

## Arts and Crafts finds beauty in simplicity

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Walk into almost any furniture and home decor store and you will find Arts and Crafts designs—everything from Mission tables and reproductions of William Morris chairs, to mica table lamps and bronze drawer pulls with hammered imprints. Most of these are mass produced, however, and therefore are not invocations of true Arts and Crafts principles. The situation reveals that the Arts and Crafts movement is perhaps one of the least understood of all historical styles.

Arts and Crafts differs from most other period styles because it encompassed so much more than design. Its roots go back to Victorian England in the late nineteenth century, when a group of political reformers, art critics, and artists coalesced in response to the social ills of their day. Led by Socialist reformer William Morris (who was also a vocal advocate of historic preservation in England), this group deplored industrialization and its dehumanizing effect on workers. They also railed against the ornate and cluttered Victorian style, which they considered both vulgar and useless, in favor of a style that valued simplicity, efficiency, and quality. Their solution was to elevate the skill of hand-craftsmanship to an art form by the production of tasteful architecture and household goods, ranging from textiles to furniture, in which the refined design would morally uplift the consumer. The Arts and Crafts movement advocated the view that social reform could be achieved through art.

The 1917 Parker House in Rensselaer features brown bricks and a green tile roof—earthy colors favored by the Arts and Crafts movement. The low-pitched roof and wide eaves, plus interior appointments including oak woodwork and a built-in mahogany buffet, make the Parker House a classic example of Arts and Crafts design.



In South Bend, the 1910 Burke House combines Arts and Crafts with the best high-style Prairie tradition. The house pairs horizontal banding characteristic of the Prairie style with Arts and Crafts signatures including wide eaves and multipaned windows.

Todd Zeiger

The movement did not flower in America until after Morris's death in 1896, but once it reached this side of the Atlantic the style quickly took off. A number of famous American Arts and Crafts proponents, most notably Gustav Stickley, attempted to inject Morris's political and social reform into the American Arts and Crafts movement, with only modest success. Most consumers in England and America simply liked the Arts and Crafts "look" and largely ignored the call for reform.

Indiana was no different in this regard. The Arts and Crafts movement came to Indiana in the 1890s through

the efforts of local advocates like Hoosier Group painter Richard Gruelle, artist Brandt Steele, and secondary school teachers like Harry Wood and Roda Selleck. These proponents took the idealism of Morris to heart and denounced the dehumanization of



industrialization. Hoosier consumers, however, lapped up machine-made Arts and Crafts wares at department stores without a twinge of guilt.

The movement's philosophy aside, the Arts and Crafts style thrived in America until World War I. Describing Arts and Crafts presents a problem because the style defies classification. In the broadest terms, the style represented the shared values among designers of truth to material, simplicity, usefulness, and beauty.

The style also emphasized the then-innovative idea of total integration, wherein a building, its furnishings, textiles and other décor all embodied the Arts and Crafts ethic. Total integration called for the use of local materials, which Arts and Crafts proponents argued were not only cheaper, but would ensure a better blend with the surrounding environment. Lastly, the work had to be "honest," meaning that the method of construction should be readily apparent. Exposed timbers in ceilings, the insertion of recesses and alcoves demonstrating wall thickness, visible dovetail joints in furniture and the staining of wood rather than painting all became the Arts and Crafts standard of beauty. These exposed elements were the "ornaments" in the Arts

**No Arts and Crafts tour of Indianapolis would be complete without a visit to the The Meridian Park neighborhood, including Tuckaway, famous for its carefully preserved Arts and Crafts styling and its colorful history.**



Marsh Davis



Mark Dollase

**Brazil's McCrea House boasts original hand-painted murals and stencils. Featured in national magazines including *Old House Journal* and *This Old House*, the home earned the admiration of art wallpaper expert Bruce Bradbury, who calls the interior "astonishing."**

and Crafts vernacular, as they showcased rather than hid the construction.

In America, Arts and Crafts' exteriors found many suitable forms, from simple Craftsman bungalows and foursquares, to high-style Prairie designs.

Arts and Crafts architecture in Indiana is chiefly residential. The bungalow, typically a one-story home with a full-length porch, endures as one of the most common vernacular styles to embrace Arts and Crafts features. Located on Pennsylvania Street in the Meridian Park neighborhood, Tuckaway represents the quintessential Indianapolis bungalow. The simple gable-front house retains its original cedar clapboard siding, and includes Arts and Crafts touches such as exposed rafters and beams, and wide eaves.

Though its exterior may be more fairly called Mission Revival, the interior of the 1910 McCrea House in Brazil is one of the best examples of a preserved Arts and Crafts décor in the state. Every room on the ground floor still shows period colors, with original hand-painted and stenciled friezes portraying garlands of grape vines, garden landscapes, and abstract Art Nouveau motifs. The house is currently being restored.

Arts and Crafts experienced a rebirth in the 1970s, when the burgeoning environmental movement and renewed appreciation of nature offered clear



Mark Dollase

connections to the Arts and Crafts philosophy. Today, the revived interest includes no implicit ties to political reform, but focuses solely on the style. As a result, machine-made reproductions proliferate, since most of us today have made peace with industrialization. The Arts and Crafts revival shows no signs of slowing, so go ahead—buy that reproduction Mission coffee table for your bungalow or modern condo. If your wallet allows, search for the authentic Stickley rocker, Rookwood pottery, or Old Hickory settle.



Greg Sekula

**In Madison, tapered porch piers supporting the porch roof and port cochere on the c.1920 bungalow at 750 West Main Street are prominent Arts and Crafts elements. The house also displays exposed rafters under its low roofline, with wide eaves that cast dramatic shadows.**