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Major Survey of Influential Arts and Crafts Figures Charles and Henry Greene Opens March 13 at the Renwick Gallery

The architecture and decorative arts designed by Charles Greene and his brother Henry Greene a century ago in California are recognized internationally as among the finest of the American Arts and Crafts movement. “The Art and Craft of Greene & Greene,” on view at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum from March 13 through June 7, presents for the first time a diverse range of the Greenes’ work, including furnishings and fixtures long-separated from their houses and from each other.

“The Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Renwick Gallery is thrilled to present, for the first time to visitors on the East Coast, the innovative architecture of Charles and Henry Greene, whose progressive ideas about design still influence California architecture today,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

“The Art and Craft of Greene & Greene,” the most comprehensive exhibition of the brothers’ work to date, examines their legacy with 127 objects in a variety of media, including beautifully inlaid furniture, artfully executed stained glass and metalwork, as well as rare architectural drawings and photographs. The exhibition commemorates the 100th anniversary of The Gamble House, constructed between 1907 and 1909 in Pasadena, Calif., which is one of the Greenes’ best-known commissions. Edward Bosley, the James N. Gamble Director of The Gamble House, and Anne Mallek, curator at The Gamble House, are co-curators of the exhibition. Robyn Kennedy, chief of the Renwick Gallery, and Nicholas Bell, curatorial associate, are coordinating the exhibition at the Renwick Gallery.

Major thematic influences on the Greenes’ work will be explored in the exhibition, such as the role that Japanese architecture, traditional wood joinery and classical proportion played in shaping their design sensibilities. The Greenes carefully considered every detail of the buildings and objects they designed, incorporating European, Asian and Native American influences. Charles Greene openly acknowledged his debt to 19th-century British designer William Morris (1834–1896), often referred to

as the “father” of the Arts and Crafts movement, who believed that the beautiful should also be purposeful. Like their contemporary Frank Lloyd Wright, the Greenes believed architecture to be no less than a design language for life, imbuing their projects with an expressive sensitivity for geography, climate, landscape and lifestyle.

“Charles and Henry Greene created legendary environments for their clients that were both beautiful and functional by drawing on the skills of outstanding craftsmen, as well as their own polytechnic training, formal architectural education and natural artistic sensibilities,” said Kennedy.

Photographs, drawings and descriptions of the Greenes’ major architectural works provide points of departure for interpreting the objects on display. Archival photographs will be accompanied by a video that shows house exteriors, interiors and landscapes as they look today.

Among the objects on display will be a breakfast table (about 1900), which is one of the earliest known examples of the Greenes’ furniture; an entry-hall leaded glass window (1903-04) from the Jennie A. Reeve house, which was the Greenes’ first significant expression of a total design of the living environment; a dining-room armchair (1908-09), dining-room plant stand (1908-09) and an entry-hall bench (1909) from the Robert R. Blacker house; a lantern (1910) from the James A. Culbertson house, which is a signature Greene & Greene light fixture; and a small letter box (1914) for the Gamble family with exquisite silver wire, ebony, ivory, jade and wood inlay.

A 2008 re-creation of a portion of the Arturo Bandini house, designed in 1903 but demolished in the early 1960s, will allow visitors to appreciate the scale and materials of an early Greene and Greene house while demonstrating how the brothers combined Japanese design with Spanish colonial traditions. The Bandini house was frequently cited as a characteristic example of the modern California bungalow.

The Greenes’ collaboration with master builder Peter Hall and his brother John Hall, a furniture maker, which began in 1905, allowed for a new refinement in their furniture designs. Examples on display in the exhibition include the dining-room armchair (1906) from the Laurabelle Robinson house that shows the Chinese Ming-era humpback stretcher, or “cloud lift,” which would become one of the Greenes’ signature motifs, and the delicately tapered spindles of the Bolton house hall chair (1907).

Although successful and productive, the Greenes’ career together was brief. They produced their most characteristic work between 1906 and 1914, primarily in and around the Los Angeles suburb of Pasadena. Of their fully coordinated houses and interior furnishings, only The Gamble

House—preserved since 1966 as a publicly accessible landmark by the University of Southern California School of Architecture—survives intact.

About Charles and Henry Greene

Charles Sumner Greene (1868-1957) and Henry Mather Greene (1870-1954) were born in Cincinnati. The family moved to St. Louis in 1874. There, the boys attended high school at the new Manual Training School of Washington University, which combined traditional academics with courses in carpentry, metalworking and other similar trades.

In the fall of 1888, the brothers began formal training in architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston. After graduating in 1891, the Greenes apprenticed until 1893 in various Boston firms that were influenced by the late Henry Hobson Richardson (1838–1886).

The brothers moved to Pasadena, Calif., in 1893. While passing through Chicago, the pair visited the World’s Columbian Exposition; its Japanese pavilion may have influenced their own later designs. Once in California, the brothers established their firm, Greene & Greene, with Henry primarily running the office and Charles serving as the firm’s primary designer.

Charles moved with his wife and children to Carmel, Calif., in 1916. Henry then ran the Greene & Greene practice with his father, who sent weekly letters to Carmel in an attempt to keep Charles engaged in the firm’s work. By 1922, the brothers stopped using the name Greene & Greene, but continued to practice independently.

Virtually forgotten during the 1920s and 1930s, the Greenes’ work was rediscovered in the 1940s by a small group of architects and critics who promoted the Greenes’ work as a forward-looking inspiration for American modernism. The American Institute of Architects awarded the brothers a special citation for creating “a new and native architecture” in 1952.

Publication

A major book, titled “A ‘New and Native’ Beauty: The Art and Craft of Greene & Greene” and published by Merrell Publishers Ltd. London, accompanies the exhibition. Edited by Bosley and Mallek, it includes 11 essays by experts in the field that explore a variety of aspects of the Greenes’ legacy. The book is available in the museum’s store for \$39.95 (softcover) and \$75 (clothbound).

Public Programs

Several free public programs are planned in conjunction with the exhibition, including a lecture and book signing by Bosley and Mallek Friday, March 13, at noon; a talk about collecting Greene and Greene by Joseph Cunningham, curator of the American Decorative Art 1900 Foundation

Thursday, March 26, at noon; the James Renwick Alliance Distinguished Lecture Series with artist Nol Putnam Sunday, April 5, at 3 p.m.; and gallery talks by Kennedy and Bell Wednesday, May 6, and Wednesday, May 20, at noon. A special family program “Legends of Vaudeville,” with live music and comedy performances is scheduled for Saturday, June 6, and Sunday, June 7, at 3 p.m. Details and complete program descriptions are available online at americanart.si.edu.

Tour

Following its presentation at the Renwick Gallery, the exhibition will travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (July 14 – Oct. 18), which is its final venue.

Credit

This exhibition has been organized by The Gamble House, University of Southern California, and The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, Calif., in cooperation with the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The James Renwick Alliance supports the exhibition’s presentation at the Renwick Gallery.

About the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,500 works of art in all media spanning more than three centuries. The museum’s branch for craft and decorative arts, the Renwick Gallery, is located on Pennsylvania Avenue at 17th Street N.W. It is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., except Dec. 25. Admission is free. Metrorail station: Farragut North (Red line) and Farragut West (Blue and Orange lines). Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Web site: americanart.si.edu.

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