

Arts & Crafts Copper Considered

Review of *The First Metal/Arts & Crafts Copper*, ed. Marilyn Archer and John S. Weber (Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, 2024) (96 pp.).

By Anne Thackray



This well-illustrated hardcover book was published to accompany an exhibition of Arts & Crafts-movement artistic copper at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon (May 6, 2023 – November 3, 2024). The subject of the book and the exhibition is Arts & Crafts copper by British and American makers.

Many of the objects featured in the book (and the exhibition) are from the Margo Grant Walsh Twentieth Century Silver and Metalwork Collection, donated to the JSMA

by Marjolaine (Margo) Grant Walsh. The exhibition also includes loans from other museums and from private collectors.

A graduate of the University of Oregon, Ms. Walsh became a major American modernist interior architect and collector. (She recently donated her major collection of twentieth-century metalwork, including Arts & Crafts silver by English and American silversmiths, to the Portland Art Museum). As Curatorial Consultant to the exhibition, Ms. Walsh supported the making of the exhibition and this accompanying book, with further support from JSMA members.



The book initially presents Arts & Crafts copperwares made in Britain, followed by those made in the U.S.A. The Arts & Crafts movement began in Victorian England as an urban movement combining artistic and social aims. Attempting to counter the shoddiness and poor design of industrially produced goods, leaders of the movement also sought to mitigate the negative effects of industrial production on workers.

Copper was a family concern for the Arts & Crafts movement's most famous champion, William Morris (1834-1896). From the 1840s to the 1870s, Morris's personal wealth derived from his father's investments in a prospective copper-mining company in southwest England. In 1861, William Morris established the company 'Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.' to produce handmade designs for the home. Famously, his company survives to this day, trading under the name 'Morris & Co.' since 1877. Arts & Crafts copper wares were produced by several individual artisans and workshops in Britain. The largest number of exhibits at the first Arts & Crafts exhibition (held by the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in London in 1888) came from C.R. Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft. The Guild was a cooperative organization known for its metalwork, including hand worked copper. Ashbee intended it to protect the status of individual artisans. Initially based in London's impoverished East End, in 1902 the Guild was relocated by Ashbee to Chipping Camden in 1902. Other Arts & Crafts workshops, like the Newlyn Industrial Class (established 1890) and the Fivemiletown Art Metal-Work School, were similarly created to enable people of modest means to earn additional income. As well as the major workshop organizations, there were individual British designer/makers like A.E. Jones (1879-1954). He opened his own business (A.E. Jones Ltd.), after training at the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft.

The Arts & Crafts movement spread from Britain to continental Europe and to America. In 1900, C.R. Ashbee and Charles Rennie Mackintosh exhibited at the Vienna Secession Exhibition, advancing the cross-fertilization of design ideas between Arts & Crafts and Jugendstil artists.

In the U.S.A., Arts & Crafts societies were founded in the 1890s to promote and exhibit crafts. Interest in artistic metalwork spread among Americans via magazines like *The Studio* (1893), *House Beautiful*, a 'shelter magazine' first published in 1896, and *The Craftsman* (founded in 1901 by Gustav Stickley and featuring major articles by Prof. Irene Sargent). Rather than developing distinctive regional styles, American artistic copper reflected the influence of everything from Art Nouveau to Arts & Crafts to Josef Hoffmann. Its fundamental characteristic was a handwrought appearance, enhanced by copper's visual qualities. (In this book, as in the exhibition, it is noticeable that some copper objects are highly polished, while others have been left to develop a distinctive patina).

Copper being relatively inexpensive and easily worked, there were large numbers of amateur copper-workers in the U.S.A., just as in Britain. A significant problem for scholars and collectors of Arts & Crafts copper is that it can be difficult to securely identify the makers of some Arts & Crafts copper, because copper wares (unlike silver ones), were not regularly marked. In the book, as in the exhibition, even major artworks like the 'Fire Screen with Flower Motif' (copper with wrought iron, on loan from Margo Grant Walsh) at p. 88, and the 'Fire Screen with Tree of Life Design' (copper with wrought iron, from the collection of Christine Isabelle Oaklander) at p. 86, are listed as by unknown British makers.

However, many of the pieces featured in *The First Metal* are by known designers, either because they are marked, or because their design and materials are associated with a particular maker. For example, the 'Copper Bowl with its Bronze Leaf and Seed Appliqué' of c. 1918 (illustrated as the frontispiece and at p. 72) is characteristic of Hans Jauchen (1883-1970), a German-born American craftsman.

In 1880s and 1890s America, women dominated 'artistic' exhibitions of Arts & Crafts metalwork. But from about 1900, Arts & Crafts-style copper was increasingly produced on an industrial scale by corporations with significant advertising and marketing budgets – corporations mostly directed by men. The most prominent copper artisans from c. 1900 were also male.

An ongoing problem for those hoping to profit from artistic copperwares was the association of copper, a base metal used for low-value currency, with cheapness. People were less willing to pay high prices for items made of copper, however beautifully designed and well-made, than for those made of obviously costly materials like silver or gold. Arts & Crafts objects hand-produced by individual artisans have become expensive luxury products for a rich (and therefore limited) clientèle. In Britain, artisan workshops like Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft and the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft swiftly ran into financial difficulties.

Keeping Arts & Crafts-style copperwares widely affordable required abandoning handicraft for largescale production. The American solution was largely mechanized mass production of 'Arts & Crafts'-style copper objects which appeared handmade but were actually industrial products. Twentieth century American corporations like Roycroft used machinery and employed hundreds of people to produce their 'handmade' furniture. By the 1920s, the original Arts & Crafts ideal – of artisans producing handmade decorative arts for the general population – was seriously compromised.

In Canada, the Arts and Crafts movement was primarily led by British-born, English-speaking craftsmen. Canada lacked the British tradition of large expensive country houses, so here the Arts & Crafts movement was fundamentally expressed in architectural fittings and stained-glass win-

dows for urban buildings. Handcrafted detailing featured in the Victoria houses designed by Samuel Maclure (1860-1929), whose house designs appeared in *The Studio*. In 1909, Maclure established the Vancouver Island Arts and Crafts Society (joined in 1913 by the artist Emily Carr).

The First Metal, concentrating as it does on British and American copperwares, does not include work by the major Canadian producer of Arts & Crafts copper, Paul Beau (1871-1949) of Montreal. Regrettably, Beau is not even mentioned among the 'European and Commonwealth Artisans and Workshops' listed in the 'Artisans Biographical Notes and Workshops'.

Examples of Beau's Arts & Crafts artistic metalwork still adorn fine Montreal houses and churches, especially those designed by the architects William and Edward Maxwell. A prominent Canadian metalworker, from 1920 to 1926 Beau directed the Parliament Hill iron workshops. Characteristically, he often combined metal of different colors (copper, brass, or bronze) in a single object. The omission of Beau from this book is surprising, given his importance in the Canadian Arts & Crafts movement, and the fact that his pieces are usually signed.

The First Metal is handsomely produced, with a clear text. It features excellent illustrations, not only of the individual objects exhibited, but also of Arts & Crafts workshops (e.g. 'The Craftsman Metal Shop', from Syracuse, New York, seen at p. 73). There is no bibliography, but references for further reading are given in the footnotes, and there are useful pages of 'Artisan Biographical Notes and Workshops' covering British, American, and European and Commonwealth makers. Unfortunately, apart from the 'Index of Illustrations' there is no index.

Readers can buy *The First Metal* online. They can also 'tour' the exhibition itself online, via the 'Exhibitions' section of the JSMA website (mpembed.com/show/?m=eqo33GCDiXk&mpu=885).

The First Metal/Arts & Crafts Copper is an excellent introduction to Arts & Crafts copper. As some followers of the movement preferred copper to silver, as a more 'authentic' material, the book explores an important aspect of the Arts & Crafts movement, one still unfamiliar to most readers.