



Image courtesy of Memorial Hall Museum, PVMA, Deerfield

Memorial Hall Museum's newest exhibit, "Skilled Hands and High Ideals," traces historic and artistic themes of the social and design reform movement, which included Deerfield women who worked alongside their neighbors to learn crafts, set up shops in their front parlors and exhibit their work locally and nationally. Pictured, "Rabbits in the Pea Patch" by Ellen Miller, 1907 dyed linen.

'Skilled Hands & High Ideals'

100 years ago, Deerfield crafters & artisans created a movement

Story by Don Stewart

When many of us think of Old Deerfield Village, we may conjure up a forlorn history of bloody Indian raids which, at one point, left the exposed Colonial outpost deserted for seven years. It becomes a surprise to discover that, a century ago, the village was the regional epicenter of a thriving arts and crafts society, one of the first in the nation. Inspired by a movement first begun in 1860s London, at its peak several dozen skilled residents provided fine embroidery, basketry, furniture and other hand-crafted accouterments sold throughout the country.

"What was happening at that time was that they were rebelling against mechanization and everything being standardized and looking exactly the same," Suzanne Flynt said during a recent walkabout at Deerfield's Memorial Hall Museum.

She's the museum's curator and author of "Poetry to the Earth — The Arts & Crafts Movement in Deerfield" (Hard Press Editions; 235 pages; \$60). The well-illustrated and highly detailed book serves as a companion catalogue to the museum's newest exhibit. A small, air-conditioned gallery and hallway now feature a cornucopia of these works in various media, designs that are

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Curator, "Skilled Hands & High Ideals" exhibit at Memorial Hall Museum, Old Deerfield

timeless in their brilliance.

Opposites attract

Margaret Whiting and Ellen Miller, newcomers to Deerfield, became intrigued with the examples of intricate, yet fading, linen-on-linen 18th century embroideries displayed in Memorial Hall. They set out to replicate the patterns before they were lost to time.

"Out of a patriotic gesture, to save these early Colonial patterns, they started trying to stitch," Flynt said.

Embroidery is a haven for obsessive compulsives and one avenue on the royal road to vision problems. The curator explained that, after undertaking a stitching project, she herself was in need of prescription glasses.

Whiting, a Chester native, and Miller, a New Haven expatriate, brought to the vil-

lage a formative background in art. The two had studied together while in New York and been mentored by well-known painters. In 1895, the women produced an illustrated 622-page book, "Wildflowers of the Northeastern States."

Now steeped in the craft of embroidery, following a summer vacation in Rowe, they began planning a broad-based cottage industry focused upon exquisite, handcrafted stitched cloth designs for the home.

Cottage industry was a mainstay for many Deerfield families. In the early 19th century, Dennis Stebbins was known for making the finest brooms in the valley. In that same era, Benjamin Ray's daughters made Panama hats and palm baskets to partially finance his home's construction.

In 1896, the women founded the Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework. The name was based upon two colors to be used exclusively in embroidery. They soon discovered, however, that this was an artistic cul-de-sac and they embraced full color.

There was a depth of philosophy to this organization, inspired by the naturalism of the Englishmen William Morris and John Ruskin. Morris, a poet and craftsman, and his contemporary Ruskin, an art critic, rebelled against the

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Image courtesy of Memorial Hall Museum, PVMA, Deerfield

The playful designs created by the Blue and White Society more than 100 years ago are just as modern today. "Rose Tree," c. 1905. 45 in. X 21 in.

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crass industrialism that was spreading across Victorian England. In 1860, Morris opened a design studio that evolved into the creation of artful and unique housewares.

The assertive Whiting, who took on managerial tasks, was described as having “an astringent wit, an amused understanding, if not always tolerance, for her fellow man.”

“Ellen Miller was described as very sensitive, quiet and (one) who lived in a world of her own,” the curator said.

She was also known to awaken in the middle of the night with design ideas that she’d immediately sketch. Miller was, in Flynt’s words “a creative genius.”

Controlled economics

The society gained momentum, exhibited in the major cities and took on valuable commissions. Members of the society, working part time in their own homes, were under strict rules. You had to live in the village or have a close association to it.

“The threads were parceled out in little bundles,” the curator said. “You’d only get enough thread to do what you were being asked to do.”

Whiting and Miller maintained exacting standards and undertook time studies for labor primarily paid by piecework. It was calculated, for example, that an embroidered bedspread would take 86 hours of work, taking into account the required 376 threaded and stitched grapes at three minutes apiece. The whole Mount Everest of an undertaking would net a worker \$17.20. One woman explained, nevertheless, that the crafts work provided more money than school teaching.

The workers ranged from 19 to 70 years in age and averaged 20 cents an hour. One industrious stitcher no doubt gloried in making \$139 for the year. In 1901, the society grossed \$2,126.76 or, adjusted for inflation, \$57,767.60 in today’s finances. Whiting and Miller’s income for that year was just a few hundred dollars.

The women were perfectionists in both design and color, using vegetable, walnut, butternut or sumac dyes for thread. Indigo was imported

from India, crimson from Mesopotamia and rich browns from South America.

“They really perfected color,” Flynt said, “and that put Deerfield on the map.” Dedicating their lives to the craft of eye-straining, complicated stitchery, both Miller and Whiting had vision problems in their later years.

National attention

In 1885, the multitalented Madeline Yale Wynne, the daughter of famed lock maker Linus Yale Jr., arrived in the village. She’d spent much of her youth and many years of her adult life as a Shelburne Falls resident.

Wynne, an author, lecturer and artisan, had toured Europe and studied under Deerfield’s George Fuller, a noted Barbizon artist.

In 1901, she founded the Deerfield Society of Arts and Crafts, an umbrella organization which the Blue and White Society aligned with for several years. This new entity, which now included men, produced a broader field of artistry, exhibiting and selling jewelry, photography, weaving, rugs, basketry and furniture.

Wynne, the curator said, “was a force to contend with. She had a lot of energy. She was extremely creative ... charismatic. People didn’t realize how important she was until she was gone.”

Whiting, Miller and Wynne, whose work was written up in such magazines as Harper’s Bazaar and Ladies’ Home Journal, had caught a cultural wave at just the right time.

Following the 1876 Centennial in Philadelphia, nostalgia for the Colonial Age blossomed and arts and crafts replicating that period were in demand.

“By the 1870s, people started coming to Deerfield,” Flynt said. “Deerfield quickly learned how to capitalize on what it had here.”

A writer for furniture designer George Stickley’s magazine “The Craftsman” noted that “Deerfield is sending all over the country beautiful things ... to bring back something of lost poetry to the earth.”

In 1901, a trolley station at Eaglebrook was constructed. It was linked to train stations in Northampton and Greenfield and, for 23 years, brought tourists to this

Colonial site and resentment to many villagers.

“The people who lived along the street, the preservationists, were outraged,” Flynt said. “They thought it would destroy the historic value of the town.”

In 1910, Thomas Edison’s movie company arrived to film “Ononko’s Vow,” a silent feature erroneously detailing the 1675 and 1704 Indian attacks. Audiences forgave its monumental lack of factuality and the popular movie brought yet more stampedes to Deerfield.

The era captured

In its various incarnations, the Deerfield arts and crafts movement continued until 1941, when the outbreak of World War II dramatically changed the lives of many villagers. Artistry still resonates upon its streets, however, as each September for the past 38 years the village has hosted an arts and crafts festival.

The pioneering work of Whiting, Miller and Wynne was well catalogued and equally well photographed by Deerfield sisters Frances and Mary Allen. Originally working as schoolteachers, they were both struck with extreme deafness while in their 30s. They then became skilled in using large-format glass plate cameras and, in time, became known as among “the foremost photographers in America.”

Their career and art is the subject of Flynt’s 2002 book “Allen Sisters Pictorial Photographers 1885-1920” (University Press; 191 pages; \$50).

To visit the small gallery and hallway displaying 175 period arts and crafts, travel to the museum on a cool day as other rooms lack temperature control. For the inspired, the passage of time will vanish as you view works as modern today as they were in your great grandparent’s time.

“Not only do we have the originals, but the largest collection of arts and crafts made in Deerfield are housed here in the museum,” Flynt enthused. “It’s our golden opportunity to tell this story. It’s long overdue.”

Flynt provides a free lecture on the arts and crafts era at the museum on Thursday, Oct. 17, at 7 p.m. The museum is open 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. through Oct. 31 and reopens



Image courtesy of Memorial Hall Museum PVMA

Deerfield women on the porch of Madeline Yale Wynne’s home in 1901 crafting intricately designed baskets made from raffia, a tough, fibrous leaf imported from Madagascar. The photo is by Frances and Mary Allen, sisters who precisely catalogued the village’s arts and crafts era.



Image courtesy of Memorial Hall Museum PVMA

The craft of embroidery in the village was undertaken entirely by women and the piece work they were paid for was based upon timed labor required for each product. Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework, “Pomegranate head cloth,” 1911. 76 in. X 62 in.

in late May. Closed Mondays except Columbus Day. Admission: adults \$6; youth and students ages 6 to 21, \$3. Also open by appointment for

group tours.

Directions: The museum is located off Routes 5 & 10 in Old Deerfield Village on

■ On Thursday, Oct. 17, at 7 p.m., Suzanne Flynt, author of the recently published hard-bound “Poetry to the Earth: The Arts and Crafts Movement in Deerfield” (Hudson Hills Press; 235 pages; \$60), will profile that era in a presentation at Deerfield’s Memorial Hall Museum. This talk was originally scheduled for September.

Memorial Street. For more info: deerfield-ma.org

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