For a long time, art historians dismissed the Saturday Evening Girls Club’s (SEG) output. Commercialized under the name of Paul Revere Pottery, it was produced in Boston at the turn of the century and proved to be an interesting experiment in both artistic production and in social improvement and inclusion. Specialists long thought its clean shapes and designs had neither the originality of the Grueby and Weller potteries, for example, or the finesse and delicacy of the decorations on Rookwood or Tiffany pieces. In fact, in the foreword to Noni Gadsden’s book on the SEG, Gerald W. R. Ward, a senior curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, mentions that the pottery was not even represented in the museum before 1979. This essay documents the beginnings of the Arts and Crafts Movement, first in the United Kingdom and then in the United States, in order to trace the origins of the SEG Club. It defines its main social objectives and philanthropic mission at the end of the Victorian era, and it presents its founder and the other women who were closely involved with it. The essay ends with an outline of the SEG’s artistic output in the almost fifty years during which the pottery was in production and the role it played in helping poor and immigrant women find honest and creative work at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Literature on the Arts and Crafts Movement shows that this period was a time rife with upheavals during which various social
improvements, including the women’s suffrage, started to take form. The foundation of the SEG Club, at that time, reached all classes of women: from working class and immigrant women to the philanthropically-inclined aristocrats, destitute gentlewomen and educated women were involved with the men who, as artists, were Arts and Crafts practitioners. The Arts and Crafts Movement was founded in the late nineteenth century by a group of British artists and social reformers inspired by John Ruskin, A.W. N. Pugin and William Morris. It sought to stem the tide of Victorian mass production, according to Pamela Todd, and it encompassed all aspects of artistic production whether they be architecture, furniture design, metal working, pottery, painting, sewing and embroidery, among others. It aimed to reinsert the artist and artisan at the heart of the artistic production and distance itself from the decorative excesses of the prevailing Victorian style. Supporters of the movement “championed the moral and spiritual uplift that would come with the revival of making objects by hand.” Many artists, designers, writers and social commentators of the period were closely associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement, namely: Walter Crane, Aubrey Beardsley, and George Bernard Shaw, the whole of the Pre-Raphaelites, William de Morgan, Charles Rennie Macintosh and the Glasgow School of Arts. Though often thought to be simply a visual arts style, the Arts and Crafts Movement was also the result of social upheavals, which brought many important social changes at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many other influences also helped give rise to the movement, including the presentation of many World Exhibitions, the opening of Japan to international trade -- with its endlessly-fascinating approach to all aspects of visual arts -- a renewed interest in the medieval era, the suffrage movement and a greater awareness to the welfare of less fortunate members of society. The Arts and Crafts Movement also swept Europe to varying degrees, not only in countries like Germany and Austria, but also in Italy, Spain, Hungary, Poland, Russia and Norway, with different visuals and vernaculars, as well as impetus which called upon various political landscapes and resistance movements. In the United States, the Arts and Crafts Movement sprang up slightly later. Visits to that country by prominent British figures like Oscar Wilde, Edward Ashbee, Walter Crane, and William Morris’s daughter all contributed to its growth. Although the American Arts and Crafts Movement emerged from the British, it developed in a unique manner. As Wendy Kaplan notes, many concepts were shared by the movement on both sides of the Atlantic, for example, the notions of “joy in labour,” “the simple life,” “truth to materials,” “unity in design,” “honesty in construction,” and “fidelity to place.” However, these similarities came with differences. Artists of the American Arts and Crafts Movement “believed that art and industry could work together.” In this respect, the American movement differed from that of England, where all matters industrials were frowned upon. This rapprochement between art and industry, however, did not extend to accepting the presence of women among the ranks of artists. In fact, women had long been kept at arms’ length in all matters related to the arts. They were considered dilettantes, mere “dabblers”, when they tried their hand at anything resembling artistic pursuits. The question “why is a woman’s work like a man’s only weaker and poorer?”, asked by the President of the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh, aptly describes the prevalent sentiment of the period. Women could give free reign to their creativity within the home; however, Bird contends that it was only when they started to gain access to training in the fine and applied arts that women artists started to make a place of their own. According to Anthea Callen, the Arts and Crafts Movement was motivated by disenchantment within the middle class, with the cheap machine-made goods produced during the Industrial Revolution and the thought that “society produces the art and architecture it deserves.” Callen also adds that, in the United States, emigration to the West and the Civil War had depleted the male population in New England and more women found themselves alone and in need of earning a living. Furthermore, conditions of hygiene and the lives of children were dismal, especially in large cities, and proponents of the temperance and social improvement movements
were becoming more vocal in their wish for better conditions for what they considered to be the moral and physical well-being of the American population. Magazines such as Ladies' Home Journal were helpful in transmitting the message and ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement, writes Elizabeth Cummings, as well as advertising the wares proposed by the artists and artisans through their pages at the beginning of the twentieth century. They also disseminated the writings of men like Ruskin and Morris, thus making the style “a recognizable and desirable style to middle-class people.”

Three women played a defining role in the creation and artistic output of the SEG club. The first, Edith Guerrier (1870-1958), the founder of the Club in 1899, was a librarian and writer from a Boston family, who was active in the literary circle of Thoreau, Emerson and Louisa May Alcott. Guerrier had been working at a community charitable institution before being appointed librarian at the Boston Public Library, which offered girls and young women -- mainly daughters of Jewish and Italian immigrants -- a respite from the “noisy, crowded tenements of Boston’s North and West Ends,” and presented social and educational opportunities while promoting the girls’ interest in books and ideas. They could also take classes in music, dancing, the theatre, and other arts. The second important female figure was Edith Brown (1872-1932), an artist and children’s books illustrator, who became the Club’s main designer. It was most certainly her training as an illustrator that helped her create the first designs the Club would produce. Clear, simple designs of animals and flowers on pure, unadorned shapes of functional wares would be the idea that would tie the whole production together. Helen Osborne Storrow (1864-1944), the third important figure in the SEG Club, was a Bostonian who came from a family of philanthropists, suffragists and abolitionists. Storrow volunteered at the Boston Public Library where she met Edith Guerrier. In 1906, she helped Guerrier purchase her first kiln and in 1907, she purchased a building on Hull Street in Boston to “house the pottery and library clubs and to provide an apartment for Guerrier and Brown.” Later, she would purchase another large property in East Gloucester, which would serve as a summer camp for the members of the group. These three women, each in their own way, helped define both the Club’s philanthropic and artistic missions.

Under the artistic direction of Edith Brown, the SEG Club produced a variety of utilitarian and decorative pieces that allied simplicity of shape and colour with imaginative design in keeping with the tenets of the Arts and Crafts Movement. At the height of its production, the SEG Club would be included in the Fifth Exhibition of the National Society of Craftsmen in New York, and its goods were sold in Boston, New York, and Chicago. Items were produced in matte, semi-matte, or high-glazed finishes. Some pieces, says Chalmers, were hand-thrown, but most were made with molds: some were also hand-built or hand-pressed. When looking at Brown’s designs, it is clear to see that she was strongly influenced by British illustrators of the time, like William de Morgan, Edward Ashbee and especially Walter Crane, who frequently created his designs for tiles and other ceramics using heavy black outlines with one-dimensional features. Crane, like Ashbee and others, had in turn been influenced by the recent arrival of wares from Japan: he had been especially influenced by woodblock prints, with their “flat surface, emphasis on line, outlining, and highly developed use of negative space.”

Among the many wares produced by the SEG Club, tiles figured prominently just as they did in the Arts and Crafts movement in England. They were used as trivets, fireplace surrounds, bakeware for ovens, and they were also used extensively to decorate kitchen walls. Edith Brown produced many of those tiles, including one depicting Paul Revere in a simple matte finish with a quotation on the surface. Brown also designed large panels composed of many such tiles, including one in a highly glazed finish, called “The Goose Girl,” which was undoubtedly made for the May 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition held at the Hall of Manufacturers and Varied Industries in San Francisco. The designer’s reliance on simple designs and clear, strong lines and her use of bright colours imbued her work with a vivacity that helped make her wares popular.

But the pieces produced at the SEG’s Paul Revere Pottery extended
mostly thanks to the work of Edith Brown.” Edith Brown died in 1932 and although “several directors followed, none were able to solve the Pottery’s economic problems, and it closed in 1942.”

Though the Saturday Evening Girls Club only existed for barely fifty years, it was able to produce a vast array of very distinctive pottery pieces which were the epitome of the Arts and Crafts Movement with its clean, simple lines, naturalistic motifs and colours and by using local clay and other basic products and tools. It also served as a method for the daughters of immigrants to get an education, which would otherwise not have been within their grasp. It opened their hearts and minds to literature, music, and visual arts, while giving them the opportunity to learn a craft and to eventually earn a good living. At a time when women were starting to assert their presence and have their voices heard in society, the SEG Club acted, in this way, as a beacon for local women’s self-determination and helped them gain agency through meaningful work. However, though there were fine examples of women’s accomplishments in the arts at the turn of the century, women still could not fully integrate into this mainstream “ideologically masculine movement” says Callen. Society still had a hard time coming to terms with women as masters of their own destiny, but groups such as the SEG Club at least tried to make inroads into women’s self-determination. At the confluences of philanthropy, art, and consumerism, the SEG Club allied the lofty ideals of Arts and Crafts, allowed some wealthy people to do good work, helped women find honest work, and produced a series of wares which are gaining a renewed appreciation with American collectors as well as those interested in various facets of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Production continued apace through to the beginning of the First World War and the pottery was incorporated in 1916 as the Paul Revere Pottery Company. In the meantime, a store, manned by the SEG Club’s employees, was opened on the premises to sell the items produced. Through those years, the three women extended their pottery and their philanthropic work with the help of local girls who, by then, had become employees and numbered twenty. Anthea Callen, in her book dedicated to the women of the Arts and Crafts Movement, says that the SEG Club “was never a financial success and [it] needed heavy subsidies to remain in production,” though she adds that the wares were popular and highly acclaimed,
ENDNOTES

1 See, for example, Meg Chalmers and Judy Young, “Saturday Evening Girls: Paul Revere Pottery,” Journal of Antiques (Jan. 2006): 3, accessed November 24, 2012, http://www.journalofantiques.com/Jan06/feature.html. In fact, the name was chosen because the building used by the Club was located close to the Old North Church where Paul Revere hung his signal lanterns.

2 Ibid.

3 Nonie Gadsden, Art & Reform: Sara Galner, The Saturday Evening Girls and the Paul Revere Pottery, (Boston: MFA Publications, 2006), 7. The museum now has a large collection on hand thanks to a donation of over 130 pieces by the descendants of Sara Galner, one of the first members of the group who worked for many years as a decorator.


8 Kaplan, 248.

9 Ibid., 11.


11 Ibid. He also adds that one of the main tenets of the movement was that people should not try to change Nature but to rather understand and respect it.


13 Bird, 71.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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