

Is it Worthwhile?

Edward Bok

Introduction

Edward Bok (1863-1930), immigrated with his family from The Netherlands to Brooklyn, New York in 1869. He was editor of Ladies' Home Journal from 1889 until his death in 1930. Bok's in-laws founded and edited the magazine during the 1880s, although it was Bok who turned Ladies' Home Journal into a powerful arbiter of white, middle-class identity. Bok's magazine taught women what their homes should look like, how they should raise their children, what they should cook for family and guests, how they should dress, and what they should buy. Bok's in-laws - who founded the magazine as a supplement of another magazine called Tribune and Farmer - were one of the wealthiest American families in history (not at "that time in history," but the entire history of the United States), and Bok amassed a fortune during his lifetime as well. His son, William Curtis Bok, was a Supreme Court justice during the 1930s, and his grandson Derek Bok, served as President of Harvard University from 1971 until 1991.

In this article, published in Ladies Home Journal in 1900, Bok promoted the Arts and Crafts Movement aesthetic of clean, simple lines and natural materials and railed against the Victorian emphasis on formal spaces and heavy, dark furniture. Bok's editorials in Ladies Home Journal reinforced Gustav Stickley's vision of the middle-class home, discussed in the next selection¹.

Primary Source

There are no people on the face of the earth who litter up the rooms of their homes with so much useless, and consequently bad, furnishing as do the Americans. The curse of the American home to-day is useless bric-a-brac. A room in which we feel that we can freely breathe is so rare that we are instinctively surprised when we see one. It is the exception, rather than the rule, that we find a restful room.

As a matter of fact, to this common error of over-furnishing so many of our homes are directly due many of the nervous breakdowns of our women. The average American woman is a perfect slave to the useless rubbish which she has in her rooms. This rubbish, of a costly nature where plenty exists, and of a cheap and tawdry character in homes of moderate incomes, is making housekeeping a nerve-racking burden. A goodly number of these women are unconscious of

¹ Originally published as an editorial in [*Ladies' Home Journal*, November, 1900](#). Believed to be in the public domain.

their mistakes. Others, if not absolutely conscious, feel that something is wrong in their homes, yet they know not exactly what it is. But all are loath, yes, I may say afraid, to simplify things.

They fear the criticism of the outside world that their homes are sparsely furnished; they dread the possibility that their rooms may be called "bare." They fear to give way to common-sense. It is positively rare, but tremendously exhilarating, to find a woman, as one does now and then, who is courageous enough to furnish her home with an eye single to comfort and practical utility, and who refuses to have her home lowered to a plane of mediocrity by filling it with useless bric-a-brac and jimcracks², the only mission of which seems to be to offend the eye and accumulate dust. . . .

We have a prevalent folly of setting aside a room in our houses which we rarely use. If means are at our command we crowd such a room full of puny gilt chairs, upon which no one dares to sit; on the walls we hang impossible paintings, with equally impossible, massive gold frames; an "elegant" sofa upholstered in silk or satin, with a gilded frame, is introduced; a gold clock which never runs is put on a mantel of solid onyx; a "Chippendale" cabinet is added – which always harmonizes so superbly with ah Louis XV sofa or chair – and we have we call a "drawingroom." Just whom or what it "draws" I have never been able to see unless it draws attention to too much money and no taste. If we are of moderate means, then we make the "drawing-room" as closely resemble one in some wealthy home we know of as possible, only with limited means we must purchase cheaper articles. Then we have as good an example of the showroom of a cheap furniture store as it is possible to obtain.

If we are poor, then we set around as stiffly and unnaturally as we can, like trees in a toy-garden, four or five black haircloth chairs; we put a marble-top table with a photo album on it in the center; a haircloth sofa which no one can possibly sit on; a Franklin stove that is never lighted; we hang a wreath of wax flowers in a glass case on the walls adding, perhaps, a coffin-plate to add a cheerful tone to the room³; a carpet riotous with the most gorgeous roses is put on the floor, and then, after we have carefully pulled down every shade into the room, so as to exclude God's pure sunshine and get a nice, musty and cemeterial smell into the room, we have what we call, in America, a parlor. And in either case we have a "best room," so best that we never use it, and people shown it are always glad to get out of it. But we have a "drawing-room," or a "parlor," and, in the minds of some, without such a room, no house is complete.

We seem to lose sight of the fact that we are most comfortable when we are most natural. We strive to paint the lily. We begin with our hall and fill it with chairs, tables, and the Lord knows what we don't put into a hall that doesn't belong there. If we buy a rug for the hall we seem bent on getting one so heavy that no one in the house can lift it for cleaning. We try our best to turn a practical thing into a burden. We miss the chief purpose of a hall: which is simply to greet the

² "Jimcrack" (alternative spelling: gimcrack) means a cheap, but showy object, i.e., tacky (and also cheap). Booker T. Washington called this kind of stuff "gewgaws" in the speech we read.

³ A coffin-plate is just what it sounds like – a decorative metal plate attached to a coffin inscribed with the name of the deceased, the date of their death, and other personal information. These plates were taken home by family members for display, so clearly this was a sarcastic (or sardonic, perhaps?) comment.

comer to our house. It is where one enter, and it therefore should partake of welcome or cheerful greeting. Hence, it should be light, airy, free to move about in, of cheerful colors and bright, warm tones. Instead the majority of halls are full of furniture, which ought to be in the rooms – or truthfully speaking, in an auction room – and every device is used to subdue.

Then, when we get into the room which should be the sanctuaries of a home and restful to the eye and mind, we are confront with a perfect confusion of color and plan which dissipates and fails of one single central note. Libraries and sitting-rooms, which should be absolutely restful and subdued, are made so busy that the mind wanders hopelessly from one point to another in the hope of finding some quiet resting-place. The dignity and restfulness of wall space are not allowed: on the contrary, every inch of space must be filled with some picture. To heighten the garish effect, we frame our pictures in massive gilt frames where soft stained woods should be used. It never occurs to us to consider the purpose of a frame, or to see whether some other treatment of frame would add greater value to a picture or bring out its qualities better. We simply labor under the idea that gilt frames lend richness and elegance to a room, and s gilt frames it must be.

Now to suggest a departure from these atrocities is to suggest to many something so radical that they are absolutely afraid. Yet we must reach a more intelligent height with regard to furnishing our homes. True, it would mean a general clearing-out in many of our rooms. But that would be blessing. We must get to that point where we will allow nothing in our homes except those things for which we have an actual use. This does not mean that our homes would be “too plain,” as many will object. Simplicity is not plainness: it is, I repeat, the highest form of good art and good taste. No one can quarrel with it. It is beyond criticism. This is easy to believe and see if we will only allow ourselves to get away from the present notion that the ornate is the ornamental. We must believe that what is ornate is never ornamental, and never in good taste. Ornateness is simply artificiality, and nothing artificial can be ornamental...

More simplicity in our homes would make our lives simpler. Many women would live fuller lives because they would have more time. As it is, hundreds of women of all positions in life are to-day the slaves of their homes and what they have crowded into them. Instead of being above inanimate objects of wood and clothes and silks, their lives are dominated by them. They are the slaves of their furniture and useless bric-a-brac⁴. One hears men constantly complain of this. The condition is not a safe one for wives. No woman can afford to allow a lot of unnecessary furnishings to rule her life. She should be their master. Comfort is essential to our happiness. But with comfort we should stop. Then we are the safe side. But we get on and over the danger line when we go beyond...it is astonishing how much we can do without and be a thousand times the better for it.

We need only to be natural: to get back to our real, inner selves. Then we are simple. It is only because we have got away from the simple and the natural that so many of our homes are cluttered up as they are, and our lives full of things that are not worth the while. We have bent the knee to show, to display, and we have lowered ourselves in doing it: surrounded ourselves with the trivial and the useless: and fining our lives with the poison of artificiality and the

⁴ Another term for cheap knickknacks intended to pass as good taste (according to Bok).

unnatural, we have pushed the Real: the Natural: the Simple: the Beautiful—the best and most lasting things—out of our lives. Now, I ask, in all fairness: Is it worth-while?

The Craftsman Home

Gustav Stickley

Introduction

Gustav Stickley, (1858-1942) was born in Osceola, Wisconsin to German immigrants. He worked in various aspect of the furniture-making business through the 1890s, and by 1901 his furniture and house designs had gained a considerable following among progressive reformers and the growing white middle-class. Stickley's style, which he called Craftsman, emphasized clean, simple lines, lack of ornamentation, and natural materials like wood and glass. Stickley's Craftsman style took inspiration from the Arts and Crafts Movement, which begin in Europe as a rejection of the Victorian aesthetic of elaborate ornamentation, mass-produced materials, and heavy, dark furniture.

In 1901, Stickley started publishing *The Craftsman* monthly magazine, which included essays on art and design, crafts and gardening, as well as fiction, poetry, and even sheet music. Stickley steadfastly decried the effects of industrialization in the monthly editorial, and instead advocated for simplicity in design (and life), and encouraged a do-it-yourself ethic and aesthetic. Readers of *The Craftsman* could order architectural plans for homes published in the magazine. These designs became so popular that the title of the magazine became ubiquitous for an affordable, middle-class home in the early twentieth century – the Craftsman Bungalow. “*The Craftsman*” magazine, along with “*Ladies' Home Journal*,” not only shaped the new middle-class home literally; they also indelibly linked consumption and respectability, a key component of middle-class identity.⁵

Primary Source

That the influence of the home is of the first importance in the shaping of character is a fact too well understood and too generally admitted to be offered here as a new idea. One need only turn to the pages of history to find abundant proof of the unerring action of Nature's law, for without

⁵ The original essay was published in a book of essays edited by Stickley called [*Craftsman Homes*](#). Online archive of [*The Craftsman*](#) magazines from 1901-1916. These sources are believed to be in the public domain.

exception the people whose lives are lived simply and wholesomely in the open who have a high degree of the sense of the sacredness of the home, are the people who have made the greatest strides in the progress of the race. When luxury enters in and a thousand artificial requirements come to be regarded as real needs, the nation is on the brink of degeneration...

Even in the rush and hurry of life in our busy cities we remember well the quality given to the growing nation by such men and women a generation or two ago and, in spite of the chaotic conditions brought about by our passion for money-getting, extravagance and show, we have still reason to believe that the dominant characteristics of the pioneer yet shape what are the salient qualities in American life.

To preserve these characteristics and to bring back to individual life and work the vigorous constructive spirit which during the last half-century has spent its activities in commercial and industrial expansion, is, in a nutshell, the Craftsman idea. We need to straighten out our standards and to get rid of a lot of rubbish that we have accumulated along with our wealth and commercial supremacy. It is not that we are too energetic, but that in many ways we have wasted and misused our energy precisely as we have wasted and misused so many of our wonderful natural resources. All we really need is a change in our point of view toward life and a keener perception regarding the things that count and the things which merely burden us. This being the case, it would seem obvious that the place to begin a readjustment is in the home, for it is only natural that the relief from friction which would follow the ordering of our lives along more simple and reasonable lines would not only assure greater comfort, and therefore greater efficiency, to the workers of the nation, but would give the children a chance to grow up under conditions which would be conducive to a higher degree of mental, moral and physical efficiency.

Therefore, we regard it as at least a step in the direction of bringing about better conditions when we try to plan and build houses which will simplify the work of home life and add to its wholesome joy and comfort. We have already made it plain to our readers that we do not believe in large houses with many rooms elaborately decorated and furnished, for the reason that these seem so essentially an outcome of the artificial conditions that lay such harassing burdens upon modern life and form such a serious menace to our ethical standards. Breeding as it does the spirit of extravagance and of discontent which in the end destroys all the sweetness of home life, the desire for luxury and show not only burdens beyond his strength the man who is ambitious to provide for his wife and children surroundings which are as good as the best, but taxes to the utmost the woman who is trying to keep up the appearances which she believes should belong to her station in life. Worst of all, it starts the children with standards which, in nine cases out of ten, utterly preclude the possibility of their beginning life on their own account in a simple and sensible way.

Boys who are brought up in such homes are taught by the silent influence of their early surroundings, to take it for granted that they must not marry until they are able to keep up an establishment of equal pretensions, an girl also take it as a matter of course that marriage must mean something quite as luxurious as their childhood home or it is not a paying investment for their youth and beauty. Everyone who thinks at all deplores the kind of life that marks a man's

face with the haggard lines of anxiety and makes him sharp and often unscrupulous in business, with no ambition beyond large profits and a rapid rise in the business world.

Also, we all realize regretfully the extravagance and uselessness of many of our women and admit that one of the gravest evils of our times is the light touch-and-go attitude toward marriage, which breaks up so many homes and makes the divorce courts in America a by-word to the world. But when we think into it a little more deeply, we have to acknowledge that such conditions are the logical outcome of our standards of living and that these standards are always shaped in the home.

That is why we have from the first planned houses that are based on the big fundamental principles of honesty, simplicity and usefulness - the kind of houses that children will rejoice all their lives to remember as "home," and that give a sense of peace and comfort to the tired men who go back to them when the day's work is done. Because we believe that the healthiest and happiest life is that which maintains the closest relationship with out-of-doors, we have planned our houses with outdoor living rooms, dining rooms and sleeping rooms, and many windows to let in plenty of air and sunlight.