

Antiques

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Brass: Roll It, Spin It Or Stamp It, To Suit Your Fancy

One of the small, must-see shows this summer is "A Brass Menagerie: Metalwork of the Aesthetic Movement" at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture. It will make you smile.

On parade are about 75 shiny examples of wildly whimsical, flamboyant and fanciful American brasswares: tables, lamps, chandeliers, fire-dogs, clocks, even doorknobs. Mostly manufactured from 1880 to 1890, these utilitarian objects are festooned with Gothic motifs, Japanese dragons, overscaled bird claws and stylized flowers. At first you might dismiss this work, known as "art brass," as eccentric, but it merits a closer look because it is so inventive and, yes, hilarious. It is on view at the Bard Center, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan, through Oct. 14.

"This show should be an eye opener," said Deedee Wigmore, a New York paintings dealer who has been collecting Aesthetic Movement brass for 20 years and lent several pieces to the show. "There is Japonisme, Modern Gothic, Aesthetic Movement — the influences are very international and very eclectic."

Nina Stritzler-Levine, the director of exhibitions at Bard, said, "The real importance of the exhibition is it gives credence to the most basic types of metal, like brass, and attempts to dispel hierarchies of materials. Who says you have to show gold or silver?"

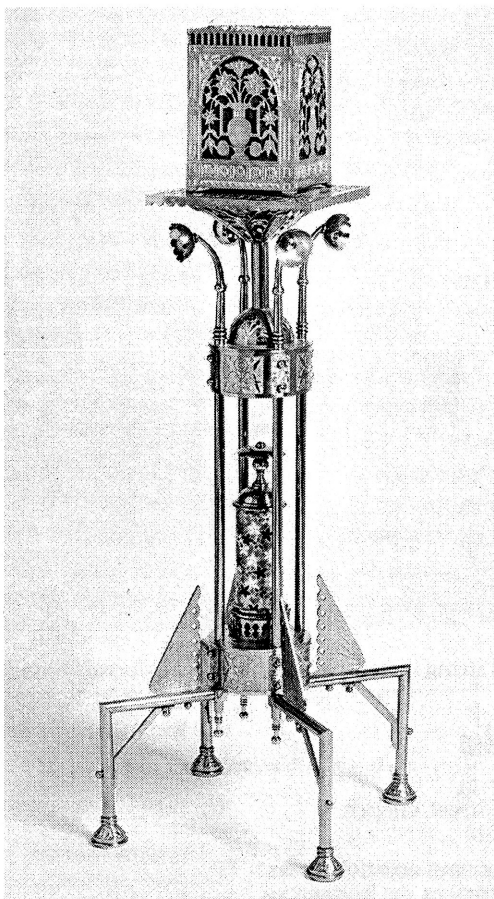
American brass manufacturers clearly took note of the success of the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876, which introduced exotic foreign designs to this country. They studied the Japanese wares and began mixing metals, combining brass with bronze and silver to create dramatic effects. They borrowed motifs: stylized clouds, cranes, butterflies and mon (Japanese family crests).

Looking at the English Aesthetic Movement decorative arts, they borrowed decorations derived from nature and Gothic, Moorish and Persian design elements. Yet they did not embrace the English movement's credo: "art for art's sake."

"The influence is about surface decoration, not ideological ideas," Ms. Stritzler-Levine said.

"In contrast to the English Arts and Crafts Movement, Americans did not despise the machine and embraced things that industrialization made available," said Nina Gray, an independent curator who did research for the show. "What was appealing was the combination of technology and design."

"Art brass" was available to the middle class only because of the Industrial Revolution. Anna Tobin D'Ambrosio, the curator of decorative arts at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, N.Y., writes in the catalog, "The second half of the 19th century was a salient period for the development of machinery and techniques that



Collection of Robert Tuggle and Paul Jeromack

Table with flowerpot (1880-85) from "Brass Menagerie" at the Bard Graduate Center.

made it easier to form and decorate metals, which in turn made it simple and cost-effective to reproduce fashionable accessories and larger furnishings." Ms. D'Ambrosio is the curator of the show, which was first seen in Utica.

It is easy to see why American companies were taken with brass. It is inexpensive, doesn't rust, and you can roll it, hammer it, spin it and patinate it.

"Brass is as agreeable a metal to work as pure silver," Albert S. Bolles writes in "Industrial History of the United States" (1879), quoted in the catalog. "In thin plates it can be stamped and embossed in any form. It spins up beautifully in a lathe. It can be drawn out into delicate wire and is so malleable that it can be beaten out almost like gold leaf itself for the purposes of cheap gilding."

Before the 19th century brass was used for household utensils. Only after 1840 was it employed for furniture and decorations, and it became popular very quickly. By the 1880s there were more than 40 brass manufacturers in Connecticut alone, with 6,000 workers.

Most companies studied the same pattern books and produced similar products. Certain pieces in the show are an amalgam of similar

parts that appear, in different configurations, in others.

For example one tall, slender table with a flowerpot, made about 1880 by the Bradley & Hubbard Manufacturing Company of Meriden, Conn., has a turquoise ceramic cylinder inset in its baluster support; wing, vine and flower motifs on its brass panels; and pad feet — all of which appear in different iterations on other tables.

"That table is called the rocket, and the shape is quite famous," said Margot Johnson, a longtime New York dealer who just moved to 135 East 65th Street in Manhattan. Ms. Johnson is considered the top dealer in American Aesthetic Movement pieces.

"I've seen dozens of certain table models," said Robert Tuggle, a New York collector who also lent to the show. He said he liked antique brass "because it is something you can collect when it rains at the flea market."

While brass tables like the "rocket" do not come up often on the market — one sold last year for \$35,000 — some fairly similar models are more common. (Prices for brass furniture from the 1880s range from \$500 to about \$85,000 apiece.)

Very few examples in the show are stripped down in form. The best might be a small circular drinks table with tubular legs that are bulging with perfectly round balusters. The table looks like a giant abacus in the round. From an unknown maker, it almost looks as if the Viennese Secessionist architect Adolf Loos designed it; it is that modern.

This is the kind of furniture that appeals to Andrew Van Styn, an architecturally trained collector and private dealer in Baltimore who also lent items to the show. "The table may be elaborate, but I respond to its nonrepresentational geometry and decorative vocabulary," he said. "The design is structurally based."

He compared it to Le Corbusier's steel furniture.

Then he noted another example in the show catalog: an ad from Bradley & Hubbard for a simple brass stand with a planter top. Here the brass cylinders forming the legs were joined by brass rings, so they looked like bamboo tree trunks.

"It's just how Warren McArthur did his aluminum tubular furniture in the 1930s," Mr. Van Styn said. "The decoration grows out of the tectonic structure."

The Bard show has something for nearly everyone, style-wise.

"It's a wonderfully focused show, yet the objects address the inner lives of different interests," Mr. Van Styn said. "They are cleverly mass-produced items that appeal to a wide-ranging 19th-century sensibility."

He said that while some saw Art Nouveau evolving from the Japonisme of the period, others thought the Arts and Crafts Movement grew out of Modern Gothic.

"It was a moment in history when things were complex," he said. At the same time, he noted with a laugh, "America was beginning her love affair with the Colonial Revival, which was going back to preindustrial, early America for inspiration." Go figure.