
Charles Rohlfs’s furniture has long been recognized for its idiosyncratic aesthetic, skilful execution, and creative influence. This handsome and accessible catalog details each of those elements and provides the first major scholarly and compelling study of an important American craftsman and designer. It accompanies an exhibition, organized by the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Chipstone Foundation, and American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation and is authored by Joseph Cunningham, curator of the American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation.

Rohlfs was married to Anna Katharine Green, a successful writer of novels, mysteries, and poems. Using archival materials recently donated to the Winterthur Library by Rohlfs’s great-granddaughter, Cunningham provides convincing evidence that Rohlfs and his wife closely collaborated on furniture design and on decorative elements and carved motifs that characterize his furniture. Comparisons between decorative details on book jackets designed by Green with similar elements carved on Rohlfs’s work are convincing examples of their partnership.

Rohlfs’ varied career path included modest success on stage, occasionally in productions written by his wife. After moving to Buffalo, New York, he designed and patented decorative elements on cast-iron stoves and created furniture for personal use in the 1880s and 1890s. After an extensive trip to Europe that inspired the couple’s artistic aesthetic, Rohlfs’s career as a furniture maker flourished. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, he accepted commissions for furniture and interiors and produced, from his small workshop in Buffalo, commercial furniture. This volume documents the development of his craft, and deftly presents Rohlfs’s influence on contemporaries, including Gustav Stickley and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Although Rohlfs’s furniture designs, materials, and techniques bear many hallmarks of other pieces from both the Arts and Crafts movement and from the Art Nouveau period, he did not consider his furniture a part of any movement. Rather, he insisted that he produced “artistic furniture” from his own singular vision.

The book includes substantive endnotes, a selective bibliography, and an extensive index. It is generously illustrated with photographs and drawings, including many previously unpublished images of furniture and accessories. Researchers and historians of craft, furniture, and interior design will find this an essential addition to decorative arts collections.

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