

FOR THE LOVE OF BEAUTY

The New England Aesthetic Style in Fine and Decorative Arts 1870-1920

The late 19th century saw the arts in post-Civil War America strive to find new ways of expressing a rapidly changing world. By the 1870s the Industrial Age was well under way. The United States was taking its place as a world leader in industry, technology, and commerce, and westward expansion was glorified in paintings and photographs of the great American landscape. It was a time of unprecedented artistic creativity and innovation in fine and decorative arts, architecture, music, and literature.

Many artists and designers in New England were influenced by the English Aesthetic Movement of the 1850s and 1860s which celebrated beauty, art, and high craftsmanship above all else as a critical response to the mechanized Industrial Revolution. Artists pursued the pleasure of beauty for beauty's sake, devoid of symbolism, narrative, politics, and morality. Many looked toward the natural world for inspiration.

Ironically, given the original intent of the Aesthetic Movement, commercial fashion for nature-inspired designs grew with the rising middle class and disposable income, leading to a great demand for beautiful and well-crafted household objects and artwork as measures of taste and high culture. Popular decorative themes included organic elements of plants and animals, female forms, and classical motifs.

The Dr. Gilbert and Frima Shapiro Gallery celebrates the fine and decorative arts of New England, particularly in the innovative and unique designs of leading regional artists and craftsmen from the turn of the last century.

New Bedford as a Community of Artists and Designers

Emily N. Vanderpoel, a New Bedford artist and author and a student of Robert Swain Gifford, published the book *Color Problems: A Practical Manual for the Lay Student of Color* in 1903, with a foreword by Gifford. The book discusses the issues that the Aesthetic movement and its practitioners sought to address, giving modern readers a unique view into the movement's core foci:

“The relation of color to light is much the same as that of music to sound. Color has its many hues, its long scales of tints and shades, its true and its false chords. Mere sound gives us but little pleasure; when developed, however, into its highest form, music, we are thrilled as by the song of a bird, a favorite ballad, or a Beethoven Symphony. So in light, our enjoyment culminates at the glories of color in a flower or a sunset, at the shadows that play over the hills, or at the varied hues of a salt marsh. Hence we may aptly term color *the music of light*; and when we think of the wonderful ways in which it has been used and combined

by painters and designers for hundreds of years, it may seem strange to us that *its* harmonies have not been as thoroughly studied and classified as those of sound" (3).

A founding member of the American Art Association and the New York Etching Club, Robert Swain Gifford spent his early life in Southern Massachusetts and was a prominent member of the New Bedford art community. Artists William Bradford, Albert Van Beest, Dwight Tryon, John La Farge, and Louis Comfort Tiffany were among his friends and peers, and he was a member of the Tile Club which included Winslow Homer and other prominent artists. Gifford was an avid traveler, touring Europe and North Africa with Tiffany in the 1870s, and again with his wife, fellow artist Frances "Fanny" Gifford. He also joined the famous Harriman Expedition along the Alaskan coast in 1899. Gifford and Fanny split their time between New York and Nonquitt in South Dartmouth, and Gifford was greatly inspired by the charming and tranquil Massachusetts landscape. While much of his early work is romantic and displays great clarity, his later landscapes are Tonalist and reflect an influence in mood and neutral hues from the French Barbizon style. *Willows of Padanaram* was one of the last paintings Gifford ever made, as he died the following year in New York in 1905.

Physically disabled from birth, Edward M. Stetson spent his life painting and weaving baskets. An active member of the New Bedford Art Club, he studied with Robert Swain Gifford and rented the older artist's studio in South Dartmouth. The influence of Gifford on Stetson is clear with his almost abstracted landscapes, but there is a wonderful depth to Stetson's work that captures the colors and textures of the local landscape in a manner that is entirely his own. Stetson never married, but lived with his sister Julia Stetson Yale in Nonquitt and New Bedford. Julia was the widow of Dr. Leroy Milton Yale, a lifelong friend and biographer of Robert Swain Gifford.

William S. Macy was a descendant of the prominent Nantucket Quaker families Starbuck and Macy, members of which had ties with the New Bedford whaling industry. He studied in New York and Munich, and worked for some time as an art dealer in New York and London. Between 1879 and 1890 he had studios in New Bedford and New York, and later moved to California where he remained until his death in 1945. Macy's landscapes are contemplative and serene in tone and color.

Louis H. Richardson, a lifelong resident of New Bedford, was trained as a tinsmith, although there is no record of whether or not he ever worked as one. An accomplished baseball player, he was named "Home Run King of 1870" by the Acushnet Baseball Club of New Bedford. He worked for six years in the New Bedford Water Department starting in 1882, and then worked for the New Bedford Health Department from 1888 until his death. However, his great passion was for art, and despite being a self-taught

painter, he was a powerful advocate for the arts in New Bedford. He was a founding member of both the New Bedford Art Club and the New Bedford Fine Arts Society, and worked with highly trained New Bedford artists like Robert Swain Gifford throughout his career. He built a studio, dubbed "The Shanty," in Salters Point in South Dartmouth, immersed in the tranquil landscapes that dominate his work. Richardson's unique style contains Tonalist qualities of atmospheric mood, darker colors, and a deep luminosity, but it also uses bright palettes and plays on natural light inspired by Impressionism. Because Richardson often painted on asbestos board instead of canvas, his paintings take on an unusual texture.

A descendant of one of the original settlers of Nantucket, William Ferdinand Macy was born in New Bedford and lived on Purchase Street. At age eighteen, he moved to New York and studied with Robert Swain Gifford for several years before relocating to Nantucket.

Pairpoint, Mount Washington, and the Aesthetic Movement

The Mount Washington Glass Company was founded in South Boston in 1837 and moved to New Bedford in 1870 under the leadership of Frederick S. Shirley. Ten years later, Shirley recruited the famed English silversmith Thomas J. Pairpoint to lead the Pairpoint Manufacturing Company. In 1894, the companies merged, and in 1900 the new business was named the Pairpoint Corporation, which thrived until the late 1930s. It reopened as the Gundersen-Pairpoint Glass Company in 1952 and closed permanently in 1957. Shirley, Mount Washington's superintendent from 1872 until 1891, patented 27 designs during his tenure, taking advantage of the early age of advertising to promote his products.

The Pre-Raphaelite movement espoused by William Morris and John Ruskin led to the Aesthetic period, with these prominent thinkers consciously and actively promoting the styles and ideas of Aestheticism in England. The movement quickly took hold in the United States, and proved influential in the most popular designs of the Pairpoint and Mount Washington companies. Frederick Shirley, Mount Washington's superintendent from 1874 to 1891, was a prolific designer who bowed to popular tastes, with designs featuring typical aesthetic motifs such as flowers, vines, ferns, and nymphs. Thomas J. Pairpoint led his company in a similar direction, creating designs inspired by nature and the literature of the period, including a centerpiece based on Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*.

Both Pairpoint and Shirley responded to popular tastes, often using the muted colors typically used in Aesthetic painting. The movement was also marked by an elevated interest in Japanese art, and Mount Washington's glass often includes elements from

this rich decorative tradition. The companies could hardly be included in the Aesthetic movement's ideal of "art for art's sake;" they clearly used the trends of the time to create beautiful products in an eager market. While Shirley and Pairpoint participated in the movement, it was largely for their own financial gain.

New Bedford Art Glass and Silver

Frederick S. Shirley received a patent in September 1879 for what is considered to be the first art glass in America. Originally called "Sicilian Ware," lava glass was created by adding a small amount of volcanic slag (supposedly from Sicily's Mt. Etna) to the glass batch to produce a rich black (or, on rare occasions, pink) background. Irregular pieces of bright pink, blue, yellow, and green glass were rolled into the surface of the black glass, and forms were shaped using the traditional glassblowing process. The glass was not very popular at the time of its manufacture, although today collectors consider it to be one of the most desirable Mount Washington art glasses.

Mount Washington produced cut glass by hand, grinding decorative lines into the surface of the glass using spinning stone wheels. A style developed in the 1880s but dating back to antiquity, the entire surface of each piece is covered with sparkling cut facets, giving the glass a diamond-like sparkle. The Mount Washington Glass Company ran an extensive cutting shop, and three independent shops were started in New Bedford by former employees of the company.

Amberina or "rose amber" glass is known for its distinctive color scheme – rich red at the top fading to yellow-amber at the base. It was made by adding a small amount of soluble gold to the formula for amber glass. Reheating portions of the glass during the blowing process caused the gold to "strike" a rich ruby color. The pattern was patented by Joseph Locke of the New England Glass Company in 1883, but the Mount Washington Glass Company and its successors produced it from 1883 until the mid-20th century.

An opaque glass patented by Frederick S. Shirley in 1885, Burmese glass is made by mixing uranium oxide and gold into the batch to produce the deep coral pink that shades to translucent yellow. Shirley gave Burmese glass to both President Grover Cleveland and Queen Victoria in 1886; according to myth, the glass got its name from Queen Victoria, who, upon seeing it, exclaimed that it reminded her of a Burmese sunset.

In 1886 Frederick Shirley patented a glass-making process that was similar to Burmese, but replaced the uranium in the batch with a small amount of cobalt or copper oxide. The resulting Peach Blow glass shades from dusty-rose at the top to a fading bluish white at the base. The forms and shapes followed those created in Burmese. Pieces were

similarly decorated with enamel or painted embellishments, including designs meant to mimic embroidery and inscriptions in verse. Peach Blow was not especially popular and production lasted for only two years, making it one of the rarest Mount Washington glass lines.

The Crown Milano glass line at the Mount Washington Glass Company featured opaque pastel backgrounds with fine enamel and gold details. Frederick Shirley and decorating shop superintendent Albert Steffin received a joint patent for decorating white opal glassware in July 1886. In 1893, the company patented the signature “CM” mark printed on the underside of Crown Milano wares. Colonial ware is almost identical to Crown Milano glass, but it has a shiny surface. Colonial ware can feature scenes of people in colonial dress or more typical Crown Milano patterns.

Perhaps the most sought-after glass line at Mount Washington was Royal Flemish glass, created by Albert Steffin in 1888 and patented in 1894. The base for the glass is clear and transparent, with acid etching producing matte surfaces. Colored enamels were fired to the inside of the glass to create the illusion of stained glass. Each piece was hand-decorated with gold relief and featured popular motifs, including coins and peacocks.

Following the trend of naming glass lines after exotic places, Verona glass is an extremely rare line from the 1890s, a clear glass with exterior decoration in silhouette shapes.

Featuring objects with both glass and metal elements, the Pairpoint Corporation’s Fine Arts line perfectly encapsulates the history of the two businesses that merged to form it: the Mount Washington Glass Company and the Pairpoint Manufacturing Company. Fine Arts pieces are engraved glass bowls or compotes on elaborate silverplate bases.

The Pairpoint Corporation table lamps on display in this gallery exemplify two important types of glass production: obverse glass and puffy glass. Obverse glass is hand-painted on the inside, creating a soft effect. These were produced from 1907 to 1929, and many Pairpoint designers – including Frank Guba – would have painted the lamps themselves. About half of these painted lamp shades were made from puffy glass, produced in molds coated in beeswax to prevent mold lines from appearing in the final product. Before painting, puffy glass was treated with acid to give the exterior a frosted effect. All painted glass shades were kiln fired multiple times to make the paint hard and permanent.

Vaseline glass is a milky yellow glass, so named in the 1920s because of its resemblance to petroleum jelly. The term can also describe glass of various cuts that ranges in color from transparent yellow to bright green. It gets its color from the small amount of uranium in the glass, which causes it to glow electric green under UV light. Production

of this once-common glass fell drastically in the 1940s when the Cold War caused restrictions on uranium availability for companies in the United States.

Silver products had been widely popular in the United States for over a century when the Pairpoint Manufacturing Company was founded. Vessels were made from lumps of silver that were hammered into sheets, shaped, and then engraved. Smaller elements were cast and soldered, a painstaking process that required great skill. The first silver mine in the American west was discovered in Nevada in 1859, which, partnered with the development of new silver production technologies, increased the availability of silver goods. The economic boom of the post-Civil War era increased the demand for silver, and what had previously been a business dominated by individual craftsmen became a major American industry.

Women and the Aesthetic Movement

Why is Jenny Lind relevant to this exhibit? The soprano Jenny Lind (1820-1887), known as the Swedish Nightingale, gained immense popularity in Europe as the prima donna of the Royal Opera in Stockholm but was not an American household name until P.T. Barnum hired her for an American tour in 1850. Through shrewd marketing before Lind's arrival, Barnum drew in huge crowds for 93 performances nationwide, making Lind and her famous voice a sensation; arguably, Barnum created one of the first American celebrities. She drew enormous crowds even though few Americans had ever heard her sing – in fact, over 40,000 people greeted her ship when she first arrived in New York Harbor. She even drew critics, most notably poet Walt Whitman. Barnum billed her as a philanthropist as well as a musician – Lind became the standard of femininity and artistry for a generation of women. She donated \$10,000 of her concert earnings to American charities, further confirming her status as “America's sweetheart.” Bridges, buildings, and roads (including one in New Bedford) were named after her as she took the country by storm. Lind had originally signed on to perform 150 concerts with Barnum, but she ended her contract with Barnum early because of personal differences. She continued performing on her own, but was never as successful as she had been with Barnum. In 1852, Lind married her accompanist and returned with him to Europe. For the rest of her life, she was a mother and teacher, rarely stepping onstage again.

Why is the portrait of Elizabeth Rotch relevant? English-born Thomas Sully spent most of his life moving through the prominent social and artistic circles of Philadelphia. He studied in England, but became known in the United States as one of the best portrait painters of his era; of his over 2,600 extant paintings, over 2,000 are portraits. His subject, Elizabeth Rotch Angier (1815-1884), was the daughter of Joseph Rotch, one of three brothers who all had a prominent hand in the New Bedford whaling industry.

Just eighteen at the time of this painting, Rotch would later marry Reverend Joseph Angier, minister of the Milton Congregational Church in Milton Hills. The casual pose and glowing colors of this portrait exemplify Sully's typically idealized depictions of his female subjects. A favorite of Queen Victoria after spending her coronation year in England, Sully returned to the United States to work on two full-length portraits of the queen, which were the subjects of the first artistic copyright lawsuit brought before an American court.