



Charles Rohlf, ca. 1905.
The Winterthur Library.

Related Book

The Artistic Furniture of Charles Rohlf, 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this award-winning book is the most comprehensive publication to date on the artist and includes a complete set of unpublished period illustrations of more than 70 works.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

Tues., Aug. 31: Joseph Cunningham, curator of "The Artistic Furniture of Charles Rohlf" and author of the related book, will speak at The Huntington's Members' Open House. Open to Members only. Call 626-405-2124 or visit www.huntington.org for Membership information.

**This exhibition is made possible by Steve Martin.
Additional support is provided by the Windgate Charitable
Foundation and the Elsie de Wolfe Foundation.**

"The Artistic Furniture of Charles Rohlf" is organized by the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Chipstone Foundation, and American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation. The exhibition is curated by Joseph Cunningham, curatorial director of American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation. He was assisted by Sarah Fayen, formerly a curator at the Chipstone Foundation and the Milwaukee Art Museum.

THE HUNTINGTON

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THE ARTISTIC FURNITURE OF

Charles Rohlf

May 22–Sept. 6, 2010

MaryLou and George Boone Gallery

The Huntington Library, Art Collections,
and Botanical Gardens



Interior of the Rohlfs home on Norwood Avenue, Buffalo, N.Y., ca. 1905. The Winterthur Library.

Charles Rohlfs (1853–1936) stands among the leaders of the nation’s first foray into modernist design, along with Frank Lloyd Wright and Gustav Stickley, but the multiplicity of his sources—which include influences from Scottish and English Arts and Crafts, French Art Nouveau, and East Asian and Near Eastern furniture, among other design traditions—makes the work difficult to categorize and has kept Rohlfs on the periphery of scholarship that has focused on more straightforward turn-of-the-century furniture.

Rohlfs was the son of a cabinetmaker in Brooklyn and trained in design at the Cooper Union in New York City. His formal education set him on a path to become a successful patternmaker for foundries—carving the wooden models for the sand-casting process—and, eventually, a patent-earning designer of cast-iron stoves. From the late 1870s through the mid-1890s he also pursued a career as an actor, performing across the country with several traveling theater companies.

In 1884, Rohlfs married the popular novelist Anna Katharine Green (1846–1935), an extremely successful mystery writer whose works are represented in the library holdings at the Huntington. She is now credited as a contributor to the design of some of the motifs he carved into his furniture.

In 1897, Rohlfs began a serious career as a furniture maker, and by the time his workshop closed 10 years later, he had developed an international reputation, earning entry into the Royal Society of Arts in London. Marshall Field’s department store promoted his furniture around 1900; in 1901 he exhibited at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo; and in 1902, Rohlfs’ designs were featured in the Exposition of International Design in Turin, Italy.

COVER: Desk Chair, ca. 1898–99. From the Rohlfs home. Oak. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Promised Gift of American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation in honor of Joseph Cunningham. Photo by Gavin Ashworth © American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation.

OVERLEAF: Tall-Back Chair, ca. 1898–99 (detail). From the Rohlfs home. Princeton University Art Museum, Gift of Roland Rohlfs. Photo by Gavin Ashworth © Trustees of Princeton University.

Artistic Furniture

Rohlfs’ 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 Rohlfs style” to differentiate his work from the mainstream Arts and Crafts movement.

Rohlfs 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.

Rocking Chair, ca. 1899. Oak, leather, and metal tacks. The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, Promised Gift of American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation in honor of Joseph Cunningham. Photo © V&A Publications.



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 Rohlfs” 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 Rohlfs’ furniture with the related architectural elements in The Huntington’s Chinese and Japanese gardens, adjacent to the Boone Gallery.



Chafing Dish, ca. 1900. Copper, brass, and oak with ceramic casserole. Private Collection, New York. Photo by Gavin Ashworth © American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation.



Lamp, ca. 1904. From the Rohlfs home. Copper, brass, and kappa shell, with replaced glass. Private Collection. Photo by Gavin Ashworth © American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation.