Related Book
The Artistic Furniture of Charles Rohlfs, by Joseph Cunningham with a foreword by Bruce Barnes and an introduction by Sarah Fayen. Published in 2008 by Yale University Press in association with the American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation, 304 pages.
Handsomely designed and lavishly illustrated, this award-winning book is the most comprehensive publication to date on the artist and includes a complete set of unpublished period illustrations of more than 70 works. Hardcover ($65) and soft-cover ($50) editions are available at The Huntington’s Bookstore & More, 626-405-2142, e-mail: bookstore@huntington.org.

Members’ Lecture

Charles Rohlfs, ca. 1905.
The Winterthur Library.
Artistic Furniture

Rohlf's furniture, consistently made of oak, clearly relates to the pared-down forms typical of the Arts and Crafts movement, but, seeing himself as an artist, he used the terms "artistic furniture" or "the Rohlf's style" to differentiate his work from the mainstream Arts and Crafts movement.

Rohlf combined design motifs in unique ways to express his interest in organic forms suggestive of the Art Nouveau movement in Europe. But perhaps his greatest contribution to early 20th-century design was his free and fanciful style, which combines a remarkably broad range of influences and an almost inexhaustible vocabulary of pierced and carved ornamental decoration.

A stunning desk chair (cover) made around 1898 illustrates the point. With masterful carving, joinery, and surface finish, its strikingly modern backrest, a dramatically elongated trapezoid cut from a single piece of oak, is carved with a detailed pattern inspired by the cellular structure of oak as seen through a microscope.

Another foray into elegant, modern form is the rocking chair (made in about 1899), a promised gift to The Huntington (below). The chair was basically constructed from four wood slabs set on two carefully proportioned bowed planks of oak. Curvy keyhole notches punctuate the design at crucial junctures on the back and armrests, and near the bottom of the chair. Under each armrest is a large decorative medallion cut from a single board in a pattern with obvious connections to Asian design.

The Huntington Connection

Progressive design of the late 19th and early 20th century is a growing strength of The Huntington’s art holdings, anchored by a major collection of William Morris materials, some of which are displayed in the Huntington Art Gallery. Many significant works by both British and American designers have been added to the collection in recent years. Once the exhibition tour of “The Artistic Furniture of Charles Rohlf’s” is completed, the oak rocking chair promised to The Huntington will join a massive ebonized oak library table by the artist in a permanent installation devoted to early 20th-century design within the Virginia Steele Scott Galleries of American Art. Also in the American art galleries is a wing devoted to Arts and Crafts proponents Charles and Henry Greene (Greene & Greene).

Visitors to the exhibition can enrich their experience by comparing the Asian influences in Rohlf’s furniture with the related architectural elements in The Huntington’s Chinese and Japanese gardens, adjacent to the Boone Gallery.