

# STYLE OF PRESENTATION

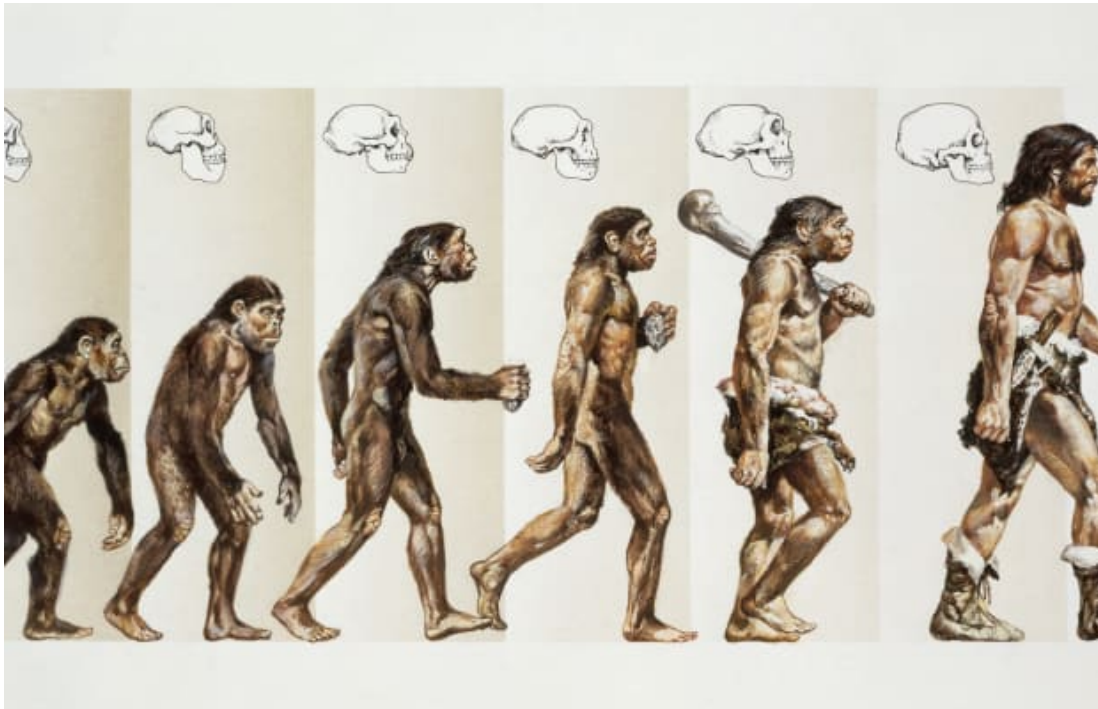


Illustration: The History Channel

# Gustav Stickley's Metal Shop: Reform, Design and the Business of Craft

Jonathan Clancy

This article documents the history of Gustav Stickley's metal shop by examining the gulf it straddled between the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement and the pressures of the factory system. A careful analysis of the shop's productions, in concert with the extant business records at the Winterthur Library, provides a rare glimpse into Stickley's operations, revealing a different structure to the workforce than previously presumed. By framing the metal shop as an example of batch production, the false binary of craft production / mass production tension dissolves, allowing for a more nuanced examination of the rhetoric and practice of labour. What emerges is not so much a view of the Arts and Crafts as a stylistic choice, and certainly not as reactionary and anti-modern, but as a strategy attempting to preserve the notion of 'authenticity' in a culture whose rapid change threatened to destabilize the traditional meanings of labour and craft.

**Keywords:** Arts and Crafts—crafts history—metals—division of labour—design history—United States

Despite the attention paid to Gustav Stickley's legacy within the history of the Arts and Crafts movement in America, surprisingly little has been written about his contributions in the field of metalwork [1].<sup>1</sup> This omission is not unique to Stickley, but is part of a larger trend within the scholarship on the movement. Although the furniture and pottery of the movement have received substantial attention in monographs and exhibitions, metalwork has been overlooked. In hindsight, because of the ease and enthusiasm with which American practitioners took to working with metals, this is a significant lacuna. Indeed, placing Stickley's venture in the context of his contemporaries reveals a wide range of production practices, from single designer-artisans, to small firms, to larger corporate enterprises. Although his production of metalwares was brief—lasting only from about 1902 to 1916—the shop's practices regarding the division of labour, design appropriation and methods of production are indicative of larger trends within the Art and Crafts movement. A close examination of the metal shop's practices illustrates some of the larger tensions inherent throughout the movement as practitioners sought to distinguish themselves from the modern factory system of production, even while adopting many of its practices.

Stickley's roles as tastemaker and furniture designer often overshadow a fundamental truth: he was an entrepreneur, the head of a company which continually penetrated deeper into the market with new products and services throughout its eighteen years of operation.<sup>2</sup> Beginning principally as a chair-maker in 1896, Stickley soon expanded into the magazine business (1901), metalwork and lighting (1902), textiles (1903) and then architectural design (1904). He engaged new markets by introducing new goods and services, as well as by establishing a physical presence through retail branches in New York (1905), Boston (1908) and Washington, DC (1912). Instead creating a model that opposed the modern system of manufacturing, Stickley's operation resembled the

organically from the company's needs, but equally important was a large supply of metal workers from which to draw, as a result of the presence of nearby batch manufacturers.<sup>3</sup> In 1908, the secretary of the Metal Trades Association noted: 'Industrial conditions in Syracuse are better than in any city of the country . . . Factories in no city in the country are running so full as those in our line in Syracuse.'<sup>4</sup> This network of workers and employers enabled Stickley to create a department whose core employees were few, but whose size could be quickly tailored to meet production demands in a given period. Indeed, throughout the metal shop's history, the number of employees on payroll dropped consistently in the months of May through August, before increasing during the autumn [8]. While Stickley's business relied on immigrant labourers, which held largely negative connotations for many at this time, his rhetoric promoted this fact as evidence of the old world skills-and-craft revival he was engaged in. 'The artisans', readers were informed, 'can trace a long ancestry of toil; their forefathers having for generations exercised the same trade in a single city, village, or hamlet of the old world.'<sup>5</sup>

## Craftsmen in a Factory Setting

The fundamental tension between the business efficiencies necessary for financial success and the need to engage the notion of authenticity that consumers sought from the Arts and Crafts movement often threatened to destabilize the link between the methods of production, the philosophical underpinnings of the movement, and the formal designs of the objects. While it was necessary to signal the handcrafted nature of an object, thus avoiding the appearance of a machined finish, there was an equally valid fear that this insistence might reward inferiorly skilled craftsmen and undermine one of the movement's fundamental tenets. As one critic in *The New York Times* noted:

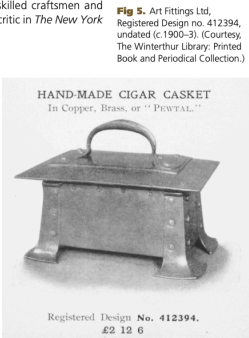
. . . it is dangerous at this stage of the arts and crafts movement to insist overmuch on the charms attaching to work in which a lack of 'mechanical' perfection is obvious . . . insistence should for a long time to come, probably, be laid upon the desirability of as much perfection as the hand can be trained to produce.<sup>6</sup>

In metal work, this tension was often mediated by eliminating the highly plished finish—which a generation before would have been the mark of a craftsman's skills—in favour of the tool marks as a visual record of the individual worker's presence.

Stickley made numerous concessions to modern industry—outsourcing his designs, employing a strict division of labour, setting up shop in an industrial corridor that provided a steady stream of employees as needed—but the metal shop largely resisted the impulse to mechanize production, and instead created wares that remained essentially hand wrought. The shop inventories reveal a workspace dominated by hand tools and spaces for workmen, and virtually devoid of mechanized



**Fig 4.** United Crafts, Cigar Box no. 342, c.1905. (Crabtree Farm, Lake Bluff, IL. Photo: Tom Gleason.)



**Fig 5.** Art Fittings Ltd, Registered Design no. 412394, undated (c.1900–3). (Courtesy, The Winterthur Library; Printed Book and Periodical Collection.)

Gustav Stickley's Metal Shop

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## Introduction: Democratic Inequality

The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future in life.

—PLATO

My story is part of the larger American story.

—BARACK OBAMA

I am surrounded by black and Latino boys.

As I looked around the common room of my new dorm this was all I could think about. It was September 1993, and I was a rather young fourteen-year-old leaving home for the first time. My parents, who had helped me unpack my room and were about to say good-bye, noticed as well. We didn't say anything to one another. But the surprise on their faces was mirrored on my own. This was not what I expected, enrolling at a place like St. Paul's School. I thought I would be unlike everyone else. I thought my name and just-darker-than-olive skin would make me the most extreme outlier among the students. But though my parents grew up in small rural villages in Pakistan and Ireland and my father was not white, they had become wealthy. My father was a successful surgeon; my mother was a nurse. I had been at private school since seventh grade, and being partly from the Indian subcontinent hardly afforded one oppressed minority status. For the other boys around me, those from poor neighborhoods in America's urban centers, St. Paul's was a much more jarring experience.

I quickly realized that St. Paul's was far from racially diverse. That sea of dark skin only existed because we all lived in the same place: the minority student dorm. There was one for girls and one for boys. The other eighteen houses on campus were overwhelmingly filled with those whom you would expect to be at a school that educates families like the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts. This sequestering was not an intentionally racist practice of the school. In fact the school was very self-conscious about it and a few years prior tried to distribute students of color across all houses on campus. But the non-white students complained. Though their neighborhoods of Harlem and the Upper East Side might border each other, a fairly large chasm separated the non-elite and elite students. They had difficulty living with one another. Within a year the minority student dorm returned. Non-white students were sequestered in their own space, just like most of them were in their ethnic neighborhoods back home.

I grew up in a variety of neighborhoods, but like most Americans, none of them was particularly diverse.<sup>1</sup> My parents' lives had not been much different until they met one another. In no small part this was because they grew up in rural towns in poor nations. My father's village consisted of subsistence farmers; things like electricity and plumbing arrived during my own childhood visits. My mother grew up on a small farm on the weather-beaten west coast of Ireland. At the time she was born, her family pumped their own water, had no electricity, and cooked on an open hearth. Modern comforts arrived during her childhood.

My parents' story is a familiar one. Their ambitions drove them to the promise of America. Early in life I lived in New York's rural Allegany County. But seeking to make the most of American opportunities, my parents moved to the suburbs of Boston where the schools were better and the chances for me and my brother were greater. There was more to this move than just new schools. The Pontiac that was standard in the driveways of rural America was replaced by a European luxury car. The trips to visit family in Ireland and Pakistan were augmented by tours of Europe, South America, and Asia. My parents did what many immigrants do: they played cultural catch-up. I spent my Saturdays attending the New England Conservatory of Music. Public school education was abandoned for private academies. There was no more time for my religious education. We became cosmopolitan.

For all these changes, my father never lost some of the cultural marks of a rural Pakistani villager, and many in Boston did not let him forget his roots. He was happiest working with

Khan, Shamus Rahman. 2011. *Privilege. The making of an adolescent elite at St. Paul's School.* Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press.

## from *The New Yorker*

March 17, 1997  
ANNALS OF STYLE

### The Coolhunt

*Who decides what's cool?  
Certain kids in certain places—  
and only the coolhunters know who they are.*

by Malcolm Gladwell

1.

Baysie Wightman met DeeDee Gordon, appropriately enough, on a coolhunt. It was 1992. Baysie was a big shot for Converse, and DeeDee, who was barely twenty-one, was running a very cool boutique called Placid Planet, on Newbury Street in Boston. Baysie came in with a camera crew—one she often used when she was coolhunting—and said, 'I've been watching your store, I've seen you, I've heard you know what's up,' because it was Baysie's job at Converse to find people who knew what was up and she thought DeeDee was one of those people. DeeDee says that she responded with reserve—that 'I was like, "Whatever" '—but Baysie said that if DeeDee ever wanted to come and work at Converse she should just call, and nine months later DeeDee called. This was about the time the cool kids

had decided they didn't want the hundred-and-twenty-five-dollar basketball sneaker with seventeen different kinds of high-technology materials and colors and air-cushioned heels anymore. They wanted simplicity and authenticity, and Baysie picked up on that. She brought back the Converse One Star, which was a vulcanized, suede, low-top classic old-school sneaker from the nineteen-seventies, and, sure enough, the One Star quickly became the signature shoe of the retro era. Remember what Kurt Cobain was wearing in the famous picture of him lying dead on the ground after committing suicide? Black Converse One Stars. DeeDee's big score was calling the sandal craze. She had been out in Los Angeles and had kept seeing the white teen-age girls dressing up like cholos, Mexican gangsters, in tight white tank tops known as 'wife beaters,' with a bra strap hanging out, and long shorts and tube socks and

shower sandals. DeeDee recalls, 'I'm like, I'm telling you, Baysie, this is going to hit. There are just too many people wearing it. We have to make a shower sandal.' So Baysie, DeeDee, and a designer came up with the idea of making a retro sneaker-sandal, cutting the back off the One Star and putting a thick outsole on it. It was huge, and, amazingly, it's still huge.

Today, Baysie works for Reebok as general-merchandise manager-part of the team trying to return Reebok to the position it enjoyed in the mid-nineteen-eighties as the country's hottest sneaker company. DeeDee works for an advertising agency in Del Mar called Lambesis, where she puts out a quarterly tip sheet called the L Report on what the cool kids in major American cities are thinking and doing and buying. Baysie and DeeDee are best friends. They talk on the



**NARRATIVE SPECTRUM:**

Non-narrative > Boring  
Narrative > Interesting  
Overly narrative > Confusing

For example, the movie Gravity (and nearly every other Hollywood hit):

- 1 main character: Ryan Stone
- 1 main incident: Spacecraft accident
- 1 clear goal: To get home alive

Olson, Randy. 2015. Houston, we have a narrative: Why science needs story. London: University of Chicago Press.



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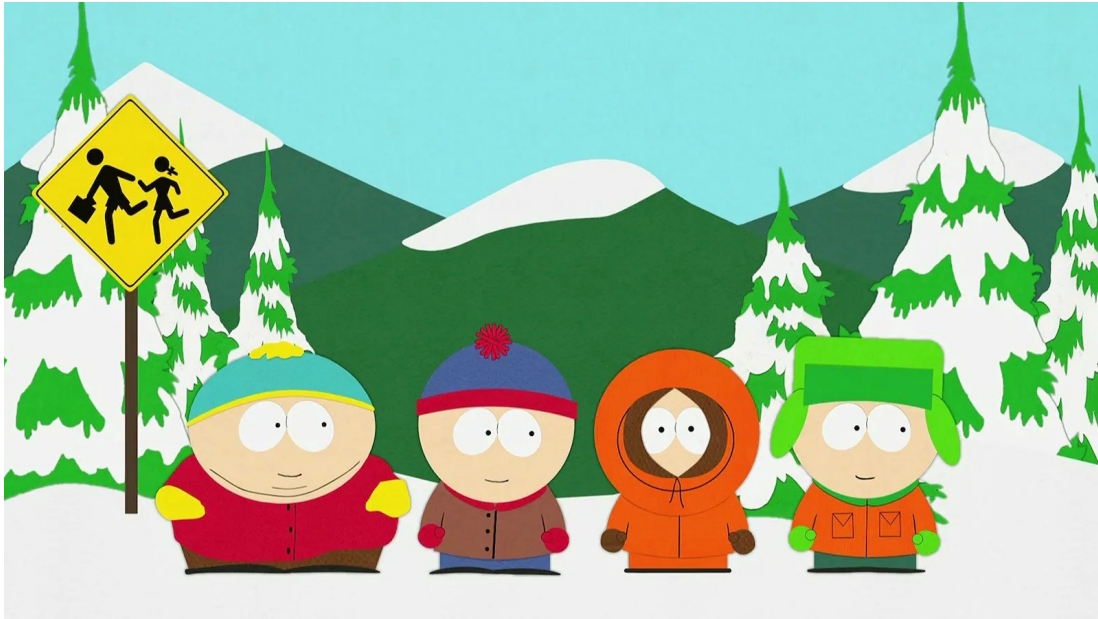
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Instead of dozens of operative figures, plots, concepts etc.,  
Focus on telling one story at a time, but do it well by using  
a simple structure and a detailed narrative.

If you have tons of stories to tell, consider a PhD degree.

Olson, Randy. 2015. Houston, we have a narrative: Why science needs story. London: University of Chicago Press.





Trey Park (South Park creator): "Story is a result of changing most of the "ands" to "but" or "therefore".

ABT-template: \_\_\_\_\_ AND \_\_\_\_\_, BUT \_\_\_\_\_, THEREFORE \_\_\_\_\_.

"Little girl is living on a farm in Kansas AND her life is boring, BUT one day a tornado sweeps her away to the land of Oz; THEREFORE she must undertake a journey to find her way home."

"In my laboratory, we study physiology AND biochemistry, BUT in recent years we've realized the important questions are at the molecular level; THEREFORE we are now investigating the following molecular questions..."

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ABT can be structured in steps.

#### 1. Informative ABT:

"In my lab, we model moderate sleep apnea in rats with a chronic intermittent hypoxia protocol in order to investigate the physiological mechanisms of sustained diurnal blood pressure, BUT we have realised the importance of molecular pathways within the central nervous system contributing towards blood pressure control; THEREFORE we have begun exploring novel molecular pathways that develop as a result of our sleep apnea model."

> **TOO MUCH INFORMATION, TOO DETAILED**

#### 2. Conversational ABT:

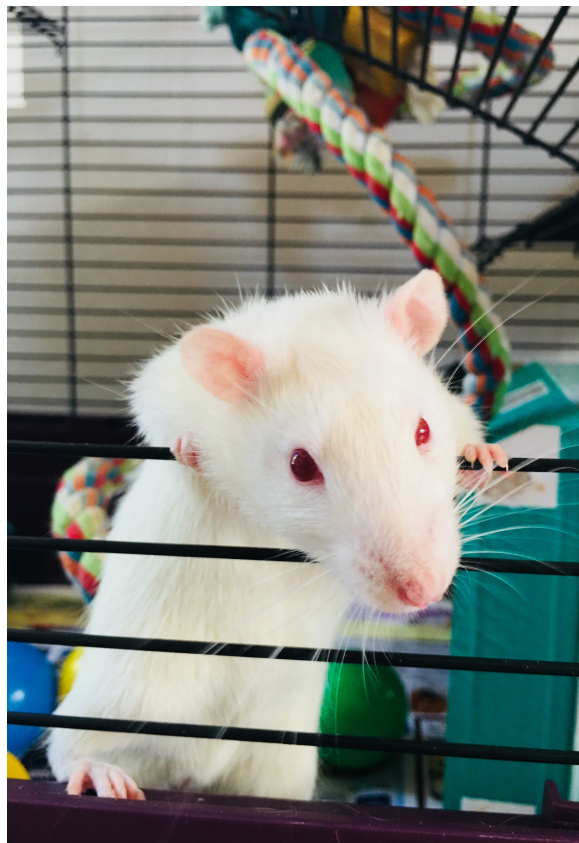
"We were looking at one way BUT realized there's another way THEREFORE we're looking at that way."

>> **TOO LITTLE INFORMATION, TOO GENERIC**

#### 3. Keeper ABT:

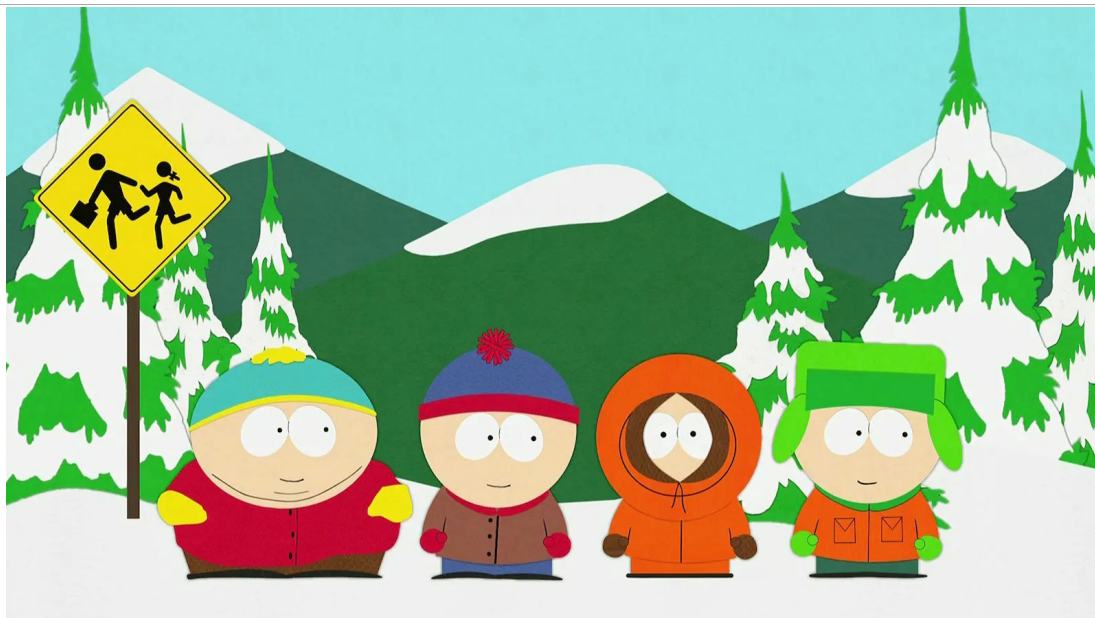
"In my lab, we're studying sleep apnea using rats as our model system, AND we've focused on physiological mechanisms, BUT lately we've realized the real controls may lie at the molecular level in the central nervous system, so AS A RESULT, we've begun exploring novel molecular pathways."

>> **GOOD BALANCE OF DETAILS AND FLOW**



Olson, Randy. 2015. Houston, we have a narrative: Why science needs story. London: University of Chicago Press.

Photo by Annemarie Horne on Unsplash



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When & where	13:15-14:00 Lectures on change	14:14-15:00 Discussion on narrative
25.10. (Q201)	Fashion	Introduction to the course, course work explained
1.11. (F101) + Thu tutoring	Diffusion	Style of Presentation
8.11. (Q201) + Thu tutoring	Lifestyle	Structure of Narrative
15.11. (Q201) + Thu tutoring	Practice	Style of Presentation
<b>22.11. (Q201) + Thu tutoring</b>	<b>Learning</b>	<b>Structure of Narrative</b>
29.11. (Q201) + Thu tutoring	Presentations of unfinished but complete "narrative productions". <b>Notice: May go overtime.</b>	

MUO-E0105 RESEARCH AND INSPIRE 6 CR

# THANK YOU!

WE'LL SEE NEXT TUESDAY  
REMEMBER OPTIONAL ZOOM TUTORING ON THURSDAY AFTERNOON.

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Aalto University  
School of Arts, Design  
and Architecture