

True Greene & Greene



Learn how the elements work together, and then use them in your furniture

BY GARY ROGOWSKI

The marrying of styles is a tricky business. Add the wrong elements, or too much of one over another, and the results look wrong and out of place. Brothers Charles and Henry Greene, the California architects of the early 20th century, created a marriage of styles that continues to please the eye and capture the imagination 100 years later. They took the plainness and exposed joinery of Arts and Crafts furniture, mixed it with the subtlety of Chinese furniture and the boldness of Japanese temple design, and then with a final flourish threw in a taste of the sinuous lines of Art Nouveau. The result is a style that has been revered, copied, and

rediscovered, but remains uniquely Greene and Greene.

If you are attempting a faithful reproduction of a Greene and Greene piece, you'll want to understand each of the essential elements in order to capture the original spirit. If you are brewing your own blend, you'll need to know how the Greenes combined carefully selected elements to create a single effect.

How the style was born

The Greene brothers began their professional careers steeped in the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement. This era in design emerged as a reaction to the crush of the Industrial Revolution—with its machine-made, often low-quality

Beyond Arts and Crafts

While the Greene and Greene style arose within the Arts and Crafts movement, the brothers added elements from Asian architecture and Art Nouveau. Rounded edges, sweeping curves, and elegant details make their work more refined, organic, and welcoming than the austere Stickley furniture that preceded it. The designers found surprising versatility in a few favorite shapes. On the rocker above, the stepped cloud-lift pattern on the crest rail is classic Greene and Greene. On the mahogany sideboard at right, the cloud lift is used in new and unexpected ways. It is easy to pick out in the backsplash and the corbels, but the linen-fold pulls and the fruitwood inlay on the doors are wonderful variations.



products—and the overwrought frilliness of the Victorian era. With a start in Europe, the movement found ready followers in America including the entrepreneur and furniture maker, Gustav Stickley.

Stickley started a magazine, *The Craftsman*, and it provided the Greene brothers with ideas, perhaps a mirror to hold up to their own work, and certainly a perspective on design that was new and exciting for the time. The Craftsman movement, both in this periodical and in shows and expositions in Europe and America, was an all-encompassing view of life. It promoted an honesty of approach as a moral truth and used a simplicity of line and form as a dictum. It also began a movement toward the architect as artist for interiors and functional items. Whereas the architect once designed only buildings, now he designed interiors, fabrics, lighting, windows, and furniture, a whole fabric for living.

However, while the Craftsman style had a certain severe, almost medieval, character about its solid planks, exposed joints, and straight lines, the Greene brothers added



SOFTER JOINERY

Exposed joinery is a hallmark of Arts and Crafts work, but the Greenes made it more welcoming. They used a unique finger joint (above) on drawer boxes and carcase joints. The bridle joint (far left) is a variation. Ebony pegs come in all shapes and sizes, sometimes covering screws, sometimes used just for effect. Ebony splines (near left) highlight joinery and soften its transitions. Despite the novel joinery, the pieces remain sturdy a century later.



THE CLOUD LIFT

Used in myriad ways, the cloud lift offers a novel way to create a taper, and adds to the soft landscape of stepped surfaces. By using negative and positive variations of the form, the Greens added complexity and richness to a chair back (left), while maintaining harmony. Note the variations on the table (above), in the breadboard top, the drawer pull, and the stretcher below the drawer. In every room of a Greene and Greene house, there is a theme. The beams over the inglenook (below left) proclaim that a single-step cloud lift is king in the living room, and a small carved detail connects the furniture and cabinets: It is a zigzag (below right) highlighting the line of the cloud lift.



joinery, carvings, and inlay. As a result, their work has both a firm grounding in honest construction methods and a sense that great care has been taken, with no detail left unconsidered.

The essential elements create a landscape

life. From Japanese temple carpentry, they used corbels and large timbers to give their work a sense of strength and foundation. They added organic and flowing shapes found in Chinese furniture: the cloud-lift form, overhanging tops, and rounded edges and corners that gave their work lightness and richness. Their furniture also showed the influence of Art Nouveau designers such as Mackmurdo and Mackintosh, who borrowed curved lines and organic shapes from nature. The Greene brothers turned these seemingly disparate elements into one seamless style.

Because the work of the Greens was done principally for the wealthy, they could afford to add a wealth of detail in the stylized

If architecture is rightly called frozen music, then the furniture and interiors of Greene and Greene are part of the symphony. The Greens emphasized the landscape of each piece. It's part of the texture of each piece that when two parts meet, there is no flush surface. Each part has its own distinct proportion and a shadow line is created at every turn. Rails step back from legs; drawers step back from rails. Some drawers are left completely proud, jutting out from the work in an architecture of forms. It may be only the slightest of differences, but each surface stands alone in the topography. And the Greens chose finely grained woods that would not distract from that landscape: walnut, teak, mahogany.



THE SWORD GUARD SHAPE

A Japanese sword guard (called a tsuba) is the common motif in the dining room of The Robinson House, which has been perfectly restored and installed at The Huntington museum's Scott Gallery in Pasadena. The dining table's veneered top (above) is cut in the tsuba shape. Splines and pegs mark the transitions between the pieces of solid-wood edging. Nothing in a room escaped the Greenes' attention. They designed the tsuba shape into the cut glass in the built-in cabinets (top right), and into the base of a hanging light fixture (below). The tsuba and the cloud lift are relatives, and the dining chairs' back splats (right) can be viewed as either one.



Deep, rich color was the goal, and sometimes pigments or chemical stains were used to darken the wood. A satin oil finish added a soft glow to smooth, stepped surfaces and rounded edges.

Joinery and pegs stand proud—Once hidden, precise joinery was now a design element in Arts and Crafts furniture, with its emphasis on visible craftsmanship. But the Greenes took it further, making it part of the textural landscape. Finger joints are left raised and shaped, bridle joints barely jut through and then get rounded over. The plugs are also an opportunity for exploration. They run the gamut from round to dead-on square to rectangular.

Breadboard ends serve a dual purpose—Almost every solid top or shelf is finished with a breadboard end. This cross-grain cap helps to keep a panel from cupping, partly by covering the end grain and cutting down moisture exchange. But breadboard ends also add another surface to the style, often just slightly raised from the top and always protruding at the ends.

Favorite forms—The cloud-lift form may be the element most often associated with Greene and Greene. The variety of this Chinese detail, its unexpected use, and the grace it bestows on their



PIERCED ELEMENTS

The matching furniture from The Thorsen House dining room shares these wide lower stretchers (far left) decorated by long parallel slots, a common Greene and Greene element. Sawn corbels, though not pierced, per se, create negative space where rails meet legs (above left). The front apron of a floor stand (near left) is broken by a unique bit of fretwork, while the side apron has a more common piercing.



designs is unmatched. It is amazing what an artist can do with a single versatile motif, using variations to create richness and harmony at once. The Greenes did this with the Japanese tsuba (sword guard) shape, theming whole rooms around this distinctive detail.

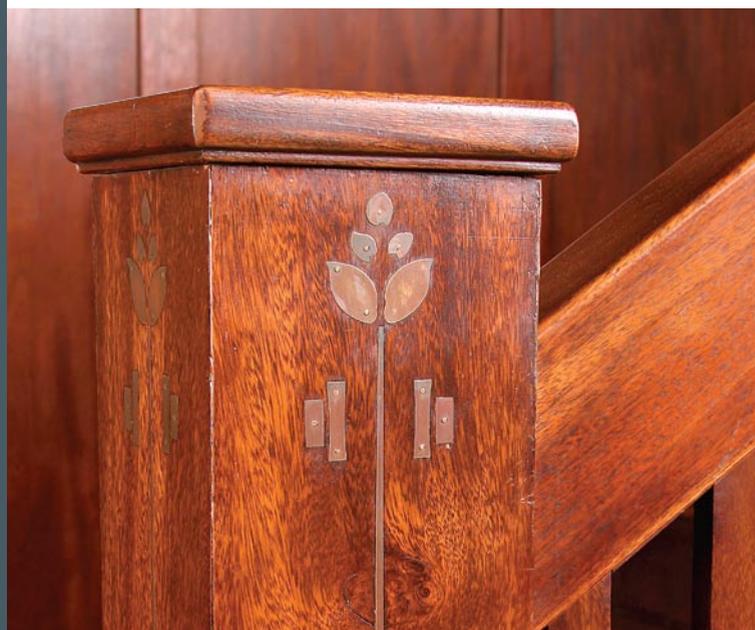
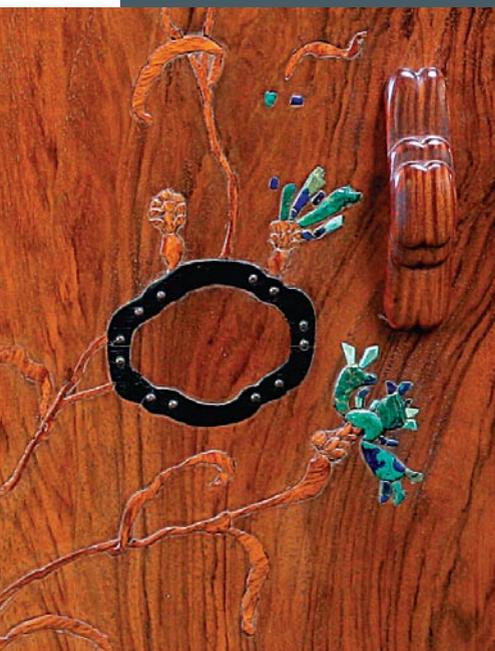
Soft edges seem hand worn—Each furniture part and detail is carefully treated with rounded edges or a taper or both. They have the look of gentle wear, like beach sand on driftwood. Parts are also subtly changed through their length, sometimes tapering just so slightly, other times boldly bumping out to create a thick and massive effect. These details show once again the handwrought quality of the pieces and how they aim to recall a sense of antiquity.

How to borrow the style

The Greene brothers chose their elements well and had a masterful control of them. They were able to combine a variety of details in one piece and still have it sing on key.

INLAY AND OVERLAY

Wealthier clients were willing to pay for further refinements. Organic designs, inlaid impeccably using beautiful woods, metals, and other materials, were the result. In a bedroom of The Gamble House, a matching chair (above) and desk (left) contain typical examples. As usual, the inlay is left a bit proud of the surface, adding to the overall texture. A stairway from The Libby House (right) is decorated by a floral appliqué, simply cut from sheet brass and pinned to the post.





Two modern takes

Modern makers have interpreted the Greene and Greene style in their own furniture. While not intended to be faithful reproductions, these two pieces include many of the classic elements. In author Gary Rogowski's sideboard (left), he reinterprets the cloud lift and long grooves, and adds a fresh Japanese touch: a playful ginkgo-leaf inlay. Darrell Peart also borrowed from Japan, from temple architecture in this case, for the bottom-heavy legs of his chest of drawers (below). His stylized take on Greene and Greene drawer joinery and his curved adaptation of the cloud lift are also harmonious touches.

Successfully using these elements in your own work requires the same care. You might reproduce them faithfully but combine them poorly. Remember that the Greens usually based a piece, even a whole room, on a single detail. It would be too much to put every Greene and Greene element you've seen into a single piece, blending dissonant details into an off-key arrangement.

When I'm designing in this style, I like to make certain elements recall the style without trying to absolutely mimic them. Cloud-rise details are infinitely adjustable, whether it's the distance between the two lines or where you start and stop the rise.

The stepped surfaces are also important, but be careful with how big you make the steps. A ¼-in. rise between breadboard ends and a tabletop can be a disaster if you're always setting wine glasses down on it. The same is true with raised plugs and joints. A little bit of rise to a plug can be more attractive and friendlier to the touch than a large, carved, textured one. Subtle effects should be just that, and they actually will have more impact. Remember that the purpose of these details is not only to show your craftsmanship but also to draw people to a piece, to make it warmer and more inviting. □

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Where to see Greene and Greene

Any discussion of Greene and Greene furniture soon leads to The Gamble House (www.gamblehouse.org) in Pasadena, Calif. It is the best-preserved of the "ultimate bungalows" the brothers created at the height of their careers.

The Greens designed everything inside and outside these homes, from the architecture and furnishings all the way down to carpets, lighting, cut glass, millwork, and clever mechanics like hidden doors.

So *FWW* headed to Pasadena to photograph some of the best surviving examples of Greene and Greene furniture—in the

house they were designed for. While in town we made another critical stop at The Huntington (a wonderful 200-acre combination of galleries, library, and botanical gardens: www.huntington.org) to photograph the Greene and Greene exhibit in the Scott Galleries of American Art. There we found furniture from The Thorsen House, a complete dining room from The Robinson House, a staircase rescued from The Libby House, and a few more pieces from the Gamble—together forming a broad sampling of the brothers' best work.

If you are ever in the Los Angeles area, make a point to visit these places. As a woodworker, you'll never forget the experience.

Online Extra

To read editor Asa Christiana's blog and see a video of the Gamble House, go to FineWoodworking.com/extras.