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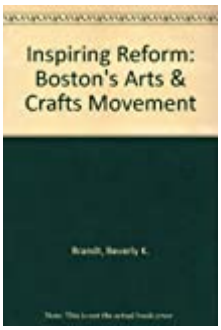

Gerald W.R. Ward, ed. *Inspiring Reform: Boston's Arts and Crafts Movement.* Wellesley, MA: Harry N. Abrams, 1997. 247 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-881894-08-7.

Reviewed by Mimi Clark (Shelburne Museum, Vermont)

Published on H-Urban (February, 1999)

In partnership with a recent exhibition of objects from the Arts and Crafts movement in Boston, this large-format, beautifully designed publication combines contextual essays and curatorial information in an effort to deepen our understanding of this significant movement. The exhibition, in celebration of the 100th year of the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston, was curated at the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, traveled to the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution, and included over 150 works of art by more than 100 artists, craftspeople, workshops, and companies. The book includes several color plates of objects exhibited in the 1997 show, an exhibition catalogue, and a comprehensive collection of biographies of the individuals within the movement discussed in the essays and represented in the exhibition. The curators of the exhibition claimed it was first time the chosen pieces had been shown together in 100 years.

The thesis of the exhibition (which I regret not seeing) and of the book, is that the Boston region was the design and philosophical nucleus of the American Arts and Crafts movement. As a collection of essays, the book presents the same spirit of cooperation that the actual participants sought to achieve. The first two essays lay the foundation for the others by explaining the reason for Boston's influence in the national Arts and Crafts scene, its regional success, and the eventual failure of the movement's participants to achieve a lasting system of reform.

In the introductory essay, Edward S. Cooke, Jr. looks at regional styles and how the Boston style of work and design related to the larger Arts and Crafts movement which was originally inspired by William Morris, C.R. Ashbee, and John Ruskin in England. Largely due to the relationship of educational institutions, art collections, and feelings of moral superiority in its wealthier citizens, Boston's cultural leaders, or 'cultural capitalists,' decided to direct their energies to the development of a reform of aesthetic values as an end in itself, and as the means to define social class along aesthetic lines. Beverly K. Brandt's essay describes the organizational structure and mission of the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston (SACB). Taking a proactive point-of-view, the SACB endeavored to promote "an appreciation of the dignity and value of good design" through educational initiatives, community events, legislative lobbying, and social forums for Boston artists. Most important to the success of SACB propaganda and its artists was its shop, where exhibitions of various handicrafts encouraged consumer participation and financial support for SACB members.

Membership in the Society was geographically widespread throughout the United States, a key factor in

the germination of SACB themes beyond Boston. SACB members worked in a surprisingly wide-range of media and trades, and Brandt correctly identifies a number of areas worth further exploration, namely the nature of separation and coexistence among various artists and crafters. A stratified membership is evident by comparing membership rolls and sales figures from the shop. For instance, Brandt considers jewelry, enameling, and metals 'higher crafts' because their work comprised over fifty percent of the SACB shop's annual revenue, while they represented about one-third of SACB membership. The SACB continues today as a leader in quality and stamina among artistic societies. While the brightest glow in the life of the SACB and production of Arts and Crafts-style objects were the years 1890s to 1930s, one can indeed wonder if the movement did indeed fail, or was it a success, now a permanent part of America's artistic heritage? Cooke, Brandt and the other nine essayists make clear that Boston played a major role in establishing the SACB as the leader it claimed to be. A combination of aesthetic ideals, historical circumstance, and social context defined the Arts and Crafts in Boston and propelled it to national significance.

A work of art itself, the book *Inspiring Reform* also includes a set of essays, each of which focus on a different medium represented by members of the Society: wood, clay, metal, jewelry, textiles, books, photography, and prints. Eventually rejecting the overly decorative flourishes of William Morris, and those of their reform-minded colleagues in the Art Nouveau movement in Paris, leading Boston designers turned to their own colonial past for inspiration. Attracted to Puritan forms of restraint and order, a generation of artists and crafters developed a new genre of American design confusingly termed in the book as both 'colonial revival' and 'Arts and Crafts'. As colonial revival this new style and related social philosophy embraced a reverence for America's pilgrim heritage and its connection to the English motherland, but is was also Arts and Crafts because it took place during the most productive term of the SACB. Wallace Nutting, for example, print-maker, photographer, and furniture designer and maker, is considered a leading artist within both movements. Perhaps he would have described himself as a 'colonial revivalist within the Arts and Crafts movement.' This leads me to wonder if all artists within turn-of-the-century Boston's artistic community (SACB member or not) considered themselves participants in the Arts and Crafts movement, or just artists who happened to have worked during this time and responded to consumer taste and/or collegial sharing with their own interpretations of contemporary design. Those featured in *Inspiring Reform* were indeed cultural and design leaders of one sort or another, rather than followers, although I believe that many of their unmentioned co-members were just in the club for the security of collective representation.

It must have been an exciting time to be an artist, tradesperson, or handiworker in Boston. Furniture-makers, pottery studios, needlework clubs, print-making colonies, and book-making cooperatives found willing participants as well as a middle class consumer audience during this time. Leading the charge were architects and book-makers who, as project leaders, were able to hire a variety of artists and crafts people to create the details of larger bodies of work commissioned by wealthy patrons. Each trade had its own leaders and roster of accomplished members who are adeptly described in each essay in a sort of family tree format.

Captain of the cultural community was Charles Eliot Norton, Harvard graduate, editor, and long-time friend of John Ruskin. As a Professor of Fine Arts at Harvard, Norton was able to pass to his students his belief in the "moral power of art" and use his position of authority to build a fellowship of leaders who would guide the nation along its proper path of good taste, both of which supposedly would develop an enlightened cultural, and therefore social, hierarchy within the American democratic structure. As a result, Bostonians collected and preserved works of art and architecture, and created a number of institutions and associations for the promotion of artistic good taste. The Museum of Fine Arts, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum can all find their beginnings during Norton's years. Influential individuals in their own right who were students of Norton included Charles Fletcher Lummis, Bernard Berenson, Wallace Nutting, and Theodore Roosevelt. Underlying Norton's philosophy, and that of the colonial revivalists, Arts and Crafts designers, and SACB leaders was a patronizing message to the increasing streams of immigrants that proper American behavior could only be achieved by those who understood America's link to its simpler, colonial past, and who acted within the values of a moral work ethic so romantically, and often successfully, translated by members of the Arts and Crafts community.

Fortunately, Norton's followers included numbers of women who found success as artists in their own right, and as influential designers of social reform. Whether

they were considered equal in the eyes of their patrons and fellow artisans or not, women represent nearly half of the works on view in the exhibition described in this book. Either as individuals or in cooperatives, women were involved in pottery, textiles, needlework, printmaking, metal work and various book-related arts. Most of these women were part of the system of learning within which the Arts and Crafts movement was generated. As students, apprentices, and production assistants, women were able to significantly carry out and take advantage of much of the movement's ideals. At the same time, using their economic and financial positions, women of means sponsored settlement house projects where immigrant women were taught lace-making or rug-making in order to develop income-producing skills, while at the same time creating something both useful and aesthetically pleasing. Unfortunately, the book's essayists fail to describe the impact of Norton, his colleagues, and subsequent followers on the home front outside of the Arts and Crafts circle, although plenty of references to further reading are provided within each chapter.

All in all, *Inspiring Reform* is a monumental work which adds the scholarship of the physical remains of Boston's Arts and Crafts movement as well as contributing to our understanding of America's cultural past. While not for the beginning student of this time period, the book will further educate those who are interested in the 'who's who' and 'who did what' of this American legacy.

Citation: Mimi Clark. Review of Ward, Gerald W.R., ed., *Inspiring Reform: Boston's Arts and Crafts Movement.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. February, 1999.

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