

E. W. Godwin, British architect and designer

Not all interior design commissions result in friendship between homeowner and designer, particularly when both parties are eccentric geniuses. A case in point involves Oscar Wilde and the equally pugnacious and idiosyncratic interior designer E. W. Godwin. They quarreled and even went to law before making up in 1885, when Wilde wrote Godwin about his remodeling and redecorating project in general and the dining room in particular: "You have had a good deal of trouble over the house for which I thank you very much, and must insist on your honorarium being not ten but fifteen guineas at least. . . . Each chair is a sonnet in ivory, and the table is a masterpiece in pearl."

An exhibition evocative of God-

win's vast and varied output is on view at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts galleries in New York City. The show is entitled *E. W. Godwin: Aesthetic Movement Architect and Designer* and remains on view until February 27, 2000. Some 150 objects testify to Godwin's extraordinary vision and talent, which he applied to nearly every aspect of architecture and decoration. He designed buildings and orchestrated the decoration of their interiors, including textiles, carpets, ceramics (both tiles and hollow ware), wallpaper; furniture, metalwork, stained glass, and theatrical stage sets and costumes. (Godwin lived with and had two children by the celebrated actress Ellen Terry.) He was also a prolific writer and critic and an astute and devoted collector. Little wonder, then, that he worked in so many stylistic idioms. His furniture designs alone incorporated ornament and design elements from many earlier civilizations and styles, among them Japanese, Chinese, Greek, Egyptian, and the English Gothic, Jacobean, Georgian, cottage, and Queen Anne periods. His designs were marketed to a wide audience and he undertook custom work for several clients.

More than a handful of his designs required the assistance of some of the leading artists and craftsmen of the period. For example, Godwin called upon his great friend James McNeill Whistler to execute splendid painted decoration on pieces of his furniture, and Whistler commissioned Godwin to design a London studio house which was to be an atelier and living quarters for the artist's students.

Thirteen essays by leading scholars comprise the catalogue for the exhibition, which gives an excellent overview of the way of life of the leading lights in England during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the many artistic collaborations that were a natural outcome of the position Godwin held in soci-



ety. The publication is edited by Susan Weber Soros and co-published by Bard and Yale University Press. It may be obtained by telephoning 800-987-7323.

Neoclassical Boston

Only in the last twenty-five years have decorative arts made in Boston between about 1810 and 1835 been the subject of broad scholarly inquiry. Previous investigations for the most part were confined to a particular medium, with furniture receiving the most attention. Now, a welcome exhibition surveys the artistic output and local patronage in this city through a group of more than one hundred objects in a wide variety of mediums. The show has been organized by Hirschl and Adler Galleries in New York City, and the guest curator for the exhibition is the decorative arts historian Page Talbott. The show is entitled *Boston in the Age of Neo-Classicism*, and, while more than one third of it is devoted to furniture, there are also paintings, prints, drawings, ceramics, glass, silver, and other metalwork. The show is on view at Hirschl and Adler until February 5, 2000.

As Talbott relates in her catalogue essay, Boston in the nineteenth century was a city of paradoxes—conservative and *retardataire*, progressive and innovative. Changes in styles were slow to take root because Bostonians preferred restraint over ostentation. Most of the city's cabinetmakers during the period were of British stock, but native born, and depending on the form they were making, they took their cue stylisti-

cally from the English Regency (card tables and chairs) or from the French Empire (secretaries, chests of drawers, and pier tables) while still displaying a fondness for forms in the then-outdated Sheraton style (chests of drawers with mirrors, some card tables, sofas, and some chairs). Quality was important, and most extant pieces of Boston furniture display excellent craftsmanship with a preference for mahogany both for highly figured veneers and in secondary locations. The most successful cabinetmakers were Vose and Coates (later Isaac Vose and Son), Emmons and Archibald, Henry and William Hancock, and William Fisk.

Documents reveal that very little furniture was imported into Boston, demonstrating that the affluent residents preferred to patronize local cabinetmakers. (During the period in question there were some one thousand firms making or selling furniture there.) Talbott puts forth two possible reasons for

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Corner cabinet entitled *Lucretia*, designed by Edward William Godwin (1833–1886), made by Collinson and Lock with painted panels by Charles Fairfax Murray (1849–1919), London, 1873. Stamped "Collinson and Lock" inside the third drawer, initialed "CFM" on the painted panel with the inscription "Lucretia" and stamped "Edwards and Roberts" on the inside of the top drawer. Rosewood with painted panels; height 75, width 32, depth 23 inches. Detroit Institute of Arts.

Bird tiles attributed to Godwin and manufactured by Minton, Hollins and Company, Stoke-on-Trent, England, c.1881. Glazed earthenware; each tile, 6 inches square. Collection of Paul Reeves.

