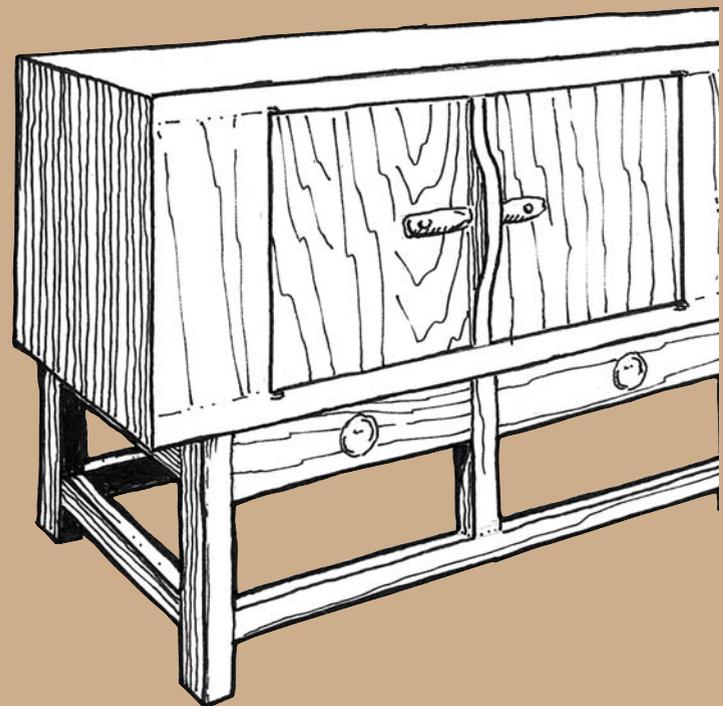
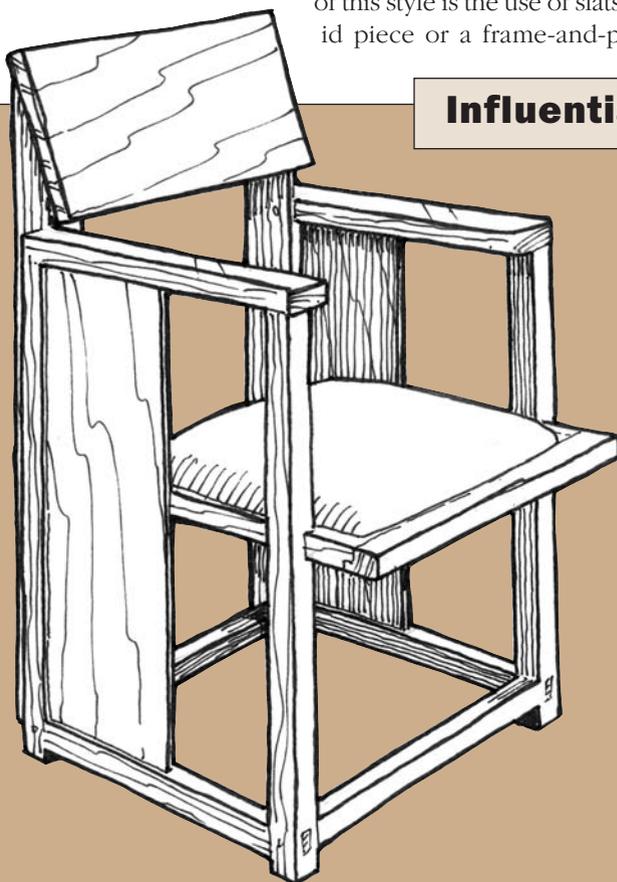
Several varieties of tenons are used, including stub, blind, through- and tusk, but each is used only when and where necessary for maximum strength without compromise. This means that if, for example, a through-tenon is the strongest possible form in a given situation, the design will make a virtue of the necessity by not attempting to hide or disguise the joint. This results in the ends of through-tenons being finished a little proud of the surface, often nicely chamfered and with any wedges thoughtfully arranged for a pleasing visual pattern and the most efficient use.

**4. Design paradigms**—In American Arts and Crafts pieces, whether of the mass-produced variety typified by Gustav Stickley's Craftsman furniture or the higher-end custom designs of the Greene brothers, there is an immediate impression of squareness. This is most evident in the profiles of tops, edges and other flat surfaces, such as broad chair arms. Molding is almost completely ab-

### Influential makers (continued)

#### FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT ARMCHAIR, 1904

Although not an avowed member of the movement, the architect Wright, like the Greene brothers, designed furniture for his houses—such as this extremely rectilinear pine chair with exposed joinery, which although typically “Wrightian,” is also distinctly in the Arts and Crafts style.

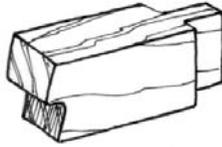


## MORTISE-AND-TENON JOINERY

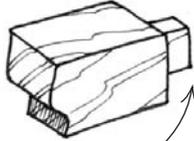
Stronger and more appropriate than dowels or biscuits, mortise-and-tenon joints may be unshouldered (as for seatback slats) or shouldered on anywhere from one to four sides, depending on their intended use and particular design.

### BLIND MORTISE AND TENON

Two shoulders  
(seat rails)

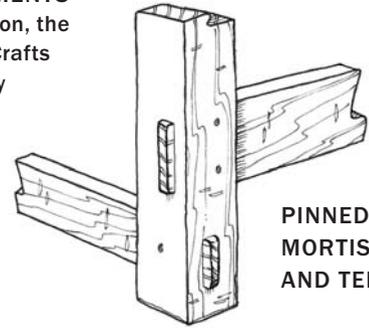


Four shoulders  
(stretchers)

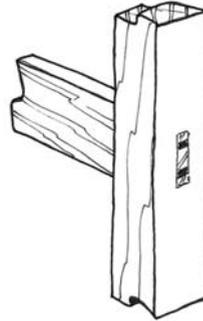


### DECORATIVE REINFORCEMENTS

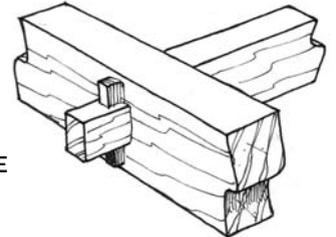
Lacking applied ornamentation, the exposed joinery of Arts and Crafts furniture became the primary decorative element.



PINNED  
MORTISE  
AND TENON



WEDGED  
MORTISE AND  
TENON



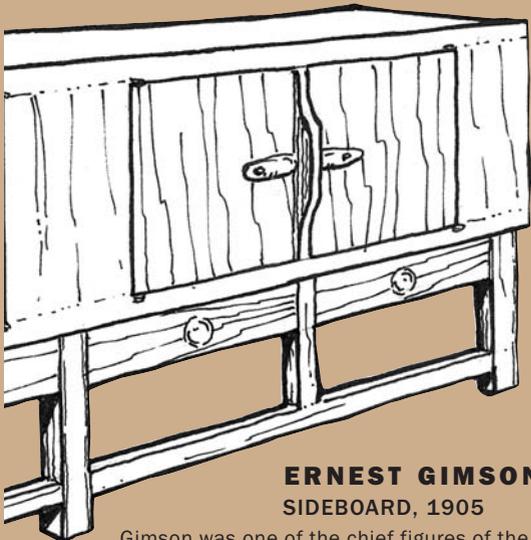
TUSK MORTISE  
AND TENON

sent, sharp edges are gently relieved but not rounded, and overhangs are kept to a minimum.

Although many details are, in fact, square—such as in paneled framing, where a bottom rail wider than other frame members is rare (see the facing page), and in the design of glazed doors, where all panes are equally square—absolute squareness is largely illusory, and slopes and curves are common. It is not that the style is inelegant—many pieces can be found based

on elegant design paradigms such as the golden rectangle (see p. 66)—but the strength and utility of a piece always dominate.

Both gently and boldly formed curves are common in skirts, chair rails and the lower edges of cabinet sides, but they are invariably simple and rarely compound, except for occasional tight cutouts on stool bases. Such shapes, including ogees and intersecting arcs, are nods to the influence of medieval Gothic oak



**ERNEST GIMSON**  
SIDEBOARD, 1905

Gimson was one of the chief figures of the Arts and Crafts movement. His sideboard, with its rectilinearity, simple lines, use of native wood (chestnut) and restrained use of minor ovolo molding on the legs, is an expression both of the values of the movement as directly expounded by William Morris and of the related attempt to reintroduce traditional country crafts to high-quality furniture.



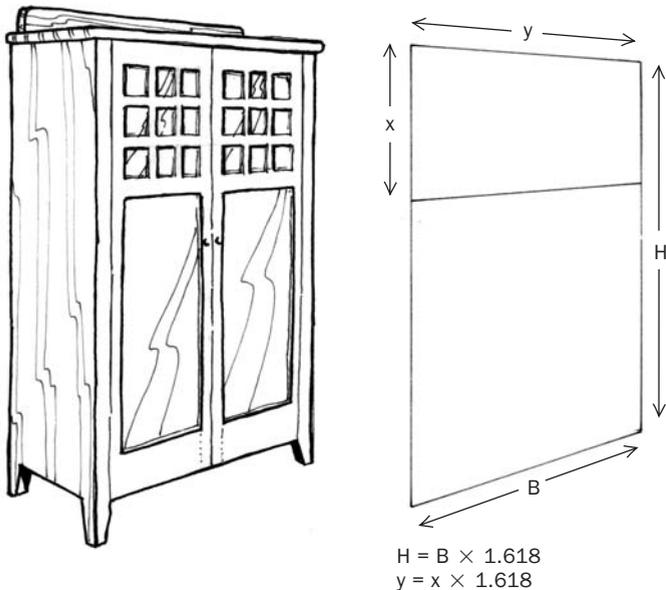
**CHARLES VOYSEY**

DINING CHAIR, 1907

Voysey was another admirer of William Morris and a leading exponent of the British Arts and Crafts movement. His particularly spare style—a Shaker-like simplicity complemented by more flowing and elegant details such as the heart-shaped cutout and square legs that taper to octagonal feet—was the precursor to the American Mission style popularized by makers such as Gustav Stickley.

## DESIGNING USING THE GOLDEN RECTANGLE

The perfect squareness of the upper glazing and the general rectilinearity of this cabinet are based on a sophisticated design paradigm in which the height (H) equals the base (B) multiplied by 1.618, a proportion called the golden rectangle. The upper portion of the cabinet also is a golden rectangle.



furniture, much valued by leaders of the Arts and Crafts style for its craftsmanship and honesty. Curved yet square-edged brackets are another common feature of many pieces.

One other detail that would seem to belie an apparent squareness and angularity is the frequent use of tapered legs. The tapers, however, are usually limited to a short section near the base. Tapering legs like this prevents the piece from appearing too heavy,

but because the tapers are equally formed on all four sides of the leg, a general feeling of squareness persists.

**5. Decoration**—Despite a superficial plainness characterized by square edges, the lack of molding, the use of a relatively homogeneous material and the flatness of panels, Arts and Crafts furniture often is decorated with a variety of techniques ranging from simple curved cutouts to delicate floral inlays. Reflecting a continuing sensitivity to other styles and fashion on the part of designers such as Harvey Ellis or Charles Rennie Macintosh, who are perhaps better known for their Art Nouveau styles, the influence of the more flowing, nature-based Art Nouveau style is felt in many Arts and Crafts pieces—for example, in the products of various “utopian” workshops such as the Byrdcliffe Arts Colony in Woodstock, N.Y.—in the form of pastel-colored painted sections, tulip inlays and lily patterns.

Central to the principle of craftsmanship in this style of furniture is the use of other natural materials, such as reed and rush for seats, leather upholstery and hand-wrought hardware made from iron or hammered brass. The hardware often is as square and sturdy as the furniture it serves and stands in complete contrast to the elegant and finely wrought shapes found on 18th-century pieces or the overworked fantastic shapes common on much 19th-century furniture. A gratuitous form of decoration in terms of structural function, but one that is consistent with the incorporation of natural materials, is the frequent use of a row of hand-wrought nails as an edge decoration.

**6. Finish**—It would be inappropriate to finish an Arts and Crafts piece with a glossy lacquer. But while natural finishes like simple oiling and waxing may predominate, other processes, such as filling, staining and fuming, are common.

Careful surface preparation is most important. In the case of an

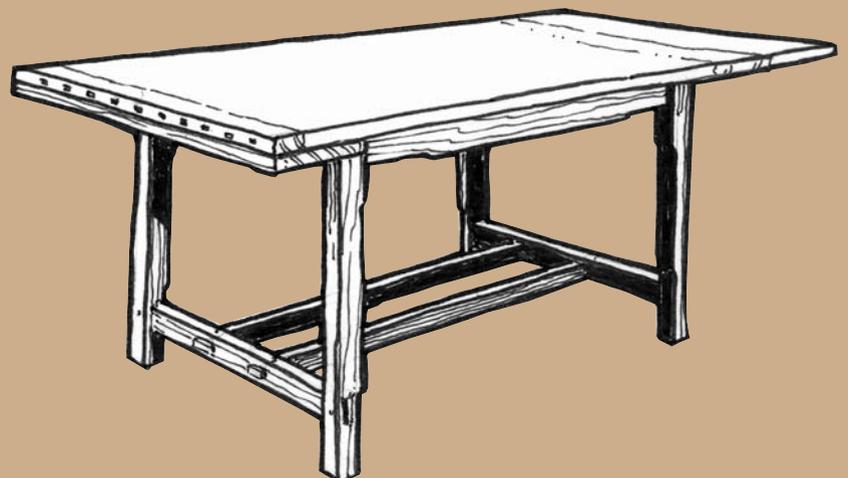
## Influential makers (continued)



### CHARLES AND HENRY GREENE

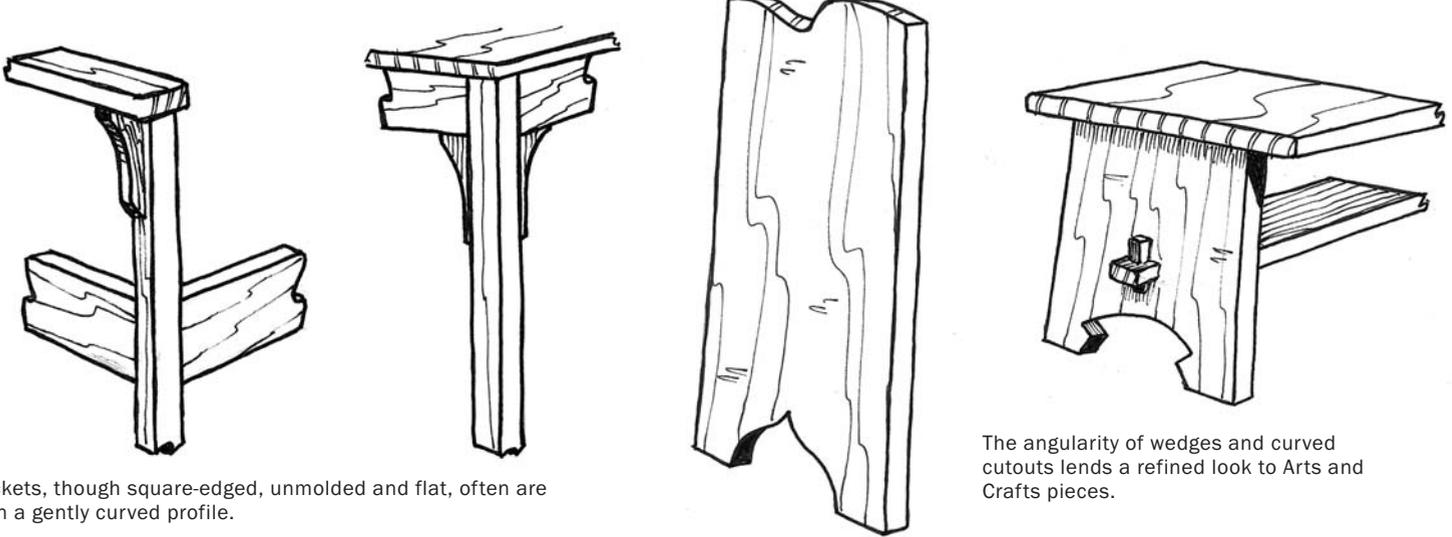
SERVING TABLE, 1910 (left) AND DINING TABLE 1929

Well known as architects, the Greene brothers designed Arts and Crafts furniture recognized for uniquely distinctive details such as the cloud-lift lines seen on various members of their tables and plugged mortises on breadboarded tabletops. Their work represents some of the highest expressions of the American Arts and Crafts movement.



## BRACKETS AND CUTOUTS

Not all details are perfectly rectilinear. Small accents, many in the form of brackets or cutouts, enliven otherwise straightforward designs.



Brackets, though square-edged, unmolded and flat, often are given a gently curved profile.

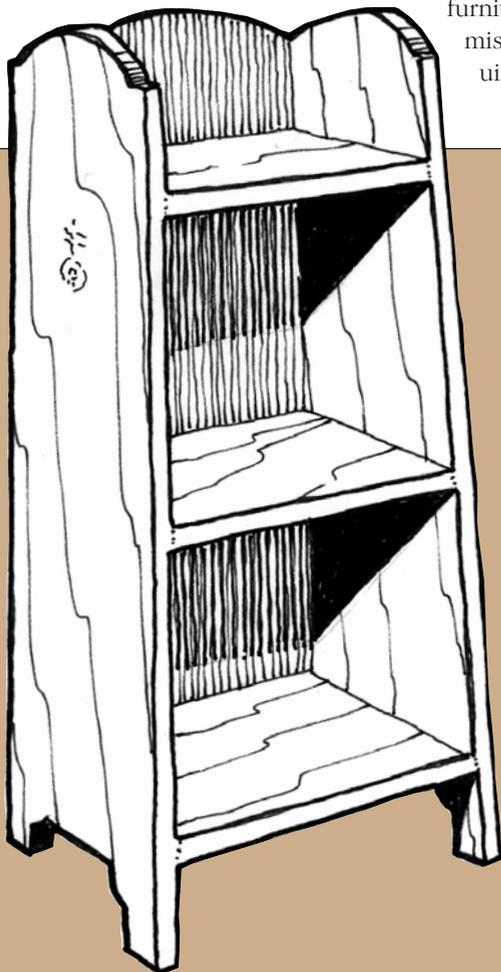
The angularity of wedges and curved cutouts lends a refined look to Arts and Crafts pieces.

open-grained wood like oak, a matching wood filler should be used. If oak is filled first, it then may be waxed or perhaps lightly oiled and then waxed. If wax alone is used, it should be colored so that the wax-filled pores in the wood do not show white.

Fuming, the process of exposing oak to the fumes of ammonia, is a common method of turning oak darker without producing the irregular color that can result from careless staining. The popularity of fuming, especially among early proponents of Arts and Crafts furniture, resulted from the misconception that genuine Gothic furniture

was extremely dark. That darkness, in fact, came from centuries of exposure to smoky atmospheres. When new, however, most Gothic furniture was brightly painted or valued precisely for its light golden color. □

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### ROYCROFT COMMUNITY MAGAZINE RACK, 1910

In contrast to the previous one-of-a-kind pieces by Charles Voysey, the Roycrofters, founded by Elbert Hubbard—an ardent believer in many aspects of the Arts and Crafts movement not limited to furniture alone—produced extremely simple and unsophisticated “factory-made” pieces in white oak.

### SIDNEY BARNESLEY CABINET-ON-STAND, 1914

This walnut cabinet-on-stand (with holly and ebony stringing) is in many ways far removed from the output of the Roycrofters and the Stickley shops but owes its essential design to the same principles of honesty of purpose and design shorn of superfluous decoration. Barnesley, his son, Edward, and Ernest Gimson constitute the “grand old men” of the Arts and Crafts movement and were the leading influences.

