



**Student's Name:**

Killian Denys

**Student's number:**

C19448272

**Dublin Institute of Technology**  
**Faculty of the Engineering and Built Environment**  
**School of Construction**  
**Dept. of Construction Skills**  
**Bachelor of Technology in Timber Product Technology**

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I declare that the work contained in this submission is my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save to the extent that such work has been cited within the text of this submission.

Signed:

Date:

**Killian Denys**

**C19448272**

**Principles of Furniture and Joinery Design**

**Designer Research**

1961 Words

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## **Introduction**

Within this report will be a discussion on the work of Gustav Stickley during the course of his life. The choices that led to his success and his philosophical ideals will be considered as well as his contribution to the development of Craftsman style, also known as Mission style furniture. Essentially, this report is aimed to provide a better understanding of Stickley's life accomplishments and of the legacy he left in the history of furniture.

## **History / Images**

To begin with, let us have a look at the origin of Gustav Stickley's career, as a child, the young Stickley provided for the family by working as a stonemason with his father. After his father's departure, Stickley and his family moved to Lanesboro, in Pennsylvania, where he began working at 18 in his uncle's chair factory: the Brandt Chair Company. During that time, he quickly learned the ins and outs of mass production and management while also developing a strong love for wood. As Stickley (1901) recollects:

“My first experience in furniture making came when I began work in a small chair factory in the hamlet of Brandt....It was the most common-place of stereotyped work, yet from it, I can date my love for working in wood and my appreciation of the beauty and interest to be found in its natural color, texture, and grain.”.

Stickley's time in this working place was a life-changing experience that not only allowed him to educate himself, but also to plan ambitious goals. After only four years, Stickley was promoted to foreman of the company; a position which he kept until his withdrawal from the firm in 1883. His final year at the Brandt Chair Company was also the year he founded his first enterprise in collaboration with his brothers, Charles and Albert. The three brothers established together a retail and wholesale business in Pennsylvania which they named the Stickley Brothers and Company. Besides, the 25-year-old Stickley married the young Eda Simmons. (New World Encyclopedia contributors, 2017)

As time passed, Stickley's career ambitions grew, in 1888, he decided to leave the Stickley Brothers enterprise to form a new one with Elgin Simonds, a salesman whose name was already well established in the furniture industry. Together, they formed the Stickley & Simonds Company (Renn, 2016). The duo manufactured furniture, and while Simonds was

the company's president, Stickley undertook to direct the manufacturing process including being the treasurer of the company. During that time, Stickley initiated training and mentoring prison inmates, to produce the business's furniture. Although this was a controversial decision, it allowed him to reduce costs and remain commercially competitive. (New World Encyclopedia contributors, 2017) In 1893, the Stickley & Simonds Company extended to a new factory in the city of Eastwood, New York.

**Figure 1:** An antique Mission Oak Hexagonal Library Table L & JG Stickley Arts & Crafts



(Bargain John's Antiques, 2018)

Stickley landed for the first time in Europe in 1895, he discovered over there the existence of the British Arts and Crafts movement. This artistic style preconised that humans should only own and produce items that are either valuable, beautiful or both. As the British William Morris, the father of the movement said: "Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful.". Other values were also highly considered in the ideology, such as having sturdy items, yet, with simple and honest designs. (The Art Story Foundation, 2021) (Renn, 2016).

The next year, Stickley revisited Europe, bringing back, this time, a flood of ideas to America. Using the knowledge he just acquired, Stickley initiated to add new materials and designs to his furniture collection. For instance, he experimented technological ways to imitate bamboo with wood during the rise of Japanism around the Western world. In another case, Stickley inspired himself from Morris, to produce one of his most influential pieces; the adjustable-back armchair. (Renn, 2016)

**Figure 2:** Stickley Furniture Living Room Spindle Morris Chair 91-369



( Interiors Home, 2021)

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1898, a turn of events occurred when Gustav Stickley proposed that the company's board dissolves the firm's current name to replace it with the Gustave Stickley Company. The decision was unanimously approved and Stickley used that day his authority to dismiss the business's current president from his functions; Elgin Simonds. From this moment, Stickley became the principal owner and the president of the organisation. Following this incident, Stickley proposed to his competitors and his allies to form a giant retail organization; to no avail.

In the wake of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Stickley's choice of finishes and designs completely shifted, Stickley started only producing products based off his new designs, which he called his 'new furniture', his furniture became simpler, cleaner, and often incorporated nature patterns, as shown below. (Renn, 2016)

**Figure 3:** Stickley 89-028 Grand Poppy Table



(Art Sample Furniture, 2021)

In the month of July 1900, Stickley presented his new pieces at the Furniture Exposition of Grand Rapid in Michigan. Stickley's work received great feedback and was even recognised by some, as modern furniture. This recent success allowed Stickley to develop his business, and his thoughts on the Arts and Craft Movement. Throughout time, Stickley became a fervent aspirant of the American Arts and Craft Movement, which greatly influenced his work and life objectives. In 1901, he exposed his work at the influential Pan American Exposition, in the city of Buffalo, New York. This exhibition not only brought him critical interest, but also commercial attention, which encouraged him that same year to rebrand the company: 'United Crafts'. (Renn, 2016)

1901 was a critical year for Stickley as for the first time, he created a magazine, which he named 'The Craftsman'. In this magazine, many topics were discussed, such as the design of home and furniture plans, but also social conditions, politics, civic life, and education. For many years, this prominent periodical inspired countless artists, furniture makers, and middle-class Americans, to design and create items along the lines of the Arts and Crafts movement. In these magazines, Stickley also discussed materials, for instance, his favourite timber was American white oak, Stickley viewed it as a "robust, manly sort of wood." (Stickley, 1909). This wood appealed to Stickley because of its aesthetics and structural

strength. The American nativity of the wood also supported Stickley's ideals of using local materials to produce items. (Renn, 2016)

Although Stickley had many commercial successes throughout his life, it did not prevent him from having commercial failures such as his investment in a book-binding company in 1902. Nevertheless, one of Stickley's best career choices was to hire craftsman, architect and artist, Harvey Ellis. Together, Stickley and Ellis designed and produced some of what is widely considered to be Stickley's most impressive set of furniture. Using lighter designs and inlaying, Ellis completely transformed the appearance of Stickley's furniture. Unfortunately, Ellis passed away in 1902, leaving a short, yet memorable legacy. (Renn, 2016)

**Figure 4:** Stickley 89-2021-CE 2021 Collector Edition Harvey Ellis Console Desk



(Interiors Home, 2021)

**Figure 5:** Stickley Furniture Accessories Harvey Ellis Jewelry Box 073



(Interiors Home, 2021)

To maintain the company's new and innovative appearance, Stickley renamed the business in 1904, changing it to 'The Craftsman Workshops', within that same year, he began selling his products under the trademark: 'Craftsman', and inaugurated 'The Craftsman Homebuilders Club' for his magazines. The club released an array of interior designs, floor plans and home plans which were mostly aimed at mid-class Americans owning small, humble homes.

In an endeavour to teach larger audiences about the virtues of Arts and Crafts, Stickley bought in 1908 a plot of land in Parsippany, New Jersey and built there a complex called the 'Craftsman Farm'. This farm was built to house young people, especially young men, for an education program that would teach them the values of working hard and manually, as well as teaching them the benefits of Arts and Crafts. The house was completed in 1911, but the educational project never came to fruition as it never gained any public interest. Over the next two years, Stickley acquired two more properties, a retail store in Washington, DC (1912), and a twelve-story building in Eastwood, New York (1913), which was going to be built to expose different aspects and iconic products of the Arts and Crafts movement. The purchase of this gigantic building signed the beginning of financial troubles for Stickley as, during that time, the competition was growing fierce, and the company's expenses were increasing. In the fall of 1913, the 'The Craftsman Workshops' was running at a loss, for the

next two years, Stickley fought to keep the business afloat, and yet, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 1915, Stickley filed for bankruptcy.

Although this bankruptcy indicated the end of the Craftsman era, Stickley “never expressed any bitterness at the failure of his business ventures,” (Glen, 1966) till his death in 1942, Stickley never stopped experimenting and creating projects.

## **Opinion**

Researching and writing on Gustav Stickley was a remarkably instructive exercise that taught me a lot about the Arts and Crafts Movement, and about late 19<sup>th</sup> century furniture history. Discovering the designs, the philosophy of Stickley and the Arts and Crafts really inspired me to work on similar designs and to explore my own creativity. I particularly appreciated the input of Harvey Ellis on Stickley’s work and entirely agree with the statement that Ellis’s work for Stickley’s furniture resulted in some of Stickley’s most impressive collection of art. Ellis’s attention to detail and ability to add value to a piece of furniture by adding beautiful, clean, inlaid shapes, has illustrated me in what manner aesthetically pleasing inlaying can be. Having seen what Harvey Ellis has inlaid, I am extremely motivated to also practice inlaying for my final project next year.

**Figure 6:** Harvey Ellis Inlaying Detail



(Kathy Church, 2021)

When it comes to Gustav Stickley's furniture, I appreciated the simplicity of his later creations as dense designs can often look heavy on the eye. On the other hand, what I did not like about Gustav's work is the straightness of his furniture. To give an example, Stickley perfectly represented 'natural shapes' on the poppy table, mixing straight legs with curved flower-shaped tops. But on other designs, such as on the Harvey Ellis armchair for Gustav Stickley, there is only an assortment of straight pieces which, in my opinion, break the organic aspect of furniture. Having some of the legs curved for instance, could add fluidity to the design ( although, consequently, it would cost more to produce).

**Figure 7:** Harvey Ellis (1852-1904) for Gustav Stickley



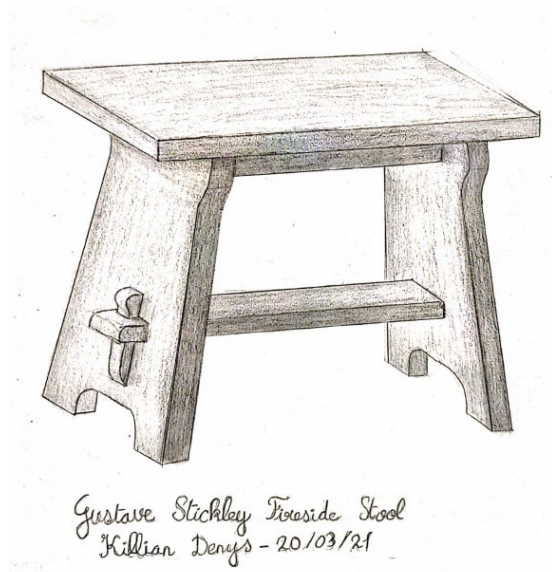
(Christie's, 2010)

On the positive side, I appreciated the symmetry that Stickley created on some of his pieces, particularly his chairs. For instance, in the picture above, the space outside of the two exterior splats appears to be the same width as the splats themselves. The distance between the top cross rail and the top rail also appears to be the same width. Another interesting geometry feature on this chair is that the rectangle formed between the top/bottom rails and the stiles appears to be close to the golden ratio proportions. When it

comes to the use of machinery for production, I think that Stickley made a shrewd decision to rely more heavily on machines, in the second half of his career. It allowed him to produce quicker and cheaper, and as we notice today, the use of machinery in the furniture industry is omnipresent, if not essential, to produce at a competitive price. Unfortunately, the Arts and Crafts's ideals of producing furniture without machinery is long-gone, and for my case, if I were to reproduce one of Stickley's furniture, I would almost certainly use machines to get the work done quickly and more easily.

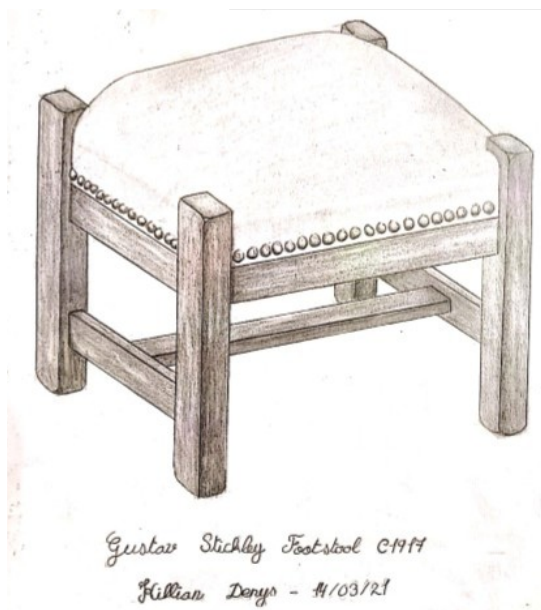
## Sketches

**Figure 8:** Gustav Stickley Fireside Stool Sketch



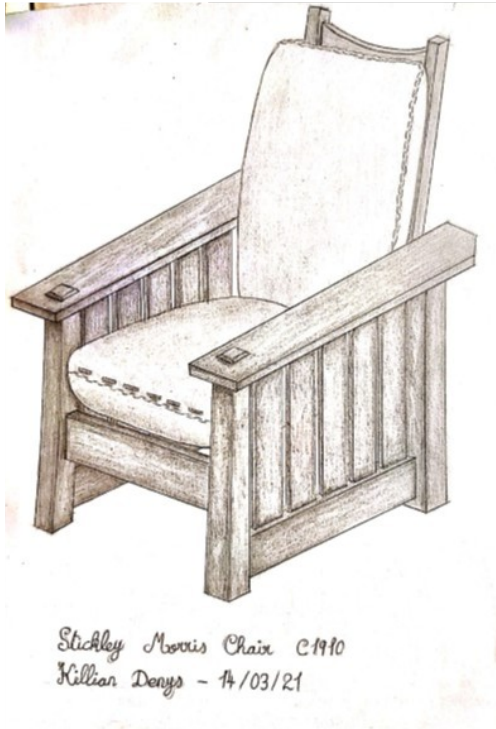
(Killian Denys, 2021)

**Figure 9:** Gustav Stickley Footstool C1917 Sketch



(Killian Denys, 2021)

**Figure 10:** Stickley Morris Chair C1910 Sketch



(Killian Denys, 2021)

**Figure 11:** Gustav Stickley Library Table Sketch



(Killian Denys, 2021)

**Figure 12:** Stickley Armchair Sketch



(Killian Denys, 2021)

Appendix

Figure 1:

Bargain John's Antiques. (2018). *Anatique Mission Oak Hexagonal Library Table L & JG Stickley Arts & Crafts* [Image]. Ebay. <https://www.ebay.com/itm/Anatique-Mission-Oak-Hexagonal-Library-Table-L-JG-Stickley-Arts-Crafts-/372110985585>

Figure 2:

Interiors Home. (2021). *Stickley Furniture Living Room Spindle Morris Chair 91-369* [Image]. Interiors Home. <https://www.interiors-furniture.com/stickley-furniture-spindle-morris-chair/369-998/iteminformation.aspx>

Figure 3:

Art Sample Furniture. (2021). *Stickley 89-028 Grand Poppy Table* [Image]. Art Sample Furniture. <https://www.artsample.com/stickley-grand-poppy-table/89-028-998/iteminformation.aspx>

Figure 4:

Interiors Home. (2021). *Stickley 89-2021-CE 2021 Collector Edition Harvey Ellis Console Desk* [Image]. Interiors Home. <https://www.artsample.com/stickley-2021-collector-edition-harvey-ellis/89-2021-ce-p117/iteminformation.aspx>

Figure 5:

Interiors Home. (2021). *Stickley Furniture Accessories Harvey Ellis Jewelry Box 073* [Image]. Interiors Home. <https://www.interiors-furniture.com/stickley-furniture-harvey-ellis-jewelry-box/073-998/iteminformation.aspx>

Figure 6:

Katty Church. (2021). *Harvey Ellis Inlaying Detail* [Image]. Pinterest. <https://www.pinterest.ie/pin/282882420323293593/>

Figure 7:

Christie's. (2010). *Harvey Ellis (1852-1904) for Gustav Stickley* [Image]. Christie's. <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-539242>

Figure 13:

Killian Denys. (2021). *Gustav Stickley Fireside Stool Sketch* [Image]. Killian Denys

Figure 9:

Killian Denys. (2021). *Gustav Stickley Footstool C1917 Sketch* [Image]. Killian Denys

Figure 10:

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Figure 11:

Killian Denys. (2021). *Gustav Stickley Library Table Sketch* [Image]. Killian Denys

Figure 12:

Killian Denys. (2021). *Stickley Armchair Sketch* [Image]. Killian Denys

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