

**The Arts and Crafts Movement
and the Work and Legacy of
Architects Charles and Henry Greene**

By

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A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF THE ARTS & CRAFTS MOVEMENT IN AMERICA RELATIVE TO DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE (1875-1920)

The traditions, values and aspirations on which the American Arts & Crafts Movement developed were centered on a respect for work, independence of expression, self-sufficiency and a strong desire to fashion a national cultural identity remote from the fanciful notions of England and Europe.

The patrons of the movement were not as obsessed as the British by a fear of industrialization which was on the march. Rather they were more inclined to compromise with mechanized production and focus on creating a symbiotic close union of man and nature. They drew from nature materials and designs for art objects and houses. They envisioned the house and natural surroundings as a harmonious unit. They looked to the future rather than the past to realize their objectives.

By 1875 Americans were beginning to feel the constraints of growth. They felt burdened by a world that had grown too complex. Middle-class Americans particularly were expressing a strong desire to break out of their vertical boxes, with their enclosed interiors, heavy ornate furniture and furnishings to a simpler life, and a home of their own, detached from their work.

The William Ralph Emerson (Boston) all-shingle style house was the first significant step toward a new domestic architecture that gave America a sense of cultural identity and freedom to explore concepts that shed the trappings of the past.

Henry Hobson Richardson carried the shingle-style house a step further. He advanced the notion of free flowing interiors that could be adapted to a variety of functions and expressions.

California grasped the brass ring. Young bright creative architects took Richardson interiors to develop an architectural style that came to be known as the California Bungalow. The California Bungalow was the first domestic architecture that looked American and accommodated to the lifestyle of Americans.

The bungalow style with its open floor plan was particularly suited to the warm climate and native beauty of California. Its acceptance was fueled by the middle class who were in search of a home they could call their own, with gardens, lawns and trees – a home setting that suggested a harmonious family life, comfort rather than luxury, straight-forward, adaptable and affordable.

At the same time the California bungalow was sweeping California, features of the style appeared in the prairie style of the Midwest. The styles of both locations were featured in publications American housewives read religiously: *House Beautiful*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Gustav Stickley's Craftsman Magazine* and many other similar publications that flooded the market.

The Greene Brothers, Charles and Henry of Pasadena, stepped onto the stage in 1894. By 1909 they created on a grand scale the "Ultimate Bungalow". Whether on the grand scale of the Ultimate bungalow or on a modest scale their creations not only articulated the traditions, values, and aspirations of the Arts and Crafts Movement in America, they elevated domestic architecture to an identifiable American art form.

Charles and Henry Greene: Golden Years

Charles and Henry Greene came to Pasadena in mid-August of 1893. Charles was 25, Henry 23. They had completed a two-year architectural course offered by MIT and a two-year apprenticeship working for several prestigious Boston architectural firms. They came to Pasadena to visit their parents, Dr. and Mrs. Thomas Greene. They fully intended to return to the east to practice their profession. Each passing day they became increasingly captivated by the climate, natural and man-made beauty of the area, as well as the local residents, many of whom had come to Pasadena, like their parents, from the East and Midwest to retire in sunny California. Moreover, it is safe to assume that the Greene brothers must have recognized that opportunities abounded in Pasadena for gifted fledgling architects. After much soul searching they opened their Pasadena office in January of 1894.

Certainly Pasadena proved to be the right place for the Greenses. It is also true that by accident of birth Charles and Henry lived and derived their rich architectural vocabulary in a period of American history that historians, flavored with nostalgia, refer to as "The Golden Years". The Golden Years are described as the 20 years before World War I – before the income tax came in and the gold standard went out; before homogenized-tract-America. In terms of architecture, it was in the Golden Years that American houses came of age; came to look like American houses and not hybrids transplanted from England or Europe. Years that homes were meant to be used in their entirety and were viewed as the source of the nation's moral and social fibre.

It also must be noted that beginning about 1880 and ending in the late 1920s the more artistic wares of American studio potters became recognized in America as well as abroad. Some of these small pottery studios became successful business ventures. Many were inspired by women such as Maria Longworth Nichols who founded Rookwood Pottery, which is considered by many collectors the Cadillac of American art pottery. China decorating also became the passionate hobby among women of means. Large and small collections of artistic pottery and painted china were common place decor of California bungalows whether they were located in California or the Midwest.

During these golden years the work of Charles and Henry flourished. Before they celebrated their 40th birthdays they had designed the best known of their "Ultimate Bungalows", i.e. the Gamble, Blacker and Culbertson houses in Pasadena, the Pratt house in Ojai, the Thorson house in Berkeley, and the Fleishhacker home in Woodside. Within the same period they completed five less known Ultimate Bungalows that rival the better known, and numerous modest houses affordable to a middle class more affluent in the Golden Years than the middle class of today.

The Greenses' success is due to their own special genius for design, their feeling for and knowledge of the nature of wood, their careful attention to details, their superb craftsmanship, and their singular way of articulating the tastes and interests of their clients into the total design of the houses they were to occupy.

Moreover, it must be acknowledged that clients of the Greenses also played a major role in their success other than providing fat pocketbooks. Their clients not only recognized the genius of the Greenses' designs, they understood what these gifted artists were expressing beyond an architectural design. They, like the Greenses, consciously or unconsciously shared the same ideals, aspirations and reforms that fueled the Arts and Crafts Movement in America.

The “New Women” and the Greene Brothers

By and large it was the “new women” of the Golden years who hailed the work of the Greenes. It was the women who worked closely with Henry and Charles while their houses were underway. It was the women more than the men who understood and were in harmony with concepts the Greenes were expressing. They took an active part in the design of the house as well as the furnishings.

Charles and Henry designed much of the furnishings – rugs, curtains, draperies and furniture for their more affluent clients. Greene furniture was never mass produced. It was always constructed for a particular house. At the same time the women were as determined as the Greenes to have the house and furnishings reflect their tastes and lifestyle. This is why each house today displays features characteristic of the Greenes as well as the imprint of the original owners.

Who were these women? They were well-educated single and married women. They were seekers of a less complex lifestyle. They were involved in reform movements – progressive education, birth control, woman suffrage, improved working conditions, and crafts that would provide women with income of their own or a stimulating hobby. They read and some published articles on home decoration, child care, diet and hygiene. They were collectors of native American art, artifacts, Indian rugs, etc.. They collected contemporary American art objects, art glass, painted china, art pottery, and early California paintings. They frankly discussed love and marriage. They were not afraid to cast away foolish conventions of the past. They did not find it vulgar to discuss political issues or religion at home or at intimate dinner parties. They wanted their homes to be used, functional and elegantly simple. They abhorred "fusty" Victorian vertical boxes and ostentatious mansions. At heart they were reformers with a socialistic bent who had the funds, vision and independent spirit to underwrite the ideals and aspirations of the American Arts and Crafts Movement.

We owe a debt of gratitude to these “new women,” for they made it possible for the Greenes to use their genius for design, apply their unexcelled craftsmanship, to express their rich architectural vocabulary. To be fair, economics played a role. These women either had means of their own or were married to financially-successful men who more or less supported and approved of their interests and ventures.

The Greene and Greene Legacy

In 1952 Charles and Henry were presented the coveted Citation of the national organization of the American Institute of Architects who hailed them as the "Formulators of a New and Native Architecture". Charles was 86, Henry 84. The citation reads;

Your gifts have now multiplied and spread to all parts of the nation, and are recognized throughout the world, influencing and improving the design of small as well as great houses. You enriched the lives of the people. You have made California synonymous with freer, and more abundant living. You helped shape our distinctly national architecture, and in giving tangible form to the ideals of our people, your names will be forever remembered among the creative Americans.

Ralph Adams Cram, referring to the work of the Greenes in his *American Country Houses of Today*, wrote, "There are things in it Japanese, things that are Scandinavian; things that hint at Sikkim, Bhutan, and the vastness of Tibet, and yet it all hangs together. It is beautiful, it is contemporary and for some reason or another it all seems to fit California." These remarks are as relevant today as when Cram wrote them in 1913. (*Five California Architects*. Esther McCoy; Hennessey, 1960).

Their houses, grand or modest, are considered among the treasures of America. Sadly, of approximately 200 it is estimated only 45-50 remain. Five remain in the families of the original owners. The most complete history of their work can be found in the Gamble House Museum, Pasadena, California, and the Greene Pavilion at the Huntington Library, Pasadena which has a wonderful display of Greene furniture and art objects.

The Gamble House in Pasadena is the only house which contains all the original furniture. The Gamble heirs gave the house and all the furnishings to the City of Pasadena and the University of Southern California.